Republicans eye Hispanic half of the ticket

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By Richard McGregor in Washington

The Republicans have been squabbling over potential candidates for the 2012 presidential poll, lurching between established party figures and outsiders to nail down a conservative who can beat Barack Obama.

But the party’s leaders and grass roots collectively swoon over the person they believe makes the ideal choice for vice-president, a Florida senator who has been on the national stage for barely a year.

Marco Rubio was elected to the Senate in late 2010, riding the wave of the then nascent Tea Party to sweep aside the once highly fancied candidate, Charlie Crist, the then Republican governor of the state.

Since landing in Washington, Mr Rubio has been meticulous in building his brand, initially eschewing the national stage to entrench his state credentials, before stepping out with a series of speeches, focusing largely on foreign policy.

At 40 years old, the son of Cuban exiles is also at work cementing his narrative in his own words, with an announcement on Monday that a memoir is in the works.

In an interview, Mr Rubio insisted he would not be the vice-presidential nominee for the Republicans. “I am flattered at being mentioned but I think I can make a difference in the US Senate,” he said.

Mr Rubio, then the speaker of the Florida state legislature, solidified his reputation as a tough local operator with his defeat of Mr Crist. “One has to be a pretty bare-knuckle brawler to get somewhere in the statehouse,” said Kevin Wagner of Florida Atlantic University. “He made good use of the Tea Party to get into the Senate.”
But Mr Rubio has a too-good-to-be-true political biography that could broaden his appeal nationally at a time when the Republican base is narrowing.

“He’s the real deal,” said Vin Weber, a former Republican congressman. “He is a significant figure in Florida [a swing state] and among Hispanics, and he can animate the base without alienating moderates.”

In person, Mr Rubio is a brusque bundle of energy, and dispenses with the usual charms of the grand barons that populate the Senate. He does not get up from his desk to greet his visitor nor to say goodbye.

He remains defined by his childhood in an anti-communist household of Cuban exiles, an upbringing that has stamped him with a muscular view of US foreign policy.

“My grandfather in particular understood that the only thing that stood between other countries having to meet the same fate that his nation had suffered was the US willingness to stop that from happening,” he said.

Mr Rubio acknowledges the human cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. But at a time when few Republicans speak up for them, he argues the case for the benefits of intervention, which include the Arab spring.

“These are young democracies. They are not going to become Canada overnight,” he says. “But every time you read that someone in Iraq is going to the supreme judicial authority to get an issue resolved without resorting to violence, that is a positive development.”

Mr Rubio has consulted widely on foreign policy, including meeting Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, who ran the Pentagon under George W. Bush. Mr Wolfowitz in particular is a fan.

Domestically, Mr Rubio represents a beachhead for Republicans among Hispanics, the largest emerging voting bloc, who increasingly favour Democrats because of strident conservative attacks on immigration.

Immigration remains a minefield for Republicans and Mr Rubio picks his way through the issue carefully, saying the problem is one of “heated rhetoric across the political spectrum”.

“That leads people to believe, rightly or wrongly, that they want less of certain people to come to the country – that’s where people started to feel unwelcome and you get into trouble with that,” he said.

“A majority of Americans and Americans of Hispanic descent acknowledge that we need to have immigration laws and to have them implemented.”

At the moment, Republican attacks on immigration are killing the party’s broader message in the Hispanic community on the economy. The party sees Mr Rubio as someone who can counter that.

“The number one issue among Hispanic voters is economic empowerment,” he says. “It is a big mistake to deal with the Hispanic vote as some kind of monolithic voting bloc. It is not a bloc for either party, nor do I see it becoming like that.”