

He's hanging the frame, but what's the picture?

A Glimpse at the Use of Framing in Ron DeSantis' Bid
for the Presidency

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The success of any political campaign, whether it's for a local board of education or the President of the United States of America, is contingent upon the efficacy of its strategic political communication. While these communication strategies may vary, the goal remains the same: to garner support and persuade public opinion. In this paper, we examine six different observations of Governor Ron DeSantis' presidential campaign from various media outlets. We will dissect the techniques and style used to allow for a more educated opinion regarding his presidential bid. From campaign website material to social media posts to debate performances, we take a microscope to the political communication of Ron DeSantis as he vies for the highest elected office in the country.

Ron DeSantis, current Governor of Florida and a Republican candidate for President, announced his candidacy on May 24, 2023.¹ On his website's page titled "Meet Ron DeSantis," he describes himself as "A native Floridian with blue-collar roots" but attended elite Ivy League universities such as Yale and Harvard Law School.² As will be discussed, the connection of DeSantis as a blue-collar worker is crucial to his campaign, as it connects him with his supporter base. With Former President Donald J. Trump leading the polls for Republicans, DeSantis has been determined to set himself apart, going so far as to call his supporters "DeSantis Republicans" as opposed to Trump Republicans.³ But despite this need for distinction, his messaging is reminiscent of Trump, leading one to believe that he seeks to gain support via proximity. Trump's "Make America Great Again" has become a war cry for Trump Republicans. DeSantis' slogan, "Great American Comeback" has strangely similar undertones and wording.⁴

¹ Steve Peoples, Anthony Izaguirre, and Adriana Gomez Licon, "DeSantis Launches GOP Presidential Campaign in Twitter Announcement Plagued by Glitches," AP News, May 25, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/ron-desantis-2024-presidential-election-live-updates-0495d567326db1e760179d01f1f7c45e>.

² "Meet Ron Desantis | Ron Desantis for President," DeSantis for President, 2023, <https://rondesantis.com/articles/meet-ron-desantis/>.

³ "Ron Desantis for President," DeSantis for President, 2023, <https://rondesantis.com/articles/meet-ron-desantis/>.

⁴ "Ron Desantis for President," DeSantis for President, 2023

One of the biggest components of political communication, regardless of political affiliation, is the use of framing. Framing is the way that politicians explain a certain topic in order to further advance their own ideology, and DeSantis' website poses many examples of this method.⁵ Addressing immigration policies, his website states, "Millions of illegal aliens have entered the United States during Biden's administration, including criminal aliens and individuals suspected but the U.S. government of terrorism, which has overwhelmed communities across the nation."⁶ This rhetoric functions as a way to incite fear, crafting a negative perception against immigrants. By framing immigrants as terrorists and criminals, DeSantis hopes to get people to support his plan for limiting immigration and increasing border security. Additionally, DeSantis uses harmful and fear-induced language in his campaign to perpetuate the idea that immigrants hurt the economy and steal jobs from hard-working American citizens. Another quote reads: "As the economy has grown over the past few decades the wages of the working class have remained stagnant on an inflation-adjusted basis. That should not be a surprise given how American workers are consistently undercut by cheaper illegal labor."⁷ On the other side of the political spectrum, activist Loretta Ross discusses ways to connect with people who hold almost completely opposite views as yourself. One of the most important things is recognizing their fears and so it makes sense for a politician to stoke those fears in order to keep the voters who already hold those stereotypes.⁸

⁵ Richard M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a Digital Age* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022).

⁶ "Stop the Invasion | Ron Desantis for President," DeSantis for President, 2023, <https://rondesantis.com/mission/stop-the-invasion/>.

⁷ "Stop the Invasion | Ron Desantis for President," DeSantis for President, 2023

⁸ Anand Giridharadas, *Persuaders: At the Front Lines of the Fight for Hearts, Minds, and Democracy* (Vintage, 2022).

In a video posted to his YouTube channel on September 6, titled “Ron DeSantis makes vow to hold the line against threat of COVID authoritarianism,”⁹ DeSantis emphasizes the use of framing by highlighting different perspectives in order to enhance and affirm a targeted idea.¹⁰ In one alarming instance, DeSantis professes: “Mandates, lockdowns and fines — we are just not doing that, they are not effective.” The denial and exclusion of pertinent information such as that, at this point, thousands of Americans had died from Covid-19 and the science that affirms the efficacy of masking and vaccines, only serves to propagate his message. The COVID-19 pandemic protocols are framed as an infringement on civil liberty rather than a global emergency that required extensive mobilization and cooperation from citizens and political leaders alike to contain the deadly disease. Additionally, it is important to note the specific use of language and rhetoric, as these are vital in framing strategies. One part of the video features Dr. Anthony Fauci, former head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stating, “You should do what you’re told,” and “You’ve got to do something draconian.”¹¹ Although brief, the message is clear. The mere utterance of “draconian,” paired with a menacing Fauci giving orders is enough to rile viewer’s anger and disdain. Rife with negative connotations, the ad affirms the punitiveness of government-enforced COVID-19 protocols as a threat to American democracy. Given the unprecedented and turbulent nature of the pandemic, DeSantis harnesses these powerful emotions to galvanize support while simultaneously blocking receptiveness to seemingly conflicting versions of reality. Going further, critics of negative political ads such as this example cite their divisive nature and use as a “decline of civility in our culture,” that

⁹ “Ron DeSantis Makes Vow to Hold the Line against Threat of Covid Authoritarianism,” YouTube, September 6, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf6l6jXizzM&t=11s>.

¹⁰ Richard M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a Digital Age*

¹¹ “Ron DeSantis Makes Vow to Hold the Line against Threat of Covid Authoritarianism,”

actively eliminates the possibility for open discussion and debate, which are essential facets to any democracy.¹²

Another way that DeSantis uses fear to frame his messaging is by “calling out” political leaders. In a post made on “X” (formerly Twitter) on September 21, DeSantis comments on a development in Texas that serves as a community for alleged undocumented immigrants. DeSantis states, “How have we gotten to a point in this country where we are permitting and facilitating sprawling developments to house thousands of illegal immigrants who have broken our nation’s laws? Weak, spineless leaders. Our national sovereignty is at stake. We must stop excusing inaction at the top. I will end this.” By framing this stance as an “us” vs. “them” issue, Democrats are rendered cruel traitors, unconcerned by the threat of undocumented immigrants against hardworking, tax-paying Americans; undocumented immigrants are stripped of their humanity and likened to criminals. This type of rhetoric imbues the mind with xenophobic, racist imagery; of violent invaders threatening the sovereignty of our nation. Framing undocumented immigrants as criminals is not only a gross generalization, but fails to address the hardships and cruelty often suffered by those seeking better lives and opportunities. In opposition to the methods of Loretta Ross, who believed that “Before calling out, you looked in,” Ross’ method takes a more humanizing, patient approach to political persuasion, with unity as its end goal. On the other side, Anand Giridharadas describes calling-out as “useful for building and revving up a following,” and one can infer that this call-out method is intentional given its effectiveness.¹³ DeSantis’ campaign panders to the emotions and beliefs of his current supporters rather than try to convert otherwise non-supporters, as changing someone’s political affiliation or stances on

¹² Lance Strate, *Amazing Ourselves to Death: Neil Postman’s Brave New World Revisited* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014).

¹³ Anand Giridharadas, *Persuaders: At the Front Lines of the Fight for Hearts, Minds, and Democracy* (Vintage, 2022).

political matters prove incredibly difficult.¹⁴ It's fair to infer that DeSantis supporters hold similar beliefs and anxieties regarding American immigration policies, and this form of political communication validates these beliefs while offering supporters righteous comfort in lashing out against the opposition.

In addition to fear, Ron DeSantis uses symbolism in order to appeal and attract members of the conservative base. On October 2, Ron Desantis posted to Rumble, a media platform designed to appeal to conservatives, wearing an immaculate suit with an American flag pin paired with cowboy boots.¹⁵ This is not because he regularly rides horses and works on ranches, but because he wants to be viewed as someone who understands and values what it means to be a hardworking, blue collar American. The cowboy boots solidify his membership within this group, serving as a reminder that he is the native Floridian with the blue collar roots.¹⁶

As previously noted, DeSantis' campaign focuses on mobilizing and cementing votes from current supporters or those with similar beliefs. DeSantis is calculated in doing so by uploading to the video sharing platform, Rumble, that, according to its website, works to "create technologies that are immune to cancel culture."¹⁷ Out of distrust for mainstream media platforms, like YouTube, Rumble and similar sites are established as alternative news and media sources.¹⁸ Posting on alternative platforms like Rumble gives credibility to the material, manifesting potentially dangerous echo-chambers of misinformation. However, no matter how harmful, echo-chambers can be used to the advantage of political leaders, harnessing this power

¹⁴ Nancy Snow, *Propaganda and American Democracy* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ "Ron DeSantis on Real Time with Bill Maher," Rumble, October 2, 2023, <https://rumble.com/v3mewea-ron-desantis-on-real-time-with-bill-maher.html>.

¹⁶ Richard M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a Digital Age*

¹⁷ "Home," Rumble, September 18, 2022, <https://corp.rumble.com/>.

¹⁸ Emily Dreyfuss, Brian Friedberg, and Joan Donovan, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

to craft their own version of reality that voters and supporters will accept as truth.¹⁹ By eliminating counter perspectives and arguments, DeSantis limits the possibility of users engaging in conflicting information that contests the substance of his claims, beliefs, and ideologies. This, in conjunction with the use of symbolism and framing, seeks to portray DeSantis as the rightful and only hero for the American people.

This wouldn't be an analysis of political communication during a presidential campaign without a discussion regarding debates. At the time this is being written, the only debates that have occurred have been the Republican Party's primary debates. Political debates are pseudo-events that function to satisfy the press and to create a certain outcome.²⁰ Social media has placed an emphasis on short bursts of memorable phrases or sound bites, and candidates have adapted to shorter, more impactful phrases at the expense of more expanded policy explanations.²¹ Debates have become a prime example of this with short response times to complex questions.

Like the rest of his messaging, DeSantis incorporated framing and symbolism into his messaging. When asked about the national debt, he claims, "The people in Washington are shutting down the American Dream with their behavior."²² DeSantis establishes himself as something "other" than the politicians already in Washington, D.C. Similar to his wearing of cowboy boots, DeSantis portrays himself as connected to his base and better understands their plight than his opponents. This approach is akin to the methods used by George W. Bush, who often presented himself as any ordinary voter and was so successful that he was able to

¹⁹ Emily Dreyfuss, Brian Friedberg, and Joan Donovan, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America*.

²⁰ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 1961).

²¹ Richard M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a Digital Age*

²² "(Full) 2024 Second Republican Primary Debate," YouTube, September 28, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XPiXnvgeyU>.

overcome his lack of public speaking skills.²³ The second layer of political communication is the use of the phrase, “American Dream.” This phrase has been used for decades as propaganda in political communication.²⁴ In this case, he is using it as a way to make his followers angry that politicians are taking away their chance to achieve the American Dream.

Another video that DeSantis posted onto his YouTube channel is called “We Must Put on the Full Armor of God, Hold the Line, and Keep the Faith.”²⁵ While only 30 seconds long, and brief in content, the framing in this video is incredibly strong. Imposing in its nature, the video features DeSantis on the stage, saying: “We protected the right of people to worship in church. We protected people’s freedom. We filed an executive order saying churches are essential activity. This is a time to stand for truth. This is a time to proudly put on the full armor of God.” America is the most religious democracy, and a vital part of any campaign.²⁶ By invoking his religion, DeSantis cements himself as a religious candidate—a personal affection that candidates cannot win without. Going deeper than religion, DeSantis again uses his words to portray the image that he is the people’s hero. However, he still uses the word “we” to create a sense of connection with his supporters, as if they also did it with him and can accomplish more with him if they vote for him as president. Effective wording is crucial in political communication. Failure to use the most emphatic word choice and politicians risk the potential for misunderstanding them or they might fail to frame the problem in a way that their target audience would enjoy and connect with.²⁷

²³ Lance Strate, *Amazing Ourselves to Death: Neil Postman’s Brave New World Revisited*

²⁴ Nancy Snow, *Propaganda and American Democracy*

²⁵ “We Must Put on the Full Armor of God, Hold the Line, and Keep the Faith,” YouTube, June 25, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8pJuYvMKsQ>.

²⁶ Nancy Snow, *Propaganda and American Democracy*

²⁷ Richard M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a Digital Age*

Although DeSantis will most likely not receive the Republican nomination for president, it would be unfair to deny the intricate efforts and strategies employed in his 2024 Presidential campaign. Criticism aside, Ron DeSantis' campaign is a master class in political persuasion, second only to Former President Donald J. Trump. By examining and analyzing his use of political communication, particularly frames, symbols, and imagery, we are better equipped to understand the strengths and weaknesses of his campaign, which can be used in comparison with future campaigns. Deepening our understanding of these behind-the-scenes strategies also fosters a more educated voter base, less likely to be persuaded by misinformation and adhere to potentially harmful and destructive ideologies. In the age of expansive media growth and influence, an engaged and media-literate populace is critical for the functionality of any modern democracy.

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