

Can Ted Cruz's Faith-Based Campaign Appeal to New Hampshire Voters?

Republican presidential hopeful Ted Cruz's performance in New Hampshire's primary election on Tuesday will be a referendum on the Southern evangelical's appeal to Northern conservatives, a breed he is not used to courting.

Cruz is fresh off a victory this week in Iowa, the first contest in the race for the nomination ahead of the Nov. 8 presidential election, and the U.S. senator from Texas is betting his undiluted religious conservatism will deliver a strong finish in New Hampshire.

Cruz's campaign does not anticipate a win in New Hampshire. Polling shows national front-runner Donald Trump – who has tighter links with the region as a New Yorker – with a roughly 20 point lead in the state.

But placing second will be crucial if Cruz hopes to keep momentum in a crowded Republican field that includes Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush and John Kasich. It could also foretell his appeal in the populous Northeastern states in later contests.

"We don't expect to win here," Cruz spokesman Rick Tyler told Reuters in New Hampshire. "We expect to do well here."

At a town hall event in Windham, New Hampshire, this week, Cruz – wearing jeans with a silver-plated belt and an open-collared shirt – pitched himself to voters as the candidate who could unite disparate groups of conservatives in the mold of former Republican President Ronald Reagan.

"What we're seeing that is so encouraging – it's what we saw last night in Iowa, but it's what we're seeing in New

Hampshire and all across the country – is we're seeing that old Reagan coalition coming back together," Cruz said.

As in Iowa, Cruz in his New Hampshire appearances invoked Bible verses, emphasized religious freedom and closed by asking the crowd to pray that God would "awaken the body of Christ to pull us back from the abyss."

Cruz's scripture-infused style was well-aimed at Iowa's evangelicals but could be less suited for one of the least religious states in the country.

Some people who have knocked on doors for Cruz in New Hampshire said they had heard complaints about Cruz's propensity for quoting the Bible, and they instead tried to emphasize his tax plan or defense of their rights to own guns.

Robert Diack, 53, a Cruz supporter from Pelham, New Hampshire, said he appreciated Cruz's willingness to share his faith but thought other, more liberal voters could be turned off. "It will be interesting to see how he fares here," he said.

Conservative culture-clash has been a problem for other Republican campaigns too. Recent Republican Iowa winners, including former Senator Rick Santorum in 2012 and former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee in 2008, had weak showings in their New Hampshire contests.

No Tailoring

But Cruz's campaign co-chair in New Hampshire, William O'Brien, said the campaign had made a clear decision not to adjust his approach for New Hampshire.

"In this race, the best way to connect with voters is to be genuine. That's why he's not tailoring his message here," he said. "We've talked a lot about this since we've been together."

This strategy could play into Cruz's efforts to brand himself

an “authentic” conservative in contrast to Trump whom Cruz paints as a political chameleon with “New York values.”

Trump leads the Republican field nationally with 38.4 percent in a recent Reuters/Ipsos poll. Trump’s second-place finish in Iowa came as a surprise, as did the strong third-place result by U.S. Senator Rubio of Florida.

Cruz has also invested in a robust ground game in New Hampshire. His campaign rented a 40-bed dorm in Chester to house some of its 2,000 volunteers, and door-knockers and callers use apps to target potentially receptive voters.

“He has a real organization with real money behind it,” said Charlie Arlinghaus, president of New Hampshire free-market think tank Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy. Cruz had \$19 million on hand at the end of 2015.

But he has also been criticized for making fewer than 20 visits to New Hampshire, less than many rivals.

Cruz’s spokesman said the senator is keeping some focus on later primary states, including those where a Southern conservative message may resonate more strongly.

(Additional reporting and editing by Richard Valdmanis in Manchester, New Hampshire; Editing by Cynthia Osterman)

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