

Five things to watch in the debates for Florida governor

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In 25 days, Florida elects a governor.

We've reached that phase of Florida's neck-and-neck governor's race where the voting is underway, the millions of dollars in nasty TV ads make less and less difference and barring an October surprise, there is probably one real opportunity to shift the overall narrative of the campaign: debates.

It starts Friday when Gov. Rick Scott and former Gov. Charlie Crist make their first joint appearance in the Telemundo TV studios in South Florida.

The 7 p.m. pre-taped debate could be critical for the campaigns' efforts to win over Hispanics, who make up 14 percent of registered voters. The questions will be in Spanish, and the answers from Crist and Scott will be dubbed over by a Spanish interpreter for the TV audience.



Gov. Rick Scott and former Gov. Charlie Crist make their first joint appearance in the Telemundo TV studios in South Florida for the first debate of the gubernatorial campaign. | Meredyth Hope Hall/Courtesy Governor's

But it is also a dress rehearsal for two live debates aimed at the broader electorate, next Wednesday from Broward College and Oct. 21 on CNN from Jacksonville.

As debate season gets underway, here are five things to keep in mind:

1. Debates matter. It's not so ludicrous to consider that but for the late Gov. Lawton Chiles' legendary debate performance in 1994, it may have been Jeb Bush, not George W. Bush, elected president in 2000.

"The old he-coon walks just before the light of day," Chiles lectured a befuddled Jeb Bush in their final debate.

The spontaneous moment helped remind Floridians — especially conservative Democrats in north Florida — why they appreciated their eccentric and genuine governor. Days later, Chiles eked out a victory against Jeb Bush, while 900 miles away his brother was elected governor of Texas.

In 2002, Democratic nominee Bill McBride never recovered from his weak performance against the relaxed and confident Gov. Bush. A flummoxed McBride struggled to answer how much the class-size reduction initiative would cost and how he would pay for it.

Eight years later, Scott credited his debates against Alex Sink, McBride's wife, with helping him narrowly win. Certainly it did not help Sink that she had to spend several of the campaign's final days explaining why she violated the debate rules by reading a text message from a campaign aide during a commercial break.

Recent polls indicate somewhere between 5 and 9 percent of the electorate remains undecided, which is enough to tilt the race either way. More than just persuading the undecided voters, the debates can determine whose side is more or less motivated to turn out.

The governor's race this year appears so close that neither Scott nor Crist can afford to make any high-profile mistakes. These debates offer them their best opportunity to do just that.

2. Don't overestimate Charlie Crist. The Republican-turned-Democrat is polished, telegenic, and has more than 15 years of experience debating before a statewide or nationwide TV audience. But truth be told, he's not especially good at it.

Crist has a penchant for winging it even with predictable questions. ("I didn't endorse it. I didn't even have a vote on the darned thing," he said, incredibly, of the federal stimulus package during a 2009 TV interview.)

I still remember Crist's explanation of his opposition to same-sex marriage during a 2006 debate against Jim Davis. Marriage, he said, is a sacred and unique commitment between man and woman — "like I had before I got divorced."

Most observers agreed Davis outperformed Crist in most or all of those debates in 2006, though it wasn't enough to change the dynamic of the campaign. Likewise, Crist did nothing to help himself in 2010 when he debated before national TV audiences both as a Republican U.S. Senate candidate and as an unaffiliated U.S. Senate candidate.

Scott, meanwhile, benefitted from low expectations against Sink in 2010 and is likely to again this year. He is almost robotic in his determination to recite talking points.

Scott's risk is that he comes off as evasive and fake and drives home the Democrats' message that he can't be trusted.

3. The other guy. In a race this close, any third-party candidate could prove to be a spoiler, and polls show Libertarian Adrian Wyllie drawing as much as 13 percent support.

But because the Palm Harbor resident has not cracked 15 percent in a credible poll, he has not been invited to participate in any of the televised debates. He filed suit challenging his exclusion Thursday. Eight years ago, Reform Party candidate Max Linn's similar lawsuit succeeded in getting him added at the last minute to a gubernatorial debate in Tampa.

Polls generally show Wyllie as a non-factor, pulling about equally from Crist and Scott, but anything that enhances his profile significantly could make him a wildcard given how unpopular the two major candidates are after months of negative ads.

4. What will they do? The debates may be the best and last opportunity for the candidates to actually explain what they want to do if elected. To date, the campaign has mainly been about casting the other guy as an untrustworthy sleaze rather than offering up an agenda for governing.

Crist says he wants to push hard to accept federal money to expand health care coverage to working Floridians, but you wouldn't know it looking at his TV ads. Mostly, those ads just remind you that Scott used to plead the Fifth Amendment frequently to avoid self-incrimination.

Scott lately seems to be throwing everything against the wall to see what works. The jobs governor's ads barely even talk about job creation anymore. Instead, he mainly reminds Floridians that Crist and President Barack Obama like each other.

5. The trust factor. Debates typically generate the biggest headlines when someone makes a gaffe, but both these candidates have a real opportunity to win rather than just avoid losing. Poll after poll shows that more people have an unfavorable than favorable impression of both Crist and Scott. That's the inevitable result of so many months of attack ads.

So here are three opportunities to actually show some genuine warmth and humanity in a way scripted commercials rarely do. Here are three opportunities for Mr. Flip-Flopper and Mr. Plead-the-Fifth to regain some trust, to look into the camera and give a reason for skeptical Floridians to vote for them, rather than against the other guy.

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Florida's gubernatorial debates

Friday: 7-8 p.m., taped earlier at Telemundo's WSCV-51 in Miramar.

Wednesday, Oct. 15: 7-8 p.m., live from Broward College in Davie.

Oct. 21: 7-8 p.m., live from WJXT-TV in Jacksonville.

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