

Rubio, Murphy trade barbs on character, judgment — and Trump — at debate

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Rubio, Murphy trade barbs at Senate debate in Davie

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Hammering each other on issues from health care to the economy, U.S. Sen. **Marco Rubio** and his re-election challenger U.S. Rep. **Patrick Murphy** tried to sway Florida's undecided voters during a debate Wednesday night at Broward College in Davie.

Each candidate sought to demonstrate he possessed keen knowledge of critical issues — and each slashed at the other on matters of character and judgment, including assertions that the other guy is a liar.

Murphy, 33, a two-term Democratic congressman from Jupiter, argued that he is better suited than Rubio to handle issues ranging from job creation to foreign affairs and to break through partisan gridlock in the Senate.

Rubio, 45, a Republican from West Miami, maintained that voters would be better served by his conservative stances and history of public service — going from city commissioner to speaker of the **Florida House of Representatives** and then to one term in the U.S. Senate.

Murphy and Rubio echoed the criticisms of each other that they have trumpeted on the campaign trail and that voters see and hear on TV ads.

Murphy paints Rubio as a senator who shirked his duties, missing a host of votes and hearings during a failed run for the **Republican presidential nomination**.

"Florida deserves a senator that is going to show up to work," Murphy said. "There's way too much at stake right now to have a missing senator."

Rubio counters that Murphy failed to accomplish anything during his two terms in the House of Representatives. Rubio has also argued that Murphy embellished both his academic and professional accomplishments.

"He's been there for four years and no one has even noticed," Rubio said. "We are too important a state to have a senator that doesn't know how to get things done."

During the debate, controversies following Republican presidential candidate **Donald Trump** continued to play a big role in the Senate race.

Murphy repeatedly criticized Rubio for still endorsing Trump, who Murphy referred to as one of "the most racist and bigoted people ever to run for office."

"Senator Rubio continues to support Donald Trump, and it is shameful that he stands there with him," Murphy said.

Rubio has said he has disagreements with Trump but still thinks Trump would still be a better president than Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton.

He criticized Murphy for continuing to steer debate questions back to Trump.

"The answer to every question tonight by Congressman Murphy is Donald Trump," Rubio said.

The race between Murphy and Rubio has national implications, with the winner potentially tipping majority

control of the Senate to either Democrats or Republicans.

Poll numbers show a tight race between Rubio and Murphy, with early voting already underway and less than two weeks until Election Day.

Rubio leads Murphy 46 percent to 42 percent, with 12 percent of voters undecided, according to a Florida Atlantic University poll released Wednesday.

The 4-point advantage for Rubio in the FAU poll is in line with most recent polling, which show the race has gotten closer in the last month. The RealClearPolitics average of Florida polls shows Rubio with a slight lead over Murphy, 47 percent to 43.4 percent, an advantage of just 3.6 percentage points.

At Wednesday's debate, Rubio said the economy under President **Barack Obama**'s administration "has been a disaster for America."

To boost the economy, Rubio called for cutting taxes and reducing federal regulations to free up businesses and create jobs.

"We have to become more competitive," Rubio said.

Murphy said too many people "are still being left out" of the economy. He said he supports taking steps such as reducing student debt and raising the minimum wage.

"We know that you think being a senator, of course, is a waste of time ... but the difference is you got paid 100 percent of your salary when you were missing those votes," Murphy said.

On Social Security, Rubio said reforms are needed to keep the program afloat. He advocates increasing the retirement age for Social Security and changing the method for calculating benefits, except for people who already receive them or are about to retire.

"For younger workers there are going to have to be some smaller changes or it won't exist," Rubio said.

Murphy says he opposes efforts to cut or privatize Social Security. He opposes raising the retirement age or cutting cost-of-living adjustments for Social Security. Murphy said he'd favor allowing a higher level of wages to be subject to the payroll tax that funds the programs.

"These programs have to be protected," said Murphy, who maintained that Rubio's proposals would dismantle Social Security.

Rubio stuck by his call for repealing the **Affordable Care Act**, also known as Obamacare, and instead providing tax credits that could be used to purchase health insurance. He called Obamacare a "bailout" for

insurance companies.

"I do not want to go back to the old system. The old system did not work," Rubio said.

Murphy called the Affordable Care Act an important advancement that should be improved — not repealed — to make it more affordable. He advocates expanding Medicaid and adding a "public option" of health care coverage through the Affordable Care Act to cover more people and lower costs.

"The Affordable Care Act was a huge step forward for our country," Murphy said. "The focus now needs to be on getting it right."

U.S. policy toward Cuba, a critical issue for many Cuban-Americans who live in Florida, prompted one of the most heated exchanges.

Murphy avoided directly answering a question about whether he would vote to lift the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba. Murphy called it an "important question" that is "a very personal situation" for many, and said he has "some Cuban relatives."

He said U.S. policy for the past half century hasn't worked. "Let's make sure we are providing more economic opportunity for those Cuban people. Would we rather see our own cruise ships, **Royal Caribbean** and Carnival and carnival, there in Havana? Or would we rather see Russian spy ships there? And we can do more to not only protect our country on a national security basis, but help the Cuban people out."

He said he would continue targeted sanctions and move toward normalization of relations, a policy advanced by the Obama administration.

Rubio ripped into Murphy and Obama, who he said has done the opposite of maintain targeted sanctions. Members of the Communist Party and government are now eligible for remittances from the U.S., he said.

In a sarcastic tone, Rubio added, "And as far as the opening is concerned, cruise ships? Basically an invasion of cruise ships is going to bring democracy to Cuba. It is not, because the Cuban government is a dictatorship. We have now made, over two years, concession after concession to the Castro regime. They have taken not even a quarter step towards democracy."

Murphy responded by pointing to Trump's past business dealings that critics say violate the embargo. "The person you chose to be our next president has basically admitted he violated the embargo. And you continue to stand by his side," Murphy said. "So what's it going to take for you to unendorse Donald Trump?"

Rubio's response: "That's bizarre, Congressman Murphy. You're criticizing Donald Trump for supporting a position you have."

Murphy shot back: "I'm criticizing you for not having the courage, senator. You have no backbone."

The audience broke up the exchange by whooping and hollering.

Rubio said the debate showed Murphy was living up to his reputation as a "serial embellisher."

"Why does someone make things up? You make them up because you don't have anything real to point to," Rubio said.

Murphy said Rubio is the one who can't be believed. "If you voted as much as you lied, you might actually be a decent senator, but you continue to throw out these lies," he said. "I'm proud of what I accomplished, proud of what I've done."

Rubio said he wasn't offering a hedge when he said in last week's debate that he'd serve a full, six-year term if re-elected, "God willing."

"I always use that. It's not a qualifier. It's what I truly believe," he said. Rubio is widely expected to run for president in 2020 if he wins re-election and Clinton wins the presidency.

One of the debate watchers, former Florida Senate President Jim Scott, a Broward Republican, said he didn't think either candidate delivered a knockout blow or committed a game-changing error during their give and take.

"I think they both did well. They made their points," Scott said, adding that he thought Rubio did "really well."

Scott said Rubio showed he's far more accomplished in the art of debating.

Murphy brought up Trump at least 14 times in the hour-long faceoff. Rubio only brought up Clinton — who holds a lead in most Florida polls — a couple of times.

Broward County Commissioner Chip LaMarca, former chairman of the Broward Republican Party, said Murphy seemed to think he was debating Trump, not Rubio.

Blaise Ingoglia, chairman of the state Republican Party, ridiculed Murphy for harping on Trump. "Patrick Murphy has this weird obsession with Donald Trump. It was clear that he was trying to run a campaign against Donald Trump. He's not running on any of his own ideas, and Marco just outclassed him tonight," he said. "I actually feel a little sorry for all the people that are in Patrick Murphy's congressional district, because if this is the representation that they had, then I think the people should ask for a refund."

U.S. Rep. Ted Deutch, D-West Boca, said it is reasonable for Murphy to raise questions about Rubio's

willingness to vote for Trump. Deutch said when Rubio spoke during his closing statement about political "courage," he must have been thinking about his own lack of courage — because he's afraid to disassociate himself from Trump.

"He kept trying to joke about all the Donald Trump references as if it's not at all relevant that he refuses to walk away from a candidate, his presidential candidate who in so many ways represents all of the things that he tried to say he doesn't support," he said. "There is one way for him to make Congressman Murphy and everyone else to stop talking about Donald Trump:" say he is no longer supporting him for president.

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