

POLICY AND POLITICS

Two Florida Republican governors with different paths on immigration, elections on mind

John Kennedy Capital Bureau | USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Published 5:07 a.m. ET March 23, 2023

TALLAHASSEE – Nine years after a Florida Republican governor and GOP-led Legislature expanded opportunities for undocumented immigrants during an election year, Republicans are now poised to enact a wide-ranging crackdown on migrants and those who help them.

With Gov. Ron DeSantis expected formally to launch a bid for the Republican presidential nomination in coming weeks, election politics is again in play.

“I think we’re expecting all of the worst that we could possibly expect from this Legislature and this governor,” said Rep. Kelly Skidmore, D-Boca Raton. “It’s such a personal affront, especially to our Hispanic community.”

But DeSantis said the sweeping restrictions he is demanding are needed and focusing on the White House, vows that he "won't turn a blind eye to the dangers of Biden's border crisis."

Changing times: Trailblazing migrant lawyer got his chance from Florida lawmakers. Now, GOP wants that door closed.

Illegal immigration in Florida: A by-the-numbers look at a surge

Politics also shaded a softer move almost a decade ago by DeSantis’ predecessor, now-U.S. Sen. Rick Scott, who signed legislation in 2014 extending in-state tuition to undocumented immigrant students and also made it possible for them to become licensed Florida lawyers.

At the time, Scott was polling poorly with Florida Hispanics driving the early success of his expected Democratic rival, Charlie Crist, a former Republican who preceded Scott as governor.

Scott eventually won that race over Crist by 1 percent, although the Democrat still carried Florida's county with the most Hispanic voters, Miami-Dade, by a decisive margin.

But the reach-out to migrants included many prominent Republican lawmakers. Among them, then-Miami Rep. Jeanette Nuñez, who is now lieutenant governor under DeSantis.

Nuñez sponsored the 2014 legislation that made students brought to the U.S. illegally as children eligible for in-state college tuition.

DeSantis would reverse break granted by Scott to migrant students

According to the Higher Ed Immigration Portal, which tracks such statistics, 40,152 undocumented students are currently enrolled in Florida colleges and universities, out of more than 1 million overall students.

DeSantis has called for an end to the program this year, along with other steps already advancing in the House and Senate.

Although curtailing in-state tuition for undocumented Floridians is not yet included in the package, House Speaker Paul Renner, R-Palm Coast, said he's open to adding the prohibition.

Almost a decade ago, a different GOP: Undocumented immigrants win big with in-state tuition, law license votes

DeSantis focuses on base issues: Before expected White House run, DeSantis woos GOP voters with more migrant crackdowns

Stunt heard round the world: Revisiting DeSantis, Martha's Vineyard, and the migrant flight controversy

How Florida went from purple to red: Changing population, weak opposition, aggressive Gov. Ron DeSantis

"I think we're going to address the governor's concerns there," Renner said. "We have a radically different scenario than when that bill passed years ago in the sense that there is zero border enforcement, and we have millions and millions of people coming across (the border.

“That type of cost issue is a concern of mine, as well as health care costs... and that means the taxpayers have to pick up the bill,” he added.

Removing immigration 'incentives' a key for Republicans

Renner said the federal government needs to enforce border security and Congress must reach some kind of consensus on immigration. But until then, he said, lawmakers need to take action “so there’s not an incentive for illegals to come into the state of Florida. And that’s one way you do it, by not giving away free tuition.”

He said those currently getting in-state tuition may be shielded from the change, if lawmakers move ahead with a ban. But the costly prohibition could be imposed on new undocumented students entering Florida schools, Renner added.

In-state tuition and fees are about \$6,000 on average at Florida universities, compared to \$21,000 for out-of-state students.

DeSantis, on track to get all he demands from Republican supermajorities in the House and Senate, made it clear last month that he wants in-state tuition banned for non-citizens.

"If we want to hold the line on tuition, then you have to say ‘you need to be a U.S. citizen living in Florida,’ " DeSantis said when rolling out his package of immigration restrictions. "Why would we subsidize a non-U.S. citizen when we want to make sure we can keep it affordable for our own people?"

Florida’s targeting of illegal immigration mirrors moves by Texas, with both Republican governors, DeSantis and Gov. Greg Abbott, seizing on an issue especially animating for GOP voters.

Republican voters want to curb immigration

Recent Gallup polling shows Republicans dissatisfied with high levels of immigration soared from 40% in 2021 to 71% now. DeSantis last fall capitalized on the issue by ordering state contractors to pluck 50, mostly Venezuelan asylum-seekers from Texas and send them to the island of Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts.

In a special session last month, the Florida Legislature passed a measure that helped DeSantis blunt legal challenges to that action.

But the legislation moving forward in Tallahassee reflects both an evolving view of immigration and a lingering divide in Florida.

When the 2014 bills were approved, it was less than two years after then-President Obama signed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, intended to protect undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children from removal proceedings and gain work authorization.

In-state tuition for these “Dreamers” has been supported by some Republicans and the business community, along with Democrats and immigrant groups who say making higher education more available is better for the overall economy.

A changing Florida helps DeSantis

But views of immigration are shifting among Florida Hispanics. While Scott lost Miami-Dade, DeSantis won 55% of the vote there last fall in also defeating Crist for re-election.

He was powered by 65% support within Hispanic majority precincts, records show.

Scott, though, stands by the bills he signed nine years ago, and opposes the reversal sought by DeSantis.

“It is unfair and cruel to punish these students who have worked hard to achieve the highest levels of academic success for the wrongs of their parents and the failures of Washington politicians to fix our immigration system,” Scott said.

Still, except for the in-state tuition ban, almost every other requirement, penalty or limit on undocumented immigrants that DeSantis wants is included in bills nearing the House and Senate floors.

The legislation strengthens employment requirements, allows state law enforcement officials to conduct random audits of businesses suspected of hiring undocumented workers, and criminal penalties would be increased for human smuggling, which opponents warn is so broadly written, it could ensnare friends or family members driving a migrant across town.

Local governments would be banned from contributing money to organizations creating identification cards for undocumented immigrants and driver’s licenses issued to non-citizens in other states would be barred from use in Florida, another provision critics say

could lead to confusion and law enforcement profiling, especially in a diverse, visitor-filled state.

Hospitals receiving state and federal Medicaid reimbursements would be required to track how much money is spent on undocumented immigrants in emergency rooms. And a 2014 law allowing undocumented immigrants to be admitted to practice law in Florida would be repealed.

Immigration crackdown could lead to 'show me your papers' state

N.R. Hines, with the American Civil Liberties Union- Florida, said the legislation is dangerous to many Floridians.

“This bill criminalizes everyday Floridians going about their daily lives,” Hines told the Senate Rules Committee. “And they could be charged or convicted with various felonies despite not being human smugglers or involved in nefarious operations.

“This could quickly turn Florida into a vigilante, ‘show me your papers’ state whereby private citizens are demanding proof of immigration status from individuals prior to providing transportation in order to stay clear of the bill’s penalties,” she said.

Sen. Blaise Ingoglia, R-Spring Hill, a former Florida Republican Party chair and sponsor of the Senate bill, blamed the Biden administration for the influx of migrants to the U.S.-Mexican border.

Although monthly numbers vary, the number of encounters between U.S. Border Patrol agents and migrants attempting to cross into the U.S. has reached levels not seen in more than two decades, according to government records.

Encounters, though, dropped to their lowest level in two years in February, after the White House announced stricter immigration measures.

“The federal government has an open border policy, make no mistake about that,” Ingoglia said. “And it’s those open border policies that are wreaking havoc on communities. It’s wreaking havoc on government... so that was the common theme (of the legislation).”

Addressing dozens of immigrant advocates who have spoken out against the legislation, Ingoglia said, “I wish we would take this passion... and go to the federal government and tell

them to fix it.”

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