

As the nation's senior Democrat, President Barack Obama is expected to work hard for his party's congressional candidates. But in Florida's unusual three-way Senate contest, the White House faces a complicated calculation.

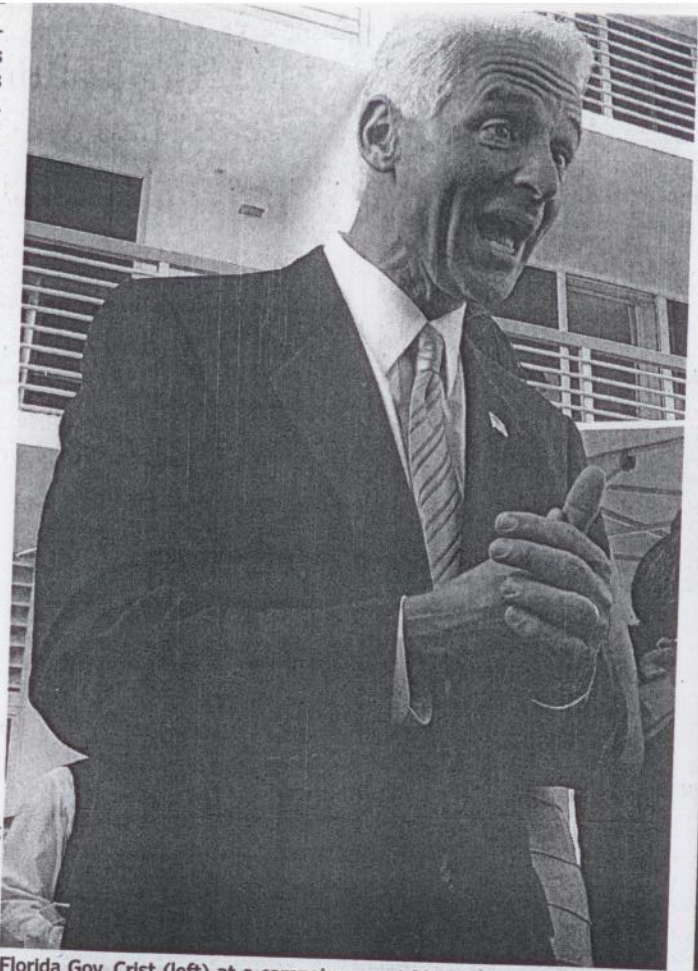
White House officials have taken calls in recent days from at least three Democrats seeking to start a conversation about the candidacy of Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, the one-time Republican star who is now running for Senate as an independent. These Democrats are active in party politics but are nonetheless backing or leaning toward Mr. Crist in the Senate race.

The White House told the Democrats that the president is supporting his party's likely nominee, U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek. But the Democrats came away from the conversations thinking that the White House might be open to discussing the level of passion that it would put behind Mr. Meek's candidacy, according to people familiar with the conversations.

Mr. Crist's path to victory would become easier if the president refrained from singling him out for criticism or from making Mr. Meek's election a top priority during the busy campaign season. The White House officials speaking with the Democrats included Mr. Obama's political director, Patrick Gaspard.

In another potential sign of Democratic interest in Mr. Crist, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D, Nev.) called the Florida governor late last week to wish him well, according to people familiar with the conversation. Allies of Mr. Crist saw the gesture as an overture to potential cooperation. A spokesman for Mr. Reid declined to comment.

Mr. Crist, in an interview, said he didn't know about calls to the White House. White House spokesman Bill Burton, in an e-mail, sought to dispel what he called "conspiracy theories" about the White House trying to tank support for anyone but Meek. He said Mr. Meek "is the president's candidate" and



Florida Gov. Crist (left) at a campaign event May 2. Rep. Kendrick Meek greets President Barack Obama in Miami in October.



that it was a "safe guess" that Mr. Obama would campaign for him. Still, people familiar with the conversations say that several factors could color Mr. Obama's approach to the race. Polls show Mr. Meek trailing significantly behind Mr. Crist and presumptive Republican nominee Marco Rubio in a three-way contest. Mr. Crist leads the pack, at least for now. Because Mr. Crist has not ruled out caucusing with the Democrats as a senator, the White House could have reason to help him defeat Mr. Rubio—or at least to avoid steps that would impede his campaign. In addition, people familiar with the conversations said that Mr. Obama's history with Mr. Meek could play a role in his

thinking. Mr. Meek was a staunch backer of Mr. Obama's chief rival for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton. By contrast, Mr. Crist literally embraced Mr. Obama on a trip to Florida early last year when the president was selling his economic stimulus plan—and supported the program as Mr. Obama was seeking Republican support to lend bipartisan credibility to his agenda. Mr. Crist was later punished by his party for that support, as Mr. Rubio and other Republicans used it to undermine him in the party primary for Senate. But Mr. Obama could risk his own political standing if he were to mute his support for his party's nominee. According to

people familiar with the deliberations, the White House is reluctant to antagonize Florida party activists backing Mr. Meek, who is black, or Mr. Meek's colleagues in the Congressional Black Caucus, whose support the White House needs to help mobilize black voters in other races around the country. Moreover, those activists would be important allies of the president during his own re-election in 2012. "This presents an interesting conundrum for the White House," said Eric Johnson, a Democratic political consultant who was chief of staff to former U.S. Rep. Robert Wexler (D., Fla.). The White House and top Democrats "really don't want Marco Rubio as a senator," said

Mr. Johnson. "But it's not yet clear whether Kendrick Meek or Charlie Crist is the man to beat Rubio." John Morgan, an Orlando-area trial lawyer and Democrat who has been advising Mr. Crist, said another impediment to White House aid is that Mr. Crist has not committed to caucusing with the Democrats as a senator. Mr. Crist has so far dodged the question, saying he is open to aligning with either party. Still, Mr. Morgan added of the White House: "I don't think they're going to put a bunch of money behind Kendrick Meek." Advisors to Mr. Meek argue that he lags in the polls only because he has yet to air television ads. Moreover, they say the White House has told the cam-

Three-Way Contest

Recent poll results for the U.S. Senate race in Florida

Gov. Charlie Crist
Independent
38%

Marco Rubio
Likely Republican nominee
32

Kendrick Meek
Likely Democratic nominee
19

Source: Mason-Dixon Polling and Research poll of 625 registered Florida voters conducted May 3-5; margin of error +/- 4.0 percentage points

campaign that it would be "heavily supportive."

"This is the No. 1 Democratic pickup opportunity in the country, so, of course the president is going to be involved," said Meek campaign strategist Steve Murphy. Another complicating factor for Mr. Meek is the surprise entry into the Democratic primary by billionaire Jeff Greene, who has pledged to spend "whatever it takes" to win.

A new Mason-Dixon poll released Thursday showed Mr. Crist leading Mr. Rubio 38% to 32%, with 19% backing Mr. Meek. But, more importantly, Mr. Crist was beating Mr. Meek among Democrats, the poll found.

Advisors to Mr. Crist believe that if he can maintain those levels of support in the Democratic base, then other voters and the White House would conclude that the governor is the strongest challenger to Mr. Rubio.

Mr. Crist said in an interview that if Mr. Obama returned to the state, he would happily stand with Mr. Obama again.

"You can't win in Florida statewide races unless you get a significant crossover vote," Mr. Crist said, noting that registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans by about 700,000 in the state. "You have to do relatively well at least among both parties in order to have some level of success."