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GUILLETTE: Some sunshine in Florida

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COMMENTARY:

On the surface, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist appears to be the rising star in the Sunshine State. Mr. Crist won a landslide election, maintains high approval ratings and was considered as a potential vice presidential choice by Republican nominee John McCain. In addition, he was even ranked the most "fiscally conservative governor in the country" by the Cato Institute - beating out even South Carolina's budget hawk Gov. Mark Sanford.

Many Florida conservatives, however, have a very different hero - Marco Rubio. Considered by grass-roots activists to be the "Cuban Newt Gingrich," Mr. Rubio is an idea-man who focuses on free-market solutions to current problems. As a state representative, Mr. Rubio held "Idea Raisers" around Florida where citizens could offer suggestions to make state government more efficient and effective. He took the best of these and published them in a book titled, "100 Innovative Ideas for Florida's Future."

Many of the ideas dealt with education and school choice, and nearly all were exceptionally conservative. One of the more revolutionary proposals was a Florida version of the fair tax to replace all property taxes with a sales tax increase.

Mr. Crist ran for governor promising to make property taxes, "Drop like a rock," but property taxes have increased for many Floridians. Mr. Rubio wants to end them entirely!

In 2007, Mr. Rubio was elected Florida's speaker of the House. Leading a strong conservative

House majority, he battled a moderate Republican Senate president as well as Mr. Crist. To prepare for this challenge, he surrounded himself with former Jeb Bush advisers.

While Mr. Crist hosted global warming "summits" proposing big-government solutions to a debatable problem, Mr. Rubio wrote op-eds in the Miami Herald advocating free-market solutions to environmental concerns. While he was speaker, all but one of his "100 ideas" passed the House. Ultimately, 57 were signed into law, a remarkable batting average.

While House speaker, Mr. Rubio also backed a Florida version of the taxpayer bill of rights. This proposal would have tied state and local government spending increases to inflation and population growth. Any increases beyond the cap would have required voter approval. Excess revenues would have been credited to the taxpayers. Conservatives were thrilled. Yet, the moderates were terrified.

The Florida TABOR was debated by a special panel empowered to take any legislation and place it directly on the ballot as a proposed amendment to the state constitution. The panel meets only once every 20 years and has 25 members appointed by Mr. Crist, Senate President Ken Pruitt and Mr. Rubio, all Republicans. Many of Mr. Rubio's appointees had close ties to still-popular Jeb Bush, and they all voted for the proposal. Some made passionate, eloquent arguments in favor of limited government and fiscal responsibility.

In contrast, one of Mr. Crist's appointees openly advocated creating a state income tax. Seven of Mr. Crist's 11 appointees voted against the spending cap. In the end, the proposal failed by one vote.

Mindful of significant upcoming budget shortfalls, Mr. Rubio worked hard to eliminate and consolidate state agencies to save money. At the time, this idea was considered extreme. Now that the budget fears have become reality, this suggestion has gained popularity throughout state government.

Mr. Crist gave up one of his most powerful tools as governor by declining to veto a single piece of legislation in last year's budget. Perhaps the Cato Institute credits Mr. Crist as a fiscal conservative simply for compromising with Mr. Rubio and signing his budgets!

Having been term-limited out of the House, Mr. Rubio's next goal is clear: The U.S. Senate.

Viewed by many as the heir-apparent to Jeb Bush, Mr. Rubio will be the candidate-of-choice for conservative Floridians. Mr. Rubio was even recently endorsed by Jeb Bush Jr., son of the former governor, as well as social-conservative-favorite Mike Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor.

Standing in his way is primary opponent Mr. Crist.

Fortunately, conservatives are beginning to realize they need more leaders like Mr. Rubio. No one can look at Mr. Crist and view him as the future of the party. He's an "old white guy" and a populist. Mr. Rubio is a stark contrast - young, Hispanic and principled.

Mr. Rubio's strong Reagan-Republican beliefs are only eclipsed by his ability to electrify a crowd and motivate the base. Handsome, sharply dressed and well spoken, Mr. Rubio earns standing ovations from conservatives and moderates with stories about the struggles of his ancestors in Cuba and his affection for America.

Mr. Crist might speak like a conservative, but Mr. Rubio behaves like one. If anyone questions his credentials, he need only to walk in Mr. Rubio's office - where a picture of Marco Rubio and Newt Gingrich hangs by his desk.

Jeb Bush recently said that the party needs to stop looking back to Reagan and start looking toward the future. Marco Rubio is that future.

Adam Guillette is executive director of the Conservative Leadership Political Action Committee.

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