

the Atlantic

Rand Paul, Media Darling

Five reasons why the Kentucky senator trails Ted Cruz in fundraising, but is still stealing the spotlight.

By David Frum

April 10, 2015

If you're a member of the Washington media, odds are you've spent at least some time over the past 48 hours discussing Rand Paul's entry into the presidential race and his testy exchanges about abortion with an Associated Press reporter. Reporters and pundits have covered Paul's debut for The Washington Post, NPR, The Huffington Post, and the Today Show. The Daily Beast offered space to the libertarian Cato Institute's David Boaz to argue that yes, Paul can do it. In The Hill, Dick Morris argued that he can't.

Meanwhile, the disclosure that Ted Cruz—also a declared candidate for president—raised \$31 million in a week, although certainly reported, seems to have aroused nothing like this kind of media excitement. Google News tallied half as many citations for “Can Ted Cruz win?” as for “Can Rand Paul win?” Chris Cillizza explained why Cruz chose to announce at Liberty University but had this to say about the candidate's prospects: “Cruz badly needs social conservatives on his side if he wants to have any serious chance at being the Republican nominee in 2016”—and then went on to explain why that was unlikely to happen. Mark Halperin dismissed Cruz as a “second-tier” candidate.

Yet to the extent there are metrics, Cruz is outperforming Paul in the first phases of the presidential race. Not only has Cruz raised more money than Paul, but a National Journal survey of social media found that Cruz's presidential launch attracted dramatically more social media interaction than Paul's.

Neither man has an easy or obvious path to the nomination. Both men face powerful, perhaps insuperable, opposition within the party. Paul's path is probably even more emphatically foredoomed, but at a minimum it is surely no less foredoomed.

So why is Paul a favorite topic of media speculation, while Cruz can't make news?

I'd offer five reasons. They're interesting in themselves, I think, but also interesting as examples of how news organizations can systematically mis-evaluate political realities.

1. Home-Court Advantage

If you live and work in Washington, DC, it's easy to imagine libertarianism as a powerful national movement. Washington is home to Reason magazine and the Cato Institute, and to dozens of hard-working and talented libertarian writers, commentators, and policy analysts. It's easy here to lose sight of the extreme marginality of the doctrine in the nation as a whole—especially because libertarianism as we see it in the capital looks a lot like the preferred politics of the institutional media (socially permissive, fiscally cautious) than like the Lincoln-hating, bullion-believing, conspiracy-mongering politics of libertarianism beyond the Beltway at the Ron Paul Institute, Antiwar.com, or the Ludwig von Mises Institute. Journalists are consequently vulnerable to claims that libertarianism appeals to independents, Millennials, or some other demographically desirable group—no matter how overwhelmingly such claims are contradicted by the evidence. Meanwhile, the conservative Christian evangelicalism to which Ted Cruz looks for his base remains perhaps more underrepresented in D.C. media and culture than any other major American social group. D.C. journalists intellectually apprehend that evangelicals are important, but they have a hard time remembering that fact when they offer their commentary.

2. Media Management

Rand Paul courts and uses the media. That may sound like a strange thing to say after a week of testy Paul-media encounters headlined by a hostile interview with Savannah Guthrie on the Today program, but also including an angry back-and-forth with the Associated Press over abortion. No one likes to be cut off. But if you suppose journalists avoid testy politicians, you don't understand the media business. Those were perfect interviews from a media point of view. They made news, generated clicks, got people talking, and made the Mediaite home page! What reporters hate, hate, hate are politicians who can never be pushed off their talking points, who don't take the bait, and who make their news on non-exclusive platforms like YouTube and Facebook. That's you we're talking about, Senator Cruz.

3. A Different Kind of Conservative

Rand Paul has some extreme—even wacky—views on issues that media professionals tend not to understand or care about, like monetary policy, or have discounted as an inescapable feature of the American political landscape, like guns. But because Paul deviates from what's seen as conservative orthodoxy on foreign policy, drugs, and policing, he benefits from a perception that his views are new, different, interesting, and potentially even appealing across party lines.

Ted Cruz by contrast is competing to be seen as the most Reagan-pure of the Reagan-pure, a contest that media professionals find boring and phony—no matter that it's almost certainly a far more important contest in a Republican primary than the contest to be most “different.”

4. Abiding by the Rules of the D.C. Machine

In their short time in the Senate—four years in Paul’s case, only two in Cruz’s— both Paul and Cruz have each engaged in one major media stunt: in Paul’s case, a 13-hour filibuster against the nomination of John Brennan as director of the CIA; in Cruz’s, a forced partial government shutdown of nearly two weeks. The shutdown was widely condemned as recklessly self-aggrandizing; the filibuster, accepted as harmlessly self-publicizing. Rand Paul abided by the rules of Washington for senators on the make. Cruz broke them. Paul’s utterly hopeless presidential ambitions are accordingly indulged and flattered; Cruz’s significantly less hopeless ambitions are resented and condemned.

5. "At least Rand Paul Believes What He Says."

The Savannah Guthrie question that so annoyed Rand Paul dealt with his stark reversals of prior positions in favor of new, more politically acceptable stances, especially on foreign policy. He had reason to be vexed. Paul has reinvented himself boldly through his successful political career. Even now, he seeks to distance himself from his father’s wilder statements while continuing to fundraise from a mailing list built by those same wild statements. In this, Paul follows in the family tradition: The father also denied knowing anything about the contents of the newsletters that provided the great bulk of his income in the early 1990s. For all the many revisions and misstatements in the Rand Paul/Ron Paul record, they are still credited as “authentic”—nutcases, maybe, but at least sincere, and isn’t sincerity the most important thing?

Cruz, however, is widely mistrusted in the media as a phony. He went to Princeton and then to Harvard Law School, and excelled at both institutions. He holds a first-class membership card in the American meritocratic elite, and therefore when he says things that the meritocratic elite find outlandish or offensive, his fellow-members of that elite assume he must be acting cynically.

Nobody should bet their rent money on either a Rand Paul or a Ted Cruz nomination. The contest between them is almost certainly a battle for third place, or maybe fourth. In that battle, Cruz not Paul has the advantage. But the inclination to depict Paul as the major national political figure—and Ted Cruz as little more than an impertinent nuisance—reveals biases that will badly detract from political reporting in 2016.