Florida's 2010 U.S. Senate race was made for headlines.

There was Marco Rubio, tea party darling and Cuban-American success story. Charlie Crist, former Republican governor turned independent. Kendrick Meek, little-known Democrat and scrappy challenger.

This year, with a Senate seat up for grabs again, it's just Connie and Bill. Two Washington veterans. Neither flashy. Neither loud. Just quietly floating along in the wake of a presidential race.

"There were just so many more dynamics in 2010," said Terry Miller, a Fort Myers-based Republican political consultant and volunteer fundraiser for Rubio's campaign. "This particular race is your atypical race. It just doesn't have the steam of the come-from-behind story Rubio had."

Three weeks before Election Day, neither incumbent U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson nor challenger Rep. Connie Mack has brought pizzazz to an otherwise listless race, unable to escape the shadow of presidential politics. Money has flowed and both candidates have started pounding the campaign trail, but pundits across the state said Florida's populace hasn't been energized by Mack or Nelson.

Onlookers have given myriad reasons for the lack of grassroots enthusiasm of the two candidates. They disagree on most every issue. They've only debated once, paltry compared to the six debates during the 2010 race. And as evidenced by last week's meeting, it's been a politics-as-usual campaign that turns off voters.

"It had potential to be competitive a few times throughout the process," said Mario Piscatella, a Democratic strategist based outside Jacksonville. "But throughout the months, it's been a bland, nonexistent adventure."

It's not to say there hasn't been interest in the campaigns.

Through the August primary, the two candidates combined to raise about $17.4 million, roughly half as much as the three candidates in 2010. Both candidates are touring the state — Mack is campaigning with Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney and Rubio Saturday in Land
O'Lakes. And Nelson has been targeted as a vulnerable seat in the Senate, where Republicans still hold longshot hopes of taking back power.

Nelson's campaign dispels the notion that enthusiasm for the incumbent has waned. It points to recent campaign stops that included a Jimmy Buffett concert and a speech to a few hundred people at The Villages, a Republican-heavy Central Florida community.

"In short, we're not seeing any lack of enthusiasm about the race," Nelson spokesman Dan McLaughlin said in an email.

For Mack, the quiet campaign could allow him to ride the surge of Romney, for whom Mack has been a prominent surrogate. Most polls have Romney tied or leading President Barack Obama in Florida.

Mack's campaign didn't respond to a request seeking comment. But in a post on Mack's campaign website, noted political consultant Arthur Finkelstein said the challenger likely will benefit from decreased enthusiasm among Democrats.

"Democratic turnout surely will be significantly less than in 2008," Finkelstein wrote. "And some of the Democratic vote that went for Obama will this time vote for Romney and the Republicans."

Nelson will hope 2012 mirrors his last senate re-election, when the Democrat ran a steady campaign en route to a 20-point win against Republican Katherine Harris.

"I'm not surprised there might be less buzz for a statewide race," said Mitchell Ceasar, chairman of the Democratic Executive Committee in Broward County, home to the second-most registered voters in Florida. "Nelson's not the type to shout off the top of a building. Nelson has kind of politically stayed afloat no matter what, and I expect that to continue in this race."

Without a strong grassroots following, Nelson, Mack and outside spending groups have moved the campaign onto the airwaves. During a three-week period in September, about $4.5 million was put into television ads, the fourth-most of any state, according to the Wesleyan Media Project, which analyzes ad spending.

"For Mack, this is not the kind of race he wanted to run," said Kevin Wagner, an associate political science professor at Florida Atlantic University. "I think he would have liked a much more vigorous kind of debate, but people are more concentrated on the presidential and House races. Plus, I think Nelson did a pretty good job sort of defining Mack in a less-than-positive race."

State GOP chairman Lenny Curry conceded it hasn't been a loud campaign, but voters will be heard at the polls.
"High-propensity voters are paying attention," Curry said. "They understand what's going on in the senate race, and they're going to make an educated vote."