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Out-Trumping the Trump

DeSantis is considered Trump's biggest rival for the Republican presidential primaries. But for Florida's governor, it's a battle of unequal weapons

It's been seven months since Florida Governor Ron DeSantis celebrated a brilliant re-election victory in the midst of an otherwise mixed Republican midterm performance. He had come in with nearly 20 per cent more votes than Democrat Charlie Crist. This was an almost surreally good result for a state that, until a few years ago, was considered a veritable swing state – and still is, according to many local media. His fabulous result made Florida's already successful chief executive the man of the hour overnight. Every smile, every gesture, every Caesar-like sweep of the crowd by the beaming victor seemed to say: here is someone who could actually challenge Donald Trump for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024. Someone who shares many of his strengths but few of his weaknesses.

A steep downward spiral

Today, these scenes seem like something from another world. Trump, who had basically been written off at one point, has now overtaken his opponent in almost all of the major opinion polls: most recently, Trump's lead according to Quinnipiac was 31 percentage points, (33 at FOX News, 34 at Morning Consult and 42 at Harvard/Harris). To some extent, the results are even more disastrous for DeSantis at the individual state level. In West Virginia, for example, a poll at the end of May saw him trailing behind Trump by a whopping 45 percentage points, with only 9 per cent thinking he was the right candidate. Admittedly, even under the best of circumstances, the Harvard lawyer wouldn't be a good fit for the coal mining towns of Appalachia. But falling below the 10 per cent mark should still wound his ego.

It is unclear what this rapid decline in pre-election popularity can be attributed to. On the one hand, of course, it seems possible that the mid-term election hype surrounding DeSantis was too great and that the situation is simply returning to normal. On the other hand, it may relate

to the criminal proceedings against Trump, his increased media presence as a result and an incipient nostalgia for his time in office. But there is a widespread view that the challenger himself is not entirely free of his own misery. DeSantis' presidential candidacy was announced comparatively late, the campaign launch with Twitter boss Elon Musk – in theory, an impressive idea – suffered from technical defects, and the narrative of the valiant fight against 'wokeness' also seems to be wearing thin these days. In this case, as so often in life, oversaturation creates frustration.

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All the more so, as one should know how to abandon a topic if it threatens to bog down the discourse and to change the branding strategy – a skill that the governor, who tends toward micromanagement, evidently cannot claim as one of his strengths. For example, when DeSantis threatened to take control of the 100-square-kilometre Reedy Creek Improvement District away from the media company Disney – which had publicly opposed a Florida anti-gay law – it initially went down well with an electorate that was already sceptical about such corporate privileges. But then, the ensuing exchange of blows did not inspire an image of a confident leader. Instead of being celebrated as a winner, DeSantis escalated the conflict, which has since become a tangle of legal confusion and has led to a freeze on Disney's investments in the state.

Even if the 44-year-old still gets the legal upper hand in the end, the scratches on his image as 'a tough man of action' cannot be glossed over so quickly. They also pose a big risk for him: the impression seems to be gaining ground that, despite all his shrewdness, he lacks a certain something – the assertiveness and the authority of his rival, who is still surrounded by a post-presidential aura. And nowhere is this difference in image more evident than when Trump and DeSantis refer to each other.

While Trump has been touring the country for months, ranting about 'Ron DeSanctimonious' as a nobody 'who needs a personality transplant' and owes his success to him alone, people in the DeSantis camp are at a loss as to how to counter this strategy. Some don't want to get involved in a mudslinging contest where they can only lose against the Insulter-in-Chief. Others see the greater danger – too much restraint, following the old proverb that 'the best defence is a good offence'.

Beating Trump at his own game

Trump's own campaign history is, of course, the best example of how successful this second strategy can be: in 2016, with a deliberately hyper-aggressive manner, he managed to repudiate all of his competitors and redirect existing loyalties to himself. This Trump was someone who savagely lashed out at his hapless predecessors, Mitt Romney and John McCain – and was enthusiastically acclaimed for it by people who had supported both. He was someone who openly accused George W. Bush of 'destabilising the Middle East' and waging unjust wars – and was met with approval from people who had spent half their lives defending those same wars. Someone who wanted to turn the Grand Old Party into his personal electoral vehicle – and the more brazenly he pursued this goal, the more open doors he charged through.

According to this logic, Trump would have to be 'out-Trumped', so to speak, in order to knock him off his pedestal. He would have to be ridiculed, with doubt cast on his assertiveness. Ask him where the promised border wall went, why Mexico didn't pay for it and why Chinese products are still flooding the US market. Accuse him of being too soft on criminals and too hard on freedom-loving patriots. Call him a failure because he has proven incapable of carrying out the *Make America Great Again* agenda. In short: turn his own weapons against him. However, it is hardly to be expected that DeSantis, with his wait-and-see attitude, will rise to the task anytime soon. The fear of prematurely losing support among the Trump supporters who are still to be wooed is likely too great.

The Indian-born biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, who is also vying for the Republican nomination and enjoys the advantage of being able to throw his punches from outside the political field of vision, is more skilful. Although he greatly respects Trump, he recently went on record saying that Trump failed in his fight against the cartels and has kept very few of his promises: 'I think I'm closer to Trump in 2015 than Trump today is to Trump in 2015.' It's not a bad move to position himself as an alternative for voters who want to make a distinction between personalities and political positions. It's a strategy that was successful enough for the unknown Ramaswamy to now rank in the polls ahead of established party figures like Tim Scott and Nikki Haley, whose half-hearted campaigns – both of whom are obviously eyeing the vice presidency – are still struggling.

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For DeSantis, whose options are more limited, it remains a fight with unequal weapons – and against time. In order to show that he actually

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has a real chance, he has to reverse the disastrous poll trend as soon as possible and unite a broad coalition of all those behind him, who have little interest in a third attempt by ex-President Trump. This includes moderate Republicans who recognise a power-conscious pragmatist behind the rhetorical bombast, the old party establishment just waiting for the right opportunity to free itself from the Babylonian captivity of the last few years, but also various libertarians, evangelicals and grassroots conservatives from the orbit of former presidential aspirant Ted Cruz, who believed that Trump ruled in an overly dirigiste manner, or who don't consider him sufficiently ideologically sound.

Forging and maintaining such a heterogeneous alliance requires not only political mobility and a strong ground game but also a bulging war chest – and at least in this respect, DeSantis seems capable of scoring. Despite the botched start, his campaign raised a whopping $8.2 million within 24 hours of announcing his candidacy, while Trump has managed to raise only $9.5 million over the past six months. The fact that this man from the small town of Dunedin has won the hearts of so many donors is more than just a sign of encouragement. Anyone who has sufficient financial resources on the hellishly expensive US primary election stage can also get through a dry spell here and there without having to fear direct operational collapse. And this much is certain: in his fight against Trump, the eternal comeback kid, DeSantis will need every penny.



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