
A liberated Crist hits Senate trail on his own

By BRENDAN FARRINGTON , 05.02.10

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. -- Gov. Charlie Crist feels liberated.

He's no longer shying away from President Barack Obama or the fact that he campaigned for the \$787 billion federal stimulus package, he vigorously defended a veto of an education bill that was a priority for Republican lawmakers and he seemed relieved not to have to have to give GOP ideology at a campaign event.

Crist, once a Republican superstar, announced last week that he was going to run for Senate without a party. Sunday was his first campaign event as a non-Republican candidate and he more firmly than ever defended his appearance with Obama last year - an event that helped lead to his plummeting poll numbers in the GOP primary with Marco Rubio.

He said he was raised to be respectful of people - especially the president. So when he had the opportunity to appear with Obama in February 2009 at a stimulus rally, he had no problem accepting.

"When some in my former party criticized that, I thought, 'Something's wrong. That's just not right. It's not right,'" Crist told a mix of more than 100 Republicans, Democrats and independents who attended a fundraiser at a posh Miami Beach hotel. "And that's not what my family stood for. It's not how I was raised and that's not how I'm going to go forward."

While Republican leaders in Florida and Washington have criticized Crist for abandoning the party, calling him a political opportunist, the governor was surrounded by a group of people that liked his independent thinking.

"It's exactly what we need," said Ben Solomon, a Miami real estate lawyer who isn't registered with either party. "The question is, 'Do you think independently?' The answer should always be 'Yes.'"

Solomon said he was already planning to vote for Crist, but after the governor decided to go independent, he will actively work for him, helping him raise money and recruiting support. Crist has said he plans to change his voter registration to no party affiliation.

Polls show that Crist has a chance running as an independent where he had little shot if he stayed in the primary against Rubio, a former House speaker with a conservative anti-Obama message who gained his first support through the tea party movement.

Rubio rose from obscurity to take a better than 20 percentage point lead in the polls over Crist among Republican voters. One reason is because he repeatedly mentioned Crist's appearance with Obama and showed the photo of the two men embracing. He says Crist can't be trusted to stand up to Obama's agenda.

In November, Crist went on CNN and tried to distance himself from his support of the stimulus, saying, "I didn't endorse it. I didn't even have a vote on the darned thing."

Sunday was a completely different story.

“Every single governor took it. Do you know why? Because No. 1, you’d have to be a moron not to take it,” Crist said. “And No. 2, it was important for the people. Some people can put politics in front of people, or before them. I won’t do that.”

Crist said the stimulus has saved 87,000 jobs in Florida, including those of 20,000 teachers.

“It was the right thing to do,” he said to applause.

While many Republicans have turned their back on Crist, former Senate President Ken Pruitt brought a \$2,400 check to the event. In introducing Crist, he held up a newspaper headline about the governor’s decision to run on his own.

“This is wrong,” Pruitt said, waving the newspaper. “He’s not going it alone. He’s got the people.”

Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Alvarez, a Republican, also appeared with Crist, as did Republican Sen. Mike Fasano of New Port Richey. But it clearly wasn’t just Republicans loyal to Crist who were there.

Tom Panza of Broward County, who is a major fundraiser for Democratic candidates, also attended.

“He’s going to pull a tremendous amount of Democrats and Republicans and independents. He’s going to get most of the people in the middle, like all the walking around people who go to work every day and do what they have to do,” Panza said, adding he was not surprised by Crist’s decision. “The Republicans actually just kind of kicked him out.”

Brent Sembler, a longtime friend and a major fundraiser, said a lot of Democrats and independents have called him since Crist made his decision. He also said Crist seems to be a political victim of the Republican Party swinging too far to the right.

“Every since he’s made this decision, it seems like the pressure’s come off a little bit. He’s more himself,” Sembler said. “He’s a lot more relaxed now and I like to see that Charlie come back.”
