

Governor DeSantis leads Florida Republicans in assault on democratic rights in new legislative session

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The Florida legislative session which began on March 7 has seen lawmakers introduce a series of new bills aimed at burnishing the right-wing credentials of Republican Governor Ron DeSantis in the lead-up to the 2024 Republican presidential primaries. With his party holding super-majorities in both chambers of the legislature, DeSantis has a free hand to further his fascistic agenda, restrained only by his own political calculations and the inevitable legal challenges which each major piece of legislation will generate.

Many of the proposed bills lack popular support in Florida, even among Republicans. One bill that would grant the automatic right to carry a concealed firearm without a permit or background check was opposed by 77 percent of respondents, including 62 percent who identified as Republican, in a recent poll taken by the University of North Florida. Across Florida gun violence is pervasive, and its largest cities are among the most violent in the US. But DeSantis is aiming for Washington D.C., not Tallahassee, and his new policies are shaped to appeal to the national Republican electorate.

The legislature is set to further restrict abortion rights, after already banning the procedure after the first 15 weeks of pregnancy during last year's legislative session. Under the new bill being considered, abortions would be illegal after the first six weeks of pregnancy. This would nearly outlaw the procedure altogether, as many women do not become aware that they are pregnant until after six weeks have passed.

In 2020 DeSantis burnished his reputation among the far right by being one of the first governors to force educators and students to return to in-person instruction at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now he aims to gut public education in Florida by eliminating income requirements for the state's school voucher program. Previously, to qualify for the state's Family Empowerment Scholarship program, which grants families up to \$7,850 per child to pay for

private schooling, a family had to fall at or below 400 percent of the federal poverty level. Now all families can apply for the vouchers, including homeschoolers. This will channel millions of dollars of state education funds into the bank accounts of the various charter school companies.

The governor has recently exploited the 2018 Parkland school shooting, where 17 students were killed by 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz using an AR-15 assault rifle that he had legally purchased, to expand the use of capital punishment in Florida. State law currently requires a unanimous Jury to sentence a convicted murderer to death, a result of a 2016 Supreme Court decision that forced the state to re-write the law that previously allowed a judge to impose the death penalty if a simple majority of jurors vote for it. After the jury in Cruz's trial recently imposed a sentence of life without parole, rather than sentencing him to die, the governor publicly expressed interest in rolling back the unanimous jury requirement.

Two new bills under consideration would only require either eight or 10 jurors, depending on which bill passes, to recommend the death penalty for the presiding judge to impose it.

DeSantis is seeking an additional \$3.1 million in funding for the state's Office of Election Crimes and Security (OECS), a police agency created in the aftermath of the 2020 elections to investigate alleged voter fraud. Former President Donald Trump falsely claimed the election was stolen from him and used this lie to launch an attempted coup on January 6, 2021 in an effort to block the certification of Joe Biden's victory.

Since its establishment, the agency has arrested only 10 individuals, most of whose charges were later dropped. No actual voter fraud has been uncovered. Those charged were primarily convicted felons who had failed to pay all of their various fines and were thus ineligible to have their voting rights restored under Florida's anti-democratic constitution.

In spite of this, DeSantis is aiming to add 27 new officers

to the OECS. Given his presidential ambitions it is likely the governor will use his private election cops to intimidate and monitor any opposition in the lead-up to the 2024 elections.

Even more extreme legislation has been introduced by DeSantis' lackeys in the legislature who want to ride his coattails to national prominence. One bill which has been widely covered by the media would require any paid blogger who writes about Florida politics to register with the governor's office, revealing their identity and employer. A transparent violation of the First Amendment that would likely be immediately overturned by the courts, the proposed legislation was criticized from all quarters, even by far-right-wing figures like former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. After an initial period of silence DeSantis stated that he would not support the bill.

Another proposed piece of legislation unlikely to be passed into law would ban any political party in Florida that once supported slavery in its platform. An obvious piece of political theatre, dubbed by its author "The Ultimate Cancel Act," the bill's purpose is to embarrass the Democrats, the former party of slavery and Jim Crow segregation.

DeSantis has been elevated by sections of the mainstream media and the Republican establishment as the leading alternative to Trump as the party's 2024 presidential nominee. His popularity among these layers derives primarily from the fact that he was the first governor of a large state to dismantle all COVID-19 protections in the early days of the pandemic and to forbid, by executive order, mask mandates or vaccine requirements throughout the state.

DeSantis' anti-scientific measures were eventually adopted by the ruling class as a whole, once pandemic restrictions became an unbearable obstacle to the continuing accumulation of wealth. Because DeSantis was among the earliest to implement the homicidal "let it rip" policy—forcing the population to accept mass infection and death so that commerce can flow unimpeded—he has been hailed as a visionary.

The second major source of his national popularity derives from the fact that he has skillfully exploited the relentless promotion of identity politics by the Democratic Party and its pseudo-left satellites.

Over at least the last decade, as inequality has deepened and more workers have entered into open struggle against capitalism, the sections of the ruling class affiliated with the Democratic Party have made a concerted effort to prevent workers from uniting as a class and fighting for their social interests by pushing the politics of race, gender and sexuality.

This has had the predictable, and desired, effect of alienating broad swaths of the population and strengthening

the far right. Posing as a defender of traditional values and democratic rights, DeSantis has used the opening provided by the Democrats to exert control over the state education system.

The "Stop Woke Act," passed into law last year, prohibits the teaching of "divisive concepts" related to racism and sexism. Another law, the "Curriculum Transparency Bill"—which requires that all books and instructional materials used in schools be made available for review, and possible removal, by parents—led to 41 percent of textbooks used in Florida classrooms being removed. School libraries throughout the state have been emptied out and bookshelves covered up until their content can be approved by one of the governor's "certified media specialists."

DeSantis has attributed his landslide victory in last year's elections to support for his right-wing agenda. A compliant press has supported this narrative. Rarely noted is the salient fact that his opponent in that election was former Republican Governor Charlie Crist, one of the most discredited and nakedly opportunist politicians in a state with no shortage of such figures. Crist has variously sought office as a Republican, Independent, and now a Democrat, depending on which way the political winds are blowing. His nomination by the Florida Democratic Party to be their candidate for governor is a testament to the party's corruption and hostility to the working class and his defeat was predictable.

Above all, DeSantis' new national prominence stems from the fact that billionaire donors that fund the Republican Party view the governor as a figure who can further their far-right agenda in the White House without the endless scandals and theatrics for which former president Trump was infamous. Whether or not he can defeat Trump in the primaries is still an open question.

Ten years ago, DeSantis began his political career in the US House of Representatives by calling for the privatization of Medicare and Social Security. The next president, regardless of party, will be tasked with carrying out far-reaching attacks on these programs as part of a broader assault on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class in the build-up to open war against Russia and China. DeSantis, who as a Naval officer in 2006 supervised the torture of inmates at Guantanamo Bay, is increasingly seen by a section of the ruling elite as the man for the job.



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