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DeSantis, center, hired Fabrizio for the role of senior advisor to his campaign.

Ron DeSantis signals establishment support in Senate race

By **MARC CAPUTO** | 05/29/15 06:30 AM EDT

Rep. Ron DeSantis, who kicked off his Florida Senate campaign with the backing of top insurgent conservative groups, showcased his establishment bonafides this week when he unveiled a list of top supporters and hired the state's most sought-after political pollster, Tony Fabrizio.

Fabrizio won't just poll for DeSantis, he'll take on the role of senior advisor to the campaign—a position he held in Florida Gov. Rick Scott's two successful campaigns. Fabrizio is also polling for Sen. Rand Paul's presidential campaign this cycle.

Fabrizio made clear that DeSantis' campaign will cast the candidate, a former U.S. Navy officer and Harvard graduate, as a fresh face who can win in a primary and general election.

“Ron DeSantis represents a new generation of conservative leadership, a reform conservative,” Fabrizio told POLITICO.

“I’m excited that Tony is on board for my campaign to reform Washington,” DeSantis said in a written statement. “Tony is a one of the best in the business, and he knows Florida as well as anyone. He will be a key player in our efforts.”

Before announcing Fabrizio’s hiring, DeSantis’ team released a roster of influential Florida Republican supporters that includes: Jim France (a NASCAR executive from Daytona Beach); former Ambassador John Rood (a Jacksonville power broker); former Gov. Bob Martinez of Tampa; and former Ambassador to the Vatican Francis Rooney (a major Mitt Romney donor and Naples neighbor of Scott).



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DeSantis’ campaign pointed out that he began the fundraising quarter with \$1.1 million in the bank and has the endorsement of conservative groups like the Club for Growth PAC, Senate Conservatives Fund and FreedomWorks PAC. Because some of these groups tried to take out Senate Leader Mitch McConnell in his Republican primary last year, some establishment Republicans began whispering about supporting Florida Lt. Gov. Carlos Lopez-Cantera, who looks increasingly likely to run for the Senate seat that his friend, Marco Rubio, is leaving to pursue a presidential bid.

Fabrizio acknowledged there would be a measure of awkwardness in helping lead a campaign against Lopez-Cantera. Fabrizio was one of a small group of advisers who urged Scott to appoint Lopez-Cantera as lieutenant governor and, as a 2014 campaign adviser, helped him get elected on Scott’s ticket.

“I wish Carlos the best — but not too much of the best,” Fabrizio chuckled. “In the end, I just don’t see how Carlos emerges. Yes, I understand he’s from Miami-Dade County [the state’s most populous], but to win a statewide election in Florida, you need to raise a lot of money. And the only person who raised all the money in the last election was Rick Scott.”

Aside from Scott and Paul, Fabrizio has worked for McConnell, Bob Dole’s 1996 presidential campaign, Texas Gov. Rick Perry’s 2012 presidential campaign, Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-La.), the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Republican Senatorial Committee’s independent effort to help Sen. David Purdue (R-Ga.) and the Republican Governors Association’s

independent campaign to reelect Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker. Fabrizio has also worked for numerous political causes and committees, including the 1988 Americans for Bush committee that produced the infamous Willie Horton ad.

As one of only two open Senate seats in a swing state, the Florida Senate race will be one of the most hotly contested. On the Democratic side, Rep. Patrick Murphy has sewed up his party's establishment support. But Rep. Alan Grayson is strongly considering a challenge. He was recently supported in a Club for Growth ad buy that attacked Murphy.



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In an extra twist, Republican-turned-Libertarian operative Roger Stone said he might run for Senate as a Libertarian candidate. If so, it would mean Fabrizio would be friendly with yet another potential DeSantis opponent. Stone lives close to Fabrizio's Fort Lauderdale home, and the two have been good friends for 30 years.

"I'm far more scared of facing Roger Stone across the debate table on Fox News than I am at the ballot box," Fabrizio said.