

Crunch Time for Rand Paul at U.S. Conservative Event

With Republican rivals like Scott Walker and Jeb Bush off to a strong start in the 2016 U.S. presidential race, Rand Paul will seek his own breakout moment at an annual gathering where hopefuls go to burnish their conservative credentials.

Of all the potential candidates speaking at the meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference, the Kentucky senator should feel most at home. He won the event's presidential straw poll the last two years, buoyed by support from young libertarian-leaning conservatives who plan to turn out in force again this year.

The 52-year-old Paul, famous for his non-interventionist approach to world affairs, could find himself at odds with a growing hawkishness among other Republican hopefuls mustering support with their calls for more aggressive action against Russia and Islamic State militants.

"He's got a challenge to overcome," said Al Cardenas, former chairman of the American Conservative Union which organizes the event known by its acronym, CPAC.

Due to speak on Friday, Paul can nonetheless count on a generational divide of sorts between the party's traditional foreign-policy hawks and younger activists who have come of age during 13 years of nonstop U.S. engagement in wars.

"We've grown up in war in Afghanistan and Iraq and we all have friends who have gone overseas and either have not come back or have come back mentally scarred. There's a toll that's been taken on young people in this war," said Jeff Frazee, executive director of Young Americans for Liberty, a libertarian group that has had a heavy presence at recent CPAC gatherings.

The influence of libertarians can be seen this year on panels that will tackle criminal-justice reform and marijuana legalization, as well as more traditional topics such as abortion and President Barack Obama's signature healthcare act.

SHARED SPOTLIGHT

With 20 months to go before the election, Walker, 47, and Bush, 62, will each have a moment in the CPAC spotlight.

Walker, the Wisconsin governor, is riding a surge of conservative support from a warmly received speech at the Iowa Freedom Summit last month but came under fire this week when he demurred on whether he believed Obama was a Christian.

Bush, the former Florida governor seen as the establishment favorite, has sought to crowd out rivals with an intensive fundraising push. His Friday appearance will test his appeal to conservatives who oppose his support for Common Core education standards and immigration reform.

CPAC can be risky terrain for an establishment candidate. Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney drew widespread derision on his way to capturing the Republican nomination in 2012 when he argued he had governed the liberal-leaning state in a "severely conservative" fashion.

The father and brother of former presidents, who has been out of office since 2007, Bush will share the stage with a new generation of conservatives forged by the Tea Party movement.

Paul's family name has goodwill attached due to the multiple presidential campaigns run by his father, former Texas Congressman Ron Paul, whose isolationist positions had a narrow yet noteworthy appeal in a segment of the Republican Party.

Paul defenders say Paul has been clear about his support for

action against Islamic State. “He wants to make sure it’s done in a targeted, smart way with a clear plan for victory,” said Jesse Benton, a Paul friend and former aide.

Republican strategist Ron Kaufman said Paul’s objective is twofold: To retain his father’s rabid base of support but make clear he is not in lockstep with him. “It’s a fine line he has to walk,” Kaufman said.

The straw poll result will be announced on Saturday.

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