

GOP Sen. Rand Paul gives Spokane his presidential pitch

Kip Hill/SR

Republican presidential hopeful Rand Paul told a packed room of Spokane supporters on Wednesday he believes the GOP could capture Washington's electoral votes in 2016, if they supported a candidate like himself.

"I think the only way Republicans would have a chance in Washington is to have a more liberty-minded Republican, a more libertarian Republican," Paul said after the speech.

Paul, the freshman senator from Kentucky who turned heads nationwide with a 13-hour filibuster challenging President Barack Obama's use of surveillance drones in 2013, is polling at about the middle of the pack in a crowded Republican field. His speech to Spokane supporters – one stop on a whirlwind Western tour that also includes events in Alaska, Idaho, Wyoming and Utah – was largely free of political barbs, instead focusing on how the Constitution should inform public policy.

At the event in the Doubletree Hotel in downtown Spokane, Paul criticized the Obama administration for leaving behind weapons and cash in the Middle East that are now being used to fund the activities of extremists.

He said he'd push for a Senate floor vote on defunding the beleaguered Planned Parenthood, which has come under fire following the release of videos implying the group accepts profits for fetal tissue – a claim the nonprofit flatly denies.

But most of all, Paul extolled his support for the Bill of Rights, saying the Republican Party should nominate a candidate who wholeheartedly supports all the amendments to the Constitution.

"It's not just the Second Amendment. We're pretty good on the Second Amendment. And if you think I don't believe in the Second Amendment, come into my house, unannounced," Paul said, to laughter from the crowd.

But Paul also talked about the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth amendments, particularly the issue of civil asset forfeiture, which has gained national prominence since an expose was published in the Washington Post last year. Paul condemned the police practice of taking money and property from suspects in crimes, which he said disproportionately affected the poor and minorities.

"You are stopped, sometimes in a neighborhood, and they say, 'Why are you driving so slow in that neighborhood?' And sometimes they'll say – they won't say this – 'Why are you black, driving in that neighborhood?'" said Paul, clad in jeans, a red tie and shirtsleeves.

The lawmaker's libertarian bent has been compared to his father, Ron Paul, who served in Congress as a representative from Texas. The elder Paul captured Spokane County's Republican caucus as a presidential candidate in 2008.

But Rand Paul's plan for the Republican Party to take Washington's 12 electoral votes is likely a tall order. No GOP candidate has done that since Ronald Reagan took 55 percent of the state's popular vote in his landslide 1984 re-election.

Yvonne Storhaug was one of the first in line to have a copy of Paul's book, "Taking a Stand," signed following the rally, which was attended by about 300 people. She said she didn't have much faith a Republican could overcome the large liberal voting bloc on the Western side of the state, but she showed up to support Paul just the same.

"He doesn't change with the wind," Storhaug said of Paul. "I'm not sure who I'm going to vote for, but I trust him. And there's not a whole lot of candidates you can trust."

Brad Davis, a tradesman from Spokane, said he appreciated Paul's economic policies, which he thought would keep jobs in America. Among other things, Paul said he would do away with the IRS and simplify the tax code. Davis also said he supported Paul's foreign policy.

"His concept on that sounds like being a good neighbor," Davis said.

Paul said after the event he was encouraged by the size of the crowd, which he said continues to grow after the first Republican debate earlier this month.

Some groups took issue with the Paul campaign's choice of who would introduce the senator. Rep. Matt Shea served as emcee, and failed congressional candidate Clint Didier spoke for several minutes before Paul took the stage. Both have compared the acts of Planned Parenthood to the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany.

Paul's comments on the group were more tempered. He said he thought people were horrified by the controversial fetal-tissue videos and called a vote on defunding the group "inevitable," though he conceded Republicans likely wouldn't have the votes to cut off funding.

Eric Walker, a spokesman of the Democratic National Committee and director of Jewish media for the group, called Paul's choice of speakers unconscionable.

"Rand Paul should denounce this irresponsible and inflammatory rhetoric, and he should pick his stage guests more carefully," Walker said in a statement after the event.

Paul stands seventh in fundraising among the Republican presidential hopefuls, and stands as a 2 percent dark horse to win the Republican nomination, according to the analysis group PredictWise, which has Jeb Bush as the favorite at 39 percent, followed by Marco Rubio at 15 percent and Donald Trump at 13 percent.

Paul also appeared at an event on the campus of North Idaho College on Wednesday evening.

