

Badge: EYES ON THE PRIZE

Hed: FL Gov. DeSantis debates Crist but... ran against Biden?

Dek: Charlie Crist mercilessly mocked Ron DeSantis on Monday, repeatedly taunting Florida's Republican governor for his plainly obvious 2024 presidential ambitions.

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During Florida's one and only gubernatorial debate Monday night, Rep. Charlie Crist hammered Gov. Ron DeSantis on his [2024](#) presidential ambitions—criticizing him for [waging a conservative crusade](#) in the hopes of gaining [MAGA](#) street cred.

DeSantis' response was... to spend the entire evening derailing the person this Republican could face in two years: [President Joe Biden](#).

"Charlie Crist has voted with Joe Biden 100% of the time," DeSantis began, when first asked about rising gas prices.

"We have [the worst inflation in 40 years](#)... thanks to the Biden-Crist policies," he said, when addressing Florida's surging cost of home insurance.

On inflation: "We know that these are the effects of the Biden-Crist policies."

On illegal immigration: "This is all happening under the Biden administration."

The gimmick opened him up to relentless ridicule by Crist, [a former Republican state governor](#) who switched to the Democratic party years ago and is now a congressman.

"Ron, you talk about Joe Biden a lot. I understand. You think you're going to be running against him. I can see how you might get confused. But you're running for governor. And I have a question for you. Why don't you look in the eyes of the people of the state of Florida and say to them, if you're re-elected, you will serve a full four-year term as governor. Yes or no?" Crist asked. "Yes or no, Ron?"

DeSantis gave the moderator a blank stare for a few seconds, then shot back with a clearly rehearsed insult: "The only worn out old donkey I'm looking to put out to pasture is Charlie Crist."

Crist repeatedly demanded that DeSantis vow he'll stay focused on managing the affairs of the Sunshine State, which has been hit hard by a vortex of crises ranging from stronger and more [lethal hurricanes](#) due to climate change, a [massive COVID-19 death toll](#), and an [unprecedented rise in housing costs](#) that have made homes and apartment rents the most unaffordable in the entire country.

“He won’t even tell you if he’ll serve four years if you re-elect him,” Crist said during his closing argument.

Even then, DeSantis wouldn’t budge.

Since he was elected governor in 2018—running [cringe-worthy TV ads](#) that praised then-President Donald Trump and featured him cheering on his own toddler to “build the wall” out of foam blocks—DeSantis has been on a MAGA rampage. In the name of freedom and transparency, he has passed laws that reduce abortion rights, [single out gay kids](#), limit [transgender teens](#) when playing sports, and increase government surveillance of public school libraries to [make it easier to ban books](#). He’s also yanked a democratically elected state attorney in Tampa from public office over the prosecutor’s refusal to enforce an abortion crackdown.

He is widely believed to be paving the way for a presidential run, although it’s still unclear whether DeSantis would run if Trump tries to retake the White House he lost in 2020. But he clearly doesn’t have the support of the former president. In private, [Trump has mocked DeSantis](#) as “fat,” “phony,” “whiny,” and “dull.” And in September, Trump on social media [publicly shared](#) an article that pushed aside DeSantis and said that “now is not his time.”

Monday night’s debate served as a preview of the DeSantis the nation could see in two years: one hellbent on attacking everything he deems as “woke.” On stage, he defended the way he has put public schools under a microscope, creating an environment where [young kids can’t openly talk about their gay parents](#) and teachers can’t tell students how English settlers violently took land already populated by Native Americans.

“Saying this country was built on stolen land... that is inappropriate for our schools,” DeSantis said.

“We need to have a focus on education, and not make political warzones out of our schools,” Crist shot back, later adding, ““He talks about dividing us all night long. It’s who you are. It’s what you do.”

Crist attacked DeSantis for that aggressive expansion of government control in the name of conservative ideals. He repeatedly reminded the governor that women still feel the sting of the Supreme Court’s decision in June to overturn Roe v. Wade and fiercely pull back protections that for 39 years allowed girls and women to end their pregnancies with limitations.

“I don’t want to ban abortion. I want to keep a woman's right to choose in the state of Florida... that's callous, it’s barbaric, and it’s wrong. And if you want better, I hope you vote like hell,” Crist said.

The hour-long debate, moderated by WPEC reporter Liz Quirantes, took place at the Sunrise Theater in Fort Pierce. The unruly crowd completely ignored the rules, with fans taking turns loudly supporting either candidate—and a few angry jabs at the sitting governor. When DeSantis

fell back on a time-tested conservative argument by meticulously describing how late-term abortions “rip the baby limb from limb,” someone in the crowd screamed, “liar!” ([The missing context](#): abortions performed after 21 weeks are extremely uncommon, representing one percent of all U.S. abortions and are usually only performed when one’s life is at risk due to deformations.)

For all the talk about the governor’s dreams of being in the White House, Crist reserved one particular criticism that will follow DeSantis into 2024: [his bully tactics](#). Crist lambasted the governor for [misappropriating taxpayer money](#) to pay contractors who lied to unsuspecting and [desperate Venezuelans](#) fleeing a socialist dictator, sending families that included a pregnant woman and a baby to a [chartered flight](#) to the rich Massachusetts island of Martha's Vineyard in September.

“It isn’t funny, it’s not right and you were inhumane in how you treated these people,” Crist said.