

Heir to the Throne: Ron DeSantis's Inheritance of a Trumpian COVID-19 Ideology

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Abstract: Despite the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, a surprising number of Americans remain skeptical of vaccines and other preventative measures. This variance in attitude may be explained in part by the diverse pandemic responses of state governors and their political ideologies. Using Florida governor Ron DeSantis as a case study, we analyze an October 2021 press conference using the rhetorical method of ideological criticism to explore the governor's ideological stance towards public health, personal liberty, and the balance between safety and economic concerns. We find he embraces an ideology of "Trumpism" that emphasizes personal choice over public health and economic prosperity over safety. We argue that DeSantis's rhetorical choices help position him as a political heir to Trump and that he used his pandemic response to achieve this political goal. Our analysis helps illuminate the motivations behind DeSantis's public health decisions during the pandemic and how other governors may have been similarly motivated. Our research contributes to the study of the rhetoric of political leaders and how their policy responses can be ideologically constructed through their speeches as well as how they can use rhetorical strategies to conceal and reveal their motives.

Keywords — COVID-19 pandemic, ideological criticism, political rhetoric, public health response, state-level politics

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INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has ravaged the world for the past two years, with initial waves sweeping the globe in December 2019 and infections continuing through the present day. Since vaccines have become widely available, almost 66% of Americans have become fully vaccinated (57.2% at the initial time of writing in October 2021) [1]. However, this proportion falls short of what public health experts say is needed to achieve strong herd immunity, and infections have continued at alarming levels, particularly among the unvaccinated. Low vaccination rates are related to vaccine hesitancy among certain ideological groups, particularly members of the far right, some of whom have spread misinformation about the vaccine's development, purpose, safety, and efficacy [2]. Meanwhile, state-level pandemic responses have varied substantially, with states like California taking stringent measures (e.g., lockdowns and mask and vaccine mandates) and others opting for less rigorous and comprehensive responses [3]. States such as Florida have gone a step further in attempting to restrict employers and schools from combatting the virus's spread [4]. We argue that these states' lax public health responses stem from their leaders' ideologies, with Democratic governors generally adopting more proactive measures and Republican governors leaning toward a laissez-faire approach [5]. Compared to the governors of other large states, Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis, delayed initiating countermeasures and removed restrictions earlier [6]. To better understand the factors motivating his public health response and the ideology underlying his decisions, we conduct an ideological criticism of his most recent COVID-related press conference at the time.

METHODS OR PROCEDURES

To provide more insight into DeSantis's ideology, we employ the rhetorical method of ideological criticism. Drawing from Wander [7], we seek to understand the "connection between what is embraced or concealed and the interests served by a particular formulation" (p. 64). As Foss notes [8], ideologies are "composed of evaluative beliefs" that "highlight particular

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positions on social issues” (p. 237). Operating as ideological critics, we attempt to “explicate the role of communication in creating and sustaining an ideology and to discover whose interests are represented in that ideology” (p. 242) [8]. We use this method to explore how political leaders’ public health responses can be ideologically constructed through the public speeches they give and how they use rhetorical strategies to conceal and reveal their motives. Specifically, we analyze how Governor Ron DeSantis’s most recent press conference at the time of writing (October 12, 2021) reveals certain ideologies he holds about the COVID-19 pandemic and the appropriate response to it.

RESULTS

In the spirit of ideological criticism, our analysis attempts to uncover the ideology of the rhetor, the conflict between ideas, and the location of power through the rhetor’s rhetorical choices. Examining DeSantis’s October 12th press conference led to some interesting insights regarding his views towards public health, personal liberty, and the balance between safety and economic concerns. Above and beyond the science and advice from public health and infectious disease experts, DeSantis’s ideology dictates his language and priorities when it comes to his public health decisions as governor during the pandemic. Two elements that stand out are his emphasis on personal choice over public health and economic prosperity over safety. These ideological components feed into the larger ideology of “Trumpism,” broadly defined as a combination of an America in decline due to mismanagement by Democrats, distrust in institutions, an appeal to the common person, pursuit of individual success, and freedom of choice [9].

PERSONAL CHOICE OVER PUBLIC HEALTH

Throughout his remarks, DeSantis emphasizes personal freedom and individual choice above all else, suggesting that his job as governor is to maximize freedom and limit restriction on citizens in both the public and private spheres. He demonstrates his strong preference for allowing people to choose their own paths when it comes to their health and his distaste for government intervention through various rhetorical strategies, including claiming the politicization of the pandemic, positioning himself as a protector of individual freedom, resisting overly restrictive public health measures and unjust treatment of individuals wishing to exercise their freedoms, and separating himself from other states’ restrictive measures. He also contradicts himself by setting up a different standard for other medical issues. By engaging in these strategies and framing COVID-19 as a struggle between personal choice and public health, we argue that he reflects a distinctive “Trumpian” ideology to court these voters and advance his own political agenda and ambitions.

In his October 12th press conference, DeSantis laments that COVID-19 has “become a political issue” and that “politicians [are] wanting to control people.” By framing the issue this way, he effectively marks off a rhetorical space where those who are not doing the same as him are seeking to do harm and desiring undemocratic control over people’s lives. The framing of COVID-19 as “political” and the implication that politics is rife with corruption and needless complication reveal DeSantis’s ideological position, as it is a common tactic of the ideological right to accuse those more liberal than them of inappropriately injecting politics into spaces and topics. His assertion that the pandemic response was political implies that such public health decisions should not be political, even though they are by nature political decisions. Claiming that others are making an issue political is also characteristic of Trump, who has argued that Democrats have unnecessarily politicized issues, despite his overt politicization of masks and other pandemic responses.

During the press conference, DeSantis indicates that his primary concern is “providing protections” so that employers cannot legally require or fire employees for not wanting to receive one of the governmentally approved COVID-19 vaccines. This idea flies in the face of decades of established U.S. law, which has allowed employers and other public and private institutions to require vaccinated status for many illnesses and infectious diseases. The reason why DeSantis has not challenged vaccinations for other diseases (e.g., measles, mumps, rubella) appears to be that those positions do not stand to earn him any political capital with Trump supporters, who still wield significantly influence in the Republican Party, as they would not align with the dominant ideology within that group. DeSantis’s pandering to this conspiratorial mindset was clearly evidenced when he mused that the federal government would move the goal posts and not follow actual evidence to further restrict freedom: “But then guess what’s going to happen? Then you’re going to be in a situation where, you may be fully vaccinated. Fauci says, you should go get a booster. So what? They’re going to say, you’re now unvaccinated, unless you get whatever they’re saying. And, obviously, there was a lot of controversy over that because the White House was pushing this and they didn’t have the data to back it up.” Once again, DeSantis picks up the torch for Trump, aligning himself with his political base by carting out his *bête noire*, Dr. Fauci. DeSantis makes similar statements regarding vaccines, claiming they “should be a personal decision,” revealing an ideology that not only values personal choice over public health but indicates that public health measures are antithetical to freedom.

DeSantis’s concern over protecting people’s right to choose when it comes to COVID-related medical decisions further manifests itself in his discussion of preventing people from being punished for opting out of vaccinations. Responding to the policies by some government offices to reprimand or fire employees if they refuse to be vaccinated, he states that: “I do think that we’ve been able to help save a lot of jobs, too. We worked with the folks in Gainesville, they were going to fire cops and firefighters, and utility workers based on this. And you shouldn’t lose your job over this. These are people that have been working on our behalf for the whole dang time. And now, all of a sudden they’re going to get tossed to the curb?” Going further, he argues that not only is the decision to receive a vaccine a personal choice that should be protected,

but to interfere with that choice is a form of injustice: “We basically don’t want people to be discriminated against. We want them to be able to live their lives regardless of their status on, on getting these shots.” His suggestion that mandating people to get vaccines is akin to discrimination turns the concept of social justice on its head, positioning the largely white, middle- and upper-middle class individuals that refuse to be vaccinated as facing systemic governmental prejudice. The pandemic is just the latest lens through which these relatively privileged individuals imagine themselves as the oppressed underdog fighting against social and governmental oppression. DeSantis also hyperbolizes the position of those who disagree with him by claiming he “want[s] [people] to be able to live their lives regardless of their [vaccination] status,” implying that those who disagree with him want to take away fundamental rights, despite that those who enforce vaccine requirements simply want people to get vaccinated against a virus that has killed millions. By framing these policies as discriminatory constraints on freedom as opposed to measures to protect public health, DeSantis reveals an ideology that values personal freedom over the public good.

ECONOMIC PROSPERITY OVER COVID SAFETY

Another clear ideological concept that emerged in our reading of DeSantis’s press conference was the importance of economic prosperity, including its weight relative to public health and safety. This ideological strategy is achieved through an overemphasis on the economy, which is used to feed into the unfounded belief that the pandemic is mostly over and overblown by others in power. These beliefs align DeSantis with the Trumpian base, who have scoffed at the pandemic response of more proactive leaders and have been fighting to live as if COVID-19 were not a serious threat.

In many respects, the primary focus of DeSantis’s press conference appears to be the economy. Instead of discussing the pandemic or his response to it, he focuses on a statistic that he claims shows how Florida has not only weathered the pandemic, but thrived in spite of it, having had “16 consecutive months of private sector job growth” and unemployment “below the national average for the last 13 months.” A central tenet of the Trumpian economic ideology is small government, with a major way of achieving this being through limiting taxation. DeSantis introduces this salient ideological argument by noting that Florida has “the lowest per capita tax burden in the United States,” while also claiming that Florida’s governmental revenues “are so strong that we have really healthy reserves.” He makes clear that these reserves and revenues are not going to be used to increase spending, even during a pandemic; rather, they will allow the state “to be able to continue to be fiscally prudent.”

While promoting Florida’s economic prosperity, DeSantis also attempts to diminish the severity of the pandemic. He makes statements such as Florida has “had 55 consecutive days in decline of the seven-day average for hospital admissions” and that hospital “admissions are down well over 80%, since we started the treatments, and the hospital census has declined statewide for 49 consecutive days.” What he neglects to mention is that these numbers have such a large capacity to fall because Florida was experiencing the largest spike of cases it has seen during the entire pandemic. The public is expected to take away from these statements that numbers going down is good and not question how they rose so high in the first place. DeSantis claims that “currently 47 states have higher seven-day case rates than the state of Florida does,” which may be true; however, there has been much scrutiny over how Florida has reported their COVID-19 cases and deaths, having fired a staffer who published related data.

For a period of 105 days during the height of the pandemic in summer 2021, the Florida Department of Health failed to release COVID death data to the public, as DeSantis’s office “declared that the pandemic had receded to the point where daily reports were no longer necessary” [10]. In place of this data and the COVID dashboard it had previously published, the state issued weekly reports that did not include previously public information such as county-level demographic vaccine rates and infections in long-term healthcare facilities and schools, leading to speculation that the state was trying to hide COVID information to make it seem like the pandemic is less severe than it is. Along these lines, in his October 12th press conference, DeSantis further minimizes public health concerns, suggesting that “even as we were doing this, we still weren’t missing a beat economically, but it sure is good to be able to see many, many people, thousands and thousands of people being able get treatment and being able to get kept from the hospital.” Once again, he is emphasizing personal choice, seeing his role as governor not to prevent the spread by aiding people in making effective, evidence-based decisions but to ensure “that folks understand that there’s options for them to be able to, to be able to get themselves better” using monoclonal antibodies (mAbs). It is telling how much DeSantis pushes mAbs, which first came into the public eye when former President Trump was infected with COVID-19 and promoted the therapy. While mAbs serve an important function in our ability to treat COVID-19, they are not nearly as widely available as vaccines. This leads to the question as to why DeSantis associate vaccines with governmental tyranny when they are our most widely available and effective method for preventing COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and death, while promoting an experimental, relatively expensive treatment that has only been shown to lessen symptom severity.

While promoting economic prosperity and growth, DeSantis repeatedly brings up the idea of restoring normalcy in the wake of the pandemic, despite its continuous impact on public health, making statements like “we want to get everything clicking... we’ve got tourism, we’ve got a lot of stuff. We’ve got to get that college football clicking going forward. So, I think we’ll work on that.” This approach, once again, takes cues from former President Trump, who continually minimized the pandemic’s severity, urged states to remove restrictions, called out governors who imposed lockdowns, and constantly pointed to the stock market and other metrics to make it seem as if the economy was booming to distract from the pandemic. This minimization serves two purposes for both men as leaders: it offers some protection and deflection against criticism

over their handling of the pandemic, and it ideologically aligns them with the Trumpian base, who from the beginning have believed COVID-19 was not as dangerous as was being claimed.

DISCUSSION

How many more Floridians would be alive, healthy, and safe from COVID-19 today if Ron DeSantis was not guided by a Trumpian ideology of limited government, anti-science public health response, and downplaying the pandemic's severity? The exact number is of little consequence; what is important is the rhetoric and ideology of those in leadership positions, as they hold immense decision-making powers that impact people's safety, livelihoods, and health. COVID-19 deepened the existing partisan divide in the US healthcare system. Republican governors such as DeSantis implemented less restrictions and measures to safeguard public health, viewing them as violations of individual freedoms. Like Trump, DeSantis and other Republican leaders decry what they perceive as unjust and unnecessary restrictions on people's ability to make their own choices, with the implication being that personal freedom trumps public health.

Despite his political power, DeSantis paints himself as a political outsider like his political ally Trump, a rhetorical strategy he uses to demonstrate his affinity with the common people. In turn, he portrays the federal government and other states under Democratic leadership as being restrictive and even discriminatory against ordinary Americans who are trying to exercise their rights to make their own medical decisions. Through his press conference, DeSantis conveys that individual liberties overrule public health and that it is his political and moral imperative to defend the public against unjust federal overreach. Similarly, he emphasizes that economic prosperity comes before public health, as people's ability to maintain their livelihoods is seen as the more important value when compared with vaccine mandates to protect their health. These ideological components are also expressed by Trump, helping position DeSantis as his ideological heir and his potential political successor. It has been widely speculated that DeSantis will seek the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, and our analysis suggests that he has attempted to take the torch from Trump, approaching COVID-19 in a similar manner.

CONCLUSION

DeSantis's ideology of Trumpism provides insight into his values, his political ambitions, and the motivations behind his pandemic response. Our analysis also reveals his clever positioning of himself as an agent of the people and representative of the disempowered, despite his clear status as a member of the dominant group(s) of power in society. Above all, analyzing DeSantis's rhetoric demonstrates that the powerful can remain in power while positioning themselves as oppressed, while the dominant groups who feel their power diminishing buy into this rhetoric.

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