

Disney v DeSantis: what's at stake for Florida as legal tug-of-war ramps up?

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Lucy Mends was very nervous about vacationing at Disney World in central Florida this spring. From her home in Elkridge, Maryland, the 46-year-old romance novelist had read about a law approved by Governor Ron DeSantis in 2022 that banned discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation in public school classrooms for children between kindergarten and the third grade.

Mends became more alarmed over a series of bills introduced during the current session of the state legislature that would extend that ban to include high school students and prohibit transgender people from amending their birth certificates and receiving transition-related care such as hormone therapy and puberty blockers for minors. "They're demonizing trans people, and it's very scary," she said.

Under pressure from its employees, the Walt Disney Company publicly opposed the so-called Don't Say Gay law last year. An angry DeSantis retaliated by denouncing Disney as the "Magic Kingdom of woke corporatism" and signed a bill in February aimed at seizing control of the self-governing special district near Orlando that the corporation has been running ever since Disney World opened its doors in 1971.

In any event, Mends went ahead with her Disney World holiday plans. Showing solidarity with the company was a big factor. "Spending money at Disney is like contributing to the fight against DeSantis," said Mends.

The ongoing dispute between DeSantis and his state's second-largest employer has ramped up in recent days. Disney sued the Florida governor in a Tallahassee federal court in late April for allegedly punishing the company for exercising its first amendment freedom of expression rights by criticizing DeSantis over last year's Parental Rights in Education Act.

The eventual outcome of the legal tug-of-war between DeSantis, who is widely expected to formally announce in the coming weeks whether he will seek the Republican presidential nomination in 2024, and Disney will have profound implications for the Sunshine state overall and the regional economy of central Florida in particular.

One potential casualty may have emerged. Owing to a \$578m tax break approved during DeSantis's first term in office, Disney had been planning to transfer about 2,000 high-paying creative jobs from California to a new regional hub of operations in south-east Orlando as early as this year. That major personnel move is reportedly now on hold.

The Guardian's requests for an interview with a Disney executive or spokesperson went unanswered. The governor's press secretary turned down a similar request on the grounds of what he called the newspaper's "bias and agenda [which] come before news or truth".

But DeSantis blasted Disney for its supposed "support of indoctrinating young schoolchildren in woke gender identity politics". That kind of talk worries many folks in central Florida. For starters, such rhetoric squares poorly with the Republican party's traditionally pro-business policies and staunch opposition to excessive government intervention.

"He's clearly evolved from being a small-government type of guy to a more Trumpist, anti-woke leader," said Congressman Darren Soto, a Democrat whose ninth district encompasses a chunk of the Disney World premises. "It's a personal vendetta, he has been attacking anybody who stands in his way, and it's terrible for the economy of central Florida."

Vocabulary: chapter 51 p.108, The education system. “Preschool education”, “Primary, secondary schools”, “Higher education”, “School life”

- **Read the first two paragraphs of the article and explain what their role is in the article.**

Anecdote, with the particular case of Lucy Mends. Atypical way of opening an article in the English language press. The article will then probably go on to bring more general ideas.

- **What do we learn about Lucy Mends, and about the topic of the article more generally?**
- **Read the next paragraph. What does the Don't Say Gay law refer to in the beginning of the text?**

Cf. beginning of the text: “a law approved by Governor Ron DeSantis in 2022 that banned discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation in public school classrooms for children between kindergarten and the third grade.”

- **Do you know a similar policy that was implemented in America in the 1990s, in another field?**

"Don't ask, don't tell", official United States policy on military service of non-heterosexual people, instituted during the Clinton administration. The policy was in effect from 1994 to 2011. The policy prohibited military personnel from discriminating against or harassing closeted homosexual or bisexual service members or applicants, while barring openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual persons from military service.

- **What does Ron DeSantis mean by the “Magic Kingdom of woke corporatism”?**

Magic Kingdom is the nickname of Disneyland parks.

Corporatism is the control of a state or organization by large interest groups.

Woke means aware of social inequalities such as racism, sexism and LGBT rights. It is often used by the conservatives as a slur against progressive ideas, although wokeism can indeed sometimes verge on radical ideas.

- **Read down to “Parental Rights in Education Act” and explain the chronology of events in the fight between DeSantis and Disney.**

DeSantis passed the Don't Say Gay bill last year. Then the Walt Disney Company exercised its first amendment rights and publicly criticized DeSantis for it. DeSantis decided to fight back and signed a bill to take control of Disney's once-autonomous district. As a consequence, Disney decided to sue the governor.

- **Read the end of the article. Find what major consequences this could have for Florida.**

Economic consequences: Disney, which before the feud wanted to transfer 2,000 jobs to Florida, have now stopped this plan. This is a major financial loss for the people of Florida, and for its government as well. Some people say DeSantis's attitude doesn't reflect the Republican Party's traditional policies.