

# COVID-19 fights bleed into larger ‘anti-vaxx’ movement, threaten longtime vaccine rules in schools

*Tom Howell Jr.*

The vocal backlash to COVID-19 vaccines and mandates around them is sparking concerns that the “anti-vaxx” movement is finding a way to broadcast its message far and wide and chip away at school vaccinations for other diseases.

Cybertrackers say the anti-vaccine movement has dramatically expanded its reach on social media, and lawmakers in some states have floated bills that could weaken long-standing immunization requirements or prevent colleges and other institutions from adding further vaccine requirements.

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Much of the debate around COVID-19 shots focuses on government mandates instead of the safety of the vaccines. Yet immunization advocates are worried about a confluence of interests among political activists. The anti-vaxx community has demonstrated an ability to latch onto pro-freedom movements, notably in 2015 in Texas, and reach a broader audience.

A rally against vaccine mandates this month drew thousands to the National Mall in Washington, including anti-vaccine activist [Robert Kennedy Jr.](#)

“People who oppose vaccines are a small group, but they have found other groups who don’t like the government telling them what to do. Unfortunately, [the anti-vaccine activists] have seen opportunities to glom onto other groups to amplify their voice,” said Rekha Lakshmanan, director of advocacy and policy at The Immunization Partnership. “The worry we have is this spilling over into kind of those routine school requirements that we’ve had for decades and that we know are effective. They’ve been around for a long, long time. It’s a cornerstone in public health. One of the things the anti-vaccine community is trying to achieve is completely undoing things like school requirements.”

Attitudes about vaccine requirements for measles, mumps, rubella and other infectious diseases appear to be shifting alongside the COVID-19 mandate wars, and some politicians have shown a willingness to broaden exemptions from school rules.

YouGov, which tracks attitudes about vaccination, found that only 46% of Republicans believed in October that parents should be required to have their children vaccinated against infectious diseases, down from 59% in August 2020. The share among independents dropped from 61% to 56%. Support for vaccine requirements increased, from 79% to 85%, among Democrats.

Texans for Vaccine Choice, which advocates for broad exemptions to vaccine rules, said it has received increased interest during the pandemic.

The group advocated for SB 1669, a bill that would eliminate all vaccine requirements, including in schools, but said COVID-19 mandates remain its top target.

“Texans for Vaccine Choice has seen tremendous growth as Democrats have attempted to forcefully vaccinate every American citizen, and many Republicans are also hesitant to end all vaccine mandates. Our organization has gained thousands of members every month as more and more Texans wake up to the reality of forced vaccines in Texas,” said board President Christine Welborn. “The most clear and present threat for our members is the ineffective COVID vaccine and the mandates surrounding it. All vaccine mandates, both public and private, must be banned.”

The bill was left pending in committee.

In Kentucky, lawmakers are considering legislation that would prohibit colleges from imposing further vaccine mandates.

In mid-2021, Tennessee fired a top vaccine official during a spat over her push to get minors vaccinated for COVID-19. The state briefly halted outreach for adolescents for all vaccines in July, only to resume efforts weeks later. Health officials said they were simply making sure vaccine messages were directed at parents, not children, but the pause caused a national uproar.

A pending bill in Georgia would prohibit proof of vaccination for access to public places. Some fear the legislation would rope in school requirements.

Ms. Lakshmanan said it is common for lawmakers to go hard out of the gate because of the uproar over COVID-19 and then pull back when they realize that other diseases could be involved.

“You see them realize, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s not what the intention is,’ but once something is proposed, it starts to steamroll,” she said. “Even if it’s COVID now, in the future, it creates a pathway to expose all those other childhood vaccinations [to challenges].”

Roughly 64% of the U.S. population is vaccinated for COVID-19, though only those 5 and older are eligible. About 1 in 5 eligible Americans have not come forward for any shots despite pleas from federal and state officials to receive a primary series and a booster shot five months later.

Vaccine hesitancy stretches across a spectrum. Some people are concerned only about the COVID-19 shots because they are new or have limited efficacy.

On the other side of the spectrum are those who are ardently anti-vaccine. This movement goes back at least to the late 1800s, when people said a smallpox vaccine derived from less-severe cowpox might cause them to take on farm animal attributes.

Some people are attracted to the anti-vaccine movement because they fear, rightly or wrongly, that their child had an adverse reaction to a shot.

The modern anti-vaccine movement was fueled in part by a 1998 study by Andrew Wakefield that linked vaccination and autism. The study was later shown to be critically flawed.

Efforts to rein in nonmedical exemptions to childhood vaccination requirements in California and Texas after well-publicized measles outbreaks in 2015 sparked a major backlash. Anti-vaccine activists joined forces with pro-liberty groups with parallel worries about the reach of government.

Questions about the safety of vaccines versus resistance to mandates are distinct, even though they are often muddled together. For that reason, it is hard to determine how many people are being drawn to anti-vaccine sentiments beyond opposition to the mandates.

Renee DiResta, a researcher at Stanford University, said there are signs that the anti-vaxx movement “has reached new adherents.”

“Long-standing anti-vaccine activists such as [RFK Jr.](#), who has spent years objecting to school requirements for [measles, mumps and rubella], saw significant audience growth on platforms like Instagram during the pandemic. Many likely began to follow these long-standing anti-vaccine activists because their opinions on COVID mandates align,” [she](#) said. “However, the activists saw this as an opportunity to then make the connection back to school shots. Some see it as an opportunity to convince the broader public that all of the science for all vaccines is bad and believe that those opposed to COVID mandates can be ‘awakened’ to that broader fact.”

[She](#) said long-standing anti-vaccine activists were entrenched in the QAnon community before the pandemic, giving them “a pathway into some of the more conspiratorially inclined right-leaning communities on social media.”

Neil Johnson, a professor at George Washington University, said he has seen a 20% increase in “community interconnectivity” between anti-vaccine groups and mainstream communities online. That means parents looking for information are more likely to encounter anti-vaccine messages.

“These mainstream communities have been reaching out for info online and now receive feed from many of these other communities, including anti-vaxx, but also now alternative health and even non-COVID conspiracy communities,” he said in an email.

The Biden administration has offered tips on navigating media sources and speaking with family members who are skeptical of the COVID-19 vaccines. The White House has prodded social media platforms to help combat misinformation about the shots.

Some public health experts say the government should have been more proactive in preparing for the backlash to the vaccines.

“Basically, nothing is being done about it, and all of this should have been initiated before the launch of the COVID vaccines knowing there was a strong anti-vaxx U.S. movement,” said Eric Topol, a professor of molecular medicine and executive vice president at Scripps Research.

Others warned President Biden that issuing mandates from the federal government might be self-defeating because it could turn vaccination into a partisan issue.

“I think the downside of this mandate, in terms of hardening positions and taking

something that was subtly political and making it overtly political, could outweigh the benefits we hoped to achieve,” former Food and Drug Commissioner Scott Gottlieb, who sits on the board of Pfizer, a top COVID-19 vaccine manufacturer, told CBS’s “Face the Nation” in September.

The Supreme Court recently blocked Mr. Biden’s most controversial mandate, which would have required large companies to identify unvaccinated employees and test them weekly.

Immunization managers said routine vaccinations for measles and other infectious diseases have declined slightly. One study found that 74% of infants turning 7 months old in September 2020 were up to date on their vaccinations, a drop from 81% in September 2019, though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it believes disruption from the pandemic, not anti-vaccine sentiment, was the primary reason.

“CDC continues to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on other vaccination efforts, but does not have evidence at this time that suggests COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy is directly impacting confidence in routine childhood and adult vaccines,” the agency told The Washington Times. “While we know the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted routine vaccination coverage, we believe the decline is associated with disruptions caused by the pandemic rather than a decline in vaccine confidence.”

Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at [Baylor College of Medicine](#), is worried that the combination of disruptions and vaccine hesitancy could lead to new outbreaks.

“We’ll know later this winter, spring,” he said, “when measles epidemics historically occur.”

[For more information, visit The Washington Times COVID-19 resource page.](#)

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