

Ted Cruz Enlists Christians for White House Bid

Casting himself as the leader of a grassroots army, Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz made an explicit appeal to Christian conservatives on Monday as he became the first major figure to jump into the 2016 U.S. presidential race.

Cruz's unyielding tactics in Washington have made him a hero to many on the Tea Party right and a thorn in the side of the Republican establishment. Seeking to break into the front ranks of candidates, Cruz solicited the support of born-again Christians who play a major role in states with early nominating contests.

Speaking at Liberty University, a Christian school founded by televangelist Jerry Falwell, Cruz discussed his Baptist faith in personal terms and urged religious conservatives who have sat out recent elections to get off the sidelines.

"Imagine instead millions of people of faith all across America coming out to the polls and voting our values," he said.

Cruz's prominent role in the 2013 government shutdown made him one of the better-known politicians in America even as he made enemies in both parties on Capitol Hill. Becoming a senator only two years ago, he made his mark last year with a 21-hour speech against Obamacare on the floor of the Senate.

But the Harvard-educated son of a Cuban immigrant starts the race for the November 2016 election as a second-tier candidate. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker have locked down deep-pocketed donors and built sophisticated campaigns-in-waiting as they court voters across the country.

Cruz, 44, came in third in an informal poll of activists last month at the Conservative Political Action Conference, and Reuters/Ipsos tracking polls show him statistically tied with five other potential candidates, well behind Bush and Walker.

As the first to jump into the race, Cruz will get extra attention from the media and voters for several weeks as he tries to position himself as the conservative alternative to more centrist candidates like Bush and Walker.

MOBILIZING THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

Campaign aides told the Houston Chronicle they do not expect to appeal to moderate or establishment-minded voters, but instead aim to run strongly among self-identified Tea Party members and pick up support from libertarians and religious conservatives.

That could help Cruz in early-voting states like Iowa, where 57 percent of Republican caucus goers identified as evangelical or born-again Christians in 2012. Cruz will likely have to compete for their support with former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, who won Iowa in 2012, and former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, who won in 2008.

Liberty University president Jerry Falwell Jr. said many evangelicals have sat out recent elections out of disappointment with the more centrist candidates that have won the party's nomination.

"Certain Republican candidates have promised so much and delivered so little over the last 25 years and I think that's the reason. If someone could mobilize that bloc, it would be amazing," Falwell told Reuters.

Speaking without notes, Cruz employed the cadence of a preacher as he told an overflow crowd of 11,000 about the religious journey of his father, who left the family when Cruz was three years old but returned after joining a Baptist

church.

“If not for the transformative love of Jesus Christ, I would have been ... raised by a single mom without my father in the house,” Cruz said.

In his speech Cruz called for the repeal of President Barack Obama’s signature healthcare law and the abolition of the tax-collecting Internal Revenue Service. He cast divisive social issues in religious terms, referring to the “sacrament of marriage” and the “sanctity of human life.”

Cruz drew some of his strongest applause when he accused Obama of playing down the religious elements of Islamic State and fostering conflict with Israel, an important issue for evangelicals.

“I believe God isn’t done with America yet,” Cruz said. “I believe in the power of millions of courageous conservatives rising up to reignite the promise of America.”

Cruz’s birth in Calgary, Canada, has raised questions about his eligibility for the White House. The U.S. Constitution requires that the president be a natural born citizen. Cruz has said he qualifies by virtue of his mother having been an American citizen by birth.

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