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Why Is Rand Paul Opening an Office in Silicon Valley?

The Kentucky senator is just part of a 21st century gold rush.

By Emma Roller

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Rand Paul's evangelism has officially reached the Pacific Coast.

The Kentucky senator announced Saturday that he would be opening a new office in Silicon Valley this year.

There's no way to avoid 2016 speculation surrounding this story. The move is clearly a bid to expand not only the Republican base, but Paul's own national profile ahead of the next presidential election.

"My goal for the past year has been to try to widen the party message and make the party big enough to win nationally," Paul told the San Francisco Chronicle on Saturday.

And as with any U.S. political campaign, winning nationally means raising lots of money. For that reason, Silicon Valley billionaires can expect to be wooed by both parties for the foreseeable future (perhaps with all-expenses-paid trips to Burning Man).

David Boaz, the executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute, says there are plenty of good reasons for out-of-state Republicans like Paul to put down roots in the Golden State.

"I can think of at least two good reasons to go to Silicon Valley that are purely political," Boaz said. "One is money. The other is, you want the technology."

While techies are considered a liberal bunch, some tech executives are joining the Republican cause. Paul counts Peter Thiel, the billionaire cofounder of PayPal, among his friends. And the tech sector donated more than \$1.4 million to Paul's father Ron during his unsuccessful presidential bids in 2008 and 2012.

Sure, the optics may look bad to some—a Kentucky senator opening an office seems like an almost extravagant show of political ambition. But opening a Silicon Valley office also offers

Paul a distinct advantage: It makes him look young, hip, and serious about working with job creators. In that way, Paul is hardly the only conservative force trying to forge relationships in Silicon Valley.

Just ask the U.S. Chamber of Commerce—the largest pro-business lobby in the country—which is in the process of opening an office in San Jose. "Follow the money," David Chavern, the chamber's executive vice president and president of its Center for Advanced Technology & Innovation, told National Journal. Chavern said Silicon Valley is ripe for national Republican outreach, especially from libertarians like Paul.

"I don't think he'll be the last one to open an office there," Chavern said. "I think there are a number of people there, particularly people of means, who don't really have a political home at the moment."

But no matter what negative optics there may be, the pros far outweigh the cons. Simply put, it's a brilliant strategy on Paul's part, to both look like a team player while setting himself apart from fellow Republican contenders. That's because, as much as the GOP would like all of its big, national names to appeal to progressive-minded Silicon Valley CEOs, only Paul and Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin have stepped outside their party's comfort zone in appealing to new party followers.

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Indeed, Republicans have historically trailed behind the Democrats in using political technology; the Obama campaign's online outreach game in 2008 is a testament to that. But the GOP has been gaining ground, particularly in its efforts to use big data and to associate itself with companies like Uber.

And Californians may offer a more receptive audience than one would think. The state is the unofficial birthplace of the Libertarian Party—it's where David Koch got his start in politics.

For Republican politicians, Silicon Valley offers all the opportunity for fundraising with none of the stodginess of setting up shop in, say, Dallas or the Financial District.

"They don't necessarily want to go to oil company offices or Wall Street offices and bring the press with them," Boaz said. "They do want to bring the press with them if they can visit Google and Apple and Uber."

In that way, Silicon Valley may be the oil industry of today—not in terms of sheer economic firepower, but in the hazier political arena of #thinkfluencing political candidates. And the money doesn't hurt.

"There is a lot of money, a lot of value being created in Silicon Valley," Garrett Johnson, the cofounder of LincolnLabs, a conservative group that is working to recruit tech entrepreneurs, told National Journal. "It has long been the innovation capital of the world, but it's quickly becoming the finance capital of the world."

Chavern has some advice for Paul in his new Left Coast environs: Talk to everybody, be open to new ideas, and, lastly, be open to new ways of dressing. Paul certainly fulfills that last bit of criteria to a tee—or to a multicolor belt with jeans, cowboy boots, and Ray-Bans.