

DeSantis has surprised everyone but himself

February 10, 2019 / By Emily L. Mahoney

TALLAHASSEE

It was a moment lost on Election Night.

As newly elected Gov. Ron DeSantis faced a blockade of TV cameras in Orlando, he told reporters that he had been misunderstood, or “unfairly demagogued,” by political rivals and the media.

At the end of a bitter campaign in which he cast himself as an uncompromising conservative who reveled in his support from President Donald Trump, DeSantis said he was eager to move on and work with those who had tried to defeat him.

Three months later, his short time in office has already shattered assumptions that he would govern exclusively from the right. He has drawn unexpected praise from Republicans *and* Democrats.

He released a budget proposal that broke the record for spending and contained no major cuts, placing him at odds with staunch fiscal conservatives in the Florida House. As he has relentlessly traveled the state in a fixer-upper plane, he has appointed Democrats to key posts, vowed to save the Everglades and urged lawmakers to allow patients to smoke medical marijuana.

“He’s taken a very pragmatic course,” said Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn. “I say this as a Democrat and as a mayor: I’ve been really pleased and pleasantly surprised by the course and the decisions he’s made.” He added that until DeSantis took office, he was “an unknown quantity.”

It’s true DeSantis’ campaign was light on policy issues and he himself was difficult to reach on the trail, rarely granting media interviews to elaborate on the handful of proposals he released.

Yet when told his first month has surprised many, DeSantis said that he has been consistent, especially when it comes to a major plank in his campaign — the environment.

“I’m basically doing what I said I was going to do,” DeSantis told the Herald/Times Thursday.

Steve Schale, a prominent Democratic strategist who ran President Barack Obama’s 2008 Florida campaign, said DeSantis’ first month reminded him of an “era of good feeling” when Charlie Crist became governor in 2007.

“I’m sure there will be plenty of things he’ll do that Democrats won’t like, but you build for those moments like he is now.”

And there’s a significant upside to appealing to moderates: DeSantis’ current playbook wouldn’t be a bad way to start off a 2024 presidential bid.



Ron DeSantis greets people at Freedom Tower, where he named Barbara Lagoa to the Florida Supreme Court.
Photo: Joe Raedle, Getty Images

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“The best way to get the next job is to be good at the job you’re in,” Schale said. “You can spend a lot of time trying to play 12-dimensional chess to figure out where the country is going to be ... DeSantis is playing the right way in not trying to overthink that game and do a good job as governor and let cards fall where they may.”

HIS IDEAS, HIS PACE

DeSantis himself is said to be the architect behind his breakneck pace in his first month.

“I saw no reason to dillydally,” he said. “I wanted to definitely hit the ground running.”

Before anyone thinks he’s a centrist, he has announced several decidedly Republican proposals and appointments, such as picking former House Speaker Richard Corcoran, an unwavering conservative who champions charter schools, to lead the Department of Education. He appointed Mary Mayhew, a top Trump healthcare official, to run the state’s Medicaid programs. Mayhew has a history of dramatically shrinking Medicaid and food stamp programs while she ran health and human services in Maine. DeSantis has also pushed to boost funding for Florida’s school voucher programs, taken aim at the Obama-era federal public school curriculum standards and appointed three conservative justices to the state Supreme Court.

But he has also moved to the center in some instances, such as requesting a \$1 billion increase for cleaning up the Everglades in the next four years, appointing two Democrats to lead major agencies, advocating for a major funding increase for public education and voting with the Cabinet to pardon four black men falsely accused 70 years ago of raping a white woman.

The pardon was something his predecessor, Rick Scott, never did. DeSantis also reversed Scott, now a U.S. senator, on the state’s ban on smokable medical marijuana by giving the Legislature an ultimatum to allow patients to puff their medicine or he would take action himself.

His wife, first lady Casey DeSantis, is a former journalist who advises the governor. She has taken a particular interest in the environment. His former congressional ally U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz, who has been a vocal advocate for medical marijuana, is a key adviser, too.

While on the campaign trail, DeSantis didn’t disclose many details about his financial vision for the state, which became clear only after he released his proposed budget earlier this month.

In addition to avoiding major spending cuts, his budget does not divert money from the state’s trust fund for affordable housing. For more than a decade, that money has been spent elsewhere — to the chagrin of housing advocates.

“Seeing Gov. DeSantis set the standard that we are going to stop sweeping trust funds is really promising,” said Rep. Carlos Guillermo Smith, D-Orlando, one of the most progressive members of the Legislature.

DeSantis’ proposal is merely a suggestion to the Legislature, which is responsible for the state budget. House Republican leaders have already indicated they will push for less spending.

A looming conflict with DeSantis’ own party could be over his environmental wish list, which includes a \$625 million annual investment in water quality and Everglades restoration. House budget chair Rep. Travis Cummings has said they currently know of about \$250 million that’s available for that request. Meanwhile, one of DeSantis’ earliest supporters in the Legislature, House Speaker José Oliva, said in a measured statement that he and House Republicans “will craft a budget that reduces per capita spending.”

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DeSantis responded by saying there is “no magic formula,” that there were Hurricane Michael expenses to consider, and more generally, in a state growing as fast as Florida, the budget will swell accordingly.

“Obviously, we don’t want to go on a spending binge, but I think some of the stuff we’re looking to do, like with the water quality, I think the cost of that will only increase if we let the problems get worse so I’m willing to kind of bite that bullet,” he told the Times/Herald.

CONTRAST TO SCOTT

Members from both parties acknowledged that his image is shaped, in part, by the contrasts between DeSantis and Scott.

“Where he [DeSantis] has a great opportunity is to be the ‘reform governor,’ and I think that’s what he’s coming out as,” said Sen. Jeff Brandes, R-St. Petersburg. “There are so many areas that were basically untouched for eight years because Gov. Scott was solely focused on jobs.”

Sen. José Javier Rodriguez, D-Miami, agrees that the comparison to Scott is helping define who DeSantis is, but he added that the difference between the two is exaggerated.

“Aside from [water policy], when you look at the things Gov. DeSantis has been doing, I believe that it’s frankly some of the low-hanging fruit,” he said. “A lot of Gov. Scott’s policies were so awful and the population has been moving forward on things like being able to receive medical marijuana through smoking — so things like that are extremely popular.”

DeSantis’ closest allies say people are only surprised because they misunderstood him from his time in Congress and during an ugly campaign for governor during which DeSantis fended off charges that he and some of his supporters were racist.

“Honestly, people didn’t truly know him as a member of Congress because he was representing just one district and they got to know him a little in the campaign,” said Rep. Joe Gruters, R-Sarasota. “Certainly he’s been on fire.”

But DeSantis, a member of the hard-right Freedom Caucus, was an unwavering Republican in Congress whose record didn’t clearly foreshadow his current environmental stances. His votes earned him a 2 percent scorecard (out of 100) from the League of Conservation Voters, for example.

DeSantis, 40, counters that he hasn’t changed as much as the political landscape he inhabits. Democrats in Florida, he said, are less rigid than those he encountered in Washington during his three terms as a congressman.

“Washington is really tough, whereas I think in Florida we may be able to find some more common ground,” DeSantis said. “I’d like to get as much support as possible.”

SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

And DeSantis’ own party is changing, both nationally and in Florida. Gruters, the Republican Party of Florida chairman, has co-sponsored a bill to add anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people and signed on to Brandes’ criminal justice reform package, which aims to make Florida’s prison system more focused on rehabilitating inmates than punishing them.

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Both those bills represent a departure from past GOP positions, and those issues continue to divide Florida Republicans as Gruters and Brandes have had to fight resistance from the right.

Gruters said Republicans are taking riskier stances because of Trump. The president has ushered in a new age of the party, Gruters said, one that liberates DeSantis and other young lawmakers.

“What President Trump has done for everybody out there on both sides, is you’re seeing more people take stands that maybe, if you were trying to just be safe all the time, you wouldn’t have done it 10 years ago,” Gruters said. “This is Donald Trump’s party. But this is also Ron DeSantis’ party and he is going to be a trendsetter.”

Tampa Bay Times National Political Correspondent Steve Contorno contributed to this report.

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