

# The American Conservative

## Can Rand Paul Still Win the Future?

*The Kentucky senator can't seem to attract both libertarian money and tea party votes.*

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The acquittal of Rand Paul aides Jesse Benton and John Tate on charges of campaign-finance violations was a small bit of good news for a campaign that sorely needs it. (The allegations are not from Rand's campaign but his father Ron's in 2012.)

For weeks now, the vultures have been circling the Paul campaign and writing obituaries for the Kentucky senator's presidential bid. The poll numbers have generally been bad and the fundraising numbers have been even worse.

In a race as wide open as the Republican presidential contest, discouraging poll numbers can possibly be overcome. Paul is manfully moving forward in Western caucus states that have been ignored by other campaigns. But you do need money to persevere and it's arguably harder to change the minds of donors than those of voters.

Amidst the media's Paul campaign deathwatch, two stories really tell the tale of why he has struggled this year. First are the reports that Ted Cruz, who clearly understood the importance of the liberty movement during his 2012 Texas senatorial primary, is actively trying to steal Paul's base. Second is former Cato Institute chief Ed Crane's apparent refusal to raise funds for his pro-Paul super PAC until the senator really lets his libertarian freak flag fly.

Very few voters equally like Ron Paul and Cruz or even Marco Rubio, but there are a fair number of Republicans who have comparable affection for Rand, Cruz and Rubio. What was supposed to be a big advantage for the younger Paul has instead been a bit of a disadvantage so far.

Paul has faced competition from his right for the more conventionally conservative Republicans who might be open to voting for him as well as his father's Tea Party supporters. He's also gotten a lot of criticism from prominent libertarians for not distinguishing himself enough from the other conservative Republicans in the race.

Crane has complained that Paul isn't focusing enough on "the NSA and bullshit in the Middle East" and too much on things like Planned Parenthood, according to *Reason*. But there are plenty

of conservatives gravitating toward candidates like Cruz who want to hear more about Planned Parenthood and any fights Republicans can pick with Barack Obama. (Isn't there a case against taxpayer funding for Planned Parenthood that ought to appeal to even pro-choice libertarians?)

The Crane story is interesting in itself, both as an example of super PACs' potential to influence candidates rather than just support them and also their ability to actively harm them. Coordination between official campaigns and super PACs is illegal, and while campaigns often circumvent this these outside groups can truly function independently.

But it is also an example of well-known libertarians being willing, even eager, to criticize Paul, with even some supporters less enthusiastic than expected. This has shown up in his sudden inability to replicate his father's fundraising success. Pressure from libertarians hasn't abated even as conservatives have demanded Paul be more like them.

Whenever Paul makes overtures to one camp, he seems to alienate or at least dampen the enthusiasm of the other. The numbers bear this out. Paul began the year with 62 percent favorability among Republicans. Even when his poll numbers first began to slide, he remained more popular with the rank-and-file than his father ever was.

Since the debates, when Paul has picked fights with other Republicans, those favorability numbers have crumbled. Public Policy Polling, a Democratic firm, finds only 31 percent of Republicans nationally view him favorably while 42 percent have an unfavorable opinion, concluding "the only other hopefuls with higher negatives than that are Bush and Lindsey Graham."

Paul has always done best when he can find issues that are simultaneously libertarian and anti-Obama. Libertarians liked his drone filibuster because it was libertarian; Republicans liked it because he was sticking it to Obama. The 2015 issue environment has presented fewer opportunities to please both camps (Obama and the hawks joining forces to disastrously arm Syrian "moderates" looms as one possibility).

The senator has run tried to run as a different kind of Republican, essentially a conservative but one who uses libertarianism to smooth the Tea Party's rough edges. Donald Trump has demonstrated that for many Republicans, the rough edges are what matter. His affectation of everyone's Fox News-loving uncle, even if he feuds with the network itself, has actually freed him to take many heterodox positions, including espousal of a not very neoconservative foreign policy.

Pat Buchanan was able to do something similar in 1992 and 1996. Nobody questioned his basic conservative bona fides, which enabled him to disagree with the other candidates and even the party's base without charges of liberalism really sticking. Conservatives don't trust the Pauls as much.

Similarly, a subset of libertarians has never trusted Rand as much as Ron. When Ron Paul did something libertarians didn't like, they blamed Jesse Benton, the Michael Deaver of Paul-world.

When Rand Paul ruffles libertarian feathers, they blame the candidate himself. (Though the number of former Ron Paul supporters backing Trump and socialist Bernie Sanders suggests even some of them weren't really ideological libertarians.)

What happens to the Rand supporters who are, in fact, libertarians or libertarian conservatives? Paul's campaign now resembles his father's, a liberty movement-building exercise, without the same level of grassroots enthusiasm. Keeping them engaged is the best argument for keeping the campaign going as long as it doesn't jeopardize his Senate seat—losing that would be a much bigger setback for the liberty movement than a losing presidential bid—even if circumstances don't improve.

The short game—fighting to win—would obviously do more to advance libertarianism in the Republican Party than anything else. But unlike the other candidates, there's a long game involved in Paul's campaign too. This is valuable experience for activists and an opportunity to expose Republican debate watchers to arguments they wouldn't otherwise hear.

Barry Goldwater and George McGovern transformed their parties despite landslide defeats. Pat Robertson, Howard Dean and, yes, Ron Paul, mobilized their constituencies without even getting close to the nomination.

That's not the campaign Paul wanted to run. But if he can't square the circle of winning Ed Crane's money and Ben Carson's votes, it's still a valuable one.