

# Rand Paul builds 50-state network, courts mainstream support for presidential bid



Ben Margot/AP - Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) speaks at the Berkeley Forum on March 19 in Berkeley, Calif.

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Sen. Rand Paul has become the first Republican to assemble a network in all 50 states as a precursor to a 2016 presidential run, the latest sign that he is looking to build a more mainstream coalition than the largely ad hoc one that backed his father's unsuccessful campaigns.

Paul's move, which comes nearly two years before the 2016 primaries, also signals an effort to win the confidence

of skeptical members of the Republican establishment, many of whom doubt that his appeal will translate beyond the libertarian base that was attracted to Ron Paul, the former Texas congressman.

Rand Paul's nationwide organization, which counts more than 200 people, includes new backers who have previously funded more traditional Republicans, along with longtime libertarian activists. Paul, of Kentucky, has also been courting Wall Street titans and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who donated to the presidential campaigns of George W. Bush and Mitt Romney, attending elite conclaves in Utah and elsewhere along with other GOP hopefuls.

For the rest of this year, his national team's chief duties will be to take the lead in their respective states in planning fundraisers and meet-ups and helping Paul's Washington-based advisers get a sense of where support is solid and where it's not. This is especially important in key early primary battlegrounds, such as Iowa and New Hampshire, and in areas rich in GOP donors, such as Dallas and Chicago.

“A national leadership team is an important step, and it's a critical one for the movement going forward,” said Fritz Wenzel, Paul's pollster. “Rand has tremendous momentum, and the formation of this team will guide him as he gets closer to a decision and [will] serve as a foundation for a campaign.”

A growing number of Republicans have started to consider presidential campaigns. Aides to New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) are sketching out how possible bids could look and keeping tabs on donors and potential staffers. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.), Texas Gov. Rick Perry and Rick Santorum, a distant runner-up to Romney in the 2012 race for the GOP nomination, have been wooing conservative leaders.

At this early juncture, Paul is consistently at or near the top in polling. A CNN/ORC International survey this month found that 16 percent of Republicans and independents who lean Republican were likely to support Paul, putting him at the front of the Republican field. Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), the 2012 GOP vice-presidential nominee, was second, at 15 percent.

Paul's leadership team is set up as part of Rand Paul Victory, a group that pools donations. It is a joint committee that overlaps the fundraising efforts of Rand PAC, Paul's political-action committee, and Rand Paul 2016, his Senate campaign, and it is described by Paul aides as the basis for a presidential campaign.

"There are people in every state who have joined Team Paul, with the money people ready to go," said Mallory Factor, a consultant and South Carolina Republican who has worked with Paul to expand the senator's footprint.

Kevin Madden, a former adviser to Romney and House Republican leaders, said the development of a national

network was a notable moment in pre-primary positioning.

“This framework of supporters is an important building block in the architecture required to build a competitive national campaign,” Madden said. “What looks like just a name is often someone who knows local reporters, has a fundraising network or has an ability or history of organizing party activists.”

Democrats are closely watching Paul as he moves to become less of a fringe figure than his father, who struggled to resonate with Republicans beyond his fervent base.

David Axelrod, director of the Institute for Politics at the University of Chicago and a former strategist for President Obama, said, “He’s certainly creating buzz, and when I saw him at Romney’s donor meeting in Utah, it showed seriousness behind what he’s trying to do, beyond all he’s done from a message standpoint.”

Axelrod dismissed the criticism of those consultants in both parties who have said Paul needs to enlist more veteran hands and tap a well-known Republican strategist with deep presidential campaign experience.

“David Axelrod wasn’t David Axelrod until he was,” Axelrod said.

At the Romney retreat last year in Park City, Utah, Paul gained some fans among the GOP elite. Though few

pledged to back him should he run for president, they did warm up to him.

“Going in, people weren’t sure. Most of them didn’t know him,” recalled Ron Kaufman, a Romney confidant. “But they had these one-on-one meetings with him and came away saying he’s a sharp guy. They were still in the grieving stage, not ready to think about 2016, but their opinion of him increased rather dramatically.”

Nevertheless, many Republicans question whether Paul can build a campaign that could win a national election.

“I think he’s dangerously irresponsible,” said Rep. Peter T. King (R-N.Y.), who is mulling his own presidential bid and has been critical of the GOP’s tea party wing, including Cruz. “I can’t believe responsible Republicans will support this guy, who’s a modern version of Charles Lindbergh.”

The decision to swiftly expand and announce Paul’s national political infrastructure — which will be fully unveiled this spring — comes after reports describing Paul’s operation as unready to compete nationally.

But it was finalized this month at a meeting at a Hampton Inn in Oxon Hill, Md., during the Conservative Political Action Conference. Speaking to more than 40 members of Paul’s circle, his strategists emphasized consolidating the sprawling support Paul has amassed into a coordinated apparatus.

Paul, who also spoke, said he will not make a final decision on a run until the end of the year, but he indicated that he is leaning toward getting into the race and wants a well-staffed political operation to move on all fronts — fundraising, advertising, Internet presence and volunteer coordination — if he does.

Paul's national team plans to huddle once every quarter, with weekly calls between the meetings. Foreign policy advisers, such as former ambassador Richard Burt and Lorne Craner, a former State Department official, are expected to be part of the chain of command.

Joe Lonsdale, a hedge-fund manager, is also onboard, as is Ken Garschina, a principal at Mason Capital Management in New York. So are Donald and Phillip Huffines, brothers and Texas real estate developers; Atlanta investor Lane Moore; and Frayda Levy, a board member at conservative advocacy groups Americans for Prosperity and the Club for Growth.

From the state parties, outgoing Iowa GOP chairman A.J. Spiker and former Nevada GOP chairman James Smack have signed on, and a handful of Republican officials are preparing to join once their terms expire, including Robert Graham, chairman of the Arizona Republican Party.

Drew Ivers, a former Iowa GOP chairman and Paul supporter, said Paul is “seriously building” a Hawkeye State network, but said much of the activity has gone unnoticed by Washington observers because it is mostly on social media. “In June 2007, Ron Paul's name

identification was zero,” Ivers said. “These days, 95 percent of Iowa Republicans know Rand Paul.”

Paul’s chief political adviser, Doug Stafford, and his fundraising director, Erika Sather, will manage the bolstered organization. Their challenge will be to construct a presidential-level operation that is able to court both the family’s long-standing grass-roots activists as and wealthy donors.

Sather, a former development director at the Club for Growth, spent much of the winter introducing Paul to donors beyond the rich libertarians who poured more than \$40 million into Ron Paul’s 2012 presidential campaign. Stafford, a former adviser to several conservative groups, has mined the donor lists of the Campaign for Liberty, FreedomWorks and other advocacy organizations.

Cathy Bailey and Nate Morris, two prominent GOP fundraisers from Kentucky, were also instrumental in bringing the group together.

Morris, previously a fundraiser for George W. Bush, has served as Paul’s guide as the freshman senator has navigated steakhouse dinners and tony receptions with Wall Street and Silicon Valley leaders.

“The bones for the network are there,” Morris said. “We’ll take that and bring in new talent, people who could be like Spencer Zwick was for Mitt Romney’s on finance. Among donors, there’s a fever out there, people are looking to rebrand the party and they haven’t yet been tapped.”

Last year, Rand Paul Victory raised \$4.4 million, with nearly half of its fourth-quarter donations coming from high-dollar donors, typically those who give more than \$500 and often contribute the legal limit.

Paul's pitch at these gatherings combined his antagonism toward the National Security Agency's surveillance programs with a discussion of issues such as drug-sentencing reform and what he calls "crunchy conservatism," a focus on the environment and civil liberties.

In June, in a pilgrimage to Facebook's headquarters in Palo Alto, Calif., Paul spoke with the company's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, and wrote a Patrick Henry-inspired social-media message — "Give me liberty to post" — on a hallway chalkboard.

Nurturing relationships with Bob Murray, a coal baron and former Romney bundler, former Bush bundler Jack Oliver, who is aligned with former Florida governor Jeb Bush, and Blakely Page, an associate of billionaire industrialists Charles and David Koch, has been a priority.

Those big-name donors have yet to sign on with any potential Republican candidate, but Paul's supporters believes the formation of a leadership team could entice them, or at least signal Paul's seriousness to them.

Billionaire Peter Thiel, the cofounder of PayPal, is another looming figure in Paul's constellation of friends, advisers, and possible bundlers. He stays in touch with Paul,



occasionally meets with him, and is one of his top West Coast allies. Another is San Francisco businessman John Dennis, who once ran for Congress against Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), the current House minority leader.

Jesse Benton, Ron Paul's former campaign manager who is running Sen. Mitch McConnell's reelection campaign in Kentucky, and Trygve Olson, a Paul ally and an adviser to American Crossroads, a Karl Rove-affiliated super PAC, are two more Paul supporters who could join his camp after the midterm elections. Rex Elsass, who has worked for Ohio Gov. John Kasich (R), has agreed to serve as Paul's media strategist.