

Charlie Crist's redistricting stance riles Republicans

MARY ELLEN KLAS

Miami Herald/posted on Fri, May 21, 2010

Here's proof that Gov. Charlie Crist is flexing his muscles as a candidate not tethered to a party platform: This week, he endorsed two redistricting amendments that attempt to ban incumbency protection when the Republican-controlled Legislature rewrites the political boundaries starting next year.

“Some people have gotten so rigid about their adherence to the party before doing what's right for the people, it's hurting our country,” Crist told the Miami Herald editorial board this week.

He said he met with the director of Fair Districts Florida and supports Amendments 5 and 6, which would require lawmakers to adhere to redistricting standards that don't favor incumbents or the party in power when they redraw legislative and congressional lines.

By contrast, Crist has nothing good to say about Amendment 7, the alternate redistricting amendment put on the ballot by the Republican-led Legislature. Lawmakers said it was needed to “clarify” and preserve minority districts but supporters, including most minority Democrats in the Legislature, said it guts the amendments.

The governor called the Legislature's amendment a “silver bullet” and said he would have vetoed it if the Constitution hadn't allowed lawmakers to escape his reach by putting it directly on the ballot.

Crist's rival in the U.S. Senate race, U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Miami, already has supported Fair District's Amendments 5 and 6, as have many other Democrats. Republicans supporting the proposal include Thom Rumberger, a lawyer who represented the Republican Party in the 1992 redistricting lawsuits, environmental activist Nathaniel Reed and former state Comptroller Gerald Milligan.

But Ellen Freidin, director of Fair Districts Florida, said that while the organization does not support any individual candidates, Crist's platform “could not be more in sync with what Fair Districts is trying to do -- which is to end partisanship and political favoritism.”

When Crist was still a registered Republican, he refrained from embracing the amendment, telling The St. Petersburg Times in March 2009 that he would reserve judgment on the proposal until he learned more about it, then noted: “It always seems like the party that's not in power doesn't like the way the districts are drawn.”

In 1993, Crist supported a similar amendment when he was first elected to office after defeating Democratic state Sen. Helen Gordon Davis -- from a seat redrawn to include more Republicans. Crist was one of the sponsors of a constitutional amendment to create a seven-member redistricting commission that would adhere to similar redistricting standards being proposed by Fair Districts.

The proposal passed unanimously in the Senate, where both parties divided the chamber evenly with 20 members, but it died in the House, which was still controlled by Democrats.

Mary Ellen Klas can be reached at meklas@MiamiHerald.com