



Vaccine ‘passports’ — with crucial protections — can help get America through herd immunity limbo

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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 point at which a large enough percentage of people become immune that transmission of the virus peters out. 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 of achieving herd immunity. 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.

“There’s currently an interagency process that is looking at many of the questions around vaccine verification,” White House press secretary Jen Psaki said last week. “And that issue will touch many agencies, as verification is an issue that will potentially touch many sectors of society. . . .That’s guidance we’ll provide.”

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.

“If you can design something like that that you can keep with you, so the information is safe with you, and anybody can have one — you don’t have to have a smartphone — well, I don’t see a problem with that,” Singer said, noting the use of similar “green passes” in Israel.

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.