



Rand Paul in 2016: Embracing and avoiding his father's legacy

By David Lightman and Sean Cockerham

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WASHINGTON - When Rand Paul [enters the Republican presidential race Tuesday](#), he'll start with an advantage few of his rivals have: a dedicated legion of supporters, well-organized and battle-tested.

But for the Kentucky senator to have a chance to win the nomination, he'll have to expand beyond the libertarian army he inherited from his father, and fast.

So far, reviews are mixed, as he moves closer to the more hawkish Republican mainstream on defense and foreign policy, while still stressing his libertarian-leaning views against domestic security surveillance and drug sentencing laws.

Paul is regarded as a top contender, but usually is [third, fourth or fifth in Republican voter polls](#). He should have some star power, but he has been overshadowed by upstart Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker. Paul needs to show he can raise big money, or he risks being outspent by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, among others.

Paul, 52, who plans to announce his candidacy at a rally at Louisville's Galt House Hotel, inherits a strong political network from his father, former Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, a libertarian hero.

The son is trying, carefully, to step out of that shadow, and his presidential fate will depend on whether he can make this balancing act work. In Iowa, the nation's first presidential caucus, where his father finished a close third in 2012, Paul starts with a strong core.

"Ron Paul slowly but surely built an organization, and Rand Paul is going to benefit from that," said Will Rogers, the Polk County (Iowa) Republican chairman.

To have a decent chance at the nomination, Paul must change the minds of Republican voters and donors who think he's not strong enough on defense and foreign policy, argued Republican strategist Ford O'Connell.

O'Connell advised the 2008 presidential campaign of Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., a defense hawk who has feuded with Paul over national security issues. Paul needs to present himself as a "reluctant warrior," O'Connell said.

Gary Bauer, a conservative activist and former presidential candidate, doesn't think Paul's policy shift will convince voters. They're unlikely to buy his recent push to increase defense spending and create a Middle Eastern nation for Kurds after criticizing American nation-building abroad. Bauer pointed to Paul bashing expected Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton last year as a "war hawk" who would scare voters with her interventionism.

"I think odds are overwhelming that the presidential debate will be between a Democratic Party seen as weak on foreign policy and national security and a Republican Party seen as strong on those things," Bauer said. "And here was Rand Paul positioning himself as the exact opposite."

Surveys in Iowa have found voters eager to fight terrorism overseas, and almost every other major Republican candidate has called for tougher United States military action on a broad scale.

Historically, though, foreign policy rarely drives presidential elections. Even now, economic concerns were on top as the biggest concern of voters. [ACBS News poll Feb. 13-17](#) found about one in five people named the economy as the country's most important problem. Islamic extremism and terrorism were far behind.

Paul also benefits from not having his father's quirky, sometimes way-out-of-the-box style. He has borrowed one key strategy that helped his father: Wooing new voters. [Entrance polls showed nearly half of voters under 30 voted for Ron Paul in 2012](#). This year, a Des Moines Register/Iowa poll found [Rand Paul led the 2016 Republican field among voters under 45](#).

"Rand Paul can help us to unite the youth more than most of the candidates," said Suzy Mulligan, a Republican activist from Virginia.

Social issues could play a role in the conservative Iowa caucus, however, and Paul has put out mixed messages on that front. He's described himself as not a crusader on social issues, but recently he spoke to a group of pastors about a "moral crisis" in the acceptance of same-sex marriage.

He's the only major potential Republican presidential candidate who hasn't commented on Indiana's controversial religious freedom law, which critics say would permit businesses to deny service to gays.

Paul could be more comfortable when the early nomination campaign moves from Iowa soon afterward into more socially moderate East Coast states, where voters are more interested in conservative stands on the economy and other policy issues.

"That gives candidates like Paul and Walker a bit of an advantage," said Andrew Smith, director of the [University of New Hampshire Survey Center](#).

Paul's brand of libertarianism plays particularly well in New Hampshire, the "Live Free or Die" state, which holds the nation's first primary. [A Franklin Pierce University/Boston Herald New Hampshire Poll](#) last month found Paul was the most popular Republican, with a 57 percent favorable rating.

Chris Edwards, an economist at the libertarian Cato Institute, said he believes Paul's speaking skills and knowledge of the issues gives him potential to reach a much broader audience than his father. And the odds he'll keep his father's legions intact are good.

"Looking at the dozen or so presidential candidates here," Edwards said, "I don't see anyone outflanking him on the libertarian side."