



Editorial Roundup: US

By Associated Press

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The Boston Globe on 'vaccine passports':

A traveler shows up at an airline gate, claiming that she's been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and thus can fly safely to a country that requires that visitors be inoculated.

How, exactly, can an airline — or hotel, or any number of other businesses that need to worry about the vaccination status of their customers — be sure?

Solving the problem is one of the key steps on the road to reopening the global economy. And as controversial as they've become, "vaccine credentials" that allow individuals to show they've been vaccinated should be part of the answer — as long as careful safeguards are included.

How, or if, to certify vaccinations has become a more pressing concern as more Americans get vaccinated against COVID-19. Uncertainty remains about whether and when the country will reach herd immunity. The lack of clear data about how coronavirus immunity works, the emergence of new variants, and lingering reluctance among some Americans to get vaccinated are among the factors that may stand in the way. Until then, the reality may be that Americans will have to learn how to travel, fully reopen the economy, and live with the virus before we're able to live without it.

Vaccine credentials developed and used by the private sector, with the help of forthcoming federal guidance, can serve as a way to help Americans and business navigate that tricky limbo period after hundreds of millions of Americans are vaccinated but before the pandemic is halted for good — so long as they do not serve as a de facto government mandate, and important protections are put in place to make sure they don't do more harm than good.

Disingenuous attempts to politicize the idea of "vaccine passports," similar to how masks were used as weapons in an ideological culture war, are already overshadowing the real causes for concern about them. No, there is no hypocrisy in opposing onerous ID laws for voting while also supporting a measure to help people demonstrate virus immunity when they need to, and actions like the executive order Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida signed Friday banning vaccine passports are counterproductive.

But a host of valid problems with the idea have been flagged by an ideologically diverse group of civil rights organizations, business groups, and watchdogs. They fear that the use of vaccine passports can exacerbate inequities already revealed by the pandemic, lead to digital data breaches or fraud, or create a "show me your papers" mentality that can add fuel to existing

culture wars. Others fear they may be bad for some small businesses who might struggle to meet their requirements.

The Biden administration has ruled out implementing a government-mandated vaccine passport system but is crafting guidance for the private sector.

That guidance must address the concerns about access and data security with requirements that the certificates be issued in paper form, so even those without smartphones can have them — and so that personal information about vaccinated individuals is not held in a central location that would make them susceptible to hacking.

Jeff Singer, a practicing surgeon and senior fellow at the Cato Institute, compared the idea to a paper airline boarding pass with a scannable bar code. That code can contain information about the time and location of the vaccination as well as what type of vaccine was administered.

The administration guidance must also boost employee protections regarding the use of vaccination documents to address concerns raised by the ACLU about a "risk that employers will prefer to hire workers with immunity than devote resources to across-the-board safety precautions that protect all workers and the people they come into contact with."

The Biden administration's guidance must provide robust protections for all workers, particularly essential workers who may have slower or impeded access to vaccines, and provide exemptions where necessary for those who have valid reasons for not being vaccinated.

And most important, it must ensure that the certificates — like the vaccine themselves — are widely available to Americans, even replacing the vaccination cards some Americans receive when they have been vaccinated, since such cards often lack security measures that prevent them from being forged or sold or fraudulently sold on the black market.

With careful planning and an eye on equity and security, vaccination certificates can be one tool for individuals and businesses to begin shifting toward a post-pandemic future — even when uncertainties linger.

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The Guardian on 'very rare' side-effects linked to the AstraZeneca vaccine:

Every day, people take medicines with known side-effects. The risk is accepted when weighed against the benefit. But Covid vaccines are unfamiliar. There is no record of use over time to build public confidence. Still, they have been tested and proven to offer protection against the virus. By all usual medical standards, they are safe. That remains true for the AstraZeneca vaccine, despite an evolving picture that side-effects might include a rare blood clotting disorder.

The UK's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Authority is still investigating the link, but has recommended, as a precaution, that other vaccines be preferred for recipients under 30. That is a notable shift in policy when ministers have dismissed any talk of risks associated with the jab. The European Medicines Agency on Wednesday recommended that blood-clotting be added to the list of "very rare" side-effects of the AstraZeneca vaccine; not sufficient to require a change in patterns of use.

According to the UK's Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation there were 30 cases of cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST), including seven deaths, in the period up to 24 March,

from a pool of 18 million people given the AstraZeneca jab. Those affected appear mostly to be women under 65, although the EMA concluded that age and gender were not determining factors in adverse reactions. The data set is growing daily. It is always feasible that guidelines regarding which vaccine is used for whom will change with new information. This is how science proceeds.

The chance of a severe reaction is probably no higher than 0.0001%. When it comes to public policy, statistical perspective matters. A very small number is not zero, but nor is it a reason to refuse vaccination.

The human mind is not good at processing risk. We pay disproportionate attention to rare events precisely because they are exceptional. Politics often exploits that cognitive weakness. That has been a hazard throughout the pandemic. It is especially problematic when it comes to reassuring audiences that might be wary of vaccines in general, and new ones in particular. It is not irrational to have questions about a medicine that did not exist a year ago. It is also not surprising that some minority communities respond warily to safety lectures from authorities that they mistrust through generations of discrimination.

There is an important distinction between vaccine hesitancy and malicious anti-vaccine misinformation that preys on hesitancy. Thankfully, the UK population has responded well to pro-vaccine advocacy, possibly because the NHS is a trusted institution. The more people get the vaccine, the more normal it becomes. One poll recently found UK respondents the most willing of any nation to be vaccinated — 78% saying they would gladly take a Covid jab — and with the highest rate of increase in positive views.

The mood could still change. The government must be respectful of public disorientation if regulators are calibrating their views. Concerns should not be dismissed glibly. It should be possible to tell people what side-effects and symptoms to be aware of without causing alarm. If the balance of risk and benefit is framed accurately, the evidence is irresistibly in favour of vaccination. Ministers must not fall into impatient, high-handed assertions of confidence. That tone can be counterproductive, as is boastfulness about the success of the UK's vaccine programme.

Politicians like certainties; scientists prefer probabilities. The challenge with vaccines is accepting the existence of risk while keeping it in a proper perspective. Science has been a trusty guide so far. As long as the facts are communicated transparently, it should be possible to process new information and navigate risk without derailing public confidence.

April 7

The Wall Street Journal on government bans on eviction and foreclosure:

One problem with government emergency actions is that the political class never wants them to end. Witness the Biden Administration's extension of the eviction and foreclosure moratoriums, which by now are creating more trouble than they're worth.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau this week proposed a rule that would effectively prohibit foreclosures through December. It has also threatened to penalize mortgage servicers and landlords who don't take action to prevent a surge in "avoidable foreclosures" and evictions when government forbearance programs end.

In short, the government is bludgeoning private businesses to fix a problem it created. Suspension of rent and mortgage payments was justifiable last spring when states locked down and some 22 million workers lost jobs. But the jobless rate has dropped to 6% from 14.8%, and employers are desperate to hire.

The Cares Act from last March let borrowers with federally backed mortgages pause payments for 360 days. The law also imposed a 120-day moratorium on evictions in housing developments supported with federal funds. After the Cares Act eviction moratorium ended, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in September extended it through December and expanded it to all rental housing. Households making up to \$198,000 qualify as long as they say they lost income due to the pandemic.

The CDC invoked the 1944 Public Health Service Act, which allows the agency to take measures to prevent the spread of communicable diseases between states. People who get evicted might move in with family or friends and spread the disease, the CDC explained. What diktat couldn't the CDC justify under this expansive rationale?

Landlords say they increasingly can't afford their mortgage payments, utilities, and maintenance costs because they can't remove nonpaying renters. District courts have rendered conflicting decisions on the order's legality that are being appealed. Meantime, the Biden Administration has extended the moratorium through June.

Most people hurting financially amid the pandemic have received plenty of relief from the government including direct payments—\$2,000 per person since December—refundable tax credits and \$300 in enhanced weekly unemployment benefits. They should also be able to find jobs.

The same goes for homeowners taking advantage of government mortgage forbearance. The Federal Housing Administration in February extended the deadline for requesting forbearance through June, which will let many skip mortgage payments through the fall. About 17.5% of FHA-insured mortgages are delinquent or in forbearance.

These crisis programs are distorting the housing market. Home values have soared in the past year amid increased demand (see nearby), so some borrowers currently in forbearance could avoid foreclosure by selling. Government forbearance may be contributing to a housing shortage by keeping people in homes they can't afford and limiting supply for potential buyers.

The Biden Administration wants to maintain the air of pandemic crisis so it can take credit for coming to the rescue. But on housing, as on other things, it is now doing more economic harm than good.

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The Des Moines Register on President Joe Biden's U.S. infrastructure plan:

The United States is the wealthiest country in the world. You wouldn't know it from the condition of the systems that make it work.

There are 45,000 bridges and more than 170,000 miles of highways and major roads in poor condition.

Drinking water is delivered to many residents through lead pipes.

Floods regularly devastate public and private structures.

Electrical systems are vulnerable, and internet connections are unreliable.

Iowa has the highest number of structurally deficient bridges in the country. More than a third of our major roads are in poor or mediocre condition.

Iowans understand that an ambitious federal investment in this country's infrastructure is long overdue. Fortunately, we now have a president who understands that, too.

Joe Biden's \$2.3 trillion American Jobs Plan is about much more than fresh concrete and steel. It rightly reimagines and expands the traditional definition of infrastructure.

In addition to surface transportation, it proposes investing in research and development, domestic manufacturing, renewable energy, worker training, airports and care for seniors and disabled people. It would make new investments in clean energy technology, such as electric-vehicle charging stations.

This could mean creation of millions of jobs and enhancement of the country's economic productivity for many years to come. Good public transportation makes it easier to get to work. Reliable internet everywhere makes it easier to bring work to homes.

The plan "will invest in America in a way we have not invested since we built the interstate highways and won the Space Race," according to a White House brief.

Unfortunately, Republicans seem inclined to reject anything the Democrats controlling Washington propose. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell quickly announced his opposition to Biden's plan.

Was he speaking for all Republicans in Congress?

The old GOP argument that Democrats are being "fiscally irresponsible" and driving up the debt isn't justified this time.

Biden's plan does something Republicans have time and time again refused to do: Generate revenue to actually pay for new spending.

The administration wants to increase taxes on corporations. This could fully fund the infrastructure investment within the next 15 years and reduce deficits in the years after. It essentially reverses many irresponsible, federal budget-busting tax law changes made by the 2017 GOP-crafted tax law. It's worth noting that Jeff Bezos, chief executive of Amazon, which employs about 950,000 people in the U.S., said he supports an increase in the corporate tax rate and Biden's infrastructure plan.

Get rid of tax cuts for the wealthiest that never should have been implemented. Use the money to fund a long overdue investment in our economy that will benefit all Americans.

The San Francisco Chronicle on the California governor's pledge to reopen the state:

There's no doubt that Gov. Gavin Newsom's vow Tuesday to fully reopen California's economy was driven by data. The question is how much of it was polling data.

Newsom's emphasis on rapid reopening comes as he is fending off a recall attempt, which likely explains why his confidence about the waning coronavirus risk is getting ahead of statistics and experts. The politics of the moment favor lifting the state's lifesaving but controversial restrictions on business activity, which helped propel the recall effort from the fringes to the mainstream.

Granted, the governor has legitimate reasons to moderate the restrictions, too. The state has the nation's lowest rate of positive coronavirus tests, new cases have subsided to pre-surge levels, and over 13 million Californians have received at least one shot of a vaccine. Newsom also built caveats into his announcement at City College of San Francisco's vaccination site, advising continued mask-wearing and other precautions while promising to scrap his color-coded tier system in two months if progress continues.

But reasons for caution persist. States in the Northeast and Midwest have seen new infections climb sharply in recent weeks, and California's have stopped falling. The Bay Area saw a nearly 9% increase in new cases last week compared with the week before, while the statewide figure ticked up 1%, all of which predated any effect of Easter weekend gatherings. About two-thirds of Californians have yet to receive a vaccine dose, and viral variants could compound the risk.

Experts are divided over the possibility of a fourth wave of infections ahead of herd immunity. Some local health officials are wisely advising residents to refrain from indoor dining and other high-risk activities even though they're allowed.

The governor's latest easing of restrictions could prove to be part of a pattern of rushed reopenings that he has acknowledged. Even before Tuesday's pledge to drop the color-coded system, Newsom had revised its rules to allow counties to progress through the tiers more quickly, repeating the goalpost-shifting that preceded previous surges.

It would be a grave error to put lives at unnecessary risk on the cusp of widespread inoculation. Californians should join the governor in welcoming the end of economic restrictions when it's safe to do so, but the end of the pandemic won't necessarily coincide with the beginning of the campaign.

March 30

The Minneapolis Star Tribune on transparency in the trial of the ex-officer charged in the death of George Floyd:

The eyes of the world are on Minneapolis.

On its citizens, as they react to the trial of Derek Chauvin, accused of murdering George Floyd last year in a killing that sparked riots locally and protests globally. But also — finally — on one of its courtrooms. For the first time in state history, the trial is being live streamed and available for Minnesotans — and the world — to see.

The coronavirus is partly the reason for live streaming. The public and news media have a right to witness court cases, especially those with such consequence, and sensible social-distancing protocols significantly restricted courtroom access for the Chauvin trial. There's also the need for transparency, the currency of trust in any endeavor.

It's about making available "an instrument of government which is for many people very opaque," Prof. Jane Kirtley, director of the Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and Law at the University of Minnesota, told an editorial writer.

Viewing the judicial process can increase confidence in the jury's verdict. "I think it's important for (citizens) to see what's happening," Kirtley said. "I would say that about any deliberation. But given the very strong emotional reactions that many in our community, if not communities around the country and even the world have had, it would be very difficult for those communities to accept the verdict if they did not know what kind of evidence was presented that led up to it."

Trust in the system can compound throughout the community, Leita Walker, a partner at the Ballard Spahr law firm, told an editorial writer.

"Our hope is by live streaming this people are able to watch it and see how the justice system works, that it builds faith in that system, and it has sort of a cathartic effect on our community," said Walker.

Until now, Minnesota has been known for its restrictive cameras-in-the-courtroom policies and only allowed audio and video recordings after a guilty plea or a guilty verdict.

"...I hope that policymakers in Minnesota and elsewhere see that and realize that we can and should provide that as a matter of course," Walker said. "It shouldn't only be something we do during a pandemic."

The policymakers who made live streaming this possible, including Hennepin County Chief Judge Toddrick Barnette and Judge Peter Cahill, deserve credit. Without any apparent compromises to the gravity of the proceedings, live streaming is allowing the world to witness the system of justice designed to give every defendant a fair trial. Their example should guide decision-making on transparency in future court proceedings.