

Florida's right-wing governor DeSantis eliminates all state funding for the arts

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Florida's extreme right-wing governor Ron DeSantis vetoed all funding for the arts from the Florida state budget in late June. The action eliminated \$32 million in grants that help fund a host of museums, theaters, symphony orchestras, cinemas, zoos, botanical gardens and other programs. This is part of a national and, in fact, global assault on the arts and artists.

The arts funding represented a minuscule portion of the \$116.5 billion dollar state budget already approved by the state legislature and was less than half the sum recommended by the state Division of Arts and Culture. Even so, the various recipients of grants had adjusted their budgets in accordance with the reduced levels of funding.

Over 600 grant recipients will see their financial position worsened. Although no single recipient relies exclusively on state funds for its operations, nearly every group either must reduce programming, cut staff or secure funds from private donors—i.e., grow more dependent on the whims of millionaires and billionaires—to make up the difference.

DeSantis sought to justify his veto in a press conference on June 27: “You have tax dollars being given in grants to things like the Fringe Festival, which is a sexual festival where they're doing all this stuff ... I can't sell the Fringe Festival to taxpayers, nor would I want to try to sell the Fringe Festival to taxpayers.”

The Orlando Fringe Festival is an annual theatre event that stages hundreds of live performances from different genres, some of which are rated for adults only. The festival was due to receive \$150,000 in funds from the state. A smaller sister event, the Tampa Fringe Festival, was set to receive a \$15,000 dollar grant.

DeSantis' characterization of the Fringe Festivals as pornographic is blatantly false and idiotic, but that is almost beside the point. The governor's veto is an

assault on culture and the arts in Florida as a whole, and the Fringe Festival is merely a pretext. He offered no initial justification when he eliminated the grants June 12, likely anticipating the media would rally to his defense. When that support apparently failed to live up to his expectations, he retroactively justified his veto by selecting a single grant recipient whose programming he mischaracterized.

A sampling of some of the programs facing cuts indicates the far-reaching impact of the governor's veto.

In Broward County, the All-Florida Youth Orchestra will see its funding reduced by \$68,690. The Fort Lauderdale Historical Society will lose \$44,281, while the Holocaust Documentation and Education Center, the Museum of Discovery and Science and the South Florida Symphony Orchestra will each lose \$70,500 in funding. The World AIDS Museum will see its funding cut by \$20,559.

In Miami-Dade, the Miami Symphony Orchestra will have to make up a \$48,097 shortfall. Both the city ballet and children's museum will lose \$70,500. In fact, many organizations received grants of this amount. The Pelican Harbor Seabird station and the Adrienne Arscht Center each lost \$500,000, while the Miami Design Preservation League saw \$270,892 removed from their budget.

Every county throughout Florida faces similar cuts.

In the two sessions since DeSantis' 2022 re-election, the state legislature has enacted a comprehensive program of right-wing social engineering. This includes banning abortions after six weeks of pregnancy, eliminating the need for a concealed weapons license to carry firearms and allowing the death penalty to be imposed if eight of twelve jurors in a criminal trial vote for it.

Public education in Florida has been a primary target. First, DeSantis and his allies introduced a regime of censorship, banning the teaching of “divisive” concepts through the “Stop Woke Act.” Another law, the “Curriculum Transparency Bill” allows parents of enrolled students to call for the removal of instructional materials until they can be approved by one of the governor’s Certified Media specialists. This has resulted in over 40 percent of textbooks being removed from classrooms.

Legislation was also passed that would decertify public employee unions if less than 60 percent of their membership pays dues. This was plainly an attempt to eliminate the state teachers’ union. The police and firefighters’ unions, supporters of DeSantis, were granted exemptions.

Since the passage of the legislation, over 60 local unions have been decertified, representing approximately 50,000 workers in Florida.

Perhaps most impactfully, the legislature eliminated the income requirements for the state voucher system, which provides up to \$8,500 dollars per student to be applied to private school tuition. This has decimated public school enrollment. In Duval County, the seat of Jacksonville, Florida’s largest city, 10,000 fewer students are expected to enroll in public schools compared to the same period five years ago, according to reporting from *Politico*. The Miami-Dade school district is anticipating enrollment to drop by 4,000 students this year. Other districts throughout the state are experiencing similar declines.

This has created conditions where districts throughout Florida are now shuttering and consolidating public schools and eliminating thousands of positions.

Throughout the course of much of DeSantis’ second term as governor his central goal was to elevate his national profile among the far right in a bid to unseat former president Trump as the Republican presidential nominee in 2024. He was selected for this role by sections of the media and donor class who saw in him a potential candidate who could enact the fascistic agenda of the Republican party minus the theatricality and unreliability of Trump. His main qualification for this role, from the perspective of his backers, was his dismantling of all public safety measures in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, a policy subsequently adopted by the ruling class as a whole.

Now, after DeSantis’ primary defeat at the hands of Trump—in which process the governor failed to draw *any* substantial national support—he has returned to Florida to plot his political future. DeSantis, a reactionary ignoramus, aiming to maintain his status as a standard-bearer of the far-right and seeking new sources of political capital, has now turned his guns on the arts.

In general, the avaricious US ruling elite views anything that does not feed it immediate gains in terms of profits as useless and worse. Moreover, the recent protests by tens of thousands of artists against the Gaza genocide have only encouraged the view within the upper echelons that artists are a species they could happily do without.



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