

Florida Democrats nominate former Republican governor

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The former Republican governor of Florida, Charlie Crist, won the Democratic nomination for the same office in a primary election Tuesday. Crist won 74 percent of the vote, easily defeating former state legislator Nan Rich, who had campaigned as a “real Democrat” against the Republican-turned-independent-turned Democrat.

In other contests the same day, ultra-right state treasurer Doug Ducey won the Republican nomination for governor of Arizona, defeating a candidate backed by the outgoing governor, Jan Brewer. Ducey is the former CEO of the Coldstone Creamery ice cream chain.

Democratic and Republican candidates for congressional seats in both states were also selected Tuesday. Other nomination contests took place in Oklahoma and Vermont, in the next-to-last day of primary voting before the general election November 4.

Crist was governor of Florida from 2007 to 2011, when he was succeeded by Republican Rick Scott, a multimillionaire hospital chain executive who won the 2010 election in the Republican landslide of that year. Crist had sought to move from the governor’s mansion to the US Senate, but lost the Republican primary to Marco Rubio, then lost the general election running against Rubio as an independent.

Crist’s political career is a monument to the cynicism and opportunism of the American two-party system, as he has repeatedly changed position on a range of issues, to further his career in a political system shifting ever further to the right.

In the mid-1990s, as a young and ambitious Republican state senator from the St. Petersburg area, he became known as “chain-gang Charlie” for his successful sponsorship of legislation to restore the infamous system of forced labor for convicts in

Florida’s prison system.

After passage of the law, he denounced the state administration (then controlled by the Democrats) for implementing chain gangs with inmates shackled individually instead of in groups of five, charging this was not harsh enough and would make escape easier.

Crist was conventionally right-wing on a wide range of issues, declaring himself a devotee of Ronald Reagan, opposing abortion rights and defending the public display of the Ten Commandments in government buildings.

In 1998, only 41 years old, he won the Republican nomination to challenge the incumbent US senator, Democrat Bob Graham. He lost badly, however, in part because of his fervent support for the Republican impeachment of President Bill Clinton, which was a major issue in the fall election campaign.

Two years later, Crist was the successful Republican candidate for state education commissioner, in the same election that produced the *Bush v. Gore* Supreme Court decision awarding Florida’s electoral votes, and the White House, to George W. Bush.

Crist was elected state attorney general in 2002, running on the same ticket with incumbent Republican governor Jeb Bush, and he backed the right-wing policies of the second-term governor, particularly in such areas as school vouchers and promoting charter schools.

His only major public disagreement with Bush came in 2005, when he declined to intervene in the Terri Schiavo case on the side of the Christian fundamentalists who were demanding that the young woman, in a vegetative state for 15 years, be maintained indefinitely on life support against the wishes of her husband.

In 2006, Crist won the Republican nomination for

governor and then the general election, despite the major swing to the Democrats in most state and federal contests that year. In that contest, he positioned himself as a moderate and was attacked from the right on some issues by his Democratic opponent, Congressman Jim Davis.

Crist's support was considered a major prize in the 2008 presidential election campaign. He endorsed Senator John McCain in the Florida primary, boosting him to a decisive victory over Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee and Rudy Giuliani at a critical point in the contest for the Republican nomination. Crist was put on the short-list as a potential McCain running mate, although McCain eventually chose Alaska governor Sarah Palin.

The rise of the Tea Party faction in the Republican Party in 2010, boosted by hundreds of millions in funding from a handful of ultra-right billionaires, ultimately redirected Crist's political career. After losing the Republican primary for US Senate to Rubio, Crist remained in the race as an independent, then quit the Republican Party altogether after his defeat in the general election.

In 2012, Crist switched to the Democratic Party and endorsed Obama's reelection campaign, while positioning himself to win the support of the party establishment for a return to the governorship in 2014. He had the endorsement of President Obama, US senator Bill Nelson, and Florida congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

What is most notable is that, in the course of his more than two decades in politics, Crist is a seeming exception to the dramatic shift to the right by both the major capitalist parties, shifting to the "left" on social issues such as abortion and gay rights.

In reality, however, Crist has been fairly consistent, only forced to switch from the Republicans as the Democrats came to occupy the right-wing political terrain he has long occupied, while the Republicans moved even further toward the ultra-right.

The contest between Crist and the Republican incumbent Scott will be the most expensive single contest in the fall election, with as much as \$150 million in projected spending, two thirds of that by Scott. Scott currently has raised \$10.3 million and Crist \$8.8 million, and outside groups, particularly right-

wing billionaires like the Koch brothers, are expected to spend more than either of the two candidates and their official party organizations.



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