

Republicans seek to make vaccine passports the next battle in the pandemic culture wars

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Republicans are opening a new front in the pandemic culture wars, attacking efforts by the Biden administration to develop guidelines for coronavirus vaccination passports that businesses can use to determine who can safely participate in activities such as flights, concerts and indoor dining.

The issue has received an increasing amount of attention from some of the party's most extreme members and conservative media figures, but it has also been seized on by Republican leaders like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who is considered a potential 2024 presidential candidate.

"We are not supporting doing any vaccine passports in the state of Florida," DeSantis said Monday. "It's completely unacceptable for either the government or the private sector to impose upon you the requirement that you show proof of vaccine to just simply be able to participate in normal society."

Other Republicans have used more inflammatory rhetoric, with Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) calling the passport idea "Biden's Mark of the Beast" and some conservative activists comparing it with Nazi policies to identify Jews.

['Vaccine passports' are on the way, but developing them won't be easy]

The hyper-charged rhetoric is directed at a nascent initiative between the Biden administration and private companies to develop a standard way for Americans to show they have received a coronavirus vaccination. The idea behind the passports or certificates is that they would be a way to ensure that people could return to normal activities without risking further spread of a virus that has killed more than 550,000 Americans.

Unlike some of the recent attacks from conservatives focused on cultural or economic issues that centered on children's books and "Satan Shoes," this one focuses directly on the Biden administration and taps into a long-standing warning from the right: that a powerful federal government will try to control the population.

"There's been this pent-up opposition to lockdowns and mask mandates and so this is building on that," said David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "Now there's this suggestion that if you don't get a vaccine, you might not be able to do — we're not quite sure what. I can see how there's a market for that concern."

The attacks also focus on an area that's been a strength for Biden: his handling of the pandemic. Under Biden's watch, vaccine distribution has significantly ramped up and, according to federal survey data, reports of vaccine hesitancy are decreasing. Covid-19 deaths have also plummeted

from January highs, in part because larger portions of older Americans have been inoculated. But there's been an uptick in infections in recent days as states have relaxed coronavirus restrictions.

[As U.S. braces for fourth pandemic wave, one governor asks for more vaccines in hot spots]

Now the effort by some Republicans to create doubt about a vaccine passport program threatens to define the Biden administration effort while it's still in the earliest phase, blunting its ability to roll out an idea that could be a popular project and putting the administration on the defensive.

The discussion around a passport has been led by various industries, including airlines, entertainment venues and sports leagues. Biden administration officials have repeatedly said there will be no national mandate.

Matt Gorman, a Republican strategist, said the fierce opposition from many in the party spawned organically and called the news that the White House is working with the business community on vaccine passports or certificates “a trial balloon that went over like a lead balloon.”

“A healthy distrust of government when it comes to health care is nothing new,” said Gorman, who used to work for the National Republican Congressional Committee. “It's a line of messaging that has been very successful to Republicans going back to Obamacare and the like.”

Paul Matzko, a historian and author of “The Radio Right,” a volume on how the conservative movement grew via talk radio, said a Democrat in the White House typically coincides with conspiracy theories growing on the right.

The current fervor over a vaccine passport feeds into existing conservative narratives that Democratic administrations try to track and control the population.

“This is a very old concern — this idea of globalized elites with a sinister plan for the world who are going to take away American sovereignty,” Matzko said.

“They want us to be seen, we can't escape them, we have a mark, whether it is a passport, or a chip or a bar code,” Matzko added, explaining the various manifestations of this theory. “It's kind of outlandish.”

The conservative attacks were launched after the White House took on a more significant role coordinating a private-sector-initiated vaccine passport effort — with administration officials preferring to refer to it as “vaccine verification” — as aides work with dozens of federal agencies to identify what vaccination data is available and how the passports could best be deployed, said five officials with knowledge of the efforts who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the private deliberations.

[U.S. on pace to clear Biden's new goal of 200 million coronavirus shots in his first 100 days]

Some federal agencies are actively working to help provide vaccine passports to their staff or people who use their services. The Department of Veterans Affairs, which provides health care to millions of military veterans, is “implementing a VA-issued vaccine credential,” according to slides obtained by The Post.

The passport plan builds off work led by the Department of Health and Human Services to ensure that in-development passport data systems meet privacy and accessibility standards and are protected against fraud.

A wide range of private-sector and nonprofit organizations, including Microsoft and the World Health Organization, have been pursuing a range of possible systems, with IBM working with the state of New York to pilot one passport.

Biden administration officials have said they're trying to strike a delicate political balance: help coordinate the ongoing push for vaccine passports without it being perceived as government-driven or as White House overreach.

“From a Federal perspective, vaccines and vaccine credentials are matters of individual choice — there is no mandate for either,” according to internal HHS slides obtained by The Washington Post. But the ubiquity of vaccine passports, driven by the private sector, “could become perceived as a Federal mandate even though there is none.”

White House coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients echoed some of those points Tuesday in a call with governors, according to a recording obtained by The Washington Post.

“We're not going to have any federally mandated, universal vaccine credential, and there will not be a federal database,” Zients said in response to questions by North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper (D), promising more information in the coming weeks.

Officials also have been holding calls with business leaders, seeking to gauge their interest in vaccine passports and understand new concerns as the issue has become increasingly politicized.

Asked about the project Monday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki described the administration effort as “focused on guidelines.”

Psaki also noted that there will not be a centralized federal database showing who in the country has received vaccinations and there are no plans for any federal mandate that all citizens have a vaccination credential.

She declined to provide any timeline about when federal guidance on the issue might be released.

A growing number of travel and entertainment businesses have said they will require customers to prove they have been vaccinated, but some major businesses have said they remain undecided.

Carnival Corp. spokesman Roger Frizzell said the cruise-line giant was “encouraged” by recent vaccination breakthroughs but closely monitoring the “evolving situation” before imposing vaccine requirements. Carnival's fleet includes the Diamond Princess and the Grand Princess, both of which became epicenters of coronavirus clusters in 2020.

[Digital health passports promise to simplify travel, but come with a lack of standards]

DeSantis has promised an executive order barring Florida from participating in any vaccination credentialing efforts and is urging the state's legislature to act as well. The governor has become a leading opponent of pandemic restrictions and has often dismissed the advice of public health experts who have criticized his downplaying the importance of masks and other precautions.

Some Republicans are supportive of a passport program.

Longtime GOP pollster Frank Luntz said he's working with the Bethesda, Md.-based de Beaumont Foundation, a public health organization, to survey voters on their reactions to

vaccination passports, identify which messages were resonating and understand whether “passports” is the right term to describe the credentials.

“It’s been politicized in two different directions,” said Luntz, arguing that liberals worry that a passport would widen inequities around who has access to vaccines and that conservatives fear it would limit their freedoms.

Luntz said the growing politicization around the passports also threatened the entire initiative. “Unless the Biden administration tempers both sides down right now, they will find within days it becomes impossible to do. I’ve seen this movie and it doesn’t have a good ending,” he said.

Some Democratic pollsters also acknowledge the issue could have some resonance, depending on how Biden handles the situation.

Republicans do have concerns that Democrats, particularly in coordination with large technology firms, are seeking broad control over the citizenry, said Stan Greenberg, a Democratic pollster. “This will fit that narrative,” Greenberg said. “But that’s not America as a whole.”

He said it’s unclear where conservatives will wage battles over vaccination requirements, and he noted that schools and employers probably will require proof of vaccination.

“I just think it puts them into an incredibly marginal position,” Greenberg said.

One key to where the party goes on the issue of passports will probably be whether former president Donald Trump weighs in on the issue.

Barry Bennett, a former Trump adviser, said the paranoia is probably overblown, and instead likened the passport idea to the yellow fever vaccination card he shows when traveling to countries in Africa.

“For someone who travels international a great deal, I want to be able to prove in a secure format that I’ve been vaccinated so I can go see my clients,” Bennett said. “If you’re talking about having to show papers to get into 7-Eleven to get a Slurpee, I think that’s paranoia. I think people are talking past each other, which is typical Washington.”

Isaac Stanley-Becker contributed to this report.