Robert Crowder's chances in race for Congress could depend on perceptions, past actions

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In the months leading up to the 2010 race for governor, a green uniform-clad local sheriff routinely told Florida's TV viewers that "Rick Scott couldn't be trusted as a CEO, and Florida can't trust Rick Scott as governor."

During the commercial pushing Democrat Alex Sink for governor, below the sheriff's photograph read: "Robert Crowder, Sheriff of Martin County, Republican."

Crowder, who is set to face off against conservative tea party icon U.S. Rep. Allen West for a proposed Treasure Coast-Palm Beach County seat in Congress, probably hasn't seen the last of that ad.

Crowder has been a mainstay on the Treasure Coast during a near-half-century tenure in local law enforcement. He's banking on that familiarity as he wraps up his fifth term as sheriff and heads for a GOP primary collision course with West, R-Plantation. The congressman left an increasingly Democratic proposed district down south for a friendlier base of GOP voters one seat north.

Crowder has unapologetically committed more than just the one anti-Scott party-line faux pas. In the coming months, the sheriff will hear more examples of his tendency to deviate from party loyalties. And frankly, he stands behind how he's shaken up party politics.

But whether that tactic that will entice moderate Republicans to give the hometown guy a shot, or overwhelmingly alienate GOP-loyal voters who want to ensure a hard-line conservative stays in Congress, is up for debate.

Crowder, 66, opted multiple times not to endorse state Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, including races for the state Senate and Congress. That, in addition to opposing Scott, drew the ire of Martin County Republicans, prompting the local Executive Committee to pass a resolution in 2010 stating Crowder was "deliberately attempting to harm the Republican party."
But as far as Crowder's concerned, blindly following party lines — Democrat or Republican — is what got Congress into the stalled-out mess it's in today. That's what he wants to address in Washington, and he thinks he's got a big enough voter base in agreement to get him to the Capitol.

"I'm very confident that we'll be able to (succeed), with the encouragement I'm getting, the calls I'm getting," Crowder said. "We'll put together a campaign that may not have the money of an Allen West or a (Democratic Fort Lauderdale candidate) Patrick Murphy, but people know me and know I'm going to speak when I feel strongly about something, and serve the people, and not just some subsection of the people."

Crowder starts the sprint to the August primary down millions in campaign dollars to West, who has received a whopping $5.85 million total from strong tea party backing nationwide. Murphy, a Democrat, clawed up $1.4 million for the contest, touting himself as the Allen West alternative in the Palm Beach-Broward District 22 race. The pair jumped ship on that race in the last two weeks and brought along their war chests.

The West campaign declined to comment on Crowder's announcement.

A day after Crowder stepped into the ring, big-name local Republicans continued throwing their weight behind West. State Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, said the 22-year-veteran Army lieutenant colonel is his choice and will take the race. Local GOP officials like what West stands for — smaller government, less taxes, fewer regulations and the like — so St. Lucie chairman Bill Paterson and Martin chairman Susan Auld both think the congressman will clinch a second term.

State Rep. William Snyder, a Stuart Republican leaving his seat after this term to run for Crowder's sheriff gig, also pledged strong support for West over his former boss at the Martin County Sheriff's Office.

"I think it pits a strong, proven conservative against a sheriff who has never had to take votes on major policy issues other than law enforcement," Snyder said. "I think it will be challenging for (Crowder) to find his footing on national issues. ... Allen West is a proven conservative who reflects the political will of this district."

Rep. Gayle Harrell, R-Stuart, commended both candidates, but steered clear of picking one. She said she's focused on reclaiming a state House seat this election cycle.

While it will ultimately come down to who shows up at the primary polls, Florida Atlantic University political science professor Kevin Wagner said he gives West the early edge over Crowder, home field advantage or not.

"He's got a lot more name recognition and a lot of Republican support, and that would be true in any district," Wagner said.
Democrats, however, viewed Crowder's entry as an indication of internal party conflict over West's candidacy. Former Democratic U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney even said Crowder, as the local guy, instantly became the favorite.

"(West's) ultra right-wing views don't sit well with Treasure Coast Democrats or Republicans and that's the reason people from his own party are absolutely determined to prevent his return to Congress," St. Lucie Democratic chair Celeste Bush said.

"Sheriff Crowder running shows that even in his own party, there is dissatisfaction about Allen West bringing his brand of extremism to the race," added Eric Johnson, spokesman for Murphy's campaign.

The new District 18 would give Republicans a less than 1 percentage point advantage over Democrats. It would, however, favor the Treasure Coast — Martin and St. Lucie combined would outnumber Palm Beach's voters by a 60-40 margin. That's only if new redistricting maps withstand court review scrutiny in the next month or so.