

# Ron DeSantis as Mainstream Radical

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*Ron DeSantis had made national headlines well before being reelected governor of Florida by the largest margin seen in the past forty years, almost 20 full points, even as he had taken no national level interviews. A large part of his gain in national attention came through the what I call a rhetorical strategy of “poking the bear,” with the bear in this case being the national media. By adopting the mainstream stance on a few key mainstream issues that the press, as a left leaning institution, would be certain to cover as controversial, even as radical, DeSantis was able to position himself as a viable contender for the Republican presidential nomination, even as he had not announced his candidacy.*

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Governor Ron DeSantis’s victory speech followed immediately on the heels of his resounding reelection victory, one with the largest margins seen in Florida the past forty years--almost 20 full points.<sup>1</sup> The speech was one in which he framed himself and those who reelected him as confronting an attack on Freedom, not only for those Floridians who had voted for him, but also for “the citizens of the United States.” Using antithesis throughout the speech, he forcefully articulated his broader political stances: “we chose facts over fear; we chose education over indoctrination; we chose law and order over rioting and disorder. Florida was a refuge of sanity. When the world went mad, we stood as a citadel of freedom for people across this country and indeed across the world....” And he pushed the contrast: “cities governed by leftist politicians have seen crimes skyrocket. They've seen their taxpayers abused. They've seen medical authoritarianism imposed, and they've seen American principles discarded. The woke agenda has caused millions of Americans to leave these jurisdictions....” And then this telling phrase: “while our country flounders due to failed leadership in Washington, Florida is on the right track....”<sup>2</sup> To me, this sounded suspiciously like something larger than a victory speech, larger than gubernatorial ambitions, so after watching it I began to wonder if he was perhaps setting himself up for a presidential run.

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<sup>1</sup> Tarik Minor, “Analyzing the Data: DeSantis Wins by Largest Margin of any Fla. Governor in 40 years,” News 4 Jacksonville, November 9, 2022, <https://www.news4jax.com/vote-2022/2022/11/09/analyzing-the-data-desantis-wins-by-largest-margin-of-any-fla-governor-in-40-years/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ron DeSantis, “Gov. Ron DeSantis Reelection Victory Speech, YouTube.com, November 8, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sP7C15Vz4s&ab\\_channel=WSVN-TV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sP7C15Vz4s&ab_channel=WSVN-TV). Transcription by author.

Axios apparently agreed with me and wrote: “Huge DeSantis win shows presidential punch.”<sup>3</sup> We were not alone in this assessment. During the months that followed leading up to the April meeting of the Southern States Communication Association Convention (SSCA) where I had to make a presentation on DeSantis and his probability of declaring a candidacy, numerous media outlets spoke to this very issue. For instance, NPR asked a month after his reelection, “What is stopping Gov. Ron DeSantis from announcing a run for president?”<sup>4</sup> In March, 2023 it stated, “Eyeing a run for president, Ron DeSantis wants to 'Make America Florida.’”<sup>5</sup> *The Washington Post* traveled so far into speculation that it published rank hearsay when it stated that, “DeSantis indicates privately he intends to run in 2024 as allies prepare.”<sup>6</sup>

When his book, *The Courage to be Free: Florida's Blueprint for America's Revival*, was published in February 2023, one could not help but notice a continuation of the victory speech theme of “freedom,”<sup>7</sup> and see the possible setting up of a presential run. There were also his appearances in Iowa and New Hampshire that, especially given his previous reluctance to be seen on the national stage, served to fuel speculation about a possible run; however, this could also signal a possible 2028 candidacy—we simply did not know.

So, by the time of my presentation on DeSantis at the April 2023 meeting of SSCA, I declared that I thought there was a 40-45 percent chance he would announce his candidacy. Below I share the three main reasons why I thought this: his grace under pressure; his stances on foreign policy issues; and his ability to attack ideological giants while mastering the press.

## Grace Under Pressure

DeSantis exhibits an approachable poise, or grace under pressure, waving off abusive insults from potential political opponents. Although not exactly a primary consideration for a mainstream radical, his actions in this area do denote an individual who shows an unflappable demeanor when dealing with the extremes of political rhetoric. For example, a few weeks after his resounding reelection win, DeSantis was asked, “What do you think of Trump’s big announcement and some of the less than flattering things he has said about you?” To which DeSantis replied: “One of the things I've learned in this job is when you're leading and you're getting things done, you take incoming fire. That's just the nature of it.” He went on to link this observation to larger matters:

I have corporate media outlets having a spasm just because I'm getting out of bed in the morning. I don't think any governor has gotten attacked more than me. . . . I think what you learn is, all that's just noise. And really what matters is, are you leading, are you getting in front of issues, are you

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<sup>3</sup> Zachary Basu, “Huge DeSantis Win Shows Presidential Punch,” *Axios*, November 8, 2022 <https://www.axios.com/2022/11/09/desantis-presidential-run-2024-trump>.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Allen, “These Could Be Some of The Reasons Desantis Hasn't Announced A Presidential Run (Yet),” NPR, December 14, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/14/1142680625/will-desantis-run-2024-president-campaign-trump>.

<sup>5</sup> Greg Allen, “Eyeing A Run For President, Ron Desantis Wants to 'Make America Florida,’” NPR, March 6, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/06/1160724251/florida-governor-ron-desantis-president>.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Knowles and Isaac Sanley-Becker, “DeSantis Indicates Privately He Intends To Run In 2024 As Allies Prepare,” *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/03/09/ron-desantis-2024-president-iowa-nevada/>

<sup>7</sup> Ron DeSantis, *The Courage to be Free: Florida's Blueprint for America's Revival* (Broadside Books, 2023).

delivering for people, and are you standing up for folks? And if you do that, none of that stuff matters. That's what we've done. We've focused on results and leadership.<sup>8</sup>

When asked about Trump implying that he was “grooming” young women during college, DeSantis merely stated that, ““I face defamatory stuff every single day I’ve been governor, that’s just the nature of it. I’d also just say this. I spend my time delivering results for the people of Florida and fighting against Joe Biden. . . . That’s how I spend my time. I don’t spend my time trying to smear other Republicans.”<sup>9</sup> In another interview, asked about the name calling and other insults by Trump, “It’s silly season,” DeSantis said on the Brian Kilmeade Show, you “know how some of this stuff goes, and obviously he does his thing and that’s kind of who he is.”<sup>10</sup> When asked during his trip to Japan in late April, 2023, about his falling behind in the polls, he replied casually with a smile, “I’m not a candidate, so we’ll see if and when that changes.”<sup>11</sup> Whether referring to a candidacy or his poll numbers remains unclear.

Presidents should be above the fray, and certainly such anodyne responses exhibit a noticeable disengagement from slinging mud. Moreover, in *Courage to be Free*, DeSantis actually offers praise to President Trump.<sup>12</sup> There are certainly other governors and high-ranking politicians, and even primary candidates who exhibit the same calm and poised responses (Robert F. Kennedy Jr. comes to mind<sup>13</sup>); so, although noteworthy, these types of behaviors alone are not a good reason for thinking he might make a presidential run. There are, however, two other reasons to consider DeSantis, one of which is his stance on foreign policy.

## Foreign Policy

DeSantis exhibit’s a rhetorical strategy of taking foreign policy positions that the mainstream news media describe as “conservative,” yet are supported by majority or more of Americans, so actually mainstream, or even centrist, when thinking of the average American and not political definitions imposed by the press or political parties. That a governor (and Congressional representative), who at the time had not at all hinted at presidential aspirations, would speak out on international policy could well be considered “testing the water” events.

Some examples of this include then Congressional Representative DeSantis speaking out against Communist China, calling it a “hostile country.” 82 percent of Americans think poorly of Communist China.<sup>14</sup> DeSantis also introduced the Palestinian Accountability Act, which would halt U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority until it formally recognizes Israel’s right to exist as a

<sup>8</sup> Townhall.com, Twitter Post, November 15, 2022, 12:12 PM, <https://twitter.com/townhallcom/status/1592566322948231169>. Transcription by author.

<sup>9</sup> Ryan Saavedra, “Trump Promotes Claim That DeSantis Was ‘Grooming High School Girls With Alcohol As A Teacher,’” *DailyWire*, February 7, 2023, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/trump-promotes-claim-that-desantis-was-grooming-high-school-girls-with-alcohol-as-a-teacher>.

<sup>10</sup> Ryan King, “DeSantis swats away Trump insults: ‘It’s silly season,’” February 28, 2023, <https://www.washington-examiner.com/news/campaigns/desantis-again-swats-trump-onslaught>.

<sup>11</sup> “Gov. DeSantis Reacts To Trump’s Growing Lead In Polls,” *CNN*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2023/04/24/desantis-trump-polls-contorno-cnn-vpx.cnn>.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, DeSantis, *The Courage to be Free*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see, “Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Explains Why He Is Running for President,” *CNN*, April 29, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRT8io6H0uo&ab\\_channel=CNN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRT8io6H0uo&ab_channel=CNN).

<sup>14</sup> Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, “Negative Views of China Tied to Critical Views of Its Policies on Human Rights.” *Pew Research Center*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/29/negative-views-of-china-tied-to-critical-views-of-its-policies-on-human-rights/>.

Jewish state. President Trump did halt this, and Joe Biden re-established it. Around 70 percent of Americans support Israel over the Palestinians.<sup>15</sup> DeSantis is also noted for his vocal condemnation of the Biden Administration's military pullout from Afghanistan in 2021. Only 45 percent of Americans support the pullout when a "terrorist threat" is mentioned as part of the polling question. Additionally, 70 percent said the Biden administration failed there.<sup>16</sup> There are other examples, but these suffice: DeSantis has a pattern of adopting mainstream positions on international issues.

### **Poking the Bears<sup>17</sup>**

Another reason I made the prediction I did was that DeSantis, as part of his rhetorical strategy of "getting in front of issues," chooses to champion issues with mainstream appeal and consensus. He often does this while concomitantly attacking major institutions/leftist ideological foundations (thus, poking the bear) which may well translate into political support from those Americans (a majority it appears) who feel confused by, or powerless against, liberal elites; such attacks also attracted the attention of the larger news media players, thus again, like above, providing DeSantis with the opportunity to expand his brand.

Although not necessarily an "institution," unless one considers the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment as institution like, there is certainly a mainstream concern with issues of gun control and 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment rights. On the issue of gun control DeSantis received an A+ from the National Rifle Association, and after the Stoneman Douglas school shooting, he publicly supported hiring retired law enforcement officers and military veterans as armed guards for schools. This is a stance decried by those leaning left, thus unlikely to vote for him, but supported by large majorities of Americans: 75 percent want armed guards and 56 percent want to arm those teachers and staff wishing to be armed.<sup>18</sup>

As the COVID-19 Pandemic effects were increasingly felt in public schools across the nation, parents began casting a close eye on the educational experiences of their children; what they saw in terms of pandemic restrictions and pedagogical restructurings was met with ever stronger displays of opposition. Additionally, many parents were increasingly concerned with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, as well as critical race theory (CRT) being seen in both K-12 and higher education. In a sense, for a majority of parents with school age children, public schools and higher education are increasingly being seen as problematic at best, and harmful at worst, with many schools being seen as openly hostile to traditional American values. DeSantis led an effort to ban the teaching of CRT in Florida public schools. He described CRT as "teaching kids to hate their country," mirroring a similar push by conservatives nationally. These attacks on CRT are quite popular among parents and voters in general, with between 60 to 70 percent of Americans

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Cortellessa, "New Poll: Americans' Support For Israel Falls To Lowest Point In A Decade," *Times of Israel*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/new-poll-americans-support-for-israel-declines-to-lowest-point-in-a-decade/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ted Van Green and Carroll Doherty, "Majority Of U.S. Public Favors Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal; Biden Criticized For His Handling of Situation," Pew Research Center, August 31, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/31/majority-of-u-s-public-favors-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-criticized-for-his-handling-of-situation/> and Frank Newport, "American Public Opinion and the Afghanistan Situation," Gallup, August 27, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/354182/american-public-opinion-afghanistan-situation.aspx>

<sup>17</sup> For those unfamiliar with this idiom, see, "poke the bear," Cambridge Dictionary, accessed October 7, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/poke-the-bear>.

<sup>18</sup> Fred Backus, Anthony Salvanto, and Jennifer De Pinto, "Parents are Scared About Gun Violence in Schools, and So Are Their School-Aged Children — CBS News Poll," CBS News, June 5 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gun-violence-schools-parents-children-opinion-poll-2022-06-05/>.

defining CRT unfavorably.<sup>19</sup> It was, closer to home here in Virginia, an issue that allowed Glenn Youngkin to win the governorship of Virginia, and is certainly an issue with which DeSantis wishes his brand to be associated.<sup>20</sup>

Another way DeSantis took on the entrenched education establishment was through his championing and signing into law the Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (WOKE) Act, which allows parents to sue school districts that teach their children CRT. According to DeSantis, "No taxpayer dollars should be used to teach our kids to hate our country or hate each other."<sup>21</sup> Americans in general love this idea, which also echoes support for school choice, and so we find 72 percent in support, with even 68 percent of Democrats offering some level of support in this area.<sup>22</sup>

Continuing the theme of taking on the public schools' institution, DeSantis also supported and signed into law the Florida Parental Rights in Education Act, what political opponents derisively called the "don't say gay bill." This is a law which prohibits the instruction of gender identity and otherwise "sexual" issues up through the third grade in public schools. This issue in particular garnered DeSantis much national level media attention. It is also another issue for which large number of average Americans agree, with around 70 percent saying that "schools should invest more in basic subjects — not transgenderism and CRT."<sup>23</sup> Specifically to Florida, over 60 percent supported the Florida Parental Rights Act.<sup>24</sup> Along these same lines DeSantis supported the removal of Black queer studies from African American advanced placement high school courses. Critics disingenuously claimed he was removing *all* advance placement courses about Black Americans, the news media parroted this, so he was able to receive much national media attention, and was also able to offer corrections, so even more press, and damaging to the press and critics. Again, this is another issue for which large number of average Americans agree, with around 70 percent saying that K-12 public schools should avoid teaching such subjects.<sup>25</sup>

Along these same lines, another press fanned controversial issue was the Fairness in Women's Sports Act (SB 1028), that was supported and signed into law by DeSantis. This bill bans transgender girls and women from participating and competing in middle-school and high-school girls' and college women's sports competitions in Florida. About 70 percent of Americans support allowing only playing on sports teams that match one's "birth gender."<sup>26</sup> He also signed into law

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<sup>19</sup> Zoe Kalin Hill, "Majority of Americans Hold Negative View of Critical Race Theory Amid Controversy," *Newsweek*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/majority-americans-hold-negative-view-critical-race-theory-amid-controversy-1601337>; Hannah Bleau, "Poll: Most Say Schools Should Focus on Basics, Not Transgenderism and Sexual Identity," *Breitbart News*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2023/01/19/poll-most-say-schools-should-focus-basics-not-transgenderism-sexual-identity/>.

<sup>20</sup> Hill, "Majority of Americans Hold Negative View of Critical Race Theory Amid Controversy."; Bleau, "Poll: Most Say."

<sup>21</sup> Callie Patterson, "Federal Judge Blocks DeSantis' 'Stop WOKE Act,' Compares Florida to 'Stranger Things,'" *New York Post*, August 19, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/08/19/federal-judge-blocks-desantis-stop-woke-act/>

<sup>22</sup> "New Poll: Overwhelming Support for School Choice," *Federation for Children*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.federationforchildren.org/new-poll-72-support-for-school-choice/>.

<sup>23</sup> Bleau, "Poll: Most Say."

<sup>24</sup> Sean Salai, "Poll: Over 60% of U.S. Voters Support Language of Florida Parental Rights Bill," *Washington Times*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/apr/1/poll-over-60-us-voters-support-language-florida-pa/>.

<sup>25</sup> Bleau, "Poll: Most Say."

<sup>26</sup> Madeline Halper, "Only 3 In 10 Americans Support Trans Athletes' Participation In Female Sports, Poll Finds," *Forbes*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/madelinehalper/2022/06/14/only-3-in-10-americans-support-trans-athletes-participation-in-female-sports-poll-finds/?sh=4c0a282226cf>; Jeffrey M. Jones, "More Say Birth Gender Should Dictate Sports Participation, Gallup, June 12, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/507023/say-birth-gender-dictate-sports-participation.aspx>.

a popular bill (passed with pluralities in both Florida Houses), that bans for minors, puberty blockers, hormones, or “any medical procedure, including a surgical procedure, to affirm a person’s perception of his or her sex if that perception is inconsistent with the person’s sex....”<sup>27</sup> Of note is that this also is a safe area for DeSantis to farm votes. Most recent surveys of Americans show that among those identifying as Republican, 90 percent say there are only two genders; among Independents this number is 66 percent, and among Democrats, 44 percent agree.<sup>28</sup> And with recent studies showing that America is the outlier among Western nations when it comes to the treatments banned in the bill above, DeSantis’s stance becomes even more mainstream.<sup>29</sup>

Another large issue, and one completely beyond most Americans to cope with is immigration. There is little that can be done on this issue at the state level, yet it is an issue in the forefront of a majority of American minds, being almost as hot a topic in the 2022 midterms as the economy. As governor, DeSantis supported and signed an anti-“sanctuary city” bill in law, and has been outspoken about illegal entry into the United States. Additionally, in a high profile act garnering much press attention, he sent two charter planes with illegal immigrants to Martha's Vineyard. Again, we see his moving decisively to act on an issue that has solid levels of support: over 80 percent of Americans oppose sanctuary cities, and a little over 50 percent support sending illegal immigrants to democrat controlled cities. Perhaps surprisingly, Americans of Hispanic descent also support such policies, and in Florida, this voter demographic convincingly voted to re-elect DeSantis, 53 to 46 percent.<sup>30</sup> DeSantis is on particularly safe ground here considering almost 70 percent of Americans want stricter boarder policies, with almost 75 percent of swing voters wanting the same.<sup>31</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Florida DeSantis fought against the Federal government and the CDC (again taking on the giants, as it were) by resisting the imposition of restrictions including face mask mandates, stay-at-home orders, and mandatory vaccination requirements. In May 2021, he signed into law a bill that prohibited businesses, schools, cruise ships, and government entities from requiring proof of vaccination. Although appearing reckless to those with a liberal political disposition, thus those unlikely to vote for him, these positions are popular with conservatives and a healthy portion of moderates, and the anticipated negative press reaction all but guaranteed DeSantis’s message would reach potential voters.<sup>32</sup>

Another major institution to come under DeSantis’s fire was the Disney empire. For decades Disney has increasingly supported the left side of the culture wars, and an opportunity was presented to DeSantis when Disney actively involved itself in opposing the Florida Parental Rights in Education Act. Acting in a large manner and decisively, DeSantis supported and signed into law

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<sup>27</sup> Joshua Arnold, “‘Let the Kids Be Kids’: DeSantis Signs 5 Bills Rejecting Trans Ideology, Protecting Conscience,” *The Washington Stand*, May 18, 2023, <https://washingtonstand.com/news/let-the-kids-be-kids-desantis-signs-5-bills-rejecting-trans-ideology-protecting-conscience>.

<sup>28</sup> PRRI Staff, “The Politics of Gender, Pronouns, and Public Education,” PRRI, June 8, 2023, <https://www.prii.org/research/the-politics-of-gender-pronouns-and-public-education/>.

<sup>29</sup> Jathon Sapsford and Stephanie Armour, “U.S. Becomes Transgender-Care Outlier as More in Europe Urge Caution,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 19, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-becomes-transgender-care-outlier-as-more-in-europe-urge-caution-6c70b5e0>.

<sup>30</sup> Minor, “Analyzing the Data.”

<sup>31</sup> “Approval and Mood of Country,” Harvard Caps/Harris Poll, May 17 -18, 2023, [https://harvardharrispoll.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/HHP\\_May2023\\_KeyResults.pdf](https://harvardharrispoll.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/HHP_May2023_KeyResults.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Alec Tyson and Cary Funk, “Increasing Public Criticism, Confusion Over COVID-19 Response in U.S.” Pew Research Center, February 9, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/02/09/increasing-public-criticism-confusion-over-covid-19-response-in-u-s/>.

the ability for him to essentially end Disney's semi-autonomous zone called the Reedy Creek Improvement District, and turn it instead into the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District, thus ending Disney's semi-autonomous reign in central Florida.<sup>33</sup> And although a majority of Americans still have a positive view of the Disney brand overall, that positive view is rapidly trending down; additionally, that same majority decries Disney's political actions.<sup>34</sup> In short, DeSantis is again acting to the mainstream audience.

Higher education is certainly an institution shrouded in mystery for a majority of Americans, even though a university degree has been highly valued for generations. However, over the past few decades, increasing numbers of Americans are viewing university attendance as a questionable investment, and the institution itself as hostile to their values; so even though higher education in terms of future employment is in general looked upon favorably, there is distrust about the ideological motivations of academics, especially among Republicans and conservatives in general.<sup>35</sup> DeSantis calling for "state colleges [to] submit spending data and other information on programs related to diversity, equity and inclusion [DEI], and critical race theory" was a way to this distrust. Initial figures being released by Florida universities showed millions of tax payer dollars being spent on the programs.<sup>36</sup> As noted by Jay P. Greene, an attack on DEI is not an attack on academic freedom, but rather on a "bloated" bureaucracy, something that Republicans and those leaning right would support.<sup>37</sup> And with the announced plan to block DEI type programs and courses,<sup>38</sup> DeSantis clearly entered into a fight with higher education, something those leaning left would dislike, but that others, particularly those likely to consider voting for him, would cheer.<sup>39</sup> Of note is that by mid-May, shortly before DeSantis announced he would run for the nomination, Florida had actually eliminated taxpayer funded DEI initiatives in Florida higher education.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ryan Saavedra, "DeSantis To Take Control Of Disney's Orlando District Under New Legislation," Daily Wire, February 6, 2023, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/desantis-to-take-control-of-disneys-orlando-district-under-new-legislation>.

<sup>34</sup> Ariel Zilber, "Disney's Reputation Takes Massive Hit Amid Feud With Ron DeSantis: Survey," *New York Post*, May 24 2023, <https://nypost.com/2023/05/24/disney-popularity-falls-in-light-of-row-with-ron-desantis-poll/>; Michael Austin, "Is The Walt Disney Company Left-Leaning? Let's Examine the Facts," *The Western Journal*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.westernjournal.com/walt-disney-company-left-leaning-examine-facts/>.

<sup>35</sup> "The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education," Pew Research Center, August 19, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/08/19/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education-2/>; Emma Whitford, "Not All Americans Think College is Worth It," *Inside Higher Education*, September 12, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/09/13/survey-shows-americans-are-divided-over-value-degree>.

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Nightingale, "Desantis' Survey of State-Run Colleges Reveals MILLIONS of Dollars Spend on DEI, Critical Race Theory," *The Post Millennial*, February 3, 2023, <https://thepostmillennial.com/desantis-survey-of-state-run-colleges-reveals-millions-of-dollars-spend-on-dei-critical-race-theory>.

<sup>37</sup> Jay P. Greene, "DeSantis Calls the Bureaucrats' Bluff," the Heritage Foundation, February 14, 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/education/commentary/desantis-calls-the-bureaucrats-bluff>.

<sup>38</sup> Guardian Staff and Agencies, "Ron DeSantis Announces Plan to Block DEI Programs in State Colleges, February 2, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/feb/02/ron-desantis-block-dei-program-state-colleges-florida>.

<sup>39</sup> Ashley R. Williams, "More Americans Disapprove Than Approve of Colleges Considering Race, Ethnicity In Admissions Decisions, Study Shows," CNN, June 11, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/11/us/pew-research-college-admissions-race-ethnicity-trnd/index.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Hannah Bleau, Florida Eliminates Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives in Higher Education," *Breitbart News*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2023/05/15/florida-eliminates-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dei-initiatives-in-higher-education/>.

### Garnering Press Attention

Of note is that with these *state* level policy actions, DeSantis attracts *national* press attention, and given the pro-left reporting tendencies of the mainstream news media,<sup>41</sup> he is certain to receive attention that then allows him to comment again on the policies, and to also subtly attack the press, something that a large majority of Americans enjoy witnessing, especially given that 59 percent of voters agree that the news media are the “Enemy of the People.”<sup>42</sup> Some news outlets noticed, even as they could not help being sucked into the fray. *The New York Times*, for example, noted as early as January 2023 that DeSantis’s attack on DEI was a type of brand building.<sup>43</sup>

Playing into the hands of DeSantis, the press would often overstate its case, or actually misreport the content of the legislation DeSantis had signed into law. Such instances were used by both supporters of DeSantis and DeSantis himself in follow up news conferences. For example, the far right media watchdog site, Resist the Mainstream, published video showing CBS’s *60 Minutes* intentionally editing its reporter’s interaction with Governor DeSantis during a press conference to cast DeSantis in a poor light. Such examples only served to support DeSantis’s claims that the media were “in the fight” for the other side.<sup>44</sup> Of note is that DeSantis is actively pointing out such instances of deceptive editing in press conferences he is subsequently giving.<sup>45</sup> Thus we see that DeSantis has made a concerted effort to “poke the bear” repeatedly on his potential road to the White House.

### Final Thoughts

In March, just prior to SSCA, DeSantis visited Iowa, and in mid-April, just after SSCA, he visited New Hampshire; of course, these visits have significance (as did his Tokyo, Japan visit). Importantly, too, in mid-May he moved his political operations center out of the Florida Republican

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<sup>41</sup> I have documented this elsewhere. See, for example, Jim A. Kuypers, ed. *The 2016 American Presidential Campaign and the News Media: Implications for the American Republic and Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018); Jim A. Kuypers, *Partisan Journalism: A History of Media Bias in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Abe Aamidor, Jim A. Kuypers, and Susan Wiesinger, *Media Smackdown: Deconstructing the News and the Future of Journalism* (New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2013); and Jim A. Kuypers, *Press Bias and Politics: How the Media Frame Controversial Issues* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> “Media Still ‘Enemy of the People,’ Most Voters Say,” *Rasmussen Reports*, May 23, 2023, [https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/biden\\_administration/media\\_still\\_enemy\\_of\\_the\\_people\\_most\\_voters\\_say](https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/biden_administration/media_still_enemy_of_the_people_most_voters_say).

<sup>43</sup> Stephanie Saul, Patricia Mazzei, and Trip Gabriel, “DeSantis Takes On the Education Establishment, and Builds His Brand,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/31/us/governor-desantis-higher-education-chris-rufo.html>.

<sup>44</sup> RTM Staff, “Watch: Major News Outlet Deceptively Edits Reporter’s Interaction With FL Governor Ron DeSantis,” Resist The Mainstream, April 5, 2021, <https://resistthemainstream.org/watch-major-news-outlet-deceptively-edits-reporters-interaction-with-fl-governor-ron-desantis>; For an explanation of how alternate news sites contest mainstream news framing and editing, see Steven D. Cooper, *Watching the Watchdog: Bloggers as the Fifth Estate* (Spokane, WA: Marquette Books, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> “Desantis Team Fires Back After Liberal Media’s Latest Attack,” FOX News, December 6, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oB2eEuufUY&ab\\_channel=FoxNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oB2eEuufUY&ab_channel=FoxNews); see also for example, “FULL PRESS CONFERENCE: Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis debunking ‘book ban hoax,’” FOX 35 Orlando, March 8, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhiYnmo9co8&ab\\_channel=FOX35Orlando](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhiYnmo9co8&ab_channel=FOX35Orlando).



Party Headquarters, a move that the press has characterized as his “starting countdown to 2024 announcement.”<sup>46</sup>

The big question to answer at SSCA in early April, 2023, was, “Will Governor DeSantis run?” And at that time I said 40-45 percent chance. A month after my SSCA presentation, DeSantis had still not declared his candidacy, but much had changed since SSCA of this year. President Trump’s campaign momentum had surged to a 55 percent to 20 percent lead over DeSantis by mid-April<sup>47</sup>; a majority of the Florida congressional delegation had endorsed Trump by this time as well.<sup>48</sup> And by mid-May, when the Florida legislative session ended, and some, such as the *Washington Post*, said DeSantis would declare his candidacy, a Harvard/Harris poll had Trump at 58 percent to 16 percent in the general primary, with a 65 percent to 35 percent in a head to head match up.<sup>49</sup> So, as I sat to begin revisions on my SSCA presentation for this special issue, I took into account the changed circumstances, and DeSantis’s continued rhetorical trajectory, and his (inter-) national movements. So on the morning of May 23, 2023 I was thinking a 50-50 percent chance DeSantis would run in the primary. That quickly changed when Republican Mega-donor Hal Lampart endorsed DeSantis on the morning of May 24, simultaneously asking Trump to bow out of the race; I then became inclined to say a 60 to 65 percent chance.<sup>50</sup> And by mid-afternoon the same day, it was reported that DeSantis had filed with the Federal Election Commission, and would make his formal announcement “in an online conversation with billionaire Elon Musk on Twitter on Wednesday evening.”<sup>51</sup>

So here is where my observations about DeSantis end. He has declared, and so has entered a new phase in his political career. If he prevails and becomes the Republican nominee, his rhetorical trajectory has positioned him well to capture media attention and appeal to a majority of voters. Should he not prevail, he will remain well placed in Florida, and will have set himself up well for a potential 2028 run.

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<sup>46</sup> Matt Dixon, “Desantis’ Political Shop Moves Offices, Starting Countdown To 2024 Announcement,” NBC News, May 15, 2023, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/other/desantis-political-shop-moves-offices-starting-countdown-to-2024-announcement/ar-AA1bduWR>.

<sup>47</sup> Darragh Roche, “Donald Trump Is Crushing Ron DeSantis in the Polls,” *Newsweek*, April 21, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-crushing-ron-desantis-polls-1795844>.

<sup>48</sup> Kristina Wong, “Majority of Florida GOP Congressional Delegation Has Endorsed Trump, Raising Questions About DeSantis’s Viability,” Breitbart News, April 21, 2023, <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2023/04/21/majority-florida-gop-congressional-delegation-has-endorsed-trump-raising-questions-about-desantis-s-viability/>

<sup>49</sup> Hannah Bleau, “Harvard-Harris Poll: DeSantis Support Continues to Collapse as Trump Dominates,” Breitbart News, May 19, 2023, <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2023/05/19/harvard-harris-poll-desantis-support-continues-collapse-trump-dominates/>. Other polls showed similar results.

<sup>50</sup> Madeline Coggins, “GOP Mega-Donor Urges Trump to Drop Out Of 2024 Race, Backs Desantis: It’s ‘Time’ For Next Generation,” Fox News, May 23, 2023, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/politics/gop-megadonor-urges-trump-drop-out-of-2024-race-backs-desantis-next-generation>.

<sup>51</sup> Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu and Noah Bierman, “Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis Launches 2024 GOP Presidential Bid In Glitchy Twitter Appearance,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2023-05-24/florida-ron-desantis-announces-bid-for-2024-presidency>.