

The Herald

Paul's road to 2016 is not the norm for GOP

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AUSTIN, TEXAS—Any doubt that Rand Paul is charting his own course toward a Republican presidential run was surely put to rest at a rooftop party where people in their 20s and 30s nursed drinks from an open bar as one of America's hippest music festivals ramped up all around them.

"You can be liberal, you can be conservative, you can be an evangelical Christian or a pot-smoking Austinite and still believe in freedom and that the government ought to leave you alone," proclaimed a sunglasses-wearing Paul, drawing approving whoops from the libertarian-leaning crowd. That's some big tent, and not one you'll find many conservative Republicans under.

While most of the rest of his potential 2016 Republican rivals spent last weekend packed into New Hampshire, Paul spoke at a historically black college in Maryland before hitting South by Southwest — a trendy mix of concerts, movie premieres and the latest must-have technology.

To be sure, the Kentucky senator has been among the most active GOP presidential prospects in the early primary voting states of Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina over the last year. He's not ignoring conventional primary politicking. But he's clearly out front in courting people he says his party has ignored.

Whether that pays off remains to be seen.

From his Sunday afternoon party with "liberty movement" aficionados, Paul appeared at a festival event examining how technology is reshaping politics, participated in a Twitter town hall and on Monday opened an Austin office devoted to using technology and data-driven analytics to help him zero in on supporters.

Paul said his South by Southwest stint was more about wooing tech-savvy campaign staffers and supporters than rewriting the campaign playbook.

"It's not like we're avoiding New Hampshire or Iowa," he said in an interview "but we're also showing that we are a little different than some of the other candidates in the sense that we recognize how important tech is and how important it's going to be."

Before Texas, though, he addressed criminal justice issues at Maryland's Bowie State University, one of America's oldest historically black colleges, another step outside the norm for many Republicans.

Paul has long had a penchant for turning up at places where the GOP often doesn't venture. He spoke on Berkeley's campus, visited Ferguson, Missouri, after the police shooting death of an unarmed black man, and has made Hispanic outreach a cornerstone of his political identity.

"Anyone can go to a traditional Republican enclave — anybody can go to a diner — but not everybody can show up everywhere," said Sergio Gor, Paul's spokesman.

Paul relishes reaching out to young and minority voters. He argues that his condemnation of U.S. drone strikes and government surveillance strikes chords across the usual lines.

But he won't admit to trying to be hipper than the rest of the would-be Republican 2016 field. "I don't know what that means," Paul said with a grin.

New Hampshire, meantime, hosted former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush in his first visit since 2000, as well as Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, former Texas Gov. Rick Perry and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz. The Texas senator also visited South Carolina, another big primary state.

"They feel bound by this mythical Republican base," said David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute. By contrast, Boaz said, "Paul's at Berkley, South by Southwest, talking about drones and the NSA, all of these things that have a chance of helping him break out among younger voters."

But it's questionable that the GOP base can be written off as obsolete. Paul's father, Ron Paul, a longtime Texas congressman and repeat presidential contender, was a libertarian hero who inspired nontraditional GOP voters, too, but never reached deep into the Republican mainstream. The younger Paul is clearly trying to appeal to a broad range of conservatives without alienating his core supporters.

He shrugged off concerns that winning over one segment of voters could disillusion another, however.

"I've not had one conservative come up to me and say, 'You need to stop defending the rights of poor people who live in the Bronx,'" Paul said. "Most people come up to me and say they are proud of the fact that I'm trying to reach out and attract new voters."

Brendan Steinhauser, a 33-year-old veteran of conservative grassroots champion FreedomWorks, organized Sunday's rooftop party. It launched Liberty Action Texas, a nonprofit that has raised more than \$1 million to mobilize young conservatives statewide.

"He's not afraid to go into any community and try to find common ground," Steinhauser said. "People respect that."