



# Sunshine State dilemma: Voting for the 2014 governor of Florida



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## ABSTRACT

The 2014 Florida gubernatorial election pitted a highly unpopular incumbent Republican against a former Republican governor since turned independent to Democratic challenger. For the duration of his first term in office, Governor Rick Scott was plagued by low approval ratings generated directly from a series of decisions that proved unpopular to most Florida voters. Fortunately for Scott, however, his opponent for reelection was none other than Charlie Crist, his predecessor in Tallahassee who chose to vacate the governorship in 2010 in a failed bid for the U.S. Senate in which he shed his Republican affiliation only to lose to Republican Marco Rubio. Since then, Crist switched from no party affiliation to the Democratic Party and then launched a spirited bid to win back his old job from Governor Scott. In this study, we use survey data supplemented by other popular accounts to demonstrate that the 2014 Florida gubernatorial election was a classic case of voters perceiving their choice as the lesser of two evils. And in this case, the low approval rating of Governor Scott was less damaging than Crist's party switch, an action that proved electorally fatal.

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On November 4, 2014, Rick Scott was reelected governor of Florida. Scott defeated a party switcher who was the immediate predecessor to his office, Charlie Crist. As was the case in 2010, Governor Scott was held to under a majority of the vote in 2014. In fact, at 50.6 percent of the *two-party* vote, Governor Scott won almost exactly the same share of the vote in 2014 as he did in 2010.<sup>1</sup> But unlike 2010, a campaign that was remarkable for wholly ignoring the media and appealing directly to Floridians with over \$70 million spent and most of it his personal funds, Governor Scott was a known commodity in 2014 and still barely won. By contrast, the 2014 gubernatorial race featured two candidates familiar to most Florida voters, but we contend in this study that the contest was so close because both candidates were viewed as deeply flawed, although for different reasons.

Governor Scott has never enjoyed majority approval from Florida residents. Indeed, he has proven to be one of the most unpopular governors to serve since the 2010 elections.<sup>2</sup> By contrast,

his 2014 opponent, Charlie Crist, has enjoyed impressive approval ratings for much of the time he served in public office, including his most recent tenure as Florida governor from 2006 to 2010, when he was a member of the Grand Old Party (GOP). But Crist suffered from a different problem, which we will demonstrate proved even more electorally detrimental: a party switch that left a substantial segment of Florida voters distrustful of what they perceived to be a politically opportunistic strategy undertaken to win back the governorship. Regarding the first point, the unpopularity of Governor Scott, the 2014 exit poll of Florida voters showed 44 percent favorable and 53 percent unfavorable, whereas 51 percent of voters had a favorable opinion of Charlie Crist (44 percent unfavorable). And with respect to the second point, 60 percent of voters agreed that Charlie Crist changed his party affiliation “more to help him win elections,” while just 30 percent thought the switch was done “more to reflect his beliefs.”<sup>3</sup> In short, the typical

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<sup>1</sup> The two-party vote in 2010 was 2,619,335 for Republican Rick Scott and 2,557,785 for Democrat Alex Sink. The two-party vote in 2014 was 2,865,343 for Republican Rick Scott and 2,801,198 for Democrat Charlie Crist. Data are from the Florida Department of State Division of Elections.

<sup>2</sup> In a list of governors up for reelection in 2014, Rick Scott's approval rating was the third lowest; see the *New York Times* article, “Which governors are most vulnerable in 2014?”: [http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/08/which-governors-are-most-vulnerable-in-2014/?\\_r=1](http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/08/which-governors-are-most-vulnerable-in-2014/?_r=1).

<sup>3</sup> The data can be found here: <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2014/exit-polls?year=2014&type=governor&filter=FL>. The vote split for favorability toward Governor Scott was: 86 to 10 in favor of Crist for those with an unfavorable opinion of Scott (53 percent); 91 to 8 in favor of Scott for those who approved of him (44 percent). The vote split for favorability toward Charlie Crist was: 88 to 8 in favor of Scott for those with an unfavorable opinion of Crist (44 percent); 87 to 12 in favor of Crist for those who approved of him (51 percent). Of the 30 percent of voters who thought Crist switched party affiliation mainly to better reflect his beliefs the vote split 82 to 16 in favor of him, whereas among the 60 percent who thought Crist switched parties to win elections, the vote split 71 to 22 percent in favor of Scott. These vote choice numbers do not sum to 100 percent because of a third party candidate, Adrian Wyllie.

Florida voter was faced with a dilemma in the 2014 gubernatorial election: a choice between an unlikeable incumbent versus an opportunistic challenger. Our findings indicate that dislike proved a more popular option than distrust.

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin with a discussion of the unpopularity of Governor Scott and then touch on the party switching literature as it relates to the behavior of Charlie Crist. Next, we briefly sketch the dynamics of the 2014 campaign. Then we describe the survey data used to examine vote choice in the 2014 Florida gubernatorial election. We follow with our results from a multivariate analysis that accounts for the significance of candidate favorability and Crist's party switch on vote choice. Finally, we conclude with a brief summary statement of our findings and what this election tells us about voting behavior when voters are given the choice between two unpalatable candidates.

## 1. Two unsavory candidates

Ever since the day Rick Scott assumed the executive office in Tallahassee, his approval rating has been underwater. Scott has failed to curry favor with a majority of Florida voters primarily because of his substantive actions as governor. For instance, staying true to his Tea Party principles, Governor Scott adhered to his pledge of denying a \$1 billion federal loan to help partially underwrite the cost of a high-speed rail system connecting Tampa to Orlando. This infrastructure project was highly popular, including among the Republican state legislative delegation and Orlando-based members of Congress. Governor Scott also approved a \$1 billion dollar reduction in K-12 education spending, which was subsequently followed by a \$300 million cut to the higher education budget. But as the time finally neared for his reelection, Governor Scott frantically moved away from the far right and comfortably into the electoral center by advocating for the federal healthcare subsidy available through President Obama's 2010 Affordable Care Act (which his Republican legislature blocked).

In addition to taking highly unpopular policy-based actions for most of his first term and then at the last minute hurriedly pivoting to find the moderate middle where the median Florida voter resides, Governor Scott repeatedly found himself at the center of more personalized scandals emanating from within his administration. Perhaps the most visible was the embarrassing resignation of his Lieutenant Governor Jennifer Carroll in March of 2013.<sup>4</sup> Carroll was just the most high profile of several members of Scott's team to step down during his first term because of actions that betrayed the public's trust.<sup>5</sup> Even after winning reelection, Governor Scott's approval rating rests comfortably below the 50-percent mark. And again, his actions seem most responsible for his perpetual unpopularity—like forcing the early departure of the chief of law enforcement,<sup>6</sup> who intended to retire within the year and most recently banning use of the term “climate change” among employees working in state

agencies like the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.<sup>7</sup> A February 2015 Quinnipiac poll put Scott's approval at 42 percent and his disapproval at 47 percent; confirming the statement by *Tampa Bay Times* political reporter Steve Bousquet: “Scott's stubbornly low approval ratings have stalked him since he took office in 2011.”<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, our own survey data reaffirms the unpopularity of Governor Scott vis-à-vis Charlie Crist, as the 2014 election drew near. We created a favorability scale ranging from 1 to 10 with 10 most favorable and 1 least favorable. Among our survey respondents, the average favorability for Rick Scott was 4.63 ( $n = 1886$ ). By comparison, the average favorability for Charlie Crist was 5.28 ( $n = 1874$ ). A simple difference of means test reveals that the favorability rating for Crist was significantly greater than the rating for Scott ( $p < .001$ ). Similarly, the median favorability rating for Scott was 5, whereas the median rating for Crist was 6. Finally, we display the frequency distributions for candidate favorability in Fig. 1. Over half of the respondents (50.9 percent) rated Scott a 4 or less on the scale, and a substantial 27.5 percent rated him a 1 (versus 19.4 percent for Crist). By comparison, over half of the respondents (50.8 percent) rated Crist a 6 or higher. We will use the favorability scales for both candidates in the vote choice model since they are expected to be a major factor shaping voter preferences.

It is difficult to devise a fictitious candidate more different than Charlie Crist is to Rick Scott. Whereas Rick Scott appears almost comically unsuited for a high-profile elective office because of his palpable socially awkward disposition, Charlie Crist is a natural-born politician, perfectly embracing his erstwhile slogan, “the people's governor.” Charlie Crist constructed a political career that has proven tragically ironic. In classic Downsian (1957) theory, Crist always sought the median voter, expecting that most of the votes could be won in the electoral center. This seemed a successful strategy for most of his tenure in public office, as Florida Attorney General and then as Florida Governor. And in a state with such a large number of political independents (at least in terms of those registered unaffiliated: 23 percent at the time of the November 2014 election), Crist was masterful at staking out positions in line with popular opinion.<sup>9</sup> But in an age of increasingly polarized party politics and volatile short-term electoral conditions, Crist surprisingly found himself out of step with the electorate he came to know so well in 2010, when he departed the governorship for a U.S. Senate run.

The political winds took a hard right turn in the 2010 election as a Republican tsunami swept GOP upstart and former Florida House Speaker Marco Rubio into Florida's open U.S. Senate seat. Charlie Crist finished second to Rubio and in the process chose to abandon his Republican affiliation, opting for no party affiliation (NPA) once it became clear that he would have lost to Rubio in the Republican primary (see McKee and Craig, 2011; McKee and Hood, 2013). Crist's strategy to occupy the vote-rich middle backfired, because a Republican tide pushed a majority of political independents in

<sup>4</sup> See the *New York Times* article, “Florida's Lieutenant Governor Resigns Amid Inquiry Into Sweepstakes Firm”: [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/14/us/lt-gov-jennifer-carroll-of-florida-resigns.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/14/us/lt-gov-jennifer-carroll-of-florida-resigns.html?_r=0).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Scott's chief of staff hastily resigned in May, 2012, amid allegations of political corruption, see the *Tampa Bay Times* article, “Gov. Rick Scott's chief of staff Steve MacNamara resigns”: <http://www.tampabay.com/news/politics/gubernatorial/gov-rick-scotts-chief-of-staff-steve-macnamara-resigns/1229815>.

<sup>6</sup> See the *Tampa Bay Times* article, “Gov. Rick Scott shakes up FDLE, forces longtime commissioner to resign”: <http://www.tampabay.com/news/politics/legislature/gov-rick-scott-shakes-up-fdle-forces-longtime-commissioner-to-resign/2210461>.

<sup>7</sup> See the *Miami Herald* article, “Gov. Rick Scott's ban on climate change term extended to other state agencies”: <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/state/florida/article13576691.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See the *Tampa Bay Times* article, “Poll shows Gov. Rick Scott spinning wheels on job approval rating”: <http://www.tampabay.com/news/politics/stateroundup/quinnipiac-poll-shows-rick-scott-job-approval-slipping/2217084>.

<sup>9</sup> The following voter registration data for the 2014 November general election as compiled by the authors from the Florida Department of State Division of Elections website is: Democrats = 38.7 percent; Republicans = 35.0 percent; no party affiliation = 23.3 percent; other party = 3.0 percent.

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