Mike Haridopolos' Pullout Intensifies Scramble for U.S. Senate

Republican field remains open, and conservatives are still conflicted

Kenric Ward
Posted: July 19, 2011 3:55 AM

Adam Hasner, Craig Miller and Mike McCalister

Mike Haridopolos' withdrawal from the GOP Senate contest will put the party to a taste test. Which flavor of conservatism will Republicans choose?

"It's an interesting test case for the viability of the tea party movement," said Kevin Wagner, professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University.

"Adam Hasner is perceived as having the tea insurgency behind him. He's had some success at raising money from small donors," Wagner said.

On the other hand, George LeMieux figures to attract some of the establishment support that had gone to Haridopolos.

And LeMieux hasn't given up on garnering tea backing to go along with his fundraising, which led the field in the second quarter.

"This remains a very fluid race. When voters read and hear about George LeMieux's fiscal record, and his plans to reduce the debt and create jobs for Floridians, they will join our effort to beat Bill Nelson," said campaign spokesman Brian Seitchik.

Other candidates -- such as Mike McCalister and Craig Miller -- could play a role, though most likely as spoilers, Wagner says.

"You need a substantial amount of money to run statewide," he notes.

Nelson announced Monday that he had $6.07 million cash on hand after raising $1.8 million in the second quarter.

McCalister, a retired Army colonel who has been courting tea-party support, tweaked
Hasner shortly after Haridopolos bowed out Monday.

"The big question now is, which Adam Hasner will emerge in the coming weeks? Will he return to the days of supporting high-speed rail and co-sponsoring climate legislation, or will he continue to call himself a tea party outsider opposed to the special interest agenda?" asked McCalister spokesman Buzz Jacobs.

Hasner, a former Florida House majority leader, has been branded by some critics as a "raging moderate."

Questions about Hasner's grass-roots conservatism were heightened when his campaign spokesman Rick Wilson deflected Sunshine State News' request for comment about pending E-Verify immigration legislation during the 2011 session.

Though Hasner co-sponsored an E-Verify bill in 2010, his campaign initially declined to take a stand on the 2011 legislation that ultimately failed.

At the time, LeMieux publicly called for a "strong E-Verify bill."

Roger Stone, a veteran GOP consultant based in Miami, said, "This race remains wide-open. Both Hasner and LeMieux benefit from the withdrawal of Haridopolos, but no one has registered any impression on the Republican primary voters."

A new online poll of 1,100 GOP voters by the Sarasota County Republican Party bore that out, with 46 percent of respondents declining to state a preference. LeMieux led the field with 18 percent, while McCalister received 13 percent, Haridopolos got 12 percent and Hasner notched just 8 percent.

Each of the presumptive front-runners has drawbacks, Stone said.

"Hasner’s running a good grass-roots campaign but can he raise the money? LeMieux’s past as a ‘Charlie Crist Republican’ is still a killer in the primary."

Seeing an opening, Stone says he will urge Nick Loeb to "renew his focus on the race."

Stone calls Loeb, a Miami resident and boyfriend to "Modern Family" Sofia Vergara, a well-heeled "conservative outsider businessman who is still the optimum candidate."

Seth McKee, political science professor at University of South Florida St. Petersburg, said, "Maybe Haridopolos deserves some credit for exiting, since he probably had no chance of winning the election and even the primary would have been tough."

As for speculation that Haridopolos could turn around and run for Congress, McKee said the lawmaker's much-publicized $150,000 book deal will haunt his future prospects.
"He has quite a bit of baggage -- a lot of it his own doing, related to his rather questionable academic endeavors. Quite frankly, it is unheard of for a nonpolitician academic to receive the money he did for a book no academic would take seriously," McKee said.

Looking ahead, McKee said the GOP field "consists of a bunch of folks the typical Florida voter has never heard of -- including LeMieux. This notably weak field of contenders really speaks to the evidence that most viable potential candidates must be thinking that Senator Nelson is hard to beat."

Still, he added, "Given our economic stagnation, a strong GOP nominee for the Senate race could definitely give Nelson a run for his money. But no strong candidate has yet emerged and pretty soon it will be too late."