

POLITICS

## Rick Scott heads to Iowa in new, powerful position defined by a familiar theme: money

BY ALEX DAUGHERTY

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Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., speaks during a Senate committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 23, 2021. (Erin Scott/POOL/AFP/Getty Images/TNS) ERIN SCOTT/POOL TNS

WASHINGTON

Rick Scott is laying the groundwork for a potential 2024 presidential run, and his path — if successful — will look at lot like his three statewide races in

Florida.

In 2010, 2014 and 2018, Scott outspent the competition, in part due to his vast wealth that allowed him to spend a combined \$150 million of his own family's money, in addition to donor support, to win and keep the governor's mansion as a virtual unknown in politics and flip a U.S. Senate seat during an election cycle that was bad for Republicans nationwide.

The 68-year-old Naples resident was also willing to spend money on poll-tested TV messages over and over again, often months before his opponents began running ads of their own. Scott ran the first [2024-style TV ad](#) over a year ago, spending money attacking then-candidate Joe Biden during the Iowa Caucuses.

But \$150 million won't buy the presidency in 2024, and Scott doesn't have the wealth that allowed 2020 Democratic also-rans Michael Bloomberg and Tom Steyer to spend nearly \$1.4 billion and stay in the race for months.

If he wants to outspend the 2024 competition, he'll need help from national donors.

Enter Scott's new position in the U.S. Senate. Within two years of his arrival in Washington, Scott nabbed a leadership position as the head of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, a job that enables him to be the money man for Senate Republicans.

The NRSC helps elect Republican senators and challengers primarily through fundraising. Scott is one of six senators elected to a leadership role, and will

manage staff and help determine strategy for key U.S. Senate races in 2022, including Florida, where Sen. Marco Rubio is up for reelection.

Scott now spends most of his time outside Washington traveling around the country to raise money that will be likely spent on negative TV ads to attack Democratic Senate candidates a year from now, the behind-the-scenes donor work that can help build a presidential campaign. Flipping a 50-50 Senate in 2022 is a strong possibility, and many of Scott's longtime aides are now in Washington working at the NRSC.

“There are two things I don't do, I don't waste money and I don't lose elections,” Scott said in a fundraising pitch to donors shortly after the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol amid a flurry of corporate actions to [pull or pause donations](#) to congressional Republicans.

On Thursday, Scott will make his first in-person appearance in an early 2024 state: [a reception in Cedar Rapids, Iowa](#) with Sen. Joni Ernst, Iowa GOP chairman Jeff Kaufman and Rep. Ashley Hinson.

## USING HIS NEW PLATFORM

Scott, like most presidential hopefuls, isn't publicly stating his intentions to run three years out. And former President Donald Trump will likely have the field mostly to himself should he choose to mount a third campaign. But Scott has used his NRSC position and relationship with Trump to position himself as a

MAGA-friendly candidate who is also palatable to the GOP establishment.

“I’m talking to people all over the country on a daily basis,” Scott said in a recent interview. “I think what you’re seeing is people agree with what we’re trying to accomplish at the NRSC. People are very frustrated with what [President Joe] Biden talked about on the campaign versus what he did as president.”

While Scott currently lacks the presidential buzz of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who recently came out on top of a straw poll conducted last month at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, GOP operatives with experience in Florida say he’s adept at finding a message that resonates with the GOP base and sticking to it. “Jobs, jobs, jobs,” was his gubernatorial campaign mantra.

Twelve years ago, Scott was a venture capitalist and political neophyte known for running the Columbia/HCA hospital chain when it was raided by the federal government and ultimately responsible for paying \$1.7 billion in [criminal and civil penalties](#) in 2002 for fraudulently billing Medicare and other misdeeds. Scott, who was never charged with a crime, left the company in 1997 with a \$10 million severance package along with stocks and options worth up to \$300 million, money that ultimately fueled his personal fortune and political career.

Scott’s two years in Washington aren’t filled with major policy achievements, a common occurrence for junior lawmakers, and his [new ideas on prescription drug pricing](#) and votes against most of Biden’s cabinet nominees aren’t likely to be cornerstones of a presidential campaign pitch to GOP donors and voters.

But there’s lots of time between March 2021 and January 2024, when Republican primary voters begin casting ballots.

“He’s a mild-mannered individual but one that showcases something that is an incredible asset in politics: not just message discipline but discipline in general,” said Republican strategist Jesse Manzano-Plaza, who worked for former Florida governors Jeb Bush and Charlie Crist and also did Spanish-language media work for Scott’s gubernatorial campaigns.

“Perhaps he might not be the warmest individual when it comes to grassroots politics, but when you’re running for president you’re not going to get to the

White House by shaking hands,” Manzano-Plaza said. “I still think today there’s a lot of people that underestimate Rick Scott, especially Democrats.”

Manzano-Plaza said Scott listens to a core team of advisers who have worked together for years, and who often find messages that resonate with the Republican base ahead of other candidates.

In 2009, Manzano-Plaza was working for Scott’s GOP primary opponent when Scott began running ads touting Arizona’s hardcore immigration laws, a tactic that perplexed Florida Republicans given that Florida doesn’t border Mexico. Scott also ran ads in 2018 advocating for term limits and hammered Sen. Bill Nelson as a “socialist” on the campaign trail, attacks that were mostly dismissed by Democrats as inconsequential or laughable.

Scott won the 2010 GOP primary by three percentage points over Bill McCollum and narrowly defeated Nelson in 2018 by .12 points in a year where Democrats performed well nationwide.

“He may have not been out there tweeting ‘send them back,’ but he was not shy about picking an issue that was perhaps laughed at, and he tripled down on that,” Manzano-Plaza said.

## **CONSISTENTLY OPPOSING BIDEN**

Recently, Scott has hammered Biden for his \$1.9 trillion COVID relief bill that generally polls well with voters who were happy to get \$1,400 checks. But Scott has used recent cable news hits to warn of impending inflation and increases in costs of living in the years ahead.

Florida Democratic Rep. Ted Deutch said Scott’s attacks are cynical and will only hurt his chances for winning a general election in the future.

“This is selective outrage from someone who is perpetually in campaign mode in both the Senate and in a likely presidential race,” Deutch said.

But the 2020 campaign didn’t go well for Senate Republicans. They lost their Senate majority and splintered into pro-Trump and pro-Mitch McConnell camps after rioters intent on overturning the 2020 election result stormed the U.S.

Capitol.

Amid the chaos, Scott has charted his own course.

He is the only member of Senate GOP leadership to meet personally with Trump since he left office and was the only member of Senate GOP leadership to vote in favor of overturning election results in Pennsylvania. But Scott has also avoided the scrutiny of Sens. Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz, who were seen as the Senate ringleaders of attempts to discredit the 2020 election result.

In his NRSC role, Scott has continued to raise money despite threats from some corporations to withhold donations after the insurrection. Fundraising has mostly kept pace with the NRSC's Democratic counterpart, and Scott has vowed to beef up the committee's ability to raise money from small donors, an area where Democrats traditionally have an advantage.

“One of the first things we did we put a big focus on online fundraising, digital fundraising,” Scott said. “We put together a team of people who know how to do that.”

## **NO PREFERENCES IN PRIMARIES**

Scott also vowed to protect all Senate incumbents, including Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who drew Trump's ire when she was the only GOP senator running in 2022 who voted to remove the president from office for his conduct during the insurrection. But Scott said he doesn't plan to get involved in primaries for open seats, noting that national Republicans didn't back him at that stage in 2010.

"I don't have a plan on getting involved in primaries in open seats," Scott said. "I'm going to support all incumbent senators. I'm very comfortable that voters will choose. [In 2010] Every Republican endorsed my opponent and I was able to win."

While Scott acknowledged that money is important, he also said the message will matter most to voters in 2022. He singled out Democratic senate hopefuls Jaime Harrison and Amy McGrath as adept at raising money online, but the issues highlighted by Republicans in South Carolina and Kentucky resonated with voters.

"If you want to be a U.S. senator you've got to address the issues that are important to your state," Scott said. "If the issues are on our side and if we do a good job of raising money we have an opportunity to win in every state in the 2022 election cycle."

Alex Conant, who once worked as Florida Sen. Marco Rubio's communications director during his 2016 presidential run, said Scott is "making all the right moves" to set himself up for a 2024 bid.

"Running for president is a team effort and a long-term commitment, you don't just wake up a couple weeks before the Iowa Caucuses and decide you want to run for president," Conant said. "Anyone who is seriously planning a run for president in 2024 is taking steps right now to keep that option open. It's not just visiting the early states, it's building a team that can run a presidential campaign. It's laying the groundwork to marshal the resources a modern presidential campaign requires, it's raising your profile with key audiences, including primary voters."

Conant said Scott is among a group of non-Trump candidates making those

early moves, including DeSantis, former Vice President Mike Pence, former UN ambassador Nikki Haley and former secretary of state Mike Pompeo, who [visited Iowa on March 26](#).

“I think its really early and hard to predict what the electorate will want three years from now,” Conant said. “But I think he’s put himself in a position where he’s got a good team, he’s raising his name ID and is going to meet all the party’s major donors this year.”

#### **ALEX DAUGHERTY**

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