

# [***How Ron DeSantis learned to embrace mainstream media and turn off Fox News***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B4X-5KN1-JBSS-S002-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; In a rare moment of self-reflection this week, Florida Gov. [*Ron DeSantis*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/politics/takeaways-town-hall-ron-desantis/index.html) acknowledged out loud what many in his political orbit have privately told him since before he even launched his White House bid.

"I came in not really doing as much media," DeSantis told conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt on Thursday. "I should have just been blanketing. I should have gone on all the corporate shows. I should have gone on everything.

"We had an opportunity, I think, to come out of the gate and do that and reach a much broader folk," he added.

The revealing admission about his diminished presidential campaign certainly explains the abrupt change in the governor's media diet in recent months. After keeping the mainstream press at arm's length early in his presidential campaign, DeSantis now will seemingly talk into any camera that is rolling.

His warming to traditional outlets has also come amid an escalating cold war with conservative media, especially Fox News, which he has repeatedly called out for what he views as ingratiating coverage of his top rival, former President [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45).

Behind the scenes, the response from many of his longtime advisers, aides and allies has been: What took so long?

At nearly every stage of his political career, people close to DeSantis have urged him to break out of his right-wing media bubble - from his days in Congress to his time in Tallahassee and through the early days of his presidential campaign. And at each interval, he dismissed them.

It's a strategy that seemed to pay dividends throughout most of his time in elected office, helping him become one of the most recognizable figures in Republican ***politics***, perhaps behind only Trump. But unlike the former president, who strategically seeks out the mainstream press and wields attention - even negative coverage - toward an advantage, DeSantis began his presidential campaign limiting access to the most conservative radio and television programs on the airwaves.

When his campaign struggled to find its footing early on, sparking a wave of penetrating negative headlines, DeSantis couldn't counter the narrative because he wasn't in the same arena, said Alex Conant, a Republican media consultant.

"Whoever gave him the advice you can run for president without talking to American media doesn't understand anything about ***politics***," said Conant, who advised Sen. Marco Rubio's 2016 presidential campaign. "The mainstream media is going to cover a presidential campaign. You can either shape that coverage by engaging with it or hope for the best."

It's a lesson DeSantis has since learned and has rapidly sought to course correct. Since the fall, he has participated in three CNN town halls and made his maiden appearances on the Sunday morning political talk shows. Campaign staff are regularly made available to speak on camera, and DeSantis has welcomed one-on-one interviews at his events.

After skipping over the Des Moines Register Political Soapbox at the Iowa State Fair this summer, a Hawkeye State tradition for presidential hopefuls, DeSantis granted an extended sit-down interview with the newspaper's lead political reporter, Brianne Pfannenstiel, just before the state's caucuses this month.

These appearances have presented a softer DeSantis than the pugnacious brawler many Americans might otherwise know him as. They have served to counter commercials from the allies of GOP presidential primary rival Nikki Haley that liken him to a mini Trump and TikTok posts that clip snippets of him looking stiff or awkward with crowds.

DeSantis opened [*a recent CNN town hall*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/04/politics/cnn-town-hall-takeaways/index.html) by playfully handing moderator Kaitlan Collins an Iowa women's basketball jersey. He appeared quick on his feet and genuinely engaged with the Iowans and New Hampshirites asking him questions. He smiled, talked convincingly about his family and beliefs and seemed comfortable onstage - a bare minimum for most politicians but a significant step forward for DeSantis.

But his supporters worry it has come too late.

"We faced six months of bad stories," one person close to his political operation told CNN. "There was a reluctance to speak to national media, which I understand. But ignoring it was worse."

A spokesman for the DeSantis campaign did not respond to questions from CNN about this story.

'We cut them off'

DeSantis has always approached the mainstream press (or "corporate media," as he disparagingly calls it) with skepticism - and largely shut out Tallahassee reporters once he was elected governor in 2018.

Much to the chagrin of some advisers aware of his political ambitions, DeSantis also rebuffed national news outlets. His only national media appearances in his first year as governor came during a hurricane.

He ultimately granted a single interview to a publication: a sit-down with a reporting team from Politico. It quickly turned contentious, [*the outlet wrote in a profile it published of DeSantis*](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/09/16/governor-ron-desantis-florida-trump-410244), as the governor demanded the reporters reveal sources who had spoken unfavorably about him. That was the end of any such interviews.

According to past advisers, his early image was carefully curated by his wife, Casey DeSantis, a former news anchor for a Jacksonville television station and a far more gifted public speaker than her husband. It was largely her decision, former aides say, to keep DeSantis siloed from the mainstream press. Her mandate to his communications staff was to get DeSantis in front of conservative media as much as possible, ignoring suggestions that having the Republican governor spar with CNN anchors or MSNBC prime-time hosts would be far more compelling television and better for his brand.

When his press team created a report laying out plans to improve media coverage of the governor, Shane Strum, DeSantis' chief of staff at the time, instructed them to "burn that paper" for fear that Casey might see it, a former aide said.

During one appearance on "Fox & Friends," host Brian Kilmeade broached an unexpected topic not discussed in advance. DeSantis deftly handled the question and the segment continued without a hitch. Casey, though, was furious.

"We're never going on Kilmeade again," she said, according to the former aide. (The moratorium was short-lived, and the following year, Kilmeade toured the Governor's Mansion in Tallahassee for a glowing profile of Florida's first family.)

As DeSantis laid the groundwork for a presidential campaign, he not only doubled down on the against-the-mainstream-media approach, he elevated like-minded people into key roles. One of those individuals, his then-press secretary Christina Pushaw, outlined the governor's media strategy in blunt detail during a 2022 speech titled "Defeating the Legacy Media's Regime Narrative Enforcement."

In her remarks, Pushaw likened the press to "Democrat activists" and said blocking access was critical to stripping the media of its legitimacy.

"They hate everything that we stand for. And I believe they hate this country. So what do we do?" Pushaw asked. "We cut them off."

All the while, DeSantis continued to receive advice that he should do the opposite. Before launching his presidential campaign, one Republican consultant advised DeSantis' team to invite national media to the Governor's Mansion for a meet and greet that would dispel some of the narratives surrounding the Florida leader. The suggestion was laughed off.

"He'll never go for that," the consultant was told.

Instead, after launching, DeSantis engaged in a lengthy tour of the conservative media ecosystem - radio, TV and influential podcasters. It was a space free of tension but also compelling moments, and if Republican voters were impressed by him routinely knocking softball questions out the park, they weren't responding to it in polls of the GOP presidential race.

"Do as much conservative media as you want. There's no risk," Conant said. "But conservative media is reactionary to what the mainstream media covers. If you're not driving the story, you're going to fall into the background really quick.

"If you're a conservative Republican, sure there's risk in sitting down with mainstream outlets," he added, "but if you're not willing to take risks, you shouldn't be running for president."

Watching DeSantis now engage with the outlets he previously stiff-armed has sparked a wave of told-you-so's from back home.

"He's had so many people try to protect him or insulate him from negative coverage," the former aide told CNN. "Negative coverage is part of the game. When you play a game, when the other team scores, you don't pick up your ball and go home. You try to score back."

From Fox favorite to cold war

With his 2024 presidential hopes fading, DeSantis has turned against the conservative media personalities and programs that once elevated him.

He has accused Fox and others of failing to challenge Trump over his pandemic record and beliefs on abortion. He also suggested the former president got away with "gaslighting" the GOP field at this month's Fox News town hall while claiming that his own hour special with the network was stacked with "a half-dozen left-wing plants" in the audience. He made those assertions on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" - the left-leaning network's weekday political show that he avoided for years until his October debut.

Trump has "basically a Praetorian Guard of the conservative media. Fox News, the websites, all this stuff," DeSantis said at a recent campaign stop, referring to the bodyguard for Roman emperors. "They just don't - they don't hold him accountable because they're worried about losing viewers and they don't want to have the ratings go down."

For his part, Trump accused Fox of "desperately trying to save" DeSantis just hours before he took the stage for his town hall, his first live appearance on the network in two years.

Amid the pile on, Laura Ingraham, one of Fox's influential prime-time hosts, encouraged DeSantis this week to "step aside" and end his presidential campaign for the good of the Republican Party and his political future.

"It's not happening," Ingraham said of DeSantis' bid for the nomination. "Trump is simply too powerful and has endured too much."

Fox News did not respond to a request for comment about DeSantis' criticism.

The breakdown in the DeSantis-Fox relationship is a stunning casualty of the Republican presidential contest and one that seemed incredibly unlikely at the onset of the race.

The conservative outlet helped launch DeSantis from the back benches of the US House to serious presidential contender. It was on Fox that DeSantis in 2017 first endeared himself to Trump, helping to secure an endorsement that proved critical to winning his race for governor in 2018.

In the aftermath of the 2020 election, as Trump waged his war on democracy to maintain power, Fox was eager to instead spotlight DeSantis and his political achievements in Florida. Over one three-month stretch spanning late 2020 to early 2021, Fox producers asked DeSantis to appear on their network 113 times - nearly once a day, according to 1,250 pages of emails between the network and the governor's office [*first reported by the Tampa Bay Times*](https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/2021/08/13/inside-fox-news-desantis-is-the-future-of-the-party-and-hes-taking-advantage/) and reviewed by CNN. DeSantis regularly agreed, sometimes popping up on the network multiple times a day - though requests that came from Fox's harder-hitting anchors such as Bret Baier were routinely ignored.

DeSantis' office sometimes separately alerted reporters from conservative outlets such as Fox to upcoming announcements from the governor, the emails showed, leaving other outlets in the dark for hours.

Together, DeSantis and Fox producers plotted exclusive events to air on the network, including the administering of the first coronavirus vaccine in Florida to a 100-year-old World War II veteran. Their correspondences were often punctuated with effusive praise, with one producer writing, "We see him as the future of the party."

That sentiment was echoed after DeSantis won reelection in 2022 by 19 points. The next day, another Rupert Murdoch media holding, the New York Post, declared the Florida governor "DEFUTURE" on its front cover.

In the following months, DeSantis repeatedly teased his presidential campaign through Murdoch's media empire - playing catch on camera with Kilmeade, sitting down with TalkTV's Piers Morgan in the Governor's Mansion, touring his hometown with the Post's Salena Zito and granting a rare newspaper interview to David Charter of The Times of London.

DeSantis expected the friendly treatment to continue. Yet, as he struggled to adjust to the campaign trail and Republicans rallied around Trump's mounting legal troubles, Fox's coverage shifted as well. He grew increasingly frustrated as the network seemed to move on from him while catering to Trump's whims.

Now, DeSantis has become disenchanted by the media landscape that once made him a conservative star.

"Let me tell you, it's all a racket, OK. It's all a racket," DeSantis recently said. "They're trying to get clicks. They're trying to do all this stuff.

"There's as much fake news on the right as there is on the corporate press."

CNN's Kit Maher contributed to this story.

By Steve Contorno, CNN

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