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Marco Rubio could collide with Jeb Bush on presidential campaign trail

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WASHINGTON

— U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, Florida's Republican rising star, may be on a collision course with his advertisement friend and mentor, GOP elder statesman, former Gov. Jeb Bush.

Both politicians are contemplating a run for president in 2016, which would thrust two prominent South Floridians into a scramble for the White House.

Rubio has announced that he will make his own decision about whether to jump into the race and won't defer to Bush or anyone else. He also has said that if he does enter the contest, he won't seek re-election to the Senate, which would open his seat to intense competition among Republican and Democratic contenders.

The results could shake up the state's political scene, analysts say, by dividing Republican loyalties between Rubio and Bush and removing a popular incumbent from the Senate race in 2016.

"It certainly would put the Senate seat in play, and it certainly would be a competitive race," said Richard Conley, a political scientist at the University of Florida who tracks presidential politics.

"Florida is a swing state and unpredictable. Frankly, if you look at the last presidential election, Republicans have reason to be worried."

President Barack Obama won Florida in 2008 and 2012 by narrow margins, drawing large numbers of black, Hispanic and young voters. Democrats also gained four congressional seats in Florida in 2012.

But Republicans prevailed in 2010, sweeping Rubio and Gov. Rick Scott into office. And nationwide polls indicate that Republicans will gain several Senate seats in this year's midterm elections.

Decisions by Rubio, 43, and Bush, 61, will have a big impact on the nation's biggest swing state. They both say they will decide on a presidential campaign by the end of this year.

Both men rose to prominence from Republican roots in Miami, where Cuban-Americans hold sway and immigration reform is a cause supported by leaders of both parties. When Rubio became speaker of the Florida House in 2006, he followed then-Gov. Bush's lead while developing a list of "100 Innovative Ideas for Florida's Future."

"Gov. Bush pointed out to me that some of his best policy ideas had come from emails he'd received from regular Floridians," Rubio wrote in his memoir, "An American Son." "I traveled the state over the next two years, joining other members at events with voters we called idea-raisers."

Rubio added that he would not have challenged Bush if the former governor had decided to run for the Senate in 2010. But Rubio, after declaring he was ready and qualified to be president, told the National Press Club last month that his prospects are not contingent on Bush's plans.

"All I would say in that regard is that I think when someone contemplates running for president of the United States, you do so based on criteria that you've established for yourself. I don't think those are decisions that you make with someone else's decision in mind."

Rubio reaffirmed that if he runs for president, he won't seek re-election to the Senate as a fallback. "I don't believe you can run effectively for an office of that magnitude while having some exit strategy in mind," he said.

Democrats relish the prospect of seizing an open seat.

"If that were to occur, I think that would give Democrats a great opportunity to get a seat that never should have been lost," said Mitch Ceasar, Democratic chairman in [Broward County](#).

He speculated that Bush would be the more formidable Republican candidate in the presidential race because he is "a more tested political entity."

Some conservatives, however, are far more receptive to a Rubio campaign.

"Marco Rubio has proven himself to be a more conservative choice," said Peter Lee, director of the East Side Tea Party in Orlando. "If Jeb Bush runs, it might as well be Hillary Clinton running. There's not much difference between the two people."

He and some other conservatives are incensed about Bush's support for an education overhaul known as Common Core, a set of standards that critics say are not rigorous enough and would reduce local control over schools. Many conservatives also object to immigration changes promoted by Bush and Rubio, which they fear will lead to amnesty for those who enter or stay in the country illegally.

"I'm not hopeful for the conservative chops of the state of Florida right now," Lee said. "But we still fight."

Sharon Day of Fort Lauderdale, co-chairman of the Republican National Committee, welcomed the prospect of two Floridians in the presidential race. "Anytime we can highlight our great leaders in Florida it's a good thing," she said.

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