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## Republicans Need a New Leader. They're Looking to Florida.

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Two weeks ago, Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida appeared with the Fox News host Laura Ingraham for a town hall that lasted the full hour of her prime-time show. That kind of airtime tends to be reserved only for Donald Trump, but Mr. DeSantis has had a meteoric rise. He's far and away the most popular potential 2024 presidential candidate among Republicans after Mr. Trump.

Even if you would never consider voting for him, it's important to understand the sources of his appeal and the direction of his politics, because one way or the other — whether he ever runs for president or not — Ron DeSantis is the new Republican Party.

Governor DeSantis's combativeness on hot-button social issues reflects Mr. Trump's influence, but he's gone even further and used government power as an instrument in the culture war — something Mr. Trump talked about but never really did. If any of Mr. DeSantis's Republican admirers are hoping he will chart a path back to the pre-2016 party, they'll probably be disappointed. Instead, the governor is a leader in a new, Trump-inflected party, but without the character flaws and baggage of the former president.

Mr. DeSantis became a Republican hero for his response to Covid-19. When many states were instituting far-reaching lockdowns and mask requirements, he took a different path. Under his leadership, Florida did what it reasonably could to protect its nursing homes, while minimizing lockdowns and other restrictions because of their economic and social downsides. When I talked to the governor in May 2020 for an article about his Covid strategy, I found him — contrary to the crude image of him as a reckless ignoramus — well versed on the research and thoughtful about the lessons from other countries. The broad parameters of his strategy — recognize there's a balance between mitigation and its social and economic costs; keep the schools open; don't force students to wear masks — have now become widely accepted.

Thanks to his Covid response, Mr. DeSantis attained a status that is invaluable in Republican politics — that of a lightning rod. His legend grew with every attack on him, especially the ones that were inaccurate or unfair. In April 2021, the CBS program "60 Minutes" ran a flagrantly flawed and misleading report alleging corruption in the distribution of Florida's vaccines. The news media was also much too quick to amplify claims by a former state health department employee that Florida was hiding a huge number of Covid deaths. Clips of Mr. DeSantis in

confrontations with reporters spread on social media, and he repeated his mantra of defending “freedom over Faucism.”

In general, there is no controversy that Mr. DeSantis doesn't address. In two weeks in April alone, Mr. DeSantis signed a 15-week abortion ban, revoked the special tax status of Disney for its opposition to his “Don't Say Gay” bill, threatened legal action against Twitter if it didn't agree to sell to Elon Musk (Florida's retirement pension fund is an investor) and signed a bill creating a task force to investigate election fraud. Meanwhile, his department of health issued guidance pushing back against the Biden administration's recommendations for treating youth with gender dysphoria.

For all the talk of how Trumpy Mr. DeSantis is, though, there is much about him that recalls the party's pre-Trump era. He was elected to Congress as a Tea Party conservative in 2012, and he is fond of boasting that Florida's budget is roughly half the size of New York's even though his state is more populous. He's proud and protective of Florida's status as a low-tax state.

He's been a highly committed advocate of expanding charter schools and scholarship programs to help families send their children to private schools. He's firmly anti-regulation. We haven't heard from him in a significant way on trade or foreign policy — two of the key issues on which Trump populists have diverged from past Republican orthodoxy. He hasn't endorsed industrial policy, a priority of a segment of the populist right.

Indeed, any movement conservative sealed in a time capsule circa 1984 and emerging today would recognize Mr. DeSantis as a more or less standard Sunbelt Republican — a fiscal conservative wooing people and businesses to his state based on a favorable economic climate who is also anti-elitist, socially conservative and eager to reform public schools.

None of this is new. What stands out as a true departure is Mr. DeSantis's willingness to use government power in the culture war.

Sometimes this has involved areas, like public education, where the government has every right to set the rules. One such example is the “Don't Say Gay” bill, more properly known as the Parental Rights in Education bill, which prohibits classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through third grade. Another is the “Individual Freedom” bill, which, among other things, prohibits promotion of the concept that a person “must feel guilt, anguish or other forms of psychological distress because of actions, in which the individual played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, sex or national origin.”

Other times, Florida has pursued a laudable goal in a dubious manner. Its “Big Tech” bill seeks to keep social media companies from removing political candidates and other users from their platforms, but it has serious First Amendment conflicts and has been enjoined by a federal judge.

Then there's the fight with Disney. The revocation of its special tax status is a frankly retaliatory act that also presents free-speech issues and could prove a legal and policy morass. That said, Disney got a truly extraordinary deal from the state that allowed it, in effect, to run its own city.

The company never would have been granted this arrangement 55 years ago if its executives had told the state's leaders, "And, by the way, eventually, the Walt Disney Company will adopt cutting edge left-wing causes as its own."

The broader point of making an example of Disney is to send a message to other corporations that there could be downsides to letting themselves be pushed by progressive employees into making their institutions weapons in the culture wars, and conclude it's best to stick to flying planes, selling soda, and so on.

How can a limited-government Tea Party Republican like Mr. DeSantis have become comfortable with this use of government? For that matter, how is it that so many Tea Party types moved so easily toward Trumpist populism?

The key, I think, is that for many people on the right, a libertarian-oriented politics was largely a way to register opposition to the mandarins who have an outsized influence on our public life. And it turns out that populism is an even more pungent way to register this opposition. Progressive domination of elite culture has now grown to include formerly neutral institutions like corporations and sports leagues. More conservatives are beginning to believe that the only countervailing institutional force is democratic political power as reflected in governor's mansions, state legislatures and — likely beginning next year — Congress.

"The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society," Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York once wrote. "The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself."

Given the state of play, conservatives have been learning to appreciate Moynihan's liberal truth. If Florida's culture-war initiatives succeed, the education establishment in the state will not mindlessly absorb the latest left-wing fad. Corporations will be warier of wading into hot-button social fights. In other words, the culture of these institutions will have changed for the better.

Even if Mr. DeSantis is willing to avail himself of this use of government power, it doesn't mean that he's abandoning his limited-government orientation. The libertarian Cato Institute rank Florida the second-most free state in the country (after New Hampshire), and Mr. DeSantis has shown no inclination to change the tax, spending and regulatory policies that contribute to that status. On Covid, he has consistently emphasized the importance of individual autonomy.

Mr. DeSantis's detractors are fond of saying that he's worse than or more dangerous than Mr. Trump. If, by this, they mean that a President DeSantis would be more focused and disciplined in pursuing a conservative agenda than Mr. Trump was, they're probably right. Otherwise, it is completely wrongheaded. Mr. DeSantis doesn't have Mr. Trump's failings. He's sharp in his rejoinders to reporters, but never gratuitously insulting. He cares about facts and takes time to master them.

Mr. DeSantis is the hottest thing in national Republican politics right now and he is doing everything to lay the groundwork, assuming he wins re-election this year, to run for president. It's impossible to know how that will go — he could get blocked by Mr. Trump or not live up to

the hype. What's clear is that his synthesis of the old and new, and the resonance it has had with the rank-and-file, points to the Republican future.