



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on November 11, 2023

How Will Florida's Conservative Movement Fare After DeSantis?

Florida has earned a reputation in recent years as one of the most conservative states in the nation. While the Sunshine State has certainly been home to some significant conservative victories, the future's not set in stone. For Florida patriots, conservatives, and constitutionalists, it's worth considering whether the conditions that have hitherto been sustaining a "Free Florida" can be perpetuated.

In reality, the relatively staunchly conservative trend in Florida seen of late has largely been tied to the political career of one man: Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis.



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Florida has long had a conservative swing to it. The lack of a state income tax has made the state a magnet for entrepreneurs, business owners, and others who tend to be of the fiscally conservative persuasion. The virtually year-long summer has made it a popular retirement destination, and those who have the money to uproot themselves from their place of origin to buy a beachfront property in sunny Florida tend to vote fiscally conservative as well.

And while Florida has an ethnically diverse population, the state is unique in that its significant Hispanic population votes conservatively at a greater proportion than the Hispanic populations of other states, largely due to the fact that Florida Hispanics tend to be averse to communism because they or their immediate ancestors escaped from socialist regimes in places such as Cuba and Venezuela.

These factors have made Florida prime territory for the GOP since the party realignment that began in the late '60s. Republicans gained control of the Florida House and Senate in 1996, and have held and expanded that majority since. In 1998, Republican Jeb Bush was elected governor, and since then every governor in the state has belonged to the GOP.

Yet, while the Republican Party's dominance has meant lower taxes and a generally business-friendly economic environment, only recently has Florida could be considered a true hotbed of conservatism. For years, items such as e-Verify to combat illegal migration, constitutional carry, and tougher abortion restrictions floundered in the state Legislature, being seen by the Republican establishment as too extreme.

All these have become reality under DeSantis (while Florida does not yet have full constitutional carry, DeSantis did sign permitless concealed carry into law; open carry is still not legal), as have other measures such as legislation to curtail China's influence in the state, laws restricting transgenderism, and several measures affecting education: killing Common Core, ending critical race theory in schools, and banning the sexualization of children in classrooms (which the Left blasted as the "Don't Say Gay" law).



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One important fact to understand about all these developments is that the Legislature was never overly enthusiastic about any of this. Many of the lawmakers who ultimately passed the above bills had balked at these kinds of policies in years past.

What changed?

The answer is simple: DeSantis became governor.

DeSantis' role in Florida's hard-right trend cannot be overstated. By using the bully pulpit and the power of his popularity among Republican voters, he has repeatedly cajoled members of his party in the Legislature into passing conservative laws they really didn't want to pass.

Many Republicans in the Florida House and Senate are not happy with the arrangement, but usually are unwilling to speak or act against DeSantis because they know opposing the highly popular governor would only hurt them politically.

The question is: If Florida's conservative fortunes are so deeply tied to DeSantis, can the trend be continued once he's no longer governor?

The results of DeSantis' presidential aspirations may give some insight into that question soon. By running against President Donald Trump in the GOP primary, DeSantis has hurt his standing among much of the conservative base on which his political successes have heavily depended. This fall from grace, coupled with the fact that he will be termed out of the governorship upon the completion of this term, may give his silent detractors confidence to push back on his agenda.

Thus, DeSantis' languishing in the polls may inadvertently hinder Florida's conservative cause to some degree. And the results of the 2026 gubernatorial race may have a far-reaching impact on the state's future.

But there are causes for hope. For one, the last few years have greatly emboldened Florida conservatives and led them to effectively organize in all manner of activist and educational groups, as well as political clubs and PACs. Many of these conservatives have flooded county Republican executive committees, and even taken over some.

In one sign of the overall conservative growth in Florida, The John Birch Society has made significant membership gains and become a highly visible presence, with influence in all manner of Republican and conservative circles.

This means that the grassroots has more influence than in the past, so that even without DeSantis in the governor's house, Republican lawmakers will have to listen to the base if they want to keep their majority.

Moreover, Donald Trump and his family continue to be a major presence in Florida. It was Trump's endorsement in 2018 that propelled DeSantis to the governorship in the first place. For a few more years at least, Trump will continue to be a unifying force to give Florida conservatives some leadership and put pressure on the Legislature.



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