

DeSantis, Once a 'No' on Storm Aid, Petitions a President He's Bashed

The Florida governor, who as a congressman opposed aid to victims of Hurricane Sandy, is seeking relief from the Biden administration as Hurricane Ian ravages his own state.

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By **Matt Flegenheimer**

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As a freshman congressman in 2013, Ron DeSantis was unambiguous: A federal bailout for the New York region after Hurricane Sandy was an irresponsible boondoggle, a symbol of the “put it on the credit card mentality” he had come to Washington to oppose.

“I sympathize with the victims,” he said. But his answer was no.

Nearly a decade later, as his state confronts the devastation and costly destruction wrought by Hurricane Ian, Mr. DeSantis is appealing to the nation’s better angels — and betting on its short memory.

“As you say, Tucker, we live in a very politicized time,” Mr. DeSantis, now Florida’s governor, told Tucker Carlson on Wednesday night, outlining his request for full federal reimbursement up front for 60 days and urging the Biden administration to do the right thing. “But you know, when people are fighting for their lives, when their whole livelihood is at stake, when they’ve lost everything — if you can’t put politics aside for that, then you’re just not going to be able to.”

The tonal whiplash for Mr. DeSantis reflects a different job and a different moment — a Tea Party-era House Republican now steering a perennially storm-battered state dependent once more on federal assistance to rebuild. Yet even in the context of his term as governor, the hurricane has required Mr. DeSantis to test another gear.



Gov. Ron DeSantis discussing Hurricane Ian on Monday in Largo, Fla. Since taking office, he has sought to position himself as a 2024 presidential contender. Chris O'Meara/Associated Press

He has, to date, often used his executive platform to elevate himself to Republican rockstardom, positioning himself as a possible 2024 presidential contender with a series of policy gambits that can feel precision-engineered to maximize liberal outrage.

His most recent stunt — flying undocumented Venezuelan immigrants from Texas to Martha's Vineyard — reinforced that he is more than willing to turn the machinery of state against specific political targets. He has suggested that the next plane of immigrants might land near President Biden's weekend home in Delaware.

The present circumstances have inspired a less swaggering posture toward a leader whom Mr. DeSantis has long called “Brandon” as a recurring troll, aimed at the man he might like to succeed. “Dear Mr. President,” the governor's request for a major disaster declaration and federal assistance began on Wednesday.

“Ironically,” said David Jolly, a former Republican congressman from Florida, “there's nobody in America that Ron DeSantis needs more than Joe Biden.”

More than that, Mr. Jolly said, a governor who self-identifies as unswerving in his principles now finds himself with little choice but to push for storm relief actions “antithetical to his professed ideology.”

“He held those convictions strong in the House,” said Mr. Jolly, who has been sharply critical of the party in the Trump years. “I doubt he will hold them as strongly in the governor’s mansion.”

In 2013, Mr. DeSantis and Representative Ted Yoho, another hard-line conservative, were the only House members from Florida to oppose the Sandy package. For Mr. DeSantis, who represented a coastal district in eastern Florida, the vote at once established him as an eager combatant from the party’s ascendant right wing — he was a founding member of the Freedom Caucus — while at times placing him on the defensive back home.

In a local interview that year, Mr. DeSantis said the bill contained “extraneous stuff” that could not be classified as emergency spending. “I never made the point of saying we shouldn’t do anything,” he said, adding that he could have supported a leaner package focused on immediate relief. Asked then if he would vote against a relief package that affected his own district, Mr. DeSantis was noncommittal, suggesting he would support a responsible plan.

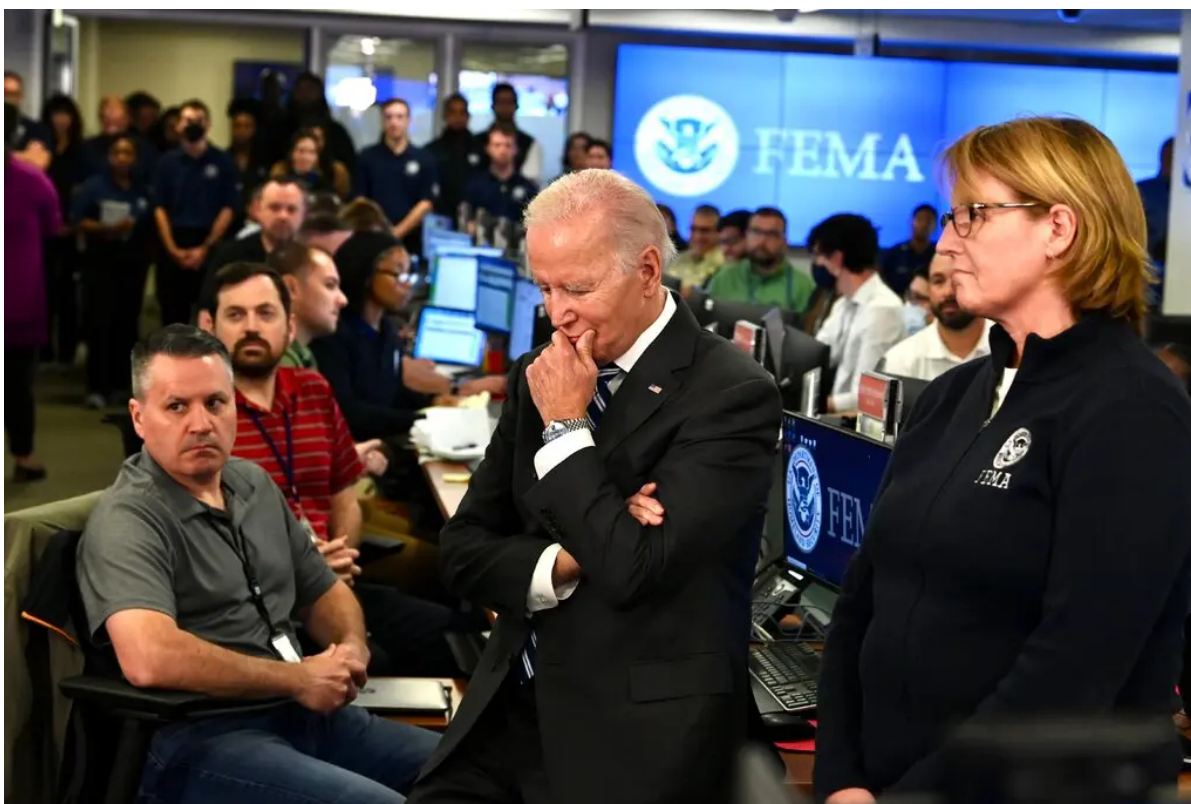
Through the years, critics in both parties have accused Mr. DeSantis of applying this standard selectively. In 2017, as he was poised to run for governor, Mr. DeSantis supported an aid package after Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria as places like Florida, Texas and Puerto Rico strained to recover.

His 2018 primary opponent, Adam Putnam, made an issue of Mr. DeSantis’s voting record during the campaign. Storm-weary voters, a Putnam spokeswoman warned then, should protect themselves against “further destruction at the hands of Hurricane Ron.” Mr. DeSantis’s congressional office denied any inconsistency at the time, rejecting a comparison between the two disaster packages and saying he had supported emergency spending “when immediate and necessary.”

Asked about the governor’s past positions on Thursday, a DeSantis spokesman said the administration was “completely focused on hurricane response.” “As the governor said earlier,” the spokesman, Jeremy T. Redfern, said, “we have no time for politics or pettiness.”

Some Northeastern lawmakers, including Republicans, have not forgotten how Mr. DeSantis and some of his peers responded when the New York area was under duress. “Year after year, we had given them billions of dollars,” said Peter King, a former Republican congressman from Long Island, alluding to aid packages for Southern states and calling the resistance to Sandy relief his angriest moment in office. “Every one of them comes to New York to raise money. They either go to the Hamptons or they go to Manhattan. And both areas were devastated by Sandy.”

This week, Mr. DeSantis said he was “thankful” for the Biden administration’s efforts so far, moving to place himself in the tradition of above-the-fray leadership from past Florida governors who negotiated catastrophic weather events on their watch.



President Biden on Thursday at the headquarters of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in Washington. He has emphasized that he and Mr. DeSantis are working together. Kenny Holston for The New York Times

The president and the governor have each made a point of saying publicly that they and their teams are in touch. “He complimented me. He thanked me for the immediate response we had,” Mr. Biden said on Thursday, suggesting that any political conflicts with Mr. DeSantis were irrelevant in these times. “This is about saving people’s lives, homes and businesses.” (In February, Mr. DeSantis baselessly said Mr. Biden “stiffs” storm victims for political reasons, insisting that the president “hates Florida.”)

Haley Barbour, a Republican former governor of Mississippi who presided over the state’s response to Hurricane Katrina, said there was nothing inherently inconsistent about a conservative governor seeking federal storm money. “People think this is a role for the federal government — that some disasters are too big for the community to bear the cost to get back to where you need to be,” he said.

Besides, he suggested, Mr. DeSantis and the White House suddenly had something in

common. “Biden likes to say, ‘Build back better,’” Mr. Barbour said. “Well, that’s what Florida wants to do.”

Matt Flegenheimer is a reporter covering national politics. He started at The Times in 2011 on the Metro desk covering transit, City Hall and campaigns. @mattfleg

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