2012 May Portend 2014 for Rick Scott and Charlie Crist

By: Jim Turner | Posted: November 5, 2012 3:55 AM

Though Tuesday will be a big day for Mitt Romney, President Obama and the nation, the results could also carry some weight into Florida’s 2014 gubernatorial contest.

Not that the outcome of Tuesday’s presidential contest will make or break Gov. Rick Scott’s re-election bid or the prospects of the overly-speculated aspirations of Charlie Crist.

But when the lights are finally turned off on Tuesday’s election, the Florida's capital punditry will shift to 2014, with one highlight being the re-election effort of Gov. Rick Scott.

Already some of the scripts have started to be written as Scott and Crist have taken dramatically different approaches to Florida’s position as a key swing state where 29 luscious electoral votes are at stake.

“A Romney victory in Florida and overall would be helpful to Scott and would suggest that Republicans are still the dominant party in statewide elections in Florida and set the stage for the governor's race,” said Aubrey Jewett, an expert in Florida politics as an associate professor and associate chair of political science at the University of Central Florida.

“An Obama victory in Florida would be helpful to Crist and re-energize the Florida Democratic Party.

“If Romney and Mack would both win in Florida this year, that would certainly suggest Scott has a better chance at re-election. However, this would still not be a lock as the Scott approval numbers are down and even though he would have a ton of money, Governor Scott would be much more well-known going into the race and have a harder time changing the public’s image about him -- especially if the Florida economy continues to drag and Scott as incumbent governor gets the blame.”
One aspect Scott will have to shake is his approval rating and the perception that he wasn’t hitting the trails with members of the Florida Cabinet for Romney.

In fact, Scott’s been called the invisible man on the campaign trail because he’s seldom stomping in the Sunshine State with those on the GOP’s presidential ticket -- a charge he has denied. In fact, he played against that charge recently, during a swing through Ocala Thursday, speaking up for Romney to campaign workers.

“As governor, you do have a job, but I was with Governor Romney in Palm Beach,” Scott noted to reporters in Tallahassee, shortly after the third presidential debate at Lynn University in Boca Raton.

While Scott sat near Ann Romney during the debate, Crist was noticeably seated in the section with First Lady Michelle Obama.

Crist, the Republican-turned-independent former governor, has been one of the most active surrogates for President Obama across Florida in the current cycle. He has taken on the role perhaps as payback for being labeled a RINO before getting brushed aside in the 2010 U.S. Senate primary, or to more firmly establish himself with Democratic voters for that speculated return quest for the governor’s mansion.

Either way, because of his tighter embrace of Obama, Crist has remained in the crosshairs of the Republican Party of Florida, featured in an ongoing “Two Faces of Charlie Crist” series of attacks that display the words of the former governor that once attacked Obama compared to his newfound fondness for the White House occupant.

Few expect Scott -- who has been learning to do a better job playing the partisan role despite not fully following the Romney national script when highlighting Florida’s economic growth -- to face any in party challenge.

The Democratic Party nomination is not something Crist will have handed to him, which in part is why many feel he has had to be more overtly pro-Obama in an attempt to win over Democrats.

"Over the course of his political career, Charlie Crist has proven himself to be a political opportunist," said Dan Smith, University of Florida professor of political science and past director of the political campaigning program.

“His support for President Obama during the campaign should come as no surprise to those who have watched his transformation from a Republican to an NPA to a likely Democrat. Whether or not Democrats in Florida will embrace the former governor if he runs in 2014 to challenge Governor Scott remains to be seen.
"But if President Obama is able to win Florida and stay in the White House, Charlie Crist will be well-positioned to take some of the credit."

Jewett says there could also be some positives for Scott with an Obama victory.

"An Obama victory would not be a disaster for Scott as he could still “run against Obama” as he did two years ago when supposedly he was actually running against Alex Sink!” Jewett said. “And if the economy continues to be soft, an Obama victory might allow Scott to transfer some of the blame to the other party."

Not everyone sees the presidential contest having any great influence on Scott or Crist into 2014.

“Charlie already has statewide name recognition, but he also carries plenty of negative baggage,” said Kevin Wagner, an assistant professor in the department of political science at Florida Atlantic University.

Besides, he noted there are a number of old hands such as Alex Sink, who lost to Scott in 2010, who have been making overtures about 2014.

Meanwhile, Scott has his own mountain to climb.

“His negatives are very high, his approval rating is still very low, so any Democrat who thinks they can make a viable campaign is going to take a look at this; it’s certainly a very winnable campaign” Wagner said.

“The problem is that in his first year he didn’t seem to navigate the politics of being governor very well and that’s sort of the problem that has stuck with him ever since.

“He’s clearly been a little more diplomatic, especially within his own party. The question is, will that be enough?”