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Shades of Red

Crist-Rubio debate highlights rough and tumble race

BY: [KENRIC WARD](#) | POSTED: MARCH 28, 2010 11:57 AM

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Charlie Crist, Marco Rubio Debate on Fox (Photo: Fox News Sunday/Freddie Lee)
Charlie Crist and Marco Rubio tangled before a national audience on "Fox News Sunday," and Republicans say the debate reinforced "defining differences" between the U.S. Senate candidates.

It also raised concerns among state party leaders.

In a statement released minutes after the debate, Republican Party of Florida Chairman John Thrasher said:

"While I appreciate our candidates' passion for this race and strong desire to serve, I was disappointed in some instances when they appeared to be moving away from the issues and utilizing personal attacks, which I don't believe benefit the people of Florida, or our party.

"I am looking forward to the next opportunity to hear more about the records and vision of Governor Crist and Speaker Rubio, and hope that moving forward, our candidates concentrate solely on discussing the issues that are important to the voters of our state," said Thrasher, a state senator who lives in St. Augustine but maintains his district office in Jacksonville.

Al Cardenas, a former state Republican Party chairman who supports Crist, said there were "no surprises" in the debate -- though he worried that the fractious primary fight could be counterproductive.

"Clearly, (there were) two distinct choices by two quality, top-tier candidates who, for the good of the order (GOP), should not be running against each other."

Cardenas applauded Crist because "he didn't modify his points of view to suit the audience. That will work well for him in the long run."

But former Florida Senate President Tom Lee said the Sunday showdown "revealed a solutions-oriented campaign vs. a campaign that doesn't want to have a serious debate.

"Clearly, (Crist) doesn't want to have a deep intellectual conversation about his record. But his personal attacks didn't get any traction," said Lee, who supports Rubio.

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Who won Sunday morning's GOP senatorial debate?

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- Marco Rubio

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Cardenas defended the governor, saying, "In spite of spending a significant portion of his time allotment taking on the speaker's ethics record, he came across as a likable candidate and put an end to the 'running as an independent' rumor."

Crist repeatedly accused Rubio of working as a "lobbyist" while serving as speaker of the Florida House. The governor also charged the Miami lawyer with utilizing a "\$600,000 slush fund," hammering away at Rubio's use of party credit cards and campaign committees.

"Whose interest was he really looking out for?" Crist asked.

Cardenas noted that "the speaker decided to brush off the ethics attacks rather than to respond to them."

"This is probably best in front of a Fox audience. I don't know if it will work as well while debating on other networks."

The candidates also sparred on taxes, with Crist taking heat for signing a 2009 state budget containing \$2.2 billion in new taxes and fees. Rubio was questioned for supporting a tax shift that would raise sales taxes in a "swap" with property taxes.

Crist defended his record by noting that the conservative Cato Institute once anointed him the "most fiscally conservative governor" -- a title he no longer holds.

"A lot of liberties were taken with the truth. And in a 40-minute debate, there's insufficient time to get to the bottom of the story," Lee said.

When moderator Chris Wallace asked Crist if he would have voted for the stimulus package, the governor said yes. That would have made him one of just four GOP senators to support it.

Rubio said he would have voted no. "For Florida Republicans," Rubio said, "the choice is pretty clear." The Tea Party movement apparently agrees.

"Crist proved he believes it's the government's role to stimulate the economy by picking and choosing the winners and losers in the economy while printing money and borrowing it from future generations," said Jason Hoyt of the Orlando Tea Party.

"The difference in the candidates could not be more clear and is fundamental to understanding and promoting free markets," added Hoyt, who co-hosts the "Tea Party Patriots Live" radio show from Central Florida.

On health care, Crist announced that he now favors a "repeal" of the newly enacted law. Previously, he had only said he was "disappointed" by its passage.

Rubio said America cannot afford the bill and supports a market-based "private" health-care program that features broader buyer pools and tort reform.

The federal health-care plan appears to be increasingly unpopular with Floridians. A Mason-Dixon poll released Saturday showed that only 34 percent of respondents supported the plan while 54 percent opposed it.

Crist dinged Rubio for entertaining an increase in the eligibility age for Social Security. It's an attack that has been a hallmark of Democratic candidates in presidential campaigns.

But Lee said Rubio "took the responsible approach, not the populist approach... The program has to be maintained in an actuarially sound way."

Crist, in naming his role models, said he most admires Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., and fashions himself as a "pragmatic, commonsense conservative."

Rubio -- who has been endorsed by rock-ribbed conservatives ranging from Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., to tax anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist -- summed up by telling Crist: "We can't trust you, governor, to stand up to President Obama."

One viewer, not surprisingly, was unimpressed with either candidate.

U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, who is seeking the Democratic nomination in the Senate race, released a statement blasting "two feuding rivals who put their personal, petty disputes ahead of the needs of hardworking Floridians."

"We didn't hear solutions to Florida's problems today, just more ideological rhetoric that does nothing to reverse the greatest economic meltdown to affect Florida families in generations."

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