



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on January 12, 2010

Rubio: The First Tea Party Senator?

The Republican primary in Florida, which pits Governor Charlie Crist against Marco Rubio, is being watched carefully as a harbinger for the impact the Tea Party may have on the midterm elections. Six months ago Crist was leading all challengers, according to Rasmussen Reports, but now Crist is tied with former state House Speaker Marco Rubio.



On social issues, Crist takes traditional conservative positions including support for gun rights and capital punishment, and opposition to elective abortion and same-sex marriage. He supported John McCain's candidacy for President in 2008, but got in trouble by supporting Obama's stimulus bill. According to Rasmussen,

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Crist angered many conservatives in the state when he embraced President Obama's \$787-billion economic stimulus plan. While the Republican establishment has endorsed Crist, many prominent GOP conservatives including Mike Huckabee, South Carolina Senator Jim DeMint and former Bush adviser Karl Rove are backing Rubio. Nationally, the GOP's Florida Senate race is being watched as a test of the new "Tea Party" mood among many conservative and traditionally Republican voters.

At the moment, both Crist and Rubio are running significantly ahead of the likely Democrat challenger, Kendrick Meek, and so whoever wins the August primary has an excellent chance to win the seat in November.

As a moderate, Crist is seen by conservatives to be guilty of consensus-seeking, deal-making, and bipartisanship — all characteristics of the "big tent" philosophy of the Republican Party. In commenting on that "big tent" philosophy, Crist said, "If the [Republican] party narrows the focus too much, there's great risk in terms of not being successful in elections." Some prominent Republicans disagree. Mike Huckabee told Mark Leibovich of the *New York Times*, "For a lot of people this race has become a real classic encounter between whether [Republicans are] going to be a let's-be-all-things-to-all-people party or whether we're going to be a principled conservative party that espouses things out of genuine conviction." He added that to "accommodate every view [would] kill the conservative movement."

Marco Rubio, Crist's opponent in the upcoming primary, is drawing a lot of attention from and support by Tea Party activists who like his "purist" ideology: limited government, personal freedom, and no compromise on important principles. Rubio states his case eloquently: "There are people who believe the way to be more successful as Republicans is to be more like Democrats. And the people who believe we need to be more like Democrats will vote for Charlie. The biggest danger facing America today are politicians who will say or do anything to get elected, who treat elections like an athletic contest."



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When asked about the potential for weakening the party with a divisive primary battle, Rubio said, “We are not debating stimulus bills or tax codes. We are debating the essence of what government should be and what role it should play.”

Senator Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) said, “I would rather have 30 Republicans in the Senate who really believe in principles of limited government, free markets, free people, than to have 60 [who] don’t.” And that is the essential difference between the two candidates: one is a pragmatist, the other is an idealist. Says Crist of his support of the Obama stimulus bill, “There is a significant difference between being a legislator and being the C.E.O. of a state. You have a duty to the people.” Without those stimulus funds, Crist says that 20,000 teachers would have lost their jobs. “I could have made a political statement and said, ‘Well, too bad for you, teachers, I’m not going to take that money.’ Well, come on, I don’t know what kind of a cold heart is able to do that. But I don’t have a cold heart in my chest.”

Erick Erickson, at RedState.com, says that the primary in Florida has become a “hill to die on for conservatives. This primary has become a lot more than just a Senate race.” A Rubio victory could serve as a signal that Republicans don’t have to compromise in order to appeal to moderates. DeMint said, “There was all this talk that conservatives couldn’t win in certain states, like Pennsylvania or Florida. [In the past] we had to go out and find middle-of-the-road Republicans who could bridge the gap between Republicans and independents. So when someone like Rubio came along, who is not milquetoast, not lukewarm, who very clearly is a conservative, an American, and independents flock to him, it sends a message.”

At present all the momentum is behind Rubio. With his rise from obscurity just a few months ago to challenging a highly popular incumbent governor, his poll numbers are remarkable. According to Erickson, Rubio has won “every single straw poll of every single county in Florida that has had them so far.” In the straw vote in Pinellas County, Crist’s own county, the GOP straw vote was 106-54 in favor of Rubio. These numbers are so strong that Erickson is now predicting that Crist [will drop out of the race altogether](#).

Whether Rubio’s supporters can pull this off remains to be seen. The primary isn’t until August 24. And the Tea Party groups, according to Leibovich, exist under a variety of umbrellas, with different agendas and aims. “Some are organized into formal political-action committees; others are little more than a ragtag of protestors. It is not clear whether these Tea Party amalgams will ever grow into a functional and cohesive political movement that can actually get candidates elected to office.”

In all the sources consulted for this article (Redstate.com, *National Review*, the *New York Times*, *Rasmussen Reports*, etc.), there was not a single mention of the Constitution of the United States. The Tea Party activists are currently running on grass-roots excitement and news-media attention that do not automatically translate into an effective functional political organization. Liebovich says that, “Campaigns are ultimately decided by the practical and the tangible — fund-raising, organizing, votes.”

Success in this primary may in fact be decided by excitement and attention. But if such campaigns are built around personalities instead of principles, the fight for freedom will not succeed. Rubio is the keynote speaker next month at the Conservative Political Action Conference. Many are expecting him to expound on the basic principles that guide his decisions and positions. He says, “I’m not a fan of personality-based politics. I’m just a messenger for a set of ideas.”

It would be instructive and comforting if that “set of ideas” includes the principles and limitations so clearly spelled out in that unique American document, The Constitution of the United States.



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Photo of Charlie Crist (left) and Marco Rubio: AP Images



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