

POLITICAL HAY

Marco Gets It

By [Larry Thornberry](#) on 10.26.09 @ 6:08AM

TAMPA -- Former Florida House Speaker Marco Rubio of Miami is one of the most conservative of the new names seeking U.S. Senate seats in 2010. He's 38, the son of blue-collar Cuban immigrants, and he compiled a solid conservative record in eight years in the Florida House, the last two as speaker.

Rubio is challenging Florida's sitting Republican governor Charlie Crist for the nomination to the Senate seat Mel Martinez recently resigned from. But in his campaign speeches his political target is more the Obama administration and its leftward lurch than it is Crist, whom he rarely mentions.

Early in the year Rubio wasn't given much of a chance. Crist, though of no discernible philosophical stripe and of no accomplishment anyone could point to, was popular, and a money-machine, as governors can be, on the campaign trail. Rubio, by contrast, trailed Crist in most polls by 25 points or so, and wasn't raising much money. In August, if the race were a fight, the ref would have stopped it.

But then some interesting things started to happen. Rubio has run a vigorous campaign. He's gotten positive notice from national conservative pundits and publications for his record and his campaign planks. He raised more than a million dollars in the last fund-raising quarter. The latest polls show Crist's job approval numbers dropping and Rubio has cut the Crist lead in half in two months, even though there are still many Republican Floridians who don't know Rubio. There's ten months left before the August primary and Rubio has the mo. This one is now a race.

It's a race because of the problematic nature of Crist. Crist, at different times has been called a moderate, a populist, a liberal, and a conservative. On many issues of importance, Crist feels very strongly both ways. He's been all over the political map, one time talking about keeping taxes and government spending and intrusion down, other times whooping up cap and trade and championing our rookie president's stimulus slush fund. His conservative credentials are further inconvenienced by the fact that he's recommended Florida adopt California's expensive auto emissions standards, was enthusiastic about the Kennedy/McCain "We Don't Need No Stinking Borders Act of 2007," has recently appointed a liberal justice to the Florida Supreme Court, and is totally absent whenever it's time to say positive things about conservative social issues.

In Florida's Senate primary next year, Florida Republicans have about as clear an ideological

choice as is ever found in a Republican primary. Before a campaign appearance Friday night in front of a few hundred enthusiasts at a dinner put on by the North Tampa Republican Club, I had a chance to sit down with Rubio. His answers to my questions give a feel for what kind of a conservative he is.

TAS: *Why do you think your campaign is increasingly successful, both in collecting money and in better poll numbers?*

Rubio: I think it's because my candidacy offers Floridians the opportunity to decide that we don't want to be the party of cap and trade, that we don't want to be the party of stimulus, that in fact we want to send people to Washington who will stand up to the direction this administration is taking our country and offer a clear alternative. We already have a Democratic Party. We doesn't need two Democratic parties.

The base is enthusiastic about our candidacy. An authentic center-right message, an authentic limited-government message is where the mainstream of American politics is. The extremists in American politics are the ones who want government to take over our economy. The extremists are the ones who want government to dictate energy policy. The extremists are the ones who want America to become more like the rest of the world and less like the exceptional country that we know and love. Those are the ones who are out of touch with everyday Americans. Those of us who believe government shouldn't spend money it doesn't have, who believe the government shouldn't become so involved in the economy that it becomes impossible to open a business in the spare bedroom of your home, we're in the mainstream of American thought.

TAS: *You're making a lot of appearances. Your ground game, aka retail campaigning, has been producing results. Will you be sticking with it?*

Rubio: When someone meets you, when they hear you speak in person, when someone in their lives that they know refers you to them, when they hear good things about you from a neighbor, a friend, or a loved one, that kind of support is permanent and lasting and meaningful and has roots. When all people know about you is what they've seen in a 30-second TV commercial, an alternative 30-second commercial can take them away from you. So I like the way we're building our name recognition. When we started very few people knew who we were. Now it's clear that at least half of Florida's Republicans have come to learn about us, and of that half an overwhelming majority support us. Now we have the other half to reach. They'll be harder to reach and it will take some money to get there. But we're going to reach them in a way that is lasting and meaningful. That's why I'm confident that we're going to win this election.

TAS: *Charlie Crist has run some ads where he claims he's a conservative because, he alleges, he cut \$7 billion from Florida budget this year, while failing to mention that Florida's constitution requires a balanced budget, the recession diminished Florida's state revenues, and the Florida Legislature was obliged to cut the budget. Crist really didn't have much to do with it. What does this tell you?*

Rubio: He's running that ad all over the state and spending a significant amount of money doing it. I think behind that ad is the cynical idea that if you can raise enough money you can fool people. You can get them to forget who you were, and in fact you can re-invent yourself. I don't think it's going to work.

Anyone who goes to paid advertising this early in the campaign is scared about something. We've heard the ads that Charlie Crist has run on the radio, where for example he claims that the Cato Institute ranks him the nation's number one conservative governor. Cato now says that was before Charlie raised taxes and fees in Florida by \$2 billion, before he embraced cap and trade, before he went on stage and supported Barack Obama's stimulus package. And we know all the other parts of his record that are troubling. He seems to have this notion that he can raise enough money to confuse people about what he's about.

My campaign is going to tell people who I am. I have a record in public service that I'm proud of. The things I'm talking about and supporting today are no different than the ones I supported three years ago when everyone was saying we needed to moderate our message. I'm confident about who I am and am prepared to campaign on that.

TAS: *Now that you have some money, you have a lot of national attention, and you're closing the gap between you and Charlie Crist, are there going to be new wrinkles in your campaign?*

Rubio: We'll get busier; it will get more intense. Obviously there will be some new things, hopefully some debates as soon as possible so people can actually see first-hand the choice they have in this election. But our message isn't going to change. I know who I am and why I'm running. I'm running because America is the greatest country in the history of the world. And I believe that everything that has made America great is now being challenged. We need to send people to Washington who'll stand up to this administration and the direction it's taking our country. I don't believe there's any other candidate in this race who will do that. That's why I'm running.

TAS: *Couldn't Charlie Crist do that?*

Rubio: When you're just a few months removed from standing on a stage in Florida and supporting \$800 billion in deficit spending, it's hard to envision that person going to Washington and being a counterbalance to that. The stimulus money isn't our tax money. Our tax money is spent years ago. The stimulus money is borrowed money from the Chinese and printed money from the Federal Reserve. I believe what Charlie Crist stands for and has supported is incompatible with the mainstream of the Republican Party. And this campaign is about giving Republican voters a choice.

TAS: *You've just finished a good fund-raising quarter with more than a million dollars collected. Is the money still coming in?*

Rubio: Yes. About 98 percent of our contributors can continue to give because they haven't maxed out. Our average contribution is barely over a hundred dollars. That means our contributors can continue to donate over and over again. Our plan is to build a consistent finance base that will every month contribute to our campaign and that's how it's working. I'm very optimistic about it.

TAS: *Any plans to hold a fundraiser in the Hamptons (as Crist has)?*

Rubio: No (laugh).

TAS: *You've clearly gotten Charlie Crist nervous.*

Rubio: If I were running in a Republican primary after supporting cap and trade, the stimulus package, amnesty for illegal aliens, and the ACORN plan to restore the rights of felons to vote automatically, I'd be nervous too.

TAS: *Florida, with almost 20 million people and 10 media markets, is supposed to be too big for a candidate to make a difference by retail campaigning, but you seem to be doing it. What's that like?*

Rubio: I'm excited about the direction things are going. It's all positive. It's hard work. We have to work 10 times as hard to raise a tenth of the money. When it's 11:30 at night and there's two hours left on the drive home, sometimes it's difficult. My daughter is a cheerleader. She's only nine, but she's got a game tonight where's she's cheerleading and I'm going to miss that game. Those are tough times. But I remind myself that I'm running to be a voice for her and for her generation.

That's what this campaign is about. If we continue down this path, theirs will be the first generation in our history to inherit a diminished country, one worse than their parents had. They deserve better. I want to be in the Senate because I think that's the ideal place to stand up to this agenda that is radically redefining the relationship between the government and the American people, and the American economy. If we continue down this line, if we accept this radical definition of the American government, we will never again be the prosperous and free people we've been for the last hundred and some-odd years. I have an opportunity to be a voice in hopes of enlisting as many of my fellow Americans as possible to the idea that this great and prosperous and exceptional nation can continue.

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