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Rubio-Bush battle puts spotlight on the sunshine state

Demetri Sevastopulo in Miami



Sipping a beer in a Miami bar nicknamed “The Rat”, Jessica Fernandez is fired up for a political fight that is sparking passionate debates and creating headaches for Republicans in the heavily Hispanic city in south Florida.

“The fact that we have two people running for president who speak Spanish . . . is transformational,” says Ms Fernandez, 30, the Cuban-American president of the Miami Young Republicans.

She is referring to [Jeb Bush](#), 62, the former Florida governor who is expected to run for the White House, and Marco Rubio, 43, the Cuban-American Florida senator, who on Monday announced his own presidential bid.

Florida Republicans are ecstatic that the Sunshine State will feature so prominently in the 2016 race, particularly since it is a critical state for the GOP to take if it is to take the White House. But many feel uneasy having to choose between two favourite sons: the dynastic contender backed by the establishment and his brash protégé who is popular among younger Cuban-Americans.

Al Cardenas, the former chairman of the Republican party in Florida who knows Mr Bush and Mr Rubio better than anyone, said he was supporting Mr Bush but that his “heart was hurting” because of his close friendships with both men.

“I am committed to Jeb but Marco is the future of the party,” said Mr Cardenas, before adding that the world situation required a president with significant experience.

“At this point in time, it is hard to buy into the future,” he said. “I would rather have Tom Brady (the legendary New England Patriots quarterback) in the White House than a young, promising rookie.”

Mimi Planas, head of the pro-gay [Log Cabin Republicans](#) in Miami, says many people are similarly conflicted. “Marco Rubio is energetic and Jeb Bush has more experience,” says Mrs Planas. “Rubio connects more with the [Cuban and Latin community](#) because they share the heritage, but Bush is a good guy; everybody loves him.”

Some Republicans were surprised that Mr Rubio had decided to run when he knew that Mr Bush, his friend and mentor, was aiming for the office previously held by his father and brother.

“The hints have been there for a while, but I guess I didn’t want to see them,” says Ana Navarro, a close friend of Mr Bush. “I was surprised. Frankly, I thought Marco wouldn’t wind up running against Jeb because of the relationship between the two and because I think Marco’s skill set is that of a great legislator.”

While Mr Rubio’s move has sparked guessing games about his motives — is he running for president in 2016 or positioning himself for a future campaign? — it has spurred a broader debate about what kind of Republican stands the best chance of beating [Hillary Clinton](#), who [announced her candidacy](#) on Sunday.

Even though close to 20 Republicans are eyeing the White House, some party members argue that only Mr Bush has the stature to beat Mrs Clinton. But others say the GOP needs a fresh face to attract a wider cross-section of the population.

“There are more than two families qualified to lead in this country,” says Ms Fernandez. “It is generational. Are we going to keep electing these ghosts of the past, or are we going to elect the future?”

With only four years in the senate under his belt, Mr Rubio faces criticism that he is following the pattern of Barack Obama. Marili Cancio, president of the Women’s Republican Club of Miami, says that while Mr Rubio is a hugely talented politician who “will be president one day”, the party “cannot criticise Obama for being a first-term senator and then do the same”.

Some Rubio fans say his Cuban heritage will help him win the Republican primary in Florida and a bigger share of the growing Hispanic vote in the general election. But Fernand Amandi, a political consultant, says Mr Rubio faces a challenge in Florida because the Cuban-American establishment “are all with Jeb because Jeb helped them all get into office”.

Mr Amandi thinks Mr Rubio has at best a slim chance of defeating Mr Bush, but concedes that he has beaten tough odds before, including in his senate race when he surged from behind to beat Charlie Crist, the sitting Republican governor.

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- Jessica Fernandez, Miami Young Republicans

People close to Mr Rubio say this record has given him the confidence to run for the White House and to reject the idea that his turn has not yet come. One question making the rounds in Miami is whether he can generate the [financial firepower](#) to take on Mr Bush, who has locked in big donors. Jorge Luis Lopez, a well-connected Republican lobbyist who is helping Mr Rubio raise money, says his campaign is under no illusion about Mr Bush's funding prowess.

"This is Jeb country. There is no doubt about it," says Mr Lopez. "But a surprising group is looking at Marco very seriously."

Mr Lopez says Team Marco has been successful in seeking non-traditional donors and adds that the campaign has been buoyed by a \$10m commitment from Norman Braman, the former owner of the Philadelphia Eagles American football team. He says Mr Rubio will not need as much cash as Mr Bush because of his ability to act as a bridge between the establishment — many of whom like him even while backing Mr Bush — and the grassroots that helped him win in 2010.

Early polls show Mr Bush with a significant lead over Mr Rubio. He is running nine points ahead nationally, according to an average compiled by Real Clear Politics, and by a margin of 11 points in Florida.

But Mr Rubio's supporters point out that polls can change quickly, as [Ted Cruz](#), the Texas senator, has shown since launching his campaign last month.

One political operative who knows both Florida politicians said Mr Rubio had given Mr Bush a dose of his own medicine — referring to Mitt Romney abandoning a third White House bid after Mr Bush told him about his ambitions for the White House.

"Jeb took a big risk when he jumped out in front of Romney," he said. "This is Macbeth. It has come back to haunt him."

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