

Same goal, different paths: US, EU seek max vaccine rates

September 19 2021, by Raf Casert



In this Sept. 1, 2021, file photo, a police officer checks a passenger's phone at Porta Garibaldi train station, in Milan, Italy. In both the U.S. and the EU, officials are struggling with the same question: how to boost vaccination rates to the max and end a pandemic that has repeatedly thwarted efforts to control it. Italy is the first major European economy to require the COVID pass to access places of work across all sectors. Credit: AP Photo/Luca Bruno, File

The Belgian town of Aarschot has a vaccination rate of 94% of all adults, but Mayor Gwendolyn Rutten worries her town is too close for comfort to the capital of Brussels, where the rate stands at 63%. But there's not much she can do about it.

Her hope is that the government mandates vaccination. "Otherwise, you drag all others back into danger," Rutten said in a recent interview.

But few European Union countries have issued outright mandates, instead requiring people to show proof of immunization, a negative test or recent recovery from COVID-19 to participate in ever more activities—even sometimes to go to work.

More sweeping requirements are the order of the day in the U.S., which has faced significant vaccine resistance. President Biden announced mandates last week that cover large portions of the population, sometimes without any option to test instead.

Despite apparently divergent strategies, officials in both the U.S. and the EU are struggling with the same question: how to boost vaccination rates to the max and end a pandemic that has repeatedly thwarted efforts to control it.

And the apparent split may in fact be narrowing. While not calling their restrictions mandates, some European countries are making life so difficult for those without the vaccine that it may amount to the same thing.

In a perhaps surprising move in a country known for touting individual freedoms, Biden has imposed sweeping vaccine requirements for as many as 100 million Americans, including many private-sector employees and [health care workers](#). Employees at firms with more than 100 workers will need to get immunized or test weekly, while

vaccination will be required for employees of the executive branch and contractors who do business with the [federal government](#)—with no option to test out. There are some exemptions.



In this Sept. 4, 2021, file photo, a man receives the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in a bus that serves as a mobile COVID-19 vaccination unit in Bucharest, Romania. In both the U.S. and the EU, officials are struggling with the same question: how to boost vaccination rates to the max and end a pandemic that has repeatedly thwarted efforts to control it. In the European Union, officials in many places are requiring people to show proof of vaccination, a negative test or recent recovery from COVID-19 to participate in everyday activities—even sometimes to go to work. Credit: AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru, File

The seemingly more aggressive U.S. policy may reflect greater pressures there. The EU, which initially lagged way behind the United States in terms of vaccinations, surpassed it at the end of July. As of Thursday, the 27-nation bloc had 60% of its population vaccinated compared to 53% for the United States, according to Our World In Data. In the both places, immunization rates vary widely from country to country or state to state.

American authorities from Biden on down have labeled the current phase a "pandemic of the unvaccinated," with data showing that nearly all COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. [are now are in people who weren't vaccinated](#). EU officials have used the same description for continuing outbreaks in their countries.

But it's harder for the EU writ large to impose vaccine mandates since health policies are the responsibility of the 27 national governments, and top EU officials walk on egg shells addressing the issue. Asked specifically by The Associated Press whether mandatory vaccination could be part of the solution, three EU commissioners swerved around the question, though none argued against it.

"This is not within our remit. This is not part of our legal framework," EU Vice President Margaritis Schinas said, before adding: "But if there is a message that we would like to repeat to member states and through member states to the European citizens, it is 'vaccinate, vaccinate, vaccinate.'"

Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton emphasized that supply wouldn't be an issue, and the bloc would "be ready for everything which is needed." That underscores that such debates can only play out in wealthy nations, while many lower-income countries remain unable to even offer all their citizens a first shot.

But while officials in Brussels can't impose a mandate on the EU's 450 million citizens, many national governments are ramping up restrictions for those who are not vaccinated. Some countries are, in fact, requiring vaccines for some groups: Slovenia is imposing them for government employees, with no option to test out.

More common in the EU, however, is essentially requiring regular testing for those who aren't vaccinated.



In this Sept. 4, 2021, file photo, a protester holds a placard reading "No to the health pass" during a demonstration against the COVID-19 health pass in front of the Eiffel Tower, in Paris. Italy and France have seen thousands take the streets in protests of the COVID passes, some of which resulted in clashes with police in Paris. Credit: AP Photo/Thibault Camus, File

Want to see "The Last Judgment" by Flemish Primitive Rogier van der Weyden at a Burgundy museum? You must show a so-called COVID pass—which provides proof of a negative test, a vaccination or recent recovery from COVID-19—to be allowed to admire that Northern Renaissance gem. The restrictions apply across France for everything from entering restaurants to visiting the Eiffel Tower.

Struggling to boost its paltry vaccination rates in the early summer, France was the first major EU nation to start using such passes. Macron then announced obligatory vaccinations for all health workers in July.

It proved effective. In the eight weeks since the announcement, the French public health service said that the overall vaccination rate went from 40% fully vaccinated to 69%.

As a result, it has found other takers in the bloc. And on Thursday, Italy, which already required the pass for many activities, upped the ante. Premier Mario Draghi's government said workers in both the public and private sectors will soon be forced to show one to go to work. Slovenia and Greece have adopted similar measures, but Italy is the first major European economy to require the COVID pass to access places of work across all sectors.

The health pass "is not a nudge to get vaccinated, it is a not-so-gentle push," Italian legal expert Vitalba Azzollini said.

On both sides of the Atlantic, people have sometimes felt the push more like a shove.

In the United States, there has been lots of angry rhetoric and scattered demonstrations.



In this Sept. 10, 2021, President Joe Biden, with first lady Jill Biden, speaks during a visit at Brookland Middle School in northeast Washington. Biden has encouraged every school district to promote vaccines, including with on-site clinics, to protect students as they return to school amid a resurgence of the coronavirus. Credit: AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta, File

"Everyone should have a right to say 'no' to something, and not lose everything," said Candace Ganjavi, a nurse at Memorial Herman Healthcare in Houston, Texas, who is helping others with advice on how to obtain an exemption from the vaccine mandate her employer has imposed.

Meanwhile, Republican governors across the U.S. have loudly condemned Biden's mandate and vowed to take legal action. South

Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster vowed to fight the president "to the gates of hell."

Biden has defended the mandates by saying "my job as president is to protect all Americans."

Italy and France have seen thousands take to the streets in protests of the COVID passes, some of which resulted in clashes with police in Paris. In Slovenia, hundreds of anti-vaccination protesters hurled flares at the parliament building on Wednesday to protest new measures that require a COVID pass for entering almost any shop as well as restaurants and private workplaces.

The government doubled down, announcing Friday it would expand the requirement to government employees.

Vaccination rates have soared since the first measures were announced.

"I would be more pleased if people understood why they have to get vaccinated," said Bojana Beović, the chief of the Health Ministry's advisory group on COVID-19. "But the main thing is that the share of the vaccinated population is increasing."

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