



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on November 22, 2023

DeSantis Campaign Marred by Infighting as Nikki Haley Pulls Ahead

The DeSantis campaign is in free fall, and the Number One priority for his flailing team at this point is not even overtaking Donald Trump as the front-runner in the race, but keeping Nikki Haley from running off with Ron DeSantis' runner-up status.

According to a piece by [NBC News](#), members of the DeSantis team nearly came to physical blows during a meeting last Tuesday due to sky-high tensions caused by disagreements over how to deal with Nikki Haley's rising poll numbers (rising relative to DeSantis that is — she still trails Trump by a significant amount).



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The heated exchange was between members of DeSantis' Never Back Down super PAC. As a source present described the scene to NBC:

Jeff Roe, the top consultant for the super PAC, got into a heated argument with longtime DeSantis confidant Scott Wagner while a small group of nine board members and senior staff were discussing budgeting.

"You have a stick up your a-, Scott," Roe fumed at Wagner, who is a member of the Never Back Down board.

"Why don't you come over here and get it?" Wagner responded, rising from his chair. He was quickly restrained by two fellow board members.

Members of the DeSantis inner circle — including the Florida governor himself and his wife, Casey — have reportedly been increasingly frustrated with the leadership of Never Back Down, most of whom are professional political operatives. Mr. and Mrs. DeSantis are said to have given the green light for three of his close allies to form a new super PAC, Fight Right Inc., after the bout last week.

The new super PAC was founded by David Dewhirst (a former advisor in DeSantis' gubernatorial office), Jeff Aaron (a lawyer) and Scott Ross (a lobbyist).

One Republican source with inside knowledge of Fight Right's creation told NBC News that "This is [DeSantis campaign manager] James [Uthmeier] taking over the money." The group has hit the ground running, immediately launching an attack ad in Iowa comparing Nikki Haley to Hillary Clinton.

Legally, campaigns are not allowed to coordinate with super PACs. The DeSantis campaign released a statement after Fight Right's launch praising its entrance into the fray.

"We are excited to see even more backers stepping up to support Ron DeSantis' candidacy," said DeSantis campaign Communications Director Andrew Romeo. "We've already seen tremendous value in



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the support of groups like Never Back Down, and adding new allies to the mix to independently help spread the governor's message will only strengthen our advantage in the important weeks and months ahead."

Those familiar with the behind-the-scenes working of Team DeSantis say Fight Right was born out of a need to be able to attack Haley without making DeSantis look bad. There was general agreement among DeSantis allies that anti-Haley ads by Never Back Down were backfiring on DeSantis, as the public realizes he is connected to that super PAC.

Never Back Down Director Ken Cuccinelli, who once worked in the Trump administration, sent an email blasting the decision to seed Fight Right with \$1 million for the new set of anti-Haley attack ads in Iowa.

"The manner in which the Haley hit and its funding appears to be proceeding is exceedingly objectionable to me, and by this email I ask Cabell Hobbs, in his capacity as Board Secretary, to preserve this email as part of the board records," Cuccinelli wrote.

But Never Back Down's critics say the super PAC has already had its chance, blowing through enormous amounts of money without producing significant results. Over the past nine months, it has spent \$100 million only to see DeSantis go from a potential front-runner, to a distant second to Trump, to now falling behind Haley in key states such as New Hampshire (where Trump is first with 46 percent, Haley is in second with 18 percent, and DeSantis is all the way down at fifth place with 7 percent).

"I'm a bit agitated these guys have spent all this money for no return," one donor told NBC News. "You don't just keep throwing money at Radio Shack."

Despite the head-scratching and tense debates within the DeSantis team, the governor's increasingly grim electoral prospects and lost ground to Nikki Haley are not difficult to understand, and were easily anticipated before DeSantis entered the race.

As is always the case in politics, the Republican Party is divided into factions. Currently, the largest and most influential bloc is the MAGA faction, of which Donald Trump is the undisputed leader. No matter what he does, DeSantis will never win over the MAGA faction so long as he is competing against the founder-leader of the bloc itself. Doing so is seen almost as sacrilege by Trump supporters.

Given his governing record and work with Trump in the past, DeSantis would have been a shoo-in as the Trump successor figure in 2028 or beyond, but trying to out-Trump Trump has only won him the ire of the MAGA crowd in this cycle, and it may well spell doom for his political career hereafter.

Without the MAGA faction in his column, the only bloc left is the Establishment wing, which is sometimes derisively referred to as the RINO or never-Trump wing. The thing is, that bloc was never big enough to win the GOP primary anyway. Even so, DeSantis was poorly positioned to ever be its champion given his longtime alignment with the MAGA crowd as governor.

As a result, DeSantis is left without any meaningful base. Haley, meanwhile, is a longtime Establishment Republican and clear favorite for the minority Establishment faction. But, again, it won't be enough to get the nomination in the end. The 2024 primary race was always Trump's to win.



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