

# [***Biden tours Idalia damage in Florida as presidential politics swirl***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6932-4GB1-DY7V-G007-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) visited storm-ravaged Florida on Saturday in the wake of Hurricane Idalia, touring areas damaged by the storm, meeting residents and thanking emergency responders. The post-disaster trip, though otherwise by the book, was partly overshadowed by a lead-up featuring contradictory statements from the White House's team and representatives for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican presidential contender, over whether the two men would meet during Biden's visit.

The back-and-forth - and the fact that they ultimately did not meet - was a stark departure from Biden's previous visits after major emergencies in the Sunshine State, and represents one of the first times the two have shown signs of their political rivalry while responding to a disaster.

Biden and DeSantis have previously met under challenging circumstances - the two convened in response to the 2021 Surfside building collapse and again in 2022 following Hurricane Ian's damage in southwestern Florida.

Upon landing, the president and first lady Dr. Jill Biden met with GOP Sen. Rick Scott, federal personnel, local officials and first responders in Live Oak, Florida, for a response and recovery briefing. Biden and Scott - who wore a baseball cap with "45" embroidered on the back - offered praise for one another, with the president thanking Scott for keeping him updated and the senator applauding Biden for the administration's "fast" response.

"Your nation has your back and we'll be with you until the job is done," Biden said Saturday.

The president and the first lady tookan aerial tour of impacted areas before delivering remarks.

Asked if he was disappointed that DeSantis didn't join Saturday's tour, Biden said he was not, saying the governor "may have had other reasons."

According to DeSantis' official schedule, he also spent the day touring storm damage - but in other parts of the state.

The White House and DeSantis' team have gone back and forth about the visit. The governor's spokesperson said Friday night that DeSantis had no plans to meet with Biden, contradicting the president, who had told CNN earlier that day that the two would meet.

On Saturday, FEMA administrator Deanna Criswell said that Biden had contacted DeSantis to inform him of the visit and that operational impacts in the area were taken into account in choosing a location for the president's visit.

"When the president contacted the governor to let him know he was going to be visiting ... the governor's team and my team, mutually agreed on a place that would have minimal impact into operations," Criswell said on "CNN This Morning."

"Live Oak, you know, the power is being restored. The roads aren't blocked, but there's families that are hurting there," she said.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre echoed Criswell, saying: "The president spoke with the governor. It was an understanding. The president said to him he was coming to Florida. We never heard any disagreement with it."

A presidential visit anywhere requires a significant security footprint, and DeSantis spokesperson Jeremy Redfern told CNN Friday evening that Biden's visit would disrupt disaster response.

"In these rural communities, and so soon after impact, the security preparations alone that would go into setting up such a meeting would shut down ongoing recovery efforts," Redfern said.

DeSantis echoed Redfern's comments Friday, telling reporters that he had raised concerns about that level of disruption as response efforts continue. But a White House official said that DeSantis did not raise those concerns about the visit with Biden when the two spoke by phone before the president announced the trip Thursday.

Asked by CNN aboard Air Force One whether any Florida emergency officials had raised similar concerns, Criswell said, "I have teams that have been on the ground since I left and we have heard no concerns over any impact to the communities that we're going to visit today."

For DeSantis, who catapulted to GOP mega-stardom in recent years in part by taking aim at the Biden White House, staying away from Saturday's visit will eliminate the possibility of any collegiality between the two being caught on camera during a tense Republican primary.

The White House had earlier attempted to downplay any rivalry between the two when it comes to responding to a natural disaster.

"They are very collegial when we have the work to do together of helping Americans in need, citizens of Florida in need," deputy national security adviser Dr. Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall told reporters Thursday when pressed on the dynamic.

The Democratic president and the Republican governor have been in close touch leading up to, during and after the hurricane, which made landfall Wednesday in the coastal Big Bend region as a powerful Category 3 storm. Biden joked that he had DeSantis "on direct dial" given their frequent communication this week. But while the president has offered direct praise for DeSantis' handling of the response, the Florida Republican largely stuck to assuring the public the two can work together.

Asked whether he sensed any ***politics*** in their conversations, Biden told reporters in the Roosevelt Room on Wednesday that he didn't - and acknowledged that it was "strange" given the polarized political climate.

"No. Believe it or not. I know that sounds strange, especially how - looking at the nature of ***politics*** today," he said.

Biden continued, "I think he trusts my judgment and my desire to help, and I trust him to be able to suggest that this is not about ***politics***, it's about taking care of the people of the state."

DeSantis hasn't shied away from criticism of the president and his handling of disasters outside his state. During a GOP presidential debate last week, days before the storm made landfall, DeSantis took aim at Biden's response to the wildfires in Maui.

"Biden was on the beach while those people were suffering. He was asked about it and he said, 'No comment.' Are you kidding me? As somebody that's handled disasters in Florida, you've got to be activated. You've got to be there. You've got to be present. You've got to be helping people who are doing this," he said.

There was a similar dynamic surrounding their work together on Hurricane Ian last year. Weeks before the storm touched down, DeSantis flew migrants to Martha's Vineyard and made a national tour spotlighting the move. Biden accused [*DeSantis at the time of "playing* ***politics*** *with human beings" and called the stunt "unAmerican.*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/18/politics/desantis-gop-rallies-migrants/index.html)

Still, they set their differences aside as DeSantis welcomed [*Biden to the state to tour damage*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/05/politics/joe-biden-ron-desantis-hurricane-ian/index.html) from the hurricane.

"I'm just thankful everyone has banded together," DeSantis said, before adding: "Mr. President, welcome to Florida. We appreciate working together across various levels of government."

That appearance together was rather deflating for Democrats who had hoped to raise concerns about DeSantis' handling of the storm, particularly the seeming lack of urgency in local evacuation orders. But when Biden called DeSantis' response to Ian [*"pretty remarkable," it closed the door on that.*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/08/politics/florida-democrats-hurricane-desantis-crist-demings/index.html)

Both leaders also poured on the niceties in the wake of the deadly condo collapse in Surfside, Florida, a year earlier.

"You recognized the severity of this tragedy from day one and you've been very supportive," DeSantis said during a briefing in Miami Beach.

Biden added, "You know what's good about this? We live in a nation where we can cooperate. And it's really important."

That dynamic was less evident Saturday.

Biden formally approved a major disaster declaration for Florida on Thursday, making federal funding available to those in affected counties.

Approximately 1,500 federal responders are on the ground in Florida, including search and rescue personnel and members of the Army Corps of Engineers.

In the wake of Hurricane Idalia and other recent disasters, the Biden administration on Friday asked Congress for $4 billion for FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund in addition to a request for $12 billion last month.

As the White House pushes Congress to pass a short-term spending bill to avoid a shutdown and ensure continuity of government services, the president has signaled that he's ready to blame Republicans if there isn't enough funding to respond to disasters.

For his part, DeSantis has lobbied unapologetically for the kind of disaster aid that as a congressman he voted against as wasteful spending.

Asked about the $4 billion request Friday, DeSantis told reporters, "How Washington handles all this stuff, I don't quite understand. ... They just did a big budget deal and did not include that. They included a lot of money for a lot of other stuff."

He continued, "You know, as governor, I'm gonna be pulling whatever levers I can to be able to help folks. And so, if that's the state, we're mobilizing all of our state assets. Private sector, we're leveraging that. And we will apply for whatever federal money is available."

This story has been updated with additional information.

CORRECTION: This story has been updated to correct where Biden discussed his conversations with DeSantis. He was at the White House.

CNN's Steve Contorno and Donald Judd contributed to this report.

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