

Weird Drug Politics in the Kentucky Senate Campaign [FEATURE]

By *psmith*

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The drug war has become an issue in the Kentucky Senate race after Republican Rand Paul attacked federal funding of drug task forces.

Drug policy has become a hot-button issue in the Kentucky US Senate race, albeit in a weird and tangential way. The race pits insurgent tea party/libertarian Republican [Rand Paul](#) [7], the son of anti-prohibitionist US Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX), against Democrat [Jack Conway](#) [8], the Kentucky attorney general.

Neither candidate even mentions drug policy on their campaign web sites, but remarks by Paul earlier this month that he opposed federal earmarks such as those that fund the anti-drug task force Operation UNITE and drug treatment programs, and that drug policy was not a "[pressing issue](#) [9]" for Kentucky voters have reverberated across the Bluegrass State.

"I don't think it's a pressing issue," Paul said in response to a query from the Associated Press about his opposition to federal earmarks for drug law enforcement. He suggested that eastern Kentucky voters are more concerned with fiscal and cultural issues. "They're socially conservative out there," Rand Paul said. "Jack's not. They're fiscally conservative. I am. Jack's not. I think we'll swamp him."



Rand Paul campaigning in Frankfort, KY (courtesy Gage Skidmore via Wikimedia)

Paul's comments left an opening for Conway, who is trailing by about eight points in the most recent polls, to

go on the attack. And the back and forth between the two campaigns has kept the drug issue in the spotlight since mid-August.

"Rand will handcuff local sheriffs trying to combat the drug epidemic, and I will make sure Kentucky's law enforcement has the tools they need to protect our families," Conway said. "That's my record as attorney general, and that's what I'll do in Washington."

Conway said that Kentucky, which is suffering from budget cuts, can't take on drug traffickers without federal help. Paul countered that that federal involvement is justified only when drugs are crossing state or federal borders.

Conway and his supporters have frequently resorted to describing drug use in Appalachian Kentucky, known as a marijuana growing hotbed and the home of numerous pill-poppers and meth cooks, as an "epidemic," and the conventional wisdom in Kentucky is that the area is rife with drug abuse.

But the conventional wisdom doesn't match up with the numbers. According to a [recent report](#) [10] from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, drug use levels in eastern Kentucky are in line with those in the rest of the state and the rest of the country. The "epidemic," in other words, is a politically convenient figment of the collective imagination.

But that doesn't stop either campaign from bemoaning it. After an initial round of attacks from Conway and his supporters on the drug issue, Paul made a point of showing up at a privately-funded drug treatment center to insist that he does care about "the drug problem."

"It's been recently insinuated that somehow I don't care about the drug problem in Kentucky, and that's absolutely wrong," [Paul said last week](#) [11]. He accused Conway of "pandering" on the drug issue.

The back and forth continued this week, with the Paul campaign accusing Conway of not doing enough to combat methamphetamine production as attorney general and the Conway campaign bringing out sheriffs to attack Rand for undercutting their drug war.

But for all the blows thrown around the drug issue, Paul's attack on federal funding for drug task forces and drug treatment does not appear to be part of an anti-prohibitionist assault on drug war orthodoxy -- Paul does not call for ending marijuana prohibition or drug prohibition in general. Instead, it is part and parcel of his anti-federal spending campaign message.

And while Paul supported medical marijuana in the primary campaign, he has [gone a bit squishy on the issue since then](#) [12]. In August, the AP ran a story saying that "he said he opposed the legalization of marijuana, even for medicinal purposes." The campaign didn't deny or confirm that report for more than a week, until asked directly about it by Mike Meno of the [Marijuana Policy Project](#) [13]. Campaign staffers then told Meno Paul was standing by his states' rights position on the issue, but refused to say whether Paul personally supported medical marijuana.

"His big campaign message is to cut back on the size of the federal government, get the deficit under control, and he's been heavy-handed in going after earmarks like Operation UNITE, and those are very important in this state," said University of Louisville political scientist Laurie Rhodebeck. "So some of the sheriffs and mid-level political people, particularly in Eastern Kentucky, are not happy with what Paul's been saying about that. I don't know that these folks were likely to support him in the first place, but I've seen even some Republican county executives who seem appalled he's taking this position," she said.

"Part of Paul's strategy is to try to make Conway look like just another robot for Pelosi and Obama," said

Rhodebeck. "Conway has to latch onto some issues, and the drug issue presented itself as something he can run with. I think it's a reasonable strategy for him to pursue this."

"Those federal task forces are just another way to waste money on an utterly failed strategy," said Ted Galen Carpenter, an analyst with the libertarian-leaning [Cato Institute](#) [14], who agreed with Paul's attack on Operation UNITE. "If we want to spend money studying a way out of prohibition, that's one thing, but I wouldn't favor spending another dollar to enforce our idiotic drug laws."

Still, Carpenter took Paul to task for saying drug policy was not "a pressing issue" for Kentucky voters. "This most certainly is a pressing issue," he said. "Aside from the continuous civil liberties issues, people in Kentucky should be just as concerned as most of the rest of the country about that conflagration we have going on across our southern border. As long as the US maintains its prohibitionist policies, we are giving billions of dollars to the Mexican cartels, and that's dangerously unwise. One wonders whether Rand Paul has taken a look at what's happening in Mexico."

The emergence of the drug issue in Kentucky and especially the critique from a Republican candidate suggests that it is an issue that can prove useful to either party, said Bill Piper, national affairs director for the [Drug Policy Alliance](#) [15]. But if Republicans want to make drug reform an issue, they have to be more coherent than Paul, he said.

"That Rand Paul is stepping out on drug policy reform and his opponent attacking him for it shows that reformers shouldn't take for granted that the Democrats are the party of reform," said Piper. "There was also a Republican drug reformer in the primary against Texas Gov. Rick Perry, and a Republican running against Barney Frank has said some things, so you have a legalizer Republican versus a legalizer Barney Frank."

But while Republicans are increasingly challenging the drug policy status quo, they don't know how to reach voters on the issue, Piper said. "Rand Paul doesn't know how to talk about this," he said. "He's talking about this in the context of taxes and spending, but as much as voters dislike taxes and spending, they've always made an exception for the drug war. He needs to be talking about how drug reform reduces the harms of drugs and keeps families safer."

Paul could take a lesson from another libertarian-leaning Republican, former New Mexico Gov. [Gary Johnson](#) [16], Piper said. "Gary Johnson got beaten up savagely before he learned how to frame it," he recalled. "Johnson still talks about freedom, but now he does a lot to reassure the listener that he cares about the problems associated with drug use."

"If Paul took this on head-on like Gary Johnson does and began saying it better, he would sound more rational than the Democrats," Piper said. "But by limiting the discussion to what the federal government should be doing, he's almost conceding his opponent's points. I suspect Rand Paul gets it about drug prohibition and he wants to wrap it in a safe way, but drugs is not an issue you can do that with. You have to say the war on drugs is making your teens less safe."

For Rand Paul, the real issue is not drug reform, but reining in federal spending. Whether his foray into the morass of drug politics will derail his campaign remains to be seen.

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