Florida Democrats point fingers at Gov. Scott, GOP lawmakers

By GEORGE BENNETT

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Regardless of who wins the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, Florida voters can expect to hear a lot from Democrats about Rick Scott, George W. Bush and the tea party next year.

At the Florida Democratic Party's annual convention this weekend, about 3,000 party activists cheered whenever speakers mentioned that President Obama signed an historic health care law, ended the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy on gays and wound down the unpopular U.S. war in Iraq.

But some of the most passionate reactions from the Democratic audience came whenever Republican Gov. Scott's name was uttered.

"If I was going to give an award for the Democrat of the year, the person who's done more for the Democratic Party than anybody else for the last 12 months, it'd be Rick Scott," Florida Democratic Party Chairman Rod Smith told convention delegates today, drawing big applause.

On the crucial issue of the economy, however, the Democratic argument for Obama typically wasn't a simple applause line. Unemployment has climbed from 7.8 percent in January 2009, when Obama was inaugurated, to 9.1 percent last month, and polls show voters giving the president low marks for handling the economy.

Vice President Joe Biden and others blamed the nation's economic woes on a combination of Bush administration policies before 2009 and tea party-influenced Republican positions since the 2010 midterm elections. They accused Republicans of preventing an economic recovery by not supporting a $447 billion Obama jobs bill.

In a Friday night speech, Biden blamed tough economic times on "the policies of the last administration and the obstruction of this Republican Congress."

Republicans control the House but not the Senate in the current Congress. Democrats controlled both chambers during Obama's first two years in office.

"I'm not surprised that they're trying to blame the Republicans for everything now. They had majorities in the Senate and House and did nothing to help the economy," said Republican Party of Florida Chairman Lenny Curry.

Curry called the Democratic finger-pointing at the GOP "a political Hail Mary."
Republicans cast their 2010 midterm election victories, including the takeover of the House and a sweep of all five statewide elections in Florida, as a repudiation of Obama’s policies. Democrats attributed the midterm election results to the party being asleep at the switch.

"In 2010, frankly, we dropped the ball and we are now witnessing the disaster and the complacency that that brought us in Washington and here in Florida with Rick Scott," said Democratic National Committee Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who is a congresswoman from Broward County.

Her mention of Scott elicited lusty boos from the Democratic activists.

Scott's budget-cutting policies have brought high disapproval ratings since he took office in January. But Scott's 50 percent negative rating in a September Quinnipiac University poll was actually better than Obama's 57 percent September disapproval score in Florida.

Even if Scott remains unpopular, the notion that he'll influence the presidential race in Florida next year is a bit of a stretch, said Florida Atlantic University political scientist Kevin Wagner.

"It's probably wishful thinking (for Democrats) that it's going to drive the election. With that said, it's never helpful to have an unpopular governor," Wagner said.

But Palm Beach County Democratic Chairman Mark Alan Siegel contended that Scott will help give Florida voters a negative view of the entire GOP next year.

"I think he'll be a factor in Florida because it effects the brand. In other words, people look at the Republican Party as a whole and they see what that party stands for, what its policies produce as results," Siegel said. "Florida is a snapshot We're a laboratory for the deplorable results those policies produce."