**DeSantis Has Only One Path Back From Failed Launch**

COMMENTARY

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Two decades before “Mad Men”-era advertising executives downed their martinis and bedded their secretaries, a brilliant predecessor came up with a powerful idea still in use today. The best way to sell any product or service, he said, was to highlight its single best quality – the one that truly stands out from the competition and benefits consumers directly. That ad man, Rosser Reeves of Ted Bates & Company, dubbed it the “unique selling proposition.” Eight decades later, advertisers and marketers still rely on it.

The failure of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis to identify his own “unique selling proposition” is the best explanation for his failure to surge in the polls, despite the high anticipation with which he entered the primaries. There were good reasons for that anticipation. He was one of the country’s most successful governors in one of the largest states. After a narrow victory in his first gubernatorial election, he won reelection in a landslide against a well-known opponent. His presidential aspirations were backed by major donors who considered him the best bet to displace Trump and win the general election. Donald Trump, they feared, carried too much baggage and had already jeopardized the entire ticket in 2018, 2020, and 2022.

Yet DeSantis went wrong almost immediately by choosing the wrong strategy. He emphasized his strong position on conservative social issues, not his state’s economic growth, low regulation, population influx, and Republican electoral success, which turned a purple state into a reliably red one. He has a strong, conservative record on multiple issues, but sinking poll numbers show he chose the wrong ones to highlight. His relaunch wisely emphasizes those kitchen-table issues.

DeSantis was not mistaken in thinking Republican primary voters care about social issues and are bitter those are still controlled (as they see it) by educated elites, entrenched bureaucrats, left-wing judges, teachers’ unions, and woke corporations. He wasn’t mistaken in figuring Republican voters want a fighter who is willing – indeed, eager – to take on those entrenched powers. That pugnacious stance is key to Trump’s appeal within the party and helped refashion its voter base.

DeSantis might have figured that tackling these wedge issues would show he was strong enough to confront elites in Washington, New York, and Silicon Valley. He would show he didn’t care if they hated him, and he was willing to risk votes in the general election to show it.

Where DeSantis went wrong – badly wrong – was in thinking these social issues were Republican voters’ highest priority or could truly distinguish him from his primary opponents. True, grassroots Republicans care a lot about those issues, but they also figure any conservative Republican nominee would care just as much. Those shared views made it hard for DeSantis to differentiate himself from the field, much less from the frontrunner. Small differences about social issues simply weren’t enough reason for primary voters to ditch Trump. They won’t be enough on economic issues, either.

DeSantis had a far better option. That option, that unique selling proposition, is to say, “DeSantis doesn’t talk big. He delivers big.” That would allow him to put his best foot forward and clearly differentiate himself from Trump.

He wouldn’t need to bloviate (something he’s not good at, anyway). He has actually delivered on economic growth for Florida. He has delivered on personal freedom, particularly on school choice and keeping the state open during the COVID pandemic. He resisted the mask mandates, school closings, and business restrictions ordered by Anthony Fauci and the Centers for Disease Control. (Any mention of Fauci would also give him a platform to criticize Trump for retaining him in such a prominent position.) He could point out that Florida’s population is surging, with residents fleeing high-tax blue states in the Northeast and Midwest, eager to benefit from his policies. He could point out that, until he took office, Florida was almost evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. Now, he could say, his leadership has put it solidly in the Republican column, up and down the ballot.

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DeSantis would still have to pass two crucial tests. First, he must link his local success to his national proposals. He’s running for president, not governor. Second, he must contrast his record of successfully implementing conservative policies with Trump’s inflated talk and deflated results. In Texas, they call that braggadocio “all hat and no cattle.” (In Yorkshire, the phrase is even better. “All fur coat and no knickers.”)

Trump can point to two significant domestic policy triumphs: three conservative justices on the Supreme Court and strong economic growth before COVID hit. He can also point to two foreign policy wins: no new wars and the Abraham Accords among longtime foes in the Middle East. He can rightly say he hates entrenched elites in both politics and the economy. He’s eager to butt heads with them, and he’s proven it. Republican voters clearly love those stances.

The problem for Trump’s primary opponents is that they all endorse his major policies and intend to continue them. That congruence rules out those policies as unique selling propositions. That uniformity hurts all of Trump’s challengers equally, but it gives DeSantis an opening if he seizes it. He’s in a strong position to highlight his success in implementing key campaign promises and the former president’s failures.

Trump didn’t lie about his goals. But he vastly overpromised and had no idea how to control Washington’s massive regulatory machine or whom to appoint to crucial administrative and staff positions. He promised, but he couldn’t deliver. Nailing that contrast is DeSantis’ best shot.

Consider Trump’s most prominent campaign promises. How much of the wall with Mexico was actually built? Hardly any. How much did Mexico pay for? None. How much did Trump reduce the deficit, as he promised? It grew. How well did he handle the bureaucracy that is sure to hobble any conservative president? Poorly. The giant flashing billboard for these bureaucratic failures was his retention of Fauci and the administration’s submission to the CDC’s guidance on COVID, including school closings.

Trump has two other potentially devastating weaknesses. Educated voters find him repulsive. That won’t change. Second, he is credibly charged with multiple felonies. Some, like obstructing justice when asked to return classified documents, are easy for voters to grasp. He should have returned them and then litigated for repossession. Instead, he claimed he had the right to keep them under the Presidential Records Act; he tried to hide them from federal investigators and even from his own lawyer, who unwittingly signed a document saying he had searched for these documents and found none. He couldn’t find them because Trump had hidden them. That, the prosecutors will say, shows consciousness of guilt. So does the recently added charge that he worked with aides to try and erase security camera footage showing document boxes being moved secretly.

Oddly, Trump’s legal troubles have not harmed him politically – at least not yet. Sometimes, they’ve helped. When the Department of Justice levels superseding felony charges against him the same week they gift wrap an unprecedented sweetheart deal for Hunter Biden and try to hide the terms from the judge, Republicans are bound to think, “This is worse than a biased, two-tiered system of justice. This isn’t justice at all.”

They certainly reached that conclusion when Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg indicted Trump on a flimsy, novel theory that would create a felony from an old misdemeanor on which the statute of limitations had already expired – if it was even a crime in the first place. They remembered that Bragg had campaigned on his record of going after Trump. Now, he was stretching the law to deliver on that promise. After Bragg’s partisan stunt, the former president’s popularity rose among Republicans.

So far, Special Counsel Jack Smith’s much more serious charges haven’t swayed those voters, either. It’s unclear if still more felony charges related to the Jan. 6 riots or Trump’s efforts to overturn the November election will have any impact on those voters. They ought to be shocked by a conspiracy to overturn a democratic election, but they will rightly demand hard evidence that Trump himself acted illegally, just as Democrats want hard evidence connecting Joe Biden to Hunter’s crimes.

Trump’s legal troubles would be more likely to affect hardline conservatives if Democrats were running a strong candidate. They aren’t. They are running Joe Biden, paired with his unpopular vice president, Kamala Harris, who could step into the Oval Office if Joe can’t make it through a second term. That’s not a remote possibility. Joe’s age, frailty, and periodic confusion are hard to hide. There’s a reason he doesn’t answer questions from the press.

Republican primary voters might think Trump, despite his baggage, can still defeat Biden, whose poll numbers are among the worst of any modern president at this stage. Republican donors and insiders disagree. So do most educated and higher-income Republicans. But, for now, they don’t have a candidate who can displace Trump.

Ron DeSantis could still reemerge as that candidate, despite his dreadful start. He cannot do that with his old, failed strategy. He can’t do it with just the economic program he announced Monday. That will help, but frankly, it doesn’t distinguish him from other candidates. What does distinguish him is his success in implementing strong conservative policies, year after year.

For DeSantis, the road back begins with identifying his Unique Selling Proposition. That shouldn’t be so hard. It’s “Big results, not big promises.”

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