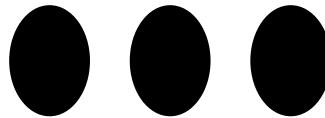




Written by [Alex Newman](#) on August 10, 2009

The Fallout of Sen. Mel Martinez's Resignation

Questions about Florida Senator Melquiades Martinez' decision to resign two years before the end of his term are flooding the Internet, along with speculation regarding who will replace him. So far, it seems nobody really knows for sure, though there are some indications.



After breaking with his party Thursday and voting to confirm Judge Sonia Sotomayor's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court, the Cuban-born Republican Senator announced Friday that he would quit as soon as Florida Governor Charlie Crist chooses his replacement.

Martinez had already said last year that he did not intend to run for a second term. But despite rumors about an early resignation, he surprised supporters and opponents alike with a letter and then a news conference in Orlando explaining the decision he arrived at. "My priorities have always been my faith, my family and my country and at this stage in my life, and after nearly twelve years of public service in Florida and Washington, it's time I return to Florida and my family," Martinez wrote in the letter to his supporters.

At the press conference, he noted that his departure was of his own free will and that "there is no impending reason, only my desire to move on and get on with the rest of my life." He said he will remain active in the party but will be returning to the private sector, though he did not offer any details.

Martinez would not comment on who his replacement might be, saying only that he would leave the decision in the hands of Governor Crist. "I think he's prepared to discuss a transparent and good process," he added.

Governor Crist now finds himself in an interesting — if awkward — situation. He was already planning to run for Martinez' seat, but now must select somebody to serve out the rest of Martinez' term.

Crist assured the public that he would not appoint himself, though theoretically he could since no Florida law prohibits it. But analysts have said it would be a bad political move, as would be appointing somebody who was not "qualified." The *Miami Herald* reported that "some speculate that Crist might step down as governor, thereby elevating Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, who could then appoint Crist to the Senate," but the chances of this occurring are probably slim.

He will likely choose a replacement who will not run for reelection, meaning people like former speaker of the State House Marco Rubio and former Florida governor Jeb Bush are out of the question. Rubio, a Cuban immigrant who is viewed as more conservative than Crist and Martinez, was already raising money to run against Crist in the next senatorial election. Jeb Bush is widely regarded as a competitor for influence in the state party.

The state chairwoman of the Democratic Party issued a statement calling on Crist to appoint an "independent caretaker," while Rubio, who has criticized the governor on issues like support for



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Obama's "stimulus package," called on Crist to appoint a conservative to fill the position.

Martinez received a 60 on the Freedom Index, putting him above average and far ahead of Florida's Democratic Senator Bill Nelson, who scored 0. But he has been widely criticized by Republicans for his support of "comprehensive immigration reform," among other issues.

Several names have already cropped up as possible successors. According to political leaders cited by the *New York Times*, the most notable are former Senator Connie Mack and former Representative Clay Shaw, though Mack immediately told the media he was not interested.

Other names that have surfaced include former Governor Bob Martinez, no relation to the senator, and former Secretary of State Jim Smith, who said he would love the position and that "it would be a great way to end a public career."

"Those are both great Floridians, there's no doubt about that," said Crist about Mack and Smith. "But that might be putting the cart before the horse at this time." A replacement will likely be chosen by the time Congress returns from its August recess. "Obviously an appointment will have to be made. We will undertake a very thorough, very comprehensive, thoughtful process to do just that," Crist said.

Martinez serves on several Senate committees including the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs. He is the ranking member of the special Committee on Aging, where he will likely be replaced by Republican Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, a spokesperson for the committee said.

His resignation comes right after the resignations of several other prominent Republicans, including Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska and Senator Kay Hutchinson of Texas, who will leave sometime this fall to campaign against Rick Perry for Governor of Texas. Including Hutchinson and Martinez, seven Republican senators have recently announced their retirement. Democrats have been gloating and will likely benefit from the wave of resignations, according to analysts.

Martinez has had a varied public career including time as the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under George W. Bush and a 10-month chairmanship of the Republican Party. He fled Fidel Castro's dictatorship without his parents when he was just 15.

Governor Crist should take this opportunity to appoint a senator who will respect his or her oath of office: to uphold the Constitution. Though he is viewed with suspicion by many Florida conservatives, there is a chance Crist could select a good candidate to replace Martinez, if only to help his own political career. Let's hope he chooses wisely, especially considering the current make-up of the Senate and the large number of big-government advocates currently seated there.

Photo: Florida Senator Melquiades Martinez



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