Frosh senator ignores ‘Rubio for VP’ push

Tea partyers, establishment like what they see in young Floridian

By Sean Lengell

Sunday, August 28, 2011

While the field for the Republican presidential nomination is crowded and up for grabs, many pundits and politicos are ready to proclaim a front-runner for the ticket's second spot — Florida's Sen. Marco Rubio.

"There are very few candidates that have such a broad Republican appeal and a chance to reach voters that Republicans are having a hard time" winning over, said Florida Atlantic University political science professor Kevin Wagner.

Mr. Rubio, 40, has served in the Senate for less than eight months and the 2012 Republican National Convention is a year away. But for now the dapper, articulate and ambitious Miami native — who is admired by tea party activists and the party's establishment alike — is the sexy choice for the GOP's vice presidential candidate.

"The ideal [running mate] is somebody that is beloved by the tea party who holds statewide office in a swing state and, oh, is Hispanic and young," said Jennifer E. Duffy, who tracks Senate races for the Cook Political Report. "Ding, ding, ding! He pretty much fills that bill, doesn't he?"

Mr. Rubio on Tuesday delivered what many consider the most important speech of his career, speaking at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library near Los Angeles at the personal invitation of former first lady Nancy Reagan.

After the speech, the senator denied he had any interest in serving as someone's running mate, a mantra he has repeated since the "Rubio for VP" push began almost immediately after his election last November.

"What happens in politics is the minute you start thinking of what else is out there for you, it starts affecting everything you do," he said. "The reality is, I'm not going to be the vice-presidential nominee."
Ron Bonjean, a Washington-based GOP political consultant, said Mr. Rubio is "playing his cards just right" for a future run at higher office.

"He doesn't think he's too big for his britches and he is working hard every day to work his way up the ladder," he said.

Mr. Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants, has wasted little time ascending the GOP depth charts. He was elected to the Florida House at age 28 and rose to speaker at 35. Then in 2009 he launched a campaign for U.S. Senate, running against another rising Republican star in then-Gov. Charlie Crist.

Mr. Crist at the time enjoyed astonishingly high approval ratings and was considered a lock for the open Senate seat. But Mr. Rubio successfully courted tea party supporters, who viewed the moderate Mr. Crist with suspicion, and rolled to victory in November.

Despite his rapid political ascent, Mr. Rubio has kept a lower profile than many of his tea party-backed GOP freshman congressional colleagues. He occasionally appears on network news and talk programs, though he hasn't oversaturated the airwaves with his presence. And he has sponsored about 15 pieces of legislation since coming to office — 50 less than fellow first-term tea party darling Sen. Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican.

The Floridian also was the last first-year senator to give his maiden speech on the Senate floor, waiting more than five months so as to "have a better sense of the institution," a spokesman said at the time.

"He just so far has shown a canny and a mature way of pacing himself," said Susan MacManus, a longtime political science professor at the University of South Florida. "He could get all the press he wanted every day but he doesn't do that, and I find that's unusual for a politician. But he's very young and I think he knows he's got a lot of time in politics."

Some political experts say it would be wise for the young senator to refrain from a vice presidential run for now. A major speech at the Republican National Convention next year, Mr. Bonjean said, would be an ideal catalyst to propel Mr. Rubio's career to a higher level — a move similarly employed at the 2004 Democratic National Convention by then-Senate candidate Barack Obama.

"It is possible for him to be on the ballot [next year], but it's more likely he will follow a strategy of a slow rise," Mr. Bonjean said. "He's likely going to put together a [legislative] record that reflects accomplishments that could set him up for higher office."

And with Mr. Rubio's national political stock on the upswing, he doesn't need a vice presidential bid to boost his profile in the way it helped former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, who was widely unknown outside her state until 2008 GOP presidential nominee John McCain picked her as his running mate.
"He's not going to shoot from the cuff, he's going to make a pretty calculated decision about what he thinks is best for his career," Mr. Wagner said. "And his career is going fine without the need to be on the ticket, so he would have to see some real benefit from doing so."

Mark Meckler, co-founder of Tea Party Patriots, one of the movement's largest groups, said he hasn't heard significant chatter among tea party supporters for a Rubio vice presidential run.

"People are really slow and reasoned in this election, and I think it's premature for folks to be really digging into who should be the vice presidential candidate when we have no idea who's going to be the top of the ticket," he said.

Still, Mr. Meckler said the senator is "definitely up there" in the pool of potential running mates who tea party supporters could embrace.

"I certainly think he is a name that's very helpful for [Republicans] to talk about," Ms. MacManus said of Mr. Rubio. "Even if he's not really going to be the selection, the fact that his name always comes up and his picture gets flashed and people talk about him, that's a good thing for the party."