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THE RED WAVE RECONSIDERED

by Charles R. Kesler

NO REACTION TO THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS WAS AS COMMON as a disappointed (if you were a Republican), or delighted (if a Democrat), exclamation of surprise that the Red Wave had fizzled. Much vaunted by election prognosticators of every stripe, the wave was forecast to be the combined effect of the standard ebbing of support from the incumbent's party in the first midterm of a new presidency, alongside the deeply depressed popularity of this president, thought to be contagious. Voilà, a massive and memorable Republican sweep of Democratic office-holders, especially congressmen and U.S. senators.

Except "it didn't happen," as a rather stunned Joe Biden said the next day. Instead, we got a red rivulet or splash that barely registered and whose effects evaporated quickly. As with most of this president's political judgments, however, it pays to look a little closer before agreeing with him.

In the first place, the kind of sweeping, realigning Republican victory promised by the Wave did happen, but it was confined to one state: Florida. Ron DeSantis was reelected governor by almost 20 percentage points, a whopping 1.5 million votes, just four years after eking out a 30,000-vote victory over the hapless but once-popular Democrat Andrew Gillum. In 2022 DeSantis carried historically blue Miami-Dade County by 11 points, just six years after Hillary Clinton in her presidential race carried it by 30 points. He won 58% of the Latino vote statewide (versus 44% in 2018) and did well among all of its subvarieties, even carrying 56% of Puerto Ricans, according to the NBC exit poll. In a race once thought to be close, U.S. Senator Marco Rubio handily won his reelection, too, by 16 points. Republicans won 20 of the state's 28 U.S. House seats, an increase of four over the GOP's 2020 total. They boosted their numbers in both chambers of the state legislature to veto-proof margins—not that they had to worry about a Democratic governor's veto.

Why did the Red Wave roll so powerfully in Florida? What did the Republicans get right there?

Governor Ron DeSantis, the man of the hour, had a ringing answer. In a high-spirited victory speech, he thanked the voters for "a win for the ages," and claimed, "we not only won an election, we have rewritten the political map."

His administration, he explained, was able to accomplish so much by pressing its fight against the "woke ideology." "Woke," a word he

used seven times—it even provided the enemy he denounced in his Churchillian peroration—can be a rather high-octane notion for ordinary American voters. Most people probably still don't know what it means; it can come across as a specialty word, as jargon. As such, the term sounds harsh and peremptory, just like the phenomenon itself.

NEVERTHELESS, DESANTIS THINKS AMERICANS NEED TO know, and to disapprove heartily, of it. While freedom was under woke assault elsewhere in the U.S. over the past four years, "Florida held the line," he boasted. "Florida was a refuge of sanity when the world went mad.... The woke agenda has caused millions of Americans to leave" their deep blue states "for greener pastures," and particularly for Florida—the anti-woke promised land, the main destination of the new exodus of Americans voting with their feet for lower taxes, schools open for in-person instruction but closed to woke indoctrination, businesses unhampered by extreme anti-COVID rules, and citizens enjoying law and order. This pro-freedom, anti-woke agenda, roughly the opposite of California's and New York's, is what Florida has gotten emphatically right.

In the background, however, loomed another famous Floridian. Donald Trump had already helped to turn what had been a classic swing state into a red bastion in 2016, winning Florida by 100,000 votes or 1.2 percentage points, a margin he increased in the 2020 presidential election to almost 400,000 votes or 3.4 points. In his own big speech commenting on the Red Wave and announcing his 2024 presidential campaign, Trump mentioned "woke" only once. Instead, comparing himself to Ronald Reagan, he played up his "historic tax and regulation cuts" and the twice booming Trump economy, both before and after COVID. Even more strikingly, he defended the GOP's narrow victory in the U.S. House of Representatives—and the ousting of Nancy Pelosi as Speaker—as in effect a genuine, albeit diminutive, Red Wave. As the chief executive on whose watch the Republicans lost first the House, then the presidency, and finally the Senate, he couldn't afford to be too critical; or to celebrate a potential rival.

Undoubtedly, Governor DeSantis will have his own Reagan comparisons to make in due course. Already, in his and Trump's speeches interpreting the 2022 results, the Republican presidential debate effectively has begun.

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