



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE  
*Guest Columnist*

# DeSantis' record toward LGBTQ people is worse than Trump's

Trump did not embark on a cultural and religious war against the  
LGBTQ community.



A person wears a shirt featuring the word “gay” over a map of the state of Florida during the raising of the Pride flag at city hall to mark the start of Pride Month on June 1 in St. Petersburg. [ MARTHA ASECIO-RHINE | Times ]

A central element to Gov. Ron DeSantis' overwhelmingly successful reelection campaign was a religious-based demonization of LGBTQ people. While no friend of the gay community, former President Donald Trump never went down that path.

During his time in office Trump implemented the policies outlined in the Republican Party platform dedicated to undermining basic LGBTQ protections. Trump appointed anti-LGBTQ judges at every level of the judicial system and pledged to only appoint Supreme Court judges who would reverse the legalization of same-sex marriage. He rescinded protections for transgender students and employees, and tweeted a ban on transgender service members. The Trump administration argued in court that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not protect people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation asserting that such discrimination was legal. And, Trump opposed the Equality Act approved in the House, which would have guaranteed critical non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people.

But Trump did not embark on a cultural and religious war against the LGBTQ community. He did not center his political identity on opposition to people with different genders and sexualities than his own. He did not encourage or participate in hateful rhetoric directed at LGBTQ people, including the pernicious charge of gay teachers "grooming" their students to engage in sinful practices. Gov. Ron DeSantis has not only done all of this, but seems to thrive on mocking and belittling our community. Unfortunately, his attacks on LGBTQ people bolstered his standing in the extremist Florida Republican Party and helped him win a landslide reelection. I believe that a President DeSantis would represent the greatest danger LGBTQ people have faced in America in decades.

DeSantis' record on LGBTQ issues is alarming. DeSantis's notorious Parental Rights in Education act, commonly referred to as the "don't say gay" law, went into effect this year. As widely noted, the law not only forbids instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade, but also prohibits teaching issues of gender or sexuality to children where it's "developmentally inappropriate."

This vague language restricting classroom instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity has already had a chilling effect beyond grades K-3. Parents have the right now to file lawsuits against schools perceived to violate these vague

policies. Schools can be subject to financial penalties, including attorney fees. Fearing the implications of the law, schools across the state have removed multiple books featuring LGBTQ characters. Gay teachers fear mentioning the existence of their spouses. Pride flags and events have been canceled. References to LGBTQ advocacy have been eliminated.

When Disney expressed support for its LGBTQ workers and opposition to the “don’t say gay” bill, DeSantis moved to remove its special tax status and ability to govern itself for the first time in more than half a century.

DeSantis approved a broad anti-LGBTQ policy in the Florida Department of Education, which instructed state schools to “ignore nondiscrimination guidance from the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Agriculture.” Florida school districts were told to ignore the new rules under Title IX that would extend sexual discrimination protections to students based on their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Under DeSantis, the Florida’s Agency for Healthcare Administration proposed a ban on Medicaid coverage for gender affirmation for trans and nonbinary youth.

DeSantis brought back a 1947 law against cross dressing to revoke Miami’s R House restaurant liquor license after a video surfaced of children attending a drag brunch there.

DeSantis intervened in local school board elections across Florida to endorse six “Moms for Liberty” candidates, all of whom won their races. Moms for Liberty is known for manufacturing culture wars over LGBTQ classroom materials and the sexual “grooming” of children.

DeSantis describes his actions as doing God’s work. Speaking to the Conservative Political Action Conference, DeSantis said, “We’re going to lead the charge here in Florida, but we need people all over the country willing to put on the full armor of God, to stand firm against the left schemes.”

It is hard not to compare DeSantis’ actions with Anita Bryant’s anti-LGBTQ campaign in Dade County in the 1970s. Bryant and her followers succeeded in overturning a county ordinance that granted gay people housing and employment protections, which meant that teachers couldn’t be fired because of their sexuality. The repeal campaign focused on the classroom and the danger of homosexual teacher “grooming” their young students to a “disgusting lifestyle.” The moral

panic of the 1970s has returned to DeSantis' Florida in 2022. Once again, homosexuality is morally suspect, seen as dangerous to children, and subsequently shouldn't be discussed in the public schools.

Anita Bryant succeeded in overturning the Dade County ordinance protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination. But this victory led to a national backlash and mobilization for gay rights which ultimately produced extraordinary progress for LGBTQ people. Let's hope that DeSantis' successful anti-LGBTQ program in Florida similarly meets its demise as he takes his far-far-right platform nationally.



**William F. Felice is professor emeritus of political science at Eckerd College. He is the author of six books on human rights and international relations. He can be reached via his website at [williamfelice.com](http://williamfelice.com).**