

Florida's Next Governor

Tallahassee Magazine meets one-on-one with the candidates to help you make a choice in September's primary. The Race is On Northwest Florida conservative Democrats could determine who sits in the Governor's office

By Lance deHaven-Smith

This year's gubernatorial race will be highly competitive, both in the primaries and in the general election. In the primaries, Republicans will be choosing between Charlie Crist and Tom Gallagher, while Democrats will pick either Jim Davis or Rod Smith.

Regardless of which candidates receive the nomination of their party, the general election probably will be very close because the state remains more or less evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. Voters in Northwest Florida, especially Blue Dog Democrats, are likely to decide the outcome, and they will have an important effect on the Democratic primary as well.

Blue Dogs are rural, white, traditional Southerners who register as Democrats but often vote Republican. They usually are the key to victory in Florida elections, because, as people say in Northwest Florida, Blue Dogs don't necessarily "go home from the dance with the one who brung 'em." They register as Democrats but vote for Republicans in state and national elections — unless the Democratic candidates are conservative Southerners like themselves. With Florida Republicans outnumbered by Democrats by more than 345,000 voters, Republicans cannot win statewide elections unless Blue Dogs cross party lines to support them. By the same token, Democrats cannot win unless they can keep Blue Dogs in the yard.

The decisive role of Northwest Florida voters was made patently clear in 1994, when Jeb Bush lost his first bid for governor because Blue Dogs supported the reelection of self-proclaimed "Florida Cracker" Lawton Chiles. After Chiles stepped down at the end of his second term in 1998 and the Democrats failed to nominate another Southern populist, Blue Dog Democrats supported Bush, who won by a solid margin with their backing.

The lessons from Florida's 1994 and 1998 gubernatorial elections were not lost on Jeb's brother George W. when the latter was running for president in 2000. On the last day of the campaign, George W. Bush and his key supporters converged on North Florida. Barbara Bush went to Destin, former President George H.W. Bush went to Tallahassee and they, along with Jeb Bush and Colin Powell, met up with George W. Bush that evening in Jacksonville. The Bush campaign chose to spend the last and arguably most important day of the race in North Florida because Florida held the key to the White House and Blue Dogs held the key to Florida.

The term "Blue Dog Democrats" comes from an earlier reference to "Yellow Dog Democrats," a phrase that originated in an old Florida saying among Southern Democrats prior to the 1950s. Democrats in the rural South were so loyal to the Democratic Party, and hated the Republican Party so much, that they would vote for a Democrat, they claimed, "even if he was a yellow dog."

When Yellow Dog Democrats began to cross over to the Republican Party in presidential elections, they were initially called Dixiecrats, after the name coined by Strom Thurmond in his third-party bid for the presidency in 1948. In the 1980s, they were called Reagan Democrats. The term "Blue Dog" surfaced in the 1990s.

Florida's Blue Dog counties are likely to be the main battleground in this year's gubernatorial election because they are home to the state's largest bloc of swing voters. The Republican candidate for governor will run strong in Southwest Florida, Pensacola and Jacksonville, while the Democratic nominee will do well in Southeast Florida, Gainesville and Tallahassee. This will leave the election to be decided by Blue Dogs in Northwest Florida and non-Cuban Hispanics around Orlando. Primary Colors

Blue Dogs also will be important in the Democratic primary. Although Blue Dogs are only a small segment of the Democratic Party in Florida, their turnout in primary elections is much higher than the turnout of more liberal Democrats, which gives them an influence greater than their numbers would suggest.

The high turnout of Blue Dogs was the key to Bill McBride's stunning victory over Janet Reno and Daryl Jones in the Democratic gubernatorial primary of 2002. Florida has 25 counties in which a majority voted Republican in the disputed 2000 presidential election — even though at least 60 percent of their registered voters are Democrats. Not only did McBride poll a majority of the primary votes in every one of these Blue Dog counties, his average across them was 62 percent of the votes cast.

It is easy to understand why Blue Dogs have a high turnout in the primaries. The main reason more conservative Southerners in the state's rural counties do not register as Republicans is precisely because they want to be able to vote in the Democratic primary. Democrats running for local offices in rural counties often are unopposed. As a result, elections for many local offices are decided in the Democratic primary, not in the general election. Republican Tactics

In this year's primary campaigns, all of the candidates will work hard to appeal to their party stalwarts without appearing so extreme that they hurt their chances with moderate voters in the general election.

This is easier for Democrats than for Republicans because the Democratic primary includes conservative Blue Dogs, who generally pull Democratic candidates toward the center. The Republican primary, in contrast, is dominated by the state's most conservative voters, and this naturally pulls Republican candidates to the right. The challenge for Crist and Gallagher will be to campaign aggressively in the primary without taking positions that will hurt them in the general election.

One touchy issue for Crist and Gallagher will be how closely they align themselves with Gov. Bush. The governor is more conservative than the typical Florida voter, but he has been able to win two statewide elections because of his presidential connections, name recognition and ability to raise campaign funds. Certainly, both Crist and Gallagher will want the governor's support as they campaign, but they will need to avoid becoming too closely identified with him

because many of the governor's policies — especially FCAT testing, school vouchers and opposition to the class size amendment — are unpopular with a majority of the electorate. Democratic Tactics

For Democrats Davis and Smith, the key to victory will be the same in both the primary and the general election, namely, successfully appealing to the Blue Dogs in rural North Florida. So far, Davis has been doing this by lining up endorsements from political leaders popular in the state's Blue Dog regions. Davis is the odds-on favorite to win the Democratic primary because he already has been endorsed by former governor and U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, whose supporters in Northwest Florida used to be called "Graham Crackers." Davis also has attracted the support of Rhea Chiles, the widow of Florida's archetypical Blue Dog, Lawton Chiles.

Still, Smith should not be counted out. He is popular among Blue Dogs, not only because he has a populist political philosophy, but also because he has a personal style or charisma that has long been popular in the rural South. It is perhaps best described oxymoronically as a sort of affable toughness or friendly hostility that combines redneck meanness with relaxed courtesy. Chiles had it, as did former Florida Gov. Reubin Askew. These legends of Florida politics won statewide elections against unfavorable odds by forcefully but politely confronting powerful special interests and advocating for ordinary people. Blue Dogs and Other Swing Voters

Regardless of which candidates win their party's nomination, the only way to reach the Governor's Mansion is through Northwest Florida. Republicans in Pensacola, Jacksonville and Southwest Florida will support the Republican candidate, just as liberal Democrats in Southeast Florida, Gainesville and Tallahassee will back the Democratic candidate. This will leave the election to be decided by Blue Dogs and other swing voters. Lance deHaven-Smith is a professor in the Reubin D. Askew School of Public Administration and Policy at Florida State University. A former president of the Florida Political Science Association, he is the author of more than a dozen books on topics ranging from religion and political philosophy to Florida government and politics. His most recently published book is "The Battle for Florida," which analyzes the disputed 2000 presidential election. DeHaven-Smith has appeared on national TV and radio shows and, in 2004, he was selected by Florida Trend magazine as one of Florida's 174 most influential people and six most influential scientists.