

BuzzFeed News

Tulsi Gabbard Is This Election's Ron Paul

“The similarities to Dr. Paul’s campaigns are striking,” one of Paul’s former aides said of Gabbard’s presidential run.

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There is no one else in the 2020 Democratic primary quite like Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, but there was someone in the 2008 and 2012 Republican primaries who was, and that is former member of Congress Ron Paul.

Paul ran the most visible message campaigns of any Republican in those years, a lone voice on the edge of the field railing against foreign intervention and the Federal Reserve. He attracted a network of enthusiastic grassroots support, and he was unwavering in his principles, even when they were unpopular. They often were, enough to get him booed more than once on the primary debate stage — once in 2007 for saying that Americans wanted the troops to come home, and once in 2011 for suggesting that American military adventurism had provided a motive for the 9/11 attacks. He was also a highly controversial figure who dabbled in conspiracy thinking and whose connection to fringe politics dogged his campaign, especially when racist newsletters from the 1970s through the 1990s with his name on them were surfaced.

Such was the success of Paul’s outsider movement that journalists hailed a “libertarian moment” in 2013 and 2014 and, this reporter included, closely monitored the career of his son, Sen. Rand Paul, who was attempting to wed his family’s hardcore libertarianism with the mainstream of the Republican Party. But Rand Paul’s 2016 presidential campaign flopped, and libertarians, like the rest of the right’s subgroups, were swallowed almost whole by the Donald Trump phenomenon. Trump’s burning-down-the-house approach appealed to many in the Paul movement who were motivated by an antiestablishment feeling and a desire to see elites chastened.

Gabbard is in some ways a thematic echo of Paul. She isn’t the only low-polling message candidate in the race — Gov. Jay Inslee is running to draw attention to climate change, and Andrew Yang is pushing his \$1,000 a month universal basic income plan — but she is the one who is the closest inheritor of the Paul legacy, focusing her message against US foreign policy interventionism and on ending the war in Afghanistan. (It’s debatable whether it’s truly accurate to call her anti-war, given her friendly stance toward the brutal Assad regime in Syria.) Her views place her outside the Democratic mainstream, so much so that she’s become a favorite of conservative media, like Tucker Carlson’s Fox News show. Like Paul, she has been dogged by an uncomfortable legacy from her past — her stances against LGBTQ rights as a legislator in Hawaii.

Her exchange with Sen. Kamala Harris on criminal justice in Wednesday night’s debate, in which she attacked Harris’s record as a tough-on-crime prosecutor in California, was of a piece with libertarian arguments about the drug war and the power of the state. “There are too many

examples to cite, but she put over 1,500 people in jail for marijuana violations and then laughed about it when she was asked if she ever smoked marijuana,” Gabbard said.

I’m not the first person to point out the similarity. Ron Paul himself has praised Gabbard, calling her the best Democratic candidate running in 2020. But over the course of the past two rounds of debates, Gabbard’s role filling the niche Paul left behind has become clearer. Paul declined to comment for this piece through his spokesperson, Ron Paul Institute Executive Director Daniel McAdams, but other prominent libertarians and Paul insiders were eager to praise Gabbard.

“I think Rep. Gabbard is running an amazing campaign, and the similarities to Dr. Paul’s campaigns are striking,” said Jesse Benton, Ron Paul’s grandson-in-law and former campaign manager, citing Gabbard’s emphasis on ending American military engagements abroad and her being “unafraid to speak hard truth to power.” “The political and tech elites try to cast her aside, just as they did with Ron,” Benton said. (That’s not true of all tech elites: Twitter’s Jack Dorsey is a Gabbard fan.) Both candidates ran as members of the House of Representatives, though while Gabbard has only served for a few years, Paul spent decades in Congress as a gadfly on the fringes of his party. Gabbard is one of the youngest candidates in this year’s race; Paul had been one of the oldest in his.

“Tulsi Gabbard’s signature stance on non-interventionism makes her the only principled opponent of American empire in the 2020 presidential race so far — and one who excites libertarians worn out by mainstream politicians who either know nothing about military adventurism or naively go along with worn-out notions of the United States as the ‘indispensable nation’ that must be fighting every battle in every corner of the world,” said Nick Gillespie, editor-at-large of libertarianism’s paper of record, Reason magazine, in an email. “Her support for whistleblowers such as Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden is similarly inspiring to those of us who worry not just about state power but the state’s willingness to obscure its worst actions.”

Reason wrote supportively Wednesday about Gabbard’s duel with Harris: “Tulsi Gabbard Calls Kamala Harris a Drug Warrior and Dirty Prosecutor. She’s Right.” There’s “a lot of libertarian enthusiasm today for her attack on Harris’s record as a prosecutor last night,” said David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute.

Boaz, who said he sees Sen. Bernie Sanders as another apt comparison to Paul, said he had seen a lot of interest in Gabbard in libertarian circles, but it was short of real support, with people couching their admiration in terms of who they would vote for if they had to vote for a Democrat — which Gabbard still is, after all, supporting Medicare for All and other social policies that are anathema to anti-government libertarians.

“I wish Gabbard's critique of state power was more thoroughly libertarian — when it comes to issues such as education and climate change, for instance, she traffics almost exclusively in tired old gestures of throwing more money at teachers and green energy rather than freeing up students and innovators from regulations and restrictions on new ways of delivering knowledge and energy,” Gillespie said.

Gabbard and Paul both enjoy a lot of online support, though Paul built a coherent movement of supporters in a way Gabbard hasn’t yet. Where did all those libertarians go?

“Seems to me that both Tulsi and Andrew Yang might be compared to Ron Paul,” said Doug Wead, a former Ron Paul adviser, in an email. “But RP represented a movement. It was manifested with the slogan ‘end the FED’ but it really was a message that said, ‘end the corruption of the elites.’ Some of his folks have actually gone onto Bernie Sanders and, of course, Donald Trump. Their point of unity is anger at the elites. I don't see Tulsi or Andrew representing a movement.”

Gabbard is “one of the few causes for optimism” in this election cycle, Gillespie said, but although libertarians might be Gabbard-curious, Boaz said many are pinning their hopes on newly ex-Republican Michigan Rep. Justin Amash, hoping that he will run on the Libertarian Party ticket.

Another challenge for Gabbard is that her signature issue is no longer at the top of Democratic voters' priority list. She's running an effective single-issue campaign on an issue that has been eclipsed in voters' minds by other concerns, particularly in the Trump presidency. “Because she is the only clearly anti-war candidate in the Democratic race, why isn't she getting more traction? Where is the left-wing anti-war movement?” said Boaz.

Like Paul, Gabbard isn't likely to be president. The considerable online interest in her, for example her being the most-googled candidate during Wednesday's debate, has not translated to a boost in polling, and she has stayed around 1% — unlike Paul, who was able to pull in support in multiple elections. But just because she likely won't win doesn't mean her campaign isn't working, in its own way.

There's been a tendency among political commentators to lump all of the lower-tier candidates together as filler padding out the bottom of the pack, but there's a difference between someone like John Delaney or Michael Bennet, running for unclear reasons to push a fuzzy agenda, and someone like Gabbard, Yang, or Inslee, who have a clear rationale for running and are raising the profile of their issues. The comparison to Paul may not be perfect, but Gabbard is operating from the same handbook that made Paul an important voice for his platform in his party.