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Rand Paul Taking an Untested Route to the Republican Nomination

By Jeremy W. Peters

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Senator Rand Paul’s entry on Tuesday into the race for the White House said as much about his own political aspirations as it did about a vexing truth for Republicans: Many of them believe their party is simply not big enough to elect a president in 2016.

Offering a conservative message threaded with a contrarian strain of libertarianism that he hopes will appeal to minority and younger voters, Mr. Paul is taking perhaps the most unconventional and untested route to assembling the broader coalition that many Republicans say they will need to remain a viable national party.

In announcing his candidacy to an animated crowd of 1,500 people of all ages who stood shoulder to shoulder in a downtown hotel ballroom, Mr. Paul said his message was “for all Americans, whether you wear a suit, a uniform or overalls, whether you’re white or black, rich or poor.”

“It’s time for a new way,” he continued, “a way predicated on justice, opportunity and freedom. Those of us who have enjoyed the American dream must break down the wall that separates us from the other America.”

As the only candidate who supports less punitive drug laws, more probing oversight of the nation’s intelligence agencies and a reduced military footprint abroad, Mr. Paul raises uncomfortable questions for a party whose nominating process increasingly demands that unorthodox candidates shift to align with conservative dogma.

Many Republicans doubt his strategy can succeed. He would have to alter voting preferences that have been ingrained for generations and overcome resistance from foreign-policy hawks within his party who are already criticizing his worldview as dangerously misguided.

Yet he drew one of his biggest rumbles from the crowd on Tuesday when he vowed to dismantle the government’s domestic phone data collection program, the issue that perhaps most sharply separates him from his rivals.

“As president,” he said, “on Day 1, I will immediately end this unconstitutional surveillance.”

Mr. Paul is joining what is expected to be a crowded field, with multiple governors, two other Republican senators and some who have run for president before. But his campaign, more than any other, will test whether one of the most enduring conventions of Republican politics — the old Reagan idea of conservatism as a three-legged stool comprising social issues, fiscal policy and national security — still stands.

Republicans are in general agreement that their party needs to grow. But there are significant differences about how. Jeb Bush, the former Florida governor, and Senator Marco Rubio of that state aim to expand the party's appeal by reconnecting with Hispanic voters. And Senator Ted Cruz of Texas is basing his campaign not on softening the party's image among minorities but on mobilizing disaffected conservatives and evangelical Christians to vote.

Whoever the Republican nominee is “has to send a signal to people who have not voted for a Republican recently that we want them as part of the center-right coalition,” said Whit Ayres, a Republican strategist who is expected to work for Mr. Rubio. “It's a tone and an attitude of inclusion and acceptance.”

If the party's next nominee received the same portion of the white vote that Mitt Romney won in 2012 — 59 percent — he or she would need to win 30 percent of the nonwhite vote to be elected, Mr. Ayres writes in his new book, “2016 and Beyond: How Republicans Can Elect a President in the New America.”

Mr. Romney received 17 percent of the nonwhite vote. Even George W. Bush, who made deep inroads among Hispanics, received only 26 percent of the total nonwhite vote in 2004.

Both Mr. Paul's words on Tuesday and the scene that played out on stage before he spoke showed how he is working to get black voters to give him a closer look. He pledged to repeal “any law that disproportionately incarcerates people of color,” and he invoked the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s description of “two Americas,” one rich with opportunity, the other marked by “daily ugliness.” A black pastor from Louisville preceded him to the stage, as did J. C. Watts, who at one time was the only black Republican in Congress. The audience, however, was overwhelmingly white.

For some time, Mr. Paul has been trying to establish himself in places where Republicans do not often find receptive audiences: at historically black campuses like Howard University, in liberal college towns like Berkeley, Calif., and Austin, Tex., and in the moneyed corridors of Silicon Valley.

At the same time — and providing his critics with fodder to label him a political contortionist — Mr. Paul has sought to remain in the good graces of the social conservatives, Tea Party fiscal hawks and libertarians who helped propel him to an improbable Senate victory in 2010, when he was little-known and had never run for office.

He offered his conservative fans reassurance on Tuesday that he is no liberal, saying: “If we nominate a candidate who is simply ‘Democrat Lite,’ what’s the point? Why bother?”

Mr. Paul did not mention that he opposes abortion rights and same-sex marriage.

He shares those views with his father, Ron Paul, the former Texas congressman who attained folk-hero status among libertarians and some conservatives through his campaigns for the nomination in 2008 and 2012.

But Mr. Paul has never seemed entirely comfortable being known in politics as his father’s son. He has not fully embraced the higher-proof libertarianism that endeared Ron Paul to so many of his die-hard followers. And in turn, they have not fully embraced him.

Ron Paul had a seat onstage during Tuesday’s announcement but did not speak, though the crowd roared as Senator Paul thanked his parents.

Mr. Paul’s buffet-style approach envisions adding to the libertarian faithful enough of a slice of each of the groups he has been courting — blacks, Tea Party members, young people and so on — to accumulate enough support to win the nomination.

When he visits Iowa on Friday, Mr. Paul will not be stopping in one of the state’s conservative strongholds but in one of its most liberal pockets, Iowa City, home to the University of Iowa.

College towns have not been fertile ground for the last two Republican nominees: President Obama won 66 percent of the vote among people ages 18 to 29 in 2008, and 60 percent in 2012, exit polls showed.

“Republicans need to not be on the wrong end of that forever,” said David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute and author of “The Libertarian Mind.”

In the ballroom at the Galt House Hotel were Cliff Federle and his son Brian, who had driven an hour and a half from Columbus, Ind., to hear Mr. Paul. As they were leaving the hotel, Brian, a student at Indiana University, said he thought Mr. Paul had the cross-generational appeal the Republican Party has lacked.

“I really feel he speaks to my generation,” he said. “And I think he will be able to be the kind of candidate who can tie all these different factions together.”

His father agreed. “I think he’ll appeal to people with an N.R.A. bumper sticker,” Mr. Federle said, “and people with a ‘Coexist’ bumper sticker.”