

WHY REPUBLICANS NEED MARCO RUBIO



Written by JOY-ANN REID



Much attention has been paid lately to the swiftly declining political fortune of Florida Gov. Charlie Crist. He was once the undisputed frontrunner in the U.S. Senate race, and now he is the underdog (and perhaps, soon, an independent.)

Crist's downfall began last February, when he made the mistake of being too nice to the president of the United States while accepting stimulus funds. The Republican base despises Barack Obama, and hugging him was a bridge too far, even for a guy the Libertarian CATO Institute named America's most fiscally conservative governor.

Crist's decline wasn't just about "the hug" – it was attended by a groundswell of support for a previously little-known politician named Marco Rubio, the 2007-08 speaker of the Florida House, who has gone from barely there to establishment candidate in less than a year.

Rubio is the singular star of the national Republican Party, endorsed by party bigwigs and beloved by conservative pundits, the right-wing blogocracy, Fox News and the tea parties.

So what's Rubio's magic?

It's not his record. During eight years in the Florida House, including two as speaker, Rubio steered more than \$250 million to pet projects, according to a newspaper analysis, including \$21 million to Florida International University, which later hired him as a part-time professor.

Politifact.com says Rubio voted for tax increases as a West Miami commissioner, and for school district tax hikes in the House. He pushed for a massive statewide sales tax increase to replace most property taxes, which would have cost Floridians some \$9 billion.

As speaker, Rubio declined to force immigration legislation to the floor, and angered the gun lobby.

He also presided over a mountain of spending, including nearly \$400,000 for a private dining room for House members, and hefty salaries for his staff.

Recent newspaper investigations have revealed that Rubio was one of several Republican officials who went to town – literally – on their campaign-donor-funded American Express cards, in Rubio's case, spending freely on expensive haircuts, wine, computer accessories, repairs to the family minivan and a family reunion in Georgia, which Rubio attended with several political pals, dubbed his "12 disciples."

Rubio presided over a breathtaking culture of entitlement in Tallahassee, much of it signed off on by then-party chairman Jim Greer, who was himself engaged in an orgy of lavish spending that puts Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele to shame. Rubio's handpicked budget chief, Ray Sansom, faces criminal charges for allegedly steering tax money to a campaign donor.

Yet the GOP remains mesmerized by Rubio, and no amount of scandal can turn them away.

The reason may be demographics.

Republicans face a daunting problem illustrated by their tea party base, which a recent New York Times/CBS poll identifies as almost exclusively older, male and white. In a country that is increasingly younger, female and brown, that presents unbearable challenges for what is

supposed to be a national party.

Hispanics are the fastest-growing part of the American electorate, and Sen. John McCain got just 31 percent of their votes in 2008 (versus George W. Bush's 40 percent in 2004.) A leading cause is the party's harsh rhetoric on illegal immigration, something that's only growing more strident.

Of the 28 current Hispanic members of Congress, only four are Republicans (three of them from Florida) — a nearly 50-percent decline in Republican Hispanic membership since 2006.

Republicans desperately need black and brown candidates who can win statewide (or even the White House) to stave off becoming a rump party. Having failed to launch Bobby Jindal, and stuck with Steele, they're betting that Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants and a young (under 40) conservative, will be their Obama.

And yet, to win over the GOP base, Rubio has followed his party to the far right. If he has national ambitions, he'll have to go even further, particularly on immigration. (He got the ball rolling this year by saying "illegals" shouldn't be counted in the U.S. Census – an idea that would cost Florida hundreds of millions of dollars.) But in doing so, Rubio risks alienating fellow Latinos.

It's a conundrum further complicated by inter-ethnic dynamics. Outside of Florida (and New Jersey), most Latinos are of Mexican descent. Even in-state, the fastest-growing Latino group isn't Cubans, it's Puerto Ricans. Latinos are no monolith, and won't necessarily respond in Pavlovian fashion to any brown face the GOP dangles in front of them, ignoring his background and views.


In the end, Rubio could wind up being less an Obama than a Latino Clarence Thomas – glorified by the right as proof of their diversity; but too far out of the mainstream among his own to be the GOP's ethnic savior.


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written by Gill, April 24, 2010
oy-Ann Reid is a writer and media/political strategist who worked on President Barack Obama's Florida campaign.



That says it all.


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...
written by Brad, April 24, 2010
Conveniently enough, Ms. Reid isn't aware that there are now more African-Americans running for US Congress in 2010 than there have been since Reconstruction.



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