

Florida Gov. Crist considers independent Senate run despite GOP pressure

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10:55 P.M. — TALLAHASSEE — Gov. Charlie Crist said Monday he may quit his GOP primary race and run for the Senate as an independent, his once-promising career threatened by fast-rising conservative opposition.

After weeks of insisting he would stay in the Aug. 24 primary, Crist told The Associated Press in a phone interview he intends to be “very, very thoughtful and deliberate” as he makes up his mind. The governor trails conservative rival Marco Rubio by double-digit margins in public polls after holding a huge lead at the outset.

Matt Caldwell, a Republican candidate for the Fort Myers state House seat held by Rep. Nick Thompson, and a Rubio supporter, said it would be a “foolish decision” for Crist to run as an independent after decades in the Republican party.

Caldwell said it would be a mistake for Crist to “jump at the last moment because things don’t look good.”

Caldwell said his feelings are not based on any polls showing Crist has a better shot to win as an independent.

“It’s a long shot no matter how you slice it,” he said.

The race is being closely watched nationally as a test of the strength of the tea party movement vs. more moderate Republicans. Rubio rose from

obscurity to a favorite among conservatives with strong support from tea party activists. Crist, a moderate leader in one of the nation’s largest states, had been considered a potential GOP presidential or vice presidential nominee.

Under pressure

Crist said he intends to listen to Florida residents as he decides his political future. He must make up his mind by the April 30 deadline to get on the ballot, and he cannot run as an independent if he gambles on the primary and loses.

Rep. Kendrick Meek is the likely Democratic nominee.

Just two years ago, Crist was riding high within the Republican Party, a popular governor on the short list for vice president on the GOP ticket. When Republican Sen. Mel Martinez announced his retirement, Crist was seen as a shoo-in for the job, a possible steppingstone to a presidential run.

But Crist’s fortunes were upended by his embrace — literally and figuratively — of President Barack Obama and his \$787 billion stimulus package along with the state’s economic woes and the strong challenge from the right.

Now top Republicans are pressuring him to quit rather than run as an independent.

“If Governor Crist believes he cannot win a primary then the proper course of action is he drop out of the race and wait for another day,” Rob Jesmer of the National Republican Senatorial Committee wrote in an e-mail to consultants.

NRSC Chairman Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, who last

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May endorsed Crist, has tried calling him to convey the same message, but Crist didn't return the call, Jesmer said.

Urged to quit

"If any of you have influence with Governor Crist, we hope you will call his campaign and encourage him to do the right thing," Jesmer wrote. He also said he thought there was "zero chance" Crist would stay in the GOP primary.

Crist said he planned to return Cornyn's call, but that it's Floridians who will influence him.

"I care what my fellow Floridians think and what their thoughts are much more than anybody from Washington," Crist said.

A year ago, a Quinnipiac University poll showed Crist ahead of Rubio by 46 percentage points. Last week the same poll showed Rubio ahead by 23 percentage points. Meek is the leading Democrat in the race.

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, campaigning with Rubio in Tampa on Monday, also said Crist should either stay in the primary or drop out altogether. He said he expects Crist to "do the right thing."

Romney is often mentioned as a potential 2012 presidential candidate, and backing Rubio could help endear him to Republican voters uncomfortable with his moderate stands on abortion and gay rights when he ran for office in Massachusetts.

Rubio speaks up

In an interview after the event, Rubio declined to pressure Crist to drop out, saying the reason he is running will not change no matter who is in the race.

"I think we need to send someone to Washington who will stand up to the Obama agenda and offer an alternative, and both Kendrick Meek and Charlie Crist, I think, to one extent or another, would support the Obama agenda," Rubio said. He said he hadn't thought about how his campaign strategy would change with Crist running as an independent.

Crist, Rubio and Meek are running to fill the seat held by George LeMieux, Crist's former chief of staff. Crist appointed him after Martinez resigned before completing his first term, saying he wanted to spend more time with his family.

— news-press.com reporter **Ryan Lengerich** and **The Associated Press** contributed to this report.



Florida Gov. Charlie Crist
(The Associated Press)

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