

## 5 ways Crist can top Rubio

By [Adam C. Smith](#), Times Political Editor

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Almost daily, some supposedly savvy Florida political operative insists Charlie Crist has already lost the U.S. Senate race.

It's a crazy suggestion considering Gov. Crist is leading Republican rival Marco Rubio by about 20 points in recent polls and so far has four times as much money to spend in the GOP primary.

But Crist, 53, is in a free-fall among likely Republican voters, say Crist supporters and detractors alike, while Rubio's trajectory is heading straight up. Crist's credibility among hard-core Republicans is practically gone, they claim, while the contest's ever-growing national attention ensures Rubio won't be as overwhelmingly outspent.

It's nine months before the primary — way too early for predictions. What's clear, though, is that Crist's long-held image as a man with remarkable gut instincts for politics and people is shot.

It took him way too long to wake up to Rubio, and then he kept handing ammunition to critics, such as lamely insisting he did not endorse the \$787 billion stimulus package that he campaigned for.

It's a pretty strong sign he's in trouble when the once-inevitable Senate nominee starts airing radio ads nearly a year out touting his conservatism. Crist's mostly self-inflicted wounds are real but not necessarily fatal.

Governor, if you're reading this, here are five things you should do to fight Rubio's insurgent threat:

**1. Govern.** Enough with the constant fundraising trips to places like Vegas and Arizona, and with the superficial photo ops. Put your head down and actually accomplish something.

Even if it's a token something — say, finally hammering out a gaming deal you don't especially like — do enough where you can declare victory with a straight face. Better yet, come up some kind of jobs program. Maybe accelerate state contracts to put more Floridians to work.

And hard as it may be, stay away from those staged media events and lighter-than-air press conferences. The images of you praising cops or kids or running to the cameras whenever some big crime story erupts are wearing thin in this grim economy. So unless the media hit involves the creation of at least 10 jobs, stay away.

**2. Aggressively start questioning Rubio's record.** The new hero of national conservatives is a lot better with rhetoric than accomplishment, so it's perfectly fair game to raise the same empty suit questions about him that his allies raise about you. Rubio, 38, barely looks 30, so it shouldn't be too hard to portray him as a kid needing much more seasoning.

**3. Lay off the "I'm more conservative" stuff, because nobody buys it.** In the 2006 gubernatorial primary, it was easy to out-conservative Tom Gallagher, a lifelong moderate, but Rubio is no Tom Gallagher.

You can start attacking Rubio for wanting to raise sales taxes while lowering property taxes, of course, but then you'll just have to explain why you've supported similar proposals. Plus Jeb Bush might jump in to defend Rubio if you go overboard and get too nasty, and that's one sleeping giant you don't want to prod.

Here's another thing: Cut the phoney, laughable claims — how you didn't endorse the stimulus bill; how you didn't know what Obama was doing in Florida recently; how the CATO Institute — lately calling you a big disappointment — loves your record; or how you slashed \$7 billion from the budget, when in fact the economy did that for you. These claims only lead to more stinging coverage cutting away at your credibility.

**4. Show some principle.** Even it doesn't poll well with likely GOP voters, take a stand on something. Declare you don't want drilling

3 miles off the coast. Or that you still support cap-and-trade policies because you support market forces. Or that, like Bush, you're not afraid to criticize your party's anti-immigration rhetoric. Just show some spine and conviction on *something*.

Otherwise, it looks like your only core principle is winning another election, and then you might not.

**5. Very quietly start recruiting a stronger Democratic candidate.** One of the best things Rubio has going for him is Kendrick Meek, the Democratic frontrunner widely viewed as a weak general election candidate. With a formidable Democrat in the race, even the ideological purists in your party will appreciate your bipartisan appeal and start to have second thoughts about risking the Senate seat to Democrats.

Maybe get some of your trial lawyer pals to start twisting the arms of U.S. Reps. Kathy Castor or Debbie Wasserman Schultz or former gubernatorial candidate Jim Davis.

Failing that, try to pump up former New Hampshire Sen. Bob Smith, a Sarasota resident often overlooked as a candidate in your primary. The more splintered the conservative primary vote, the better for you.

So what's the advice for Rubio to win this race?

Keep doing exactly what you're doing, former Speaker Rubio, and hope Crist keeps doing exactly what he's doing.

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