

How lawmakers in Texas and Florida undermine COVID vaccination efforts

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A rule added to Texas' budget that went into effect Sept. 1 forbids health departments and other organizations funded by the state government to advertise, recommend, or even list COVID vaccines alone. "Clinics may

inform patients that COVID-19 vaccinations are available," the rule allows, "if it is not being singled out from other vaccines."

Texas isn't the only state curtailing the public conversation about COVID vaccines. Tennessee's health department homepage, for example, features the flu, vaping, and cancer screening but leaves out COVID and COVID vaccines. Florida is an extreme case, where the health department has issued guidance against COVID vaccines that runs counter to scientific studies and advice from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Notably, the shift in [health information](#) trails rhetoric from primarily Republican politicians who have reversed their positions on COVID vaccines. Fierce opposition to measures like masking and business closures early in the pandemic fueled a mistrust of the CDC and other scientific institutions and often falls along [party lines](#): Last month, a KFF poll found that 84% of Democrats said they were confident in the safety of COVID vaccines, compared with 36% of Republicans. It's a dramatic drop from 2021, when two-thirds of Republicans were vaccinated.

As new vaccines roll out ahead of the expected winter surge of COVID, some health officials are treading carefully to avoid blowback from the public and policymakers. So far, [vaccine](#) uptake is low, with less than 5% of Americans receiving an updated shot, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. Wells fears the consequences will be dire: "We will see a huge disparity in [health outcomes](#) because of changes in language."

A study published in July found that Republicans and Democrats in Ohio and Florida died at roughly similar rates before COVID vaccines emerged, but a disparity between parties grew once the first vaccines were widely available in 2021 and uptake diverged. By year's end, Republicans had a 43% higher rate of excess deaths than Democrats.

Public health initiatives have long been divisive—water fluoridation, needle exchanges, and universal health care, to name a few. But the pandemic turned up the volume to painful levels, public health officials say. More than 500 left their jobs under duress in 2020 and 2021, and legislators in at least 26 states passed laws to prevent public officials from setting health policies. Republican Arkansas state Sen. Trent Garner told KFF Health News in 2021, "It's time to take the power away from the so-called experts."

At first, vaccine mandates were contentious but the shots themselves were not. Scott Rivkees, Florida's former surgeon general, now at Brown University, traces the shift to the months after Joe Biden was elected president. Though Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis initially promoted COVID vaccination, his stance changed as resistance to COVID measures became central to his presidential campaign.

In late 2021, he appointed Joseph Ladapo surgeon general. By then, Ladapo had penned Wall Street Journal op-eds skeptical of mainstream medical advice, such as one asking, "Are COVID Vaccines Riskier Than Advertised?"

As bivalent boosters rolled out last year, the Florida health department's homepage removed information on COVID vaccines. In its place were rules against mandates and details on how to obtain vaccine exemptions. Then, early this year, the department advised against vaccinating children and teens.

The state's advice changed once more when the CDC recommended updated COVID vaccines in September. DeSantis incorrectly said the vaccines had "not been proven to be safe or effective." And the health department amended its guidance to say men under age 40 should not be vaccinated because the department had conducted research and deemed the risk of heart complications like myocarditis unacceptable.

It refers to a short, author-less document posted online rather than in a scientific journal where it would have been vetted for accuracy. The report uses an unusual method to analyze health records of vaccinated Floridians. Citing serious flaws, most other researchers call it misinformation.

Scientifically vetted studies, and the CDC's own review, contradict Florida's conclusion against vaccination. Cases of myocarditis following mRNA vaccines have occurred but are much less frequent than cases triggered by COVID. The risk is sevenfold higher from the disease than from mRNA vaccines, according to an analysis published in a medical journal based on a review of 22 other studies.

Since leaving his post, Rivkees has been stunned to see the state health department subsumed by political meddling.

About 28,700 children and adults from birth to age 39 have died of COVID in the United States. Florida's anti-vaccine messaging affects people of all ages, Rivkees added, not just those who are younger.

He points out that Florida performed well compared with other states in 2020 and 2021, ranking 38th in COVID deaths per capita despite a large population of older adults. Now it has the sixth-highest rate of COVID deaths in the country.

"There is no question that the rise of misinformation and the politicization of the response has taken a toll on public health," he said.

As in Florida, the Texas health department initially promoted COVID vaccines, warning that Texans who weren't vaccinated were about 20 times as likely to suffer a COVID-associated death. Such sentiments faded last year, as state leaders passed policies to block vaccine mandates and other public health measures. The latest is a prohibition

against the use of government funds to promote COVID vaccines. Uptake in Texas is already low, with fewer than 4% of residents getting the bivalent booster that rolled out last year.

At Lubbock's health department, Wells managed to put out a press release saying the city offers COVID vaccines but stopped short of recommending them. "We aren't able to do as big a push as other states," she said.

Some [health officials](#) are altering their recommendations, given the current climate. Janet Hamilton, executive director at the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists, said clear-cut advice to get vaccinated against COVID works when people trust the scientific establishment, but it risks driving others away from all vaccines. "It's important for public health to meet people where they are," Hamilton said.

Missouri's [health](#) department took this tack on X, formerly known as Twitter: "COVID vaccines will be available in Missouri soon, if you're in to that sort of thing. If not, just keep scrolling!"

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