

## DeSantis' Florida Record Fails the White House Test

The governor's heralded achievements were built on the soft sand of a compliant Republican legislature in a gerrymandered state, masking his significant political flaws.

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By **Mary Ellen Klas**

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Not ready for prime time. *Photographer: Joe Raedle/Getty Images*

Ron DeSantis' chief argument in his bid to replace Donald Trump at the top of the Republican Party's ticket is that he has achieved the policy wins in Florida that the former president has only talked about. The governor's pitch assumes that if Trump is convicted of a felony, voters will reject him and pick DeSantis: Trump without the baggage.

But an honest look at the DeSantis record shows he comes with some baggage of his own. His political instincts are flawed, and his heralded record was built on the soft sand of a compliant Republican legislature in a gerrymandered state. Florida's GOP stronghold is

hardly a true test for a president who will have to navigate a divided Congress in a polarized nation.

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DeSantis cites as evidence of his effectiveness his performance over more than four years as governor. It's true that he was methodical in his implementation of a conservative agenda. He achieved a more complete pass rate on extremist initiatives limiting abortion, gay rights, transgender health care and academic freedom than anything the former president accomplished while in the White House.

But politics is about disagreement and compromise. Effective leaders find common ground, moderate disputes and work toward consensus to get things done. Resolving disputes requires understanding and appreciating differences.

Instead, DeSantis achieves success by bullying and intimidation. When Republicans in both the Florida House and Senate attempted to avoid legal challenges by passing a redistricting map they believed complied with the state constitution's Fair District standards, DeSantis threatened a veto. He pledged to recruit primary candidates to run against any Republicans who opposed him. He then dismantled two predominately Black districts to give Republicans the advantage – drawing a legal challenge.

Florida's legislative leaders – who are elected with little competition – backed down in one of many demonstrations that they are a spineless bunch. The presiding officers once told me they considered themselves “collaborators” with DeSantis, not a check on his power.

A founding member of Congress' far-right and often combative Freedom Caucus, DeSantis isn't known for consensus building. Like Trump, who openly campaigns as an authoritarian, DeSantis prefers strong-arm tactics and punishing perceived disloyalty.

Every policy is designed with a political calculation in mind – to exploit the stereotypical values of White working-class voters and stoke public anger and resentment. It's a cynical attempt to consolidate his power and woo Trump's base.

DeSantis will tell you he was reelected governor because of his unique ability to read public sentiment and tap into parental angst. During the pandemic, it seemed as if DeSantis did have some rare political instinct that allowed him to counter the establishment messaging on closing schools and businesses during the pre-vaccine days of Covid-19. He risked keeping schools open, banned mask mandates and was rewarded by Florida voters, who were primarily pleased that the state's economy rebounded faster than the rest of the nation.

But it wasn't DeSantis' skills that made him a winner. It was luck. Voters may have handed him a 19-point re-election victory, based in large part on his Covid policies. But later examinations found the results of those policies were mixed. While he may have gotten children back into classrooms, his elevation of vaccine skeptics and anti-mask rhetoric may have cost lives.

He co-opted the Florida Legislature to adopt his extremist policies and establish himself as a cult-leading culture warrior, but what he doesn't talk about is his record of rushed legal work, poor bill drafting and the absence of meaningful legislative debate that has led to strategic blunders, costly litigation and missed opportunities.

Earlier this year, legal challenges forced DeSantis to rewrite the law that underpinned his program to relocate migrants from the Texas border to Martha's Vineyard and retroactively fix another law the state used to accuse 20 people of voter fraud.

Federal and state courts have put holds on many of his proposals and the list of DeSantis initiatives that have been halted due to First Amendment issues include: the "Stop WOKE Act" which attempts to limit companies from implementing racial bias training and restricts what teachers can say about race; a law to punish venues that admit kids to drag shows; and a social media law that restricts platforms' right to remove or suppress the posts of political candidates and media organizations.

Maybe if these ideas had been subject to real debate, if their sponsors had truly intended to find common ground instead of advancing DeSantis' presidential ambitions, then perhaps versions that could withstand constitutional challenges would be law. But that would

require the governor to compromise and that doesn't happen. His political committee is named "Never Back Down."

DeSantis' miscalculations have common themes. He has an inherent distrust of corporate America – as evidenced by his prolonged attack on Disney. He has a fundamental misunderstanding of how small businesses operate – as demonstrated by his attempt to punish them for trying to keep their workplaces safe during the pandemic. And rather than seek consensus, he uses extra-legal means to create law.

These flawed gambits can be explained in part by the fact that DeSantis is also a first-time chief executive and former backbencher in Congress who had to learn his executive and negotiating skills on the job. Combined with a personality prone to grandiosity and a small inner circle of green advisers, his mistakes have been self-inflicted.

But what DeSantis lacks in executive acumen, he makes up for with a misguided confidence in his – and his wife's – political instincts. After he was elected to a second term a year ago, the governor declared that Florida is "where woke goes to die." Few knew what he meant, but he built his presidential campaign around it.

Today, after three campaign staff shake-ups and the retreat of several major donors, DeSantis has backed down from the war on "woke." He rarely says the word anymore and, for the last three months, he has even done interviews with the same legacy media he once proudly spurned.

Now, DeSantis' once-surging support among voters in key primary states is slipping. He's gone from the favorite of the party's Never-Trump faction to losing ground for second place to former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley. (DeSantis was expected to tout and defend his record as governor in a Thursday night debate with California Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom.) Many Republicans now view DeSantis as less electable as president than they did when he was reelected governor and, even in Florida, a recent Florida Atlantic University poll showed that GOP voters prefer Trump to DeSantis by 41 percentage points. The Never-Trumpers may want an alternative, but DeSantis' argument that he's it has failed.

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