

Ted Cruz to announce presidential bid Monday

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U.S. Politics

Senator will be first declared GOP candidate

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Sen. Ted Cruz is ready to run.

Sen. Ted Cruz plans to announce Monday that he will run for president of the United States, accelerating his already rapid three-year rise from a tea party insurgent in Texas into a divisive political force in Washington.

Cruz will launch a presidential bid outright rather than form an exploratory committee, said senior advisers with direct knowledge of his plans, who spoke on condition of anonymity because an official announcement had not been made yet. They say he is done exploring and is now ready to become the first Republican presidential candidate.

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The senator is scheduled to speak Monday at a convocation ceremony at Liberty University in Virginia, where he is expected to declare his campaign for the presidency.

Over the course of the primary campaign, Cruz will aim to raise between \$40 million and \$50 million, according to advisers, and dominate with the same tea party voters who supported his underdog Senate campaign in 2012. But the key to victory, Cruz advisers believe, is to be the second choice of enough voters in the party's libertarian and social conservative wings to cobble together a coalition to defeat the chosen candidate of the Republican establishment.

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Yet critics of Cruz argue that he will have trouble raising high-dollar donations from traditional contributors, will land few endorsements from the nation's political establishment and be unable to escape comparisons to President Barack Obama, who also ran for president in his first Senate term. And if he advances to a general election, Cruz trails likely Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton solidly in early public opinion polls.

"I don't consider him a mainstream candidate, and usually to win you've got to be inside the 45-yard lines," said Greg Valliere, a political adviser to Wall Street firms who believes that if Cruz did earn the nomination, he would not win more than a dozen states in the general election. "The enthusiasm for him will be tremendous in maybe a third of the party, but another third of the party will be strongly opposed and another third of the party will be wary."

'Mushy middle'

Senior advisers say Cruz will run as an unabashed conservative eager to mobilize like-minded voters who cannot stomach the choice of the "mushy middle" that he has ridiculed on the stump over the past two months in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina.

"Ted is exactly where most Republican voters are," said Mike Needham, who heads the conservative advocacy group Heritage Action for America. "Most people go to Washington and get co-opted. And Ted clearly is somebody that hasn't been."

Upon arriving in Washington, D.C., Cruz discarded the expectation of deference that accompanies a freshman senator, launching frequent one-man stands to stymie congressional Democrats and Republicans alike. After Cruz led a shutdown of the federal government in October 2013 as part of an effort to defund the Affordable Care Act, conservative activists flocked to their new hero even as Republican leaders excoriated him.

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For Cruz, 44, Monday's planned announcement will culminate two years of open musing about running for president that began nearly the moment voters elected him to the Senate in 2012. A week after Election Day, as senator-elect, Cruz established a political action committee to back conservative candidates nationwide. During his first summer in Congress, he was already visiting Iowa.

And over the past seven months, the Jobs, Growth and Freedom PAC has added a coterie of nationally experienced political operatives to the 2012 team of Texas strategists who engineered the surprise dethroning of Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst in the Republican primary. Joining the team Monday will be Cruz's wife, Heidi, a managing director at Goldman Sachs in Houston, who will take leave from the firm and accompany her husband on the campaign trail.

Those staffers have relocated to an Upper Kirby modern headquarters with empty offices reserved for soon-to-arrive senior staff and an empty deep pink and heart-red playroom reserved for their young children. About two dozen staffers now pace the sleek L-shaped, wraparound-windowed office that gives the finance team a prime view of U.S. 59. The senator's personal office is windowless.

This new blood, led by campaign manager Jeff Roe, and old guard, led by 2012 chief strategist Jason Johnson, will converge to try and persuade primary voters to elect Cruz after nominating more moderate candidates in the past two presidential elections.

"He's alienated from the dominant wing of the party," said Valliere.

Cruz's senior advisers, however, see a path to victory that all but ignores that wing. To them, the Republican primaries are a series of single-elimination brackets where the four GOP leaders who best represent the party's libertarian, establishment, social conservative and tea party wings will survive as the field winners. Cruz will vie for the support of the tea party electorate, his advisers say, but will fare well enough with social conservative and libertarian voters to assemble a powerful coalition.

"Those guys who run for the middle have name ID, but they don't truly have one bracket they crush," said one adviser.

Getting religious voters

Forty percent of the electorate may vote for the establishment candidate, the advisers predict, but Cruz will "crush" with the 25 percent of voters who come from the tea party bracket. He will then peel some second-choice support from the 10 percent who consider themselves libertarians and from the rest of the voters who identify as social conservatives.

Advisers to Cruz, the son of a pastor, believe he can make a special argument to these religious voters like the thousands of students he is expected to address at a basketball arena Monday at Liberty, a school founded by leader of the religious right Jerry Falwell. About half of the voters in the Iowa caucus this year are expected to be evangelical Christians.

That theory - and those percentages - is described by some Republican hands as overly charitable to the element of the party that Cruz represents. Henry Olsen of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative think tank, said the Cruz campaign was dramatically underestimating the voting power of the liberals, moderates and establishment Republicans in a presidential primary. Olsen argued that about 70 percent of the party will choose the candidate who aligns with the left or the center.

"They seem to like experience, they seem to like rhetorical modulation, they seem to like conservatism - but not in excess," Olsen explained. "Ted Cruz has nothing to say to the moderates."

As soon as Cruz entered the U.S. Senate, he became perhaps its most unpopular member. House Speaker John Boehner - whose chamber Cruz has on occasion helped disrupt - has not minced words. Fellow Republican U.S. Sen John McCain called him a "wacko bird."

In September 2013, Cruz triggered a 16-day government shutdown when he pressured Congressional leadership not to fund the government unless it defunded President Barack Obama's signature health care law. For 21 hours, Cruz led a filibuster of the spending bill, reading "Green Eggs and Ham" on the Senate floor as part of an unsuccessful stand to defund Obamacare.

"He burned a lot of bridges in 2013 and '14 in the Senate," Valliere said. "Regardless of how strident the people are when they first come to Washington, they are elected to legislate."

Yet David Panton, who is the lead donor for a "super PAC" committed to raising \$50 million to back a Cruz presidential bid, said that antipathy from Washington would matter little in a presidential primary not decided by denizens of the Capitol - or the "graybeards" as Cruz calls them - but by farmers in Iowa and veterans in South Carolina.

"I know of no president who won because of who endorsed them, other than voters," he said.

Cruz will also need to court the endorsements of donors, believing that he needs about \$30 million to compete in the top tier. Some of Cruz's easiest money will be gathered from the donors who will host a kickoff reception for him on March 31 in Houston.

Some of those local contributors have known Cruz since his childhood. Born in Canada to a father who, as the senator so-frequently tells it, escaped despotism in Cuba with \$100 sewn into his underwear, Cruz moved to Houston at age 4. He became educated by the nation's elite: winning national championships as a debater at Princeton University; working as a primary law-review editor at Harvard Law School; clerking for Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist.

"I thought he would make a great statesman in some capacity, so was it shocking to me that he ran for the Senate? No," said Panton, who was Cruz's debate partner at Princeton and the best man at his wedding. "Is it shocking to me that he may run for president? No."

Experience questions

Cruz made his fame in Texas as solicitor general under then-Attorney General Greg Abbott. Cruz defended the installation of the Ten Commandments on the grounds of the Texas Capitol, which brought headlines and fueled his political ambition. In 2009, he briefly considered running for attorney general, but quickly abandoned his bid.

Three years later, a U.S. Senate seat opened up, with Dewhurst's name practically carved into it. Cruz, making his first run for political office, seized on the same anti-establishment fervor that had ousted Republicans perceived as too moderate in primaries two years prior. He defeated Dewhurst, who invested \$25 million of his own money into the race.

In Cruz's new campaign - like in that first one - he will be confronted with questions about his experience.

This year, though, he will also need to rebuff comparisons to Obama. That has been an all-too-easy jab for Cruz's more experienced competitors to throw.

After Monday's announcement, Cruz will not immediately embark on a roll-out tour because of obligations in the Senate, senior advisers said, but he is scheduled to appear in New Hampshire on Friday and in Iowa two weeks later.

In late June, Cruz will unveil a new book: "A Time for Truth."

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