



TURNING POINT ACTION'S STUDENT ACTIVISTS WERE TORN BETWEEN TRUMP AND DESANTIS LAST YEAR. NOT ANYMORE - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on July 18, 2023 by JILL COLVIN | Associated Press



Photo: Miranda Nielsen, left, Soren Nielsen, right, from Ann Arbor, Mich., and Dolan Bair, from Kent City, Mich., talk about the Republican Party during the Turning Point Action Conference

When student activists assembled in Florida last year for Turning Point Action's annual summit, many were torn, wrestling with whether former President Donald Trump or Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis was the Republican Party's best hope for 2024.

One year later, there is no more doubt. Attendees at this year's meeting booted at even the suggestion of a contested GOP primary. Trump, they overwhelmingly said, is their pick.

"Trump, for sure. I don't think anyone else really has a chance," said Sky Sanchez, 21, a student from Durham, North Carolina, who was volunteering at the conference with the Tea Party Patriots.

Soren Nielsen, 18, who lives near Ann Arbor, Michigan, said he had been seriously considering DeSantis earlier this year, worried that Trump had lost momentum, particularly after a weaker-than-expected Republican showing in last year's midterm elections.

But those views changed as he watched Trump reenergize his campaign and saw DeSantis falter.

"I started to realize his campaign did not launch as successfully as I thought it would," Nielsen said. "And he doesn't have the stamina, like Trump does, to win a general election."

While the conference provides only a snapshot of a small slice of the electorate, the views expressed in interviews here over the weekend reflect the broader contours of the GOP contest six months before voting is to begin. While DeSantis was once seen as a serious threat to Trump's hold on the party — and remains his strongest challenger — he has so far failed to catch fire. His campaign over the weekend confirmed it had laid off a handful of staffers amid concerns over runaway spending, while polling shows Trump ahead by 20 to 30 points, or more, even after a pair of criminal indictments that only seemed to bolster his standing.

Last year, both Trump and DeSantis attended the Turning Point Student Action Summit, held in Tampa, as they prepared to launch their campaigns. DeSantis headlined the Friday night program; Trump headlined Saturday's. Both were introduced with pro wrestling-style videos and elaborate pyrotechnics. Both received rousing welcomes.

But this year DeSantis chose to skip the events, as did most other top-tier candidates, turning it into a full-on Trumpfest, like so many other conservative gatherings. The program featured a who's-who of "MAGA" world, including MyPillow chief executive Mike Lindell, Roger Stone and Donald Trump Jr.

The former president was met with thundering applause Saturday as he mocked DeSantis' campaign, calling it a "hopeless cause" that was only dividing the party and wasting money.

Of the 2024 GOP candidates who did decide to show up, several received very rough receptions. Former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, a Trump critic, was loudly booed as he took the stage and later interrupted when the crowd began to chant Trump's name. Miami Mayor Francis Suarez was greeted by jeers, as some shouted "RINO" — Republican In Name Only — and "Traitor!"

When former Fox News host Megyn Kelly, a speaker at the event, suggested that the primary was a two-person race between Trump and DeSantis — "Realistically, it's probably going to be one of those two," she said — the room erupted in anger.

"I think they like Trump, Megyn," responded Charlie Kirk, Turning Point's founder.

Indeed, an unscientific survey of attendees found Trump was the first choice for president for nearly 86% of respondents. Asked to name their second pick, 51% named Vivek Ramaswamy, the millionaire tech entrepreneur who has declined to criticize Trump. (DeSantis last year had been the first choice of 19% of attendees, behind only Trump. This year, he was the first choice of just over 4%.)

Beyond the main stage, an exhibition hall was filled with tables selling MAGA merchandise, including bejeweled purses with Trump's name spelled out in rhinestones. One wall featured large cutouts of each candidate's face. Attendees were encouraged to share thoughts using Post-it notes. DeSantis' entries ranged from "TRAITOR" to "Trump is your Daddy." Attendees pegged Trump their "ONLY HOPE" and "The ONLY choice. period," though also noting he "Might go to jail."

DeSantis' decision to skip the event, citing a scheduling conflict, drew criticism from attendees and angered organizers who noted their long history with the Florida governor.

While founder Kirk has endorsed Trump and Turning Point is widely seen as a pro-Trump organization, it has also organized events for DeSantis over the years. Indeed, earlier this year, Kirk drew Trump's ire for appearing too cozy with DeSantis as the Florida governor's stock was on the rise.

As for DeSantis' no-show over the weekend, Tyler Bowyer, Turning Point's chief operating officer, said, "You only have a few opportunities in the grand scheme of an election cycle to get in front of major groups and all the media and to pass up this opportunity to lay out your vision for America I just think is one of the biggest mistakes."

DeSantis press secretary Bryan Griffin noted that the governor had "spent the day with lowans and spoke to a packed house at the Tennessee GOP Statesman Dinner later that night."

"This was a day after he delivered the strongest interview at the Family Leadership Summit, which Donald Trump notably skipped," Griffin said. "Ron DeSantis is campaigning to win."

Nielsen, who had been leaning toward DeSantis before switching to Trump, said he has concerns about DeSantis' electability. "If he were to win the primary, Trump voters aren't going to vote for him," he said. "All those people aren't guaranteed Republican voters. They're

guaranteed Trump voters."



Dolan Bair, 21, said he, too, had been "more leaning toward DeSantis," drawn to his embrace of culture war issues and his 20-point margin of victory in his reelection race last fall. But now he doubts that DeSantis can win the presidential primary.

"I don't think he has the same sort of energy," said Bair, of Kent City, Michigan.

Riley Tobin, a 21-year-old student at the University of Hawaii, said he had admired DeSantis from afar during the COVID-19 pandemic as he rolled back restrictions. But he feels DeSantis has failed to measure up to expectations as a presidential candidate.

"A year ago, everyone was in love with DeSantis," said Tobin after the conference Sunday. "I really think he could have had a phenomenal campaign, but he turned to the wrong people and had the wrong supporters. And you could hear it yesterday, having 6,000 people pretty much boo at him. It's like he's doing something wrong if he's making that many upset conservatives."

Some critics cited DeSantis' comments on Ukraine; others his perceived establishment ties. Some were furious at the very fact that he had dared to challenge Trump in the first place."

"I'm very disappointed in him," said Alan Pincus, 66, one of the thousands of party activists, officials and fans of the speakers who joined the students at the event. "Since he announced he's running, I am no longer a fan."

Pincus, who is running for Congress and lives in Boynton Beach, Florida, credited Trump for DeSantis' first victory as governor and accused him of disloyalty, echoing a charge Trump often makes. "The fact that he even decided to run against Trump is astounding to me. It's not about personal gains anymore. It's about bringing this country back."

Jasmin Rodriguez, 61, who traveled to the event from Harker Heights, Texas, said she loved what DeSantis had done in Florida, but was disappointed in his decision to run. "Dang, dude! You should have just waited a bit, you know? Wait your turn."

Last year, she said, she would have loved to see Trump pick DeSantis as his vice president or support him in 2028. But now her opinion has soured.

"He's burned that bridge," said her ex-husband, Randy Rodriguez, 50. "He's been a huge disappointment."