

WORLD

Going viral

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A few weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic, a Florida attorney strolled along the state's coastline in a hooded robe and a black face mask, toting a plastic scythe. Daniel Uhlfelder declared the beaches unsafe for tourists, and he filed a lawsuit against Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, seeking to force the Republican to shutter the shores.

Beachgoers glanced up from umbrellas and koozies, unfazed by the sight of the Grim Reaper on a lifeguard stand.

DeSantis and his supporters seemed unfazed too. More than a year later, a political action committee backing the governor sells koozies emblazoned with DeSantis' name and a slogan: "Don't Fauci my Florida."

The jab at Anthony Fauci—the president's chief medical adviser—touts the governor's pushback against Fauci's plea for other states to reopen with more caution than Florida. It also stokes DeSantis' national profile. In June, the governor topped the Western Conservative Summit's straw poll for GOP nominee for president in 2024. He narrowly edged out a fellow Floridian: former President Donald Trump.

The political action committee selling DeSantis merchandise also reported a massive fundraising haul in the first seven months of the year: \$40.4 million. More than \$4 million came in July alone.

Less than a year into President Joe Biden's administration, it's still early to speculate on the presidential nominee for either party in 2024, especially with next year's midterm elections set to grab attention within the next few months.

But it's not too early for planning, and DeSantis is at least getting practice in a state that serves as a kind of microcosm of the nation: Florida is nearly evenly split between Republicans and Democrats and regularly offers nail-biter elections decided on razor-thin margins.

Sound familiar?

For DeSantis, any road to the White House runs first through the pandemic: On that front, he's banked on a reopening strategy even some of his critics admitted worked during an earlier wave of the virus. But a similar strategy has met rough roadblocks from the delta variant pounding

through Florida this summer—and from some local officials who say DeSantis has concentrated too much power on the state level, despite his conservative creds.

Though most Republicans in the state back the governor, one dissenting GOP mayor has called DeSantis “a dictator” during the pandemic. DeSantis dismisses such labels with an equally dramatic analogy: “We are, effectively, America’s West Berlin.”

Whether that message lands depends largely on the trajectory of the pandemic, and as DeSantis appears poised to announce a reelection bid for the state’s gubernatorial race next year, he also faces questions about his prospects for 2024: Could a candidate eyeing two contests at one time win both with the same game plan?

DESANTIS HAD a game plan from an early age.

Flash back to 30 years ago this summer, and a 12-year-old DeSantis is winding up on the pitcher’s mound at the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pa. The Dunedin Little League All Stars of 1991 were the first team from Pinellas County, Fla., to make it to the top tournament since 1948. (The team won only a single game, but DeSantis struck out 11 batters in five innings to help clinch the win.)

The future governor grew up in a working-class family in Dunedin, Fla., and ended up at bat for Yale University. DeSantis was the baseball team’s Rookie of the Year in 1998 and then the team captain before heading to Harvard Law School and a commission as a U.S. Navy JAG officer, with a tour of duty in Iraq.

He rode a tea party wave to Congress in 2012, then mounted a brief Senate run until Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., dropped a presidential bid and decided to run for reelection to the Senate. In 2018, DeSantis made another pitch, this time asking voters to elect him as governor of Florida.

DeSantis had amassed a conservative voting record in Congress but a sometimes-cautious approach to President Donald Trump during his first White House run. (As a congressman, DeSantis didn’t endorse Trump until after Trump had nearly secured the GOP nomination in 2016, despite Trump winning Florida two months earlier.)

But by the fall of 2018, DeSantis was running a campaign ad that showed him helping his young daughter “build the wall” with toy blocks and reading Trump’s book *The Art of the Deal* to his infant son. Trump appeared with DeSantis at a Florida rally, with a nod that may have nudged DeSantis over the edge: He won a razor-thin race against Democrat Andrew Gillum by 0.4 percent, triggering an automatic recount and making DeSantis the youngest Florida governor in a century.

If voters expected a mini-Trump in the new governor, DeSantis’ inauguration speech may have surprised them: The governor spoke about curbing illegal immigration and lowering taxes, but he also talked about the importance of clean water and a healthy environment to the state’s economic climate. (He later appointed a chief resilience officer to prepare the state for the effects of sea level rise.)

His first veto as governor was surprising too.

In 2019, the GOP state Legislature passed a bill that would have prevented local governments from banning single-use plastic straws. Major business groups including the Florida Retail Federation backed the bill, but DeSantis swatted it down. He said local governments should have control over such decisions.

“If they’re doing things that infringe on people’s constitutional freedoms or frustrate state policy, then that becomes something that can be ripe for state intervention,” the governor said at the time. “Unless I see it violating some other principle, I usually just let people do as they see fit.”

Less than a year later, that notion met a test that neither DeSantis nor anyone else could have anticipated as health officials started warning about a mysterious virus that had shown up on American shores.

WHEN COVID-19 made its dramatic appearance in the United States in March 2020, spring break was breaking out in Florida, and DeSantis was loathe to shut down quickly.

But the governor did make an exception: That same month, he announced a ban on most visits to Florida nursing homes. Health workers scrambled to adjust to the new conditions, but the move likely saved the lives of many residents most vulnerable to the virus.

The state also closed schools, but in the fall of 2020, DeSantis bucked the trend of many other states by announcing schools would fully reopen to in-person learning. Many critics decried the move and warned of a deadly surge of the virus. By spring, even some of DeSantis’ critics said they thought he made the right move, as schools didn’t appear to be major sources of spread.

In March of this year, Nikki Fried, the state’s agricultural commissioner—and now a Democratic candidate for governor in 2022—responded with a single word when *Politico* asked if DeSantis had done anything right during the pandemic: “Schools.” John Morgan, an Orlando attorney and megadonor to both political parties, added in the March report, “On the pandemic—as of this writing—DeSantis won.”

Indeed, DeSantis was taking a spring victory lap, even as the article noted the pandemic wasn’t over: “Ominous variants lurk.”

The delta variant lurked through the spring, then lunged at Florida and states across the country over the summer. DeSantis insisted on staying the course without mask mandates or closures, even as cases surged. He encouraged vaccination, and he also set up sites across the state to offer federally funded treatments of monoclonal antibodies to patients with a positive test.

By early August, cases still surged as school was about to start: Though Florida accounts for about 6 percent of the U.S. population, it represented some 18 percent of the seven-day average of cases nationwide, according to a Heritage Foundation analysis.

The same analysis noted Florida deaths related to COVID-19 remained below the levels reached last summer and during January, though the numbers were trending higher by the end of August.

The statistics roiled all sides of the pandemic debate, as DeSantis came down hard on at least one thing he wasn't willing to allow local governments to do as they see fit: issue mask mandates. The controversy came to a boiling point with a handful of large school districts that pushed back against the governor's attempt to ban local school officials from mandating masks for students.

DeSantis signed an executive order in July called "Ensuring Parents' Freedom To Choose," in part to prevent mask mandates in schools, and he directed school officials to allow parents to decide whether their children wear masks. Some parents balked, arguing all students should wear masks for the safety of others. Four families brought a lawsuit against the governor.

Damaris Allen, one of the parents named in the suit, told a local news station the debate was also an issue of governance: "The Republican Party is supposed to be the party of local control and small government, so when you don't allow locally elected officials to make their own decisions, then you can't base it on the needs of the community."

It's an argument a handful of local mayors have made as well, saying the governor has made it difficult for them to make decisions about COVID-19 precautions on a local level. In May, the governor signed a bill prohibiting government entities or businesses from requiring proof of vaccination for services. He also signed an executive order invalidating any remaining local emergency orders related to COVID-19.

Hialeah Mayor Carlos Hernández, a Republican, branded DeSantis "a dictator." Francis Suarez, the GOP mayor of Miami, has said DeSantis should let local officials decide on the measures best for their communities, calling local control a Republican principle.

DeSantis and his administration push back against those arguments when it comes to the pandemic, saying when local officials infringe on individual rights, the state should step in. The governor says that's also true for businesses that want to require proof of vaccination from customers. DeSantis has sought to ban so-called COVID-19 passports, but a U.S. appeals court upheld Norwegian Cruise Line's policy of requiring such proof.

Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the libertarian CATO Institute, thinks private businesses should have the legal right to set the parameters they think serve their customers best. He points out that cruise ships were vectors for COVID-19 at the beginning of the pandemic, and the industry likely wants to avoid more outbreaks and another round of potentially crippling economic consequences: "It's just remarkable to me that the state of Florida is going to substitute its own judgment for the judgment of businesses."

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A Florida judge also ruled against the governor's attempt to ban mask mandates in schools, saying he lacked the legal authority to enforce it. DeSantis' office said it would appeal the ruling,

and officials with the Florida Board of Education said they would follow through with a plan to withhold the salaries of board members in counties still instituting face masks—a decision likely to keep the heat turned up in Florida as fall approaches, and as the delta variant proves far more contagious.

It's the kind of heat that makes it impossible to gauge what the political fallout or windfall might be for DeSantis in next year's gubernatorial race or potentially in a presidential race down the road.

Hans Hassell, the director of the Institute of Politics at Florida State University, thinks DeSantis' insistence on banning mask mandates and similar moves will resonate more with conservatives than concerns about taking too much control from local governments: "I think their counter-argument would be what the government is really doing here is protecting civil rights or liberties by preventing the local governments from taking away individual freedoms."

He also says much of DeSantis' election prospects depends more on what's happening a year from now than what's happening today: "We're a long way off, and voters tend to have relatively short-term memories."

DESANTIS' PROSPECTS in three years are even harder to predict, but they also likely depend at least in part on another factor close at hand: former President Trump. From his home base in Palm Beach, Fla., Trump continues to endorse candidates and raise speculations about whether he'll run for the GOP nomination in 2024.

Every Republican hopeful likely factors Trump into calculations about a potential bid, but it may be a particularly thin tightrope for DeSantis in a state that backed Trump in 2020. How Trump responds to DeSantis' rising popularity may shape how other candidates—including DeSantis—decide whether to run or hit pause.

Trump and DeSantis seem friendly so far, but DeSantis has shown a willingness to peel away in key moments: In late June, after a condo tower collapsed in Surfside, Fla., and killed 98 people, DeSantis skipped a Trump rally in Sarasota while the search for survivors continued. Two days before Trump's event, DeSantis appeared in Surfside—with President Joe Biden.

It wasn't a truce—DeSantis and Biden have sparred sharply over the pandemic—but DeSantis' willingness to respond to a sudden tragedy without a politicized lens may resonate with voters somewhere in the middle. Daniella Levine Cava, mayor of Miami-Dade County, has also clashed with DeSantis, but the Democrat publicly praised his response in Surfside: "Hats off to the governor."