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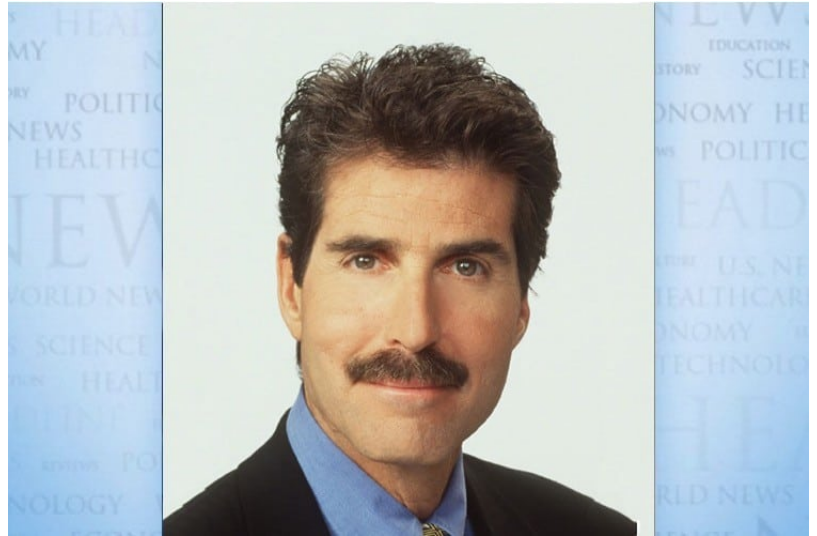
President DeSantis?

Recently, Gov. Ron DeSantis sat down with me for a one-hour interview.

I started by praising him for keeping Florida largely open during Covid.

"I just had to make the decision as a leader," says DeSantis. "Are you gonna worry about the daily news cycle? Worry about your personal popularity?... I did not know how it was going to work out politically. I was going to do what I thought was right."

That worked well for Floridians. "If you look at excess mortality, we were the lowest in the Sunbelt and [had] lower excess mortality than California and New York."



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In addition, since the pandemic started, Florida gained more than 500,000 jobs. My state, New York, lost more than 200,000. Florida opened schools quickly. As a result, kids suffered less learning loss. Good for DeSantis.

DeSantis also banned mask mandates.

"Some local police departments were going to fine people.... We kneecap them with our clemency power ... no penalties for wearing a mask or not. It's your choice."

"Your choice" is a great thing. But DeSantis' laws and executive orders often *limit* choice. Today no Florida business may require its customers wear masks or show proof of vaccination.

I push back. "If it's *my* business and I'm scared ... why can't I?"

"You do have freedom to choose, but so do individuals," answers DeSantis. "In Florida, we've just consistently sided with the individual."

But people who own businesses or who want to be surrounded by masks are individuals, too.

Florida does give parents a choice when it comes to picking a school. In fact, thanks to DeSantis, Florida leads the nation in school choice, offering parents \$8,000 scholarships they can take to a better school. So why can't parents choose a school with a mask mandate?

"Because it's irrational," replies DeSantis. "Hysteria took over evidence-based analysis ... the policy shouldn't be based on fear."

No, it shouldn't be. But while mask mandates were often irrational, and possibly harmful to children, one-size-fits-all rules are harmful, too.

I change the topic to immigration.

Last summer, DeSantis flew 50 migrants to Martha's Vineyard — a stunt meant to expose the hypocrisy of places declaring themselves "sanctuary" jurisdictions.

"Liberal elites ... don't ever face any of the consequences," complains DeSantis. "Towns in Texas are



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getting overrun.”

Media called his stunt “cruel.” A lawyer for migrants criticized DeSantis for not phoning “Martha’s Vineyard so that even the most basic human needs arrangements could be made.”

I read that to DeSantis. He replies, “Do you think these Texas border towns are having people call ahead?!”

“Most of those people that went to the vineyard,” he adds, “were thankful to be in that area ... They were not treated well by Biden.”

Today’s favorite media “hate-DeSantis” topic is his Parental Rights in Education law. Critics smear it by calling it the “Don’t Say Gay” law.

The law bans “classroom instruction ... on sexual orientation or gender identity.”

“Transgender or probing some student’s sexuality, that is not appropriate for the schools. We’re going to leave that to parents to discuss.”

But “it can come up,” I say. How far does the ban go? “A gay teacher could say he’s gay?”

“Our law doesn’t affect that,” DeSantis answers. Also, the decision to teach sex education is made at the district level.

Good.

I ask, “Doesn’t school choice solve this? Parents who want kids taught about gender changes could have that.”

Some private schools do teach that, says DeSantis. But “when you’re talking about what the taxpayers are funding, you just have to make a choice.”

For 44 minutes, DeSantis and I talk about: how America will go broke, whether he’d cut social security or raise retirement age, what departments he’d cut if he were president, the drug war, his opposition to Barack Obama’s plan to send Americans to Syria, Donald Trump and whether DeSantis is a “slob who eats pudding with his fingers.”

I don’t think his staff liked some of my questions. They cut our interview short, saying the governor had to go.

You can watch it all at JohnStossel.com.

I like some things DeSantis says and does.

I also worry that he’s an authoritarian.

In any case, he’s definitely smarter and better than both Trump and Biden.

Every Tuesday at JohnStossel.com, Stossel posts a new video about the battle between government and freedom.

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