

An Idea, a Book, an Agenda

In Florida, the speaker thinks the best policy might just come from the people.

BY STEVE BOUSQUET

The Florida Legislature is brimming with new ideas. It's the result of a unique collaboration between residents of the fourth-largest state and the new speaker of the Florida House, Marco Rubio. He's a 35-year-old Republican with a mission to create a fresh vision for Florida's future, one that gives people a more meaningful say in how laws are made.

Rubio's goal: Put policy first and politics second, by encouraging lawmakers to solicit bold ideas from their constituents and find ways to make them happen.

"I honestly and truly believe that people are dying for problem-solvers in politics," Rubio says. "I think we have to show how innovative ideas can be a catalyst for change."

A son of Cuban exiles, Rubio is the first Cuban-American speaker in Florida's history. He was born and raised in Las Vegas, where his father tended bar in a hotel. When Rubio was formally designated as speaker on Sept. 13, 2003, Radio Marti, the U.S. government-funded channel, beamed the ceremony to Cuba.

Rubio on that day challenged his colleagues, Republicans and Democrats alike, to fill the pages of a blank book with 100 innovative ideas that reflect "the real hopes and the real anxieties of real Floridians."

The book, *100 Innovative Ideas for Florida's Future*, was published in November by conservative publisher Regnery and financed

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by the Republican Party of Florida, a decision that has subjected Rubio to some criticism. He says he had no other way to pay for it, and that it would have been wrong to directly solicit donations from special interests with a stake in pending legislation.

SHARING THE IDEA

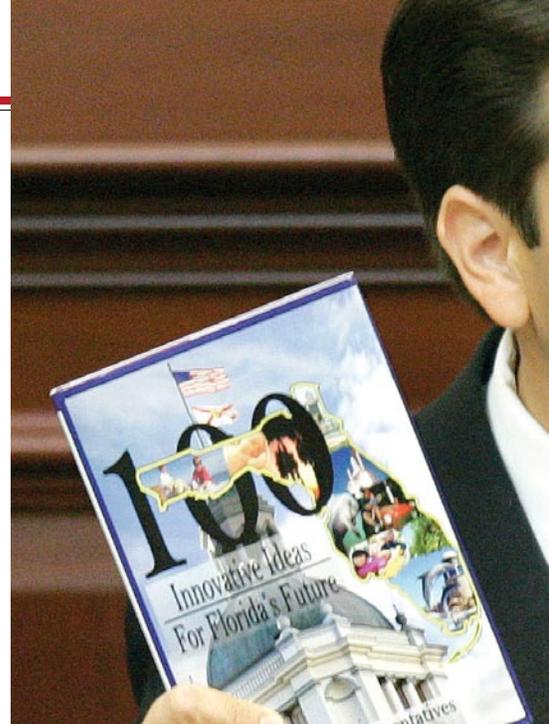
Rubio has shared his concept with politicians all over the country, and the idea is being imitated everywhere. Georgia public health officials say their 100 Ideas for a Healthier State "was borrowed from our friends in Florida." Iowa candidate for governor Jim Nussle assembled "99 Ideas to Energize Iowa's Future." Ohio Representative Mark Wagoner contacted Rubio's staff about launching a similar program in his state.

The book is an outgrowth of a website started last year by Rubio and House Republicans, www.100ideas.org. Thousands of people have posted ideas on the site, and legislators and candidates have held "idea-raisers" to seek new ways of dealing with familiar problems. In August, hundreds of people filled a hotel ballroom near Disney World for a statewide policy summit, that featured speeches by Jack Kemp, Newt Gingrich, Stephen Goldsmith and others.

FROM THE PEOPLE

The ideas posted by everyday Floridians on the website range from thought-provoking to old hat to weird to we-tried-this-and-it-didn't-work.

Among them: Ratify the ERA. Require prison inmates to learn how to read before they are released. Relocate the state capitol to a more densely populated city, such as Orlando. Levy fines on people who don't vote. Make physical education classes man-



Speaker Marco Rubio involved Florida citizens in compiling 100 Innovative Ideas for Florida's Future, which will guide the Legislature in upcoming sessions.

datory in public schools. Require equal press coverage for all candidates for public office. Impose mandatory death sentences on repeat sex offenders. Restrict coastal development and set larger minimum lot sizes for new homes to slow sprawl.

On the website, Ed Baranowski of Melbourne, Fla., posted a lengthy proposed solution to Florida's homeowners insurance crisis, including state-imposed limits on company profits and a ban on insurers and their lobbyists from making campaign contributions to candidates.

Martha Monroe of Gainesville wants Florida to get serious about bicycle safety, including adding bike paths and roadside travel lanes for bicyclists.

Chuck Schroeder of St. Petersburg suggested that all restaurants be banned from using hydrogenated oil, which produces artery-clogging trans fats.

The 100 ideas in the book were narrowed down from thousands by a committee of Republican legislators. Nearly one-third of them relate to education, Rubio says, the issue that consistently resonates strongest among Florida voters. Some Democrats criticized Rubio and the Republicans for omitting ideas that are popular among Democrats, such as paper trails for electronic voting machines and an independent redistricting commission.

As he seeks to implement the people's ideas, Rubio has the advantage of an overwhelming



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

majority of Republicans under his command of the Florida House. Even though the Democrats picked up seven seats in the November election, the GOP has a 79-41 majority.

Rubio's ideas will need to attract support in the Florida Senate, which is also controlled by Republicans. But the Senate is considered more moderate than the House on most issues, and has been resistant to tackling wedge issues that are important to social conservatives.

In addition, Rubio also will have to deal with a new governor, Charlie Crist, who ran a centrist campaign devoid of emphasis on social issues. And Florida, despite its population of 18 million, still has a part-time legislature that meets for only 60 days every spring.

Watching closely across the aisle from Rubio is Representative Dan Gelber, a Miami Beach Democratic leader. He says previous policy efforts by the Republican majority have been driven too often by conservative ideology.

As examples, Gelber cited House passage of a bill that would have required additional state intervention in the Terri Schiavo end-of-life case and a measure opposing embryonic stem cell research.

Gelber faulted Rubio and his leadership

team for reducing the list of ideas to 100 in private. But he says it's important to give Rubio the benefit of the doubt overall.

"An idea can be both good or bad, or meaningless," Gelber says. "I'm all for efforts by either party of seeking ideas that presume to be innovative. The test will be when we look at them. I don't think it would be fair to prejudge Marco's efforts until we see the product."

THE BEGINNING

Rubio discovered political activism while attending college at the University of Florida. In a five-year span, from 1993 to 1998, he served as an intern in the office of U.S. Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, got a law degree at the University of Miami, volunteered on Bob Dole's 1996 presidential campaign and won a city commission seat in West Miami.

He won a House seat in 2000, and immediately went to work campaigning to be speaker.

Rubio, who speaks rapidly and is possessed of a quick wit, realizes he doesn't have much time. That's why he has made the 100 Ideas project a joint venture with the two men in line to succeed him as speaker: Republicans Ray Sansom and R. Dean Cannon.

By promoting the power of ideas, Rubio may be the Florida politician who comes closest to continuing the legacy of Governor Jeb Bush, who led with a strong, decisive hand and often brought a missionary's zeal to the pursuit of a broad policy agenda.

"Marco is a person who believes in the power of ideas," Bush says. "He'll be fair, and he won't be timid. And I think timidity in politics is the death knell of a party that doesn't stand for anything."

To some legislators, Rubio's crusade for new ideas offers a newfound enthusiasm for the work of lawmaking.

"Government has a tendency to crisis-manage," says Representative Ellyn Bogdanoff. "For the first time in a long time—or probably ever—we will achieve an agenda. The citizens of Florida created that agenda, and

will know exactly what they can expect from their Legislature over the next six years."

A VISION

Bogdanoff added that the long-term vision sought by the 100 Ideas project could serve to counteract the negative side effects of term limits. A revolving-door Legislature has robbed the body of much of its institutional knowledge in addressing challenges in education, growth management, health care, transportation and tax policy.

The Florida Legislature historically has had rapid turnover in leadership, with speakers and Senate presidents usually selected among their peers years in advance and serving for a single two-year term.

Through a mix of happenstance, luck and the personal magnetism of ambitious politicians, the system has produced its share of outstanding visionaries and narrow-minded partisans.

In 1992, Florida voters amended the state Constitution by passing a citizens' initiative known as "Eight is Enough," which limited the terms of legislators to eight years. The effect has been dramatic. Freshman House members jockey for support for the speaker's post almost from the day they are elected, with the goal of holding the position in the final two years of their eight-year careers.

It is at that point in his political career where Rubio finds himself now, and he wants to make the most of it.

"If the purpose of partisanship is to advance ideas, then partisanship is good. But if the purpose of partisanship is beating people up for the sake of winning an election, then partisanship is bad," Rubio says. "This is designed to elicit heated debate, but for the purpose of coming up with solutions."

Rubio himself chaired a select legislative committee that studied Florida's eminent domain law, the first time in his six years in office that he played a leading role in a major public policy area.

He is young and is viewed as highly ambitious, so the 100 Ideas project has led to a considerable speculation that he plans to use the project and book to catapult himself onto the national political stage.

"I've been behind it, but it hasn't been a form of self-promotion," Rubio says. "I don't think it would work if it were a Marco Rubio project. If these are my 100 ideas, I can only get so far with that." 



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