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# Meet The Tea Party's New Favorite Candidate

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JESSICA TAYLOR



Three major Tea Party groups endorsed Ron DeSantis, R-Fla., to replace Marco Rubio in the Senate. DeSantis speaks here in 2013 against Obamacare.

*J. Scott Applewhite/AP*

Conservatives have found their candidate for one of 2016's most important Senate races: Florida Congressman Ron DeSantis.

Soon after he launched his bid Wednesday, a trifecta of deep-pocketed Tea Party-aligned groups — the Senate Conservatives Fund, the Club for Growth and FreedomWorks — all signaled they would back the two-term congressman in his bid to succeed Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., who's running for president.

Florida is an important state in 2016 for many reasons. It will not only be a crucial part of any White House campaign, but it will also be critical in the battle for control of the Senate. While Republicans won the majority in 2014, two years later they will find themselves almost entirely on defense, defending 24 seats — several in blue-leaning states President Obama carried — compared to the just 10 Democrats are defending. Democrats need to flip just five seats to take back the Senate.

So with few GOP primaries where they can make a mark, the trio of conservatives groups quickly circled their wagons around DeSantis, who won a competitive GOP primary for a new seat in 2012. The race sets up what could become the most important Tea Party versus establishment clash next year.

In less than three years in the House, DeSantis has staked out a conservative foothold. He was among the founders of the new House Freedom Caucus, created to try and nudge GOP leadership to the right. He's a Harvard Law grad, who later served in the Navy JAG Corps, and he's currently the only declared GOP candidate in the Florida Senate contest so far. Several top-tier candidates, who were expected to run, surprisingly passed.

An aide with the National Republican Senatorial Committee said it has met with DeSantis, "respect his candidacy" and will meet with anyone interested in running. Other Republicans who could enter the race include Lt. Gov. Carlos Lopez Cantera, fellow Reps. Jeff Miller and David Jolly and former state Attorney General Bill McCollum, who lost a 2010 gubernatorial primary.

If a split within the GOP does emerge, with conservatives firmly on DeSantis's side, it could

not only hurt Republicans' chances of holding onto the seat they need for their Senate calculus, but it could harm the party's presidential nominee, too.

National Democrats were eager to paint him as a "Tea Party extremist," calling DeSantis "wildly out of step with mainstream Floridians." They have endorsed moderate Rep. Patrick Murphy, D-Fla., as their nominee, but he could still face a bitter primary of his own from the more progressive and bombastic Rep. Alan Grayson, D-Fla.

Conservative groups had been making the pitch to DeSantis, who played in the Little League World Series and captained the Yale baseball team, to jump in the race ever since Rubio made his White House bid official and announced he wouldn't run for reelection to the Senate.

These are the same groups that were instrumental in helping now-presidential candidates Sens. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, Rand Paul, R-Ky., and even Rubio win their primaries. The groups also tried unsuccessfully to oust several incumbents last cycle in Mississippi and Kansas, and they could still take aim at Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., this cycle as well.

But with few open GOP primaries to play in, DeSantis will have their heavy support.

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