

**The Washington Post**  
*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

# How the anti-vaccine movement is gaining power in statehouses



By Lauren Weber

December 22, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EST

BATON ROUGE — A wave of lawmakers who oppose vaccine requirements are winning elections for state legislatures amid a national drop in childhood vaccination rates and a resurfacing of preventable deadly diseases.

The victories come as part of a political backlash to pandemic restrictions and the proliferation of misinformation about the safety of vaccines introduced to fight the coronavirus.

In Louisiana, 29 candidates endorsed by Stand for Health Freedom, a national group that works to defeat mandatory vaccinations, won in the state's off-year elections this fall.

Fred Mills, the retiring Republican chairman of the Louisiana Senate's health and welfare committee, said he fears that once-fringe anti-vaccine policies that endanger people's lives will have a greater chance of passing come January when newly-elected lawmakers are sworn in and more than a dozen Republican moderates like himself leave office.

Louisiana's shift is a sign of the growing clout of the anti-vaccine movement in the nation's statehouses as bills that once died in committee make it onto the legislative floor for a vote.

Since spring, Tennessee lawmakers dropped all vaccine requirements for home-schooled children. Iowa Republicans passed a bill eliminating the requirement that schools educate students about the HPV vaccine. And the Florida legislature passed a law preemptively barring school districts from requiring coronavirus vaccines, a move health advocates fear opens the door to further vaccine limitations.

“Politics is going to win over medicine,” said Mills, a pharmacist who has weakened or defeated bills that would have limited vaccine access and promoted vaccine exemptions in schools and workplaces. But after 13 years in the Senate, Mills has hit the state’s three-term limit.

His seat will be filled in January by Blake Miguez, an ultraconservative endorsed by Stand for Health Freedom. Miguez, a current state representative, did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Once propelled by left-leaning activists, the anti-vaccine movement has been supercharged by conservatives since the pandemic started.

Leah Wilson, Stand for Health’s co-founder and executive director, said in a written statement that their influence grew in direct response to pandemic-related requirements. “Before 2020, medical mandates primarily affected school-aged children, university students and health-care workers,” she said. “In 2020, the mandates began to affect everyone in some way. So now you have more people seeing the need to protect their rights.”

Mills said the health and welfare committee devolved into the “health and warfare” committee as the pandemic hit and some of his Louisiana colleagues stopped listening to science and bowed to political pressure.

Republican legislators decried what they saw as government overreach and vowed to dismantle public health mandates about masking and vaccines. That rhetoric seeped into the broader vaccine debate, he said, providing ammunition to legislators such as Beryl Amedee, a recently reelected state representative who for years had sponsored anti-vaccine legislation with little success.

As she enters her third term, Amedee said she believes her bills will gain traction in the upcoming legislative session with the support of “liberty-loving” colleagues who have latched onto the idea that the government should not mandate anything. She said she is not “anti-vaccine,” but rather, “pro everyone having the opportunity to make their own health decisions.”

“Covid was the catalyst that ignited the firestorm,” Amedee said. “The moderates on the ballot were not the ones that got the votes.”

# Pandemic drove anti-vaccine sentiment

As the “medical freedom” movement gains clout, childhood vaccination rates continue to decline. Nationally, the proportion of kindergartners whose parents opted them out of vaccines hit a new high of 3 percent in the 2022-2023 school year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a fact that has alarmed public health experts.

Growing vaccine hesitancy contributed to a measles outbreak in Columbus, Ohio, last year and in other communities with low vaccination rates.

In Louisiana, kindergarten vaccination rates dropped nearly two percentage points in one year to 89 percent by the 2022-2023 school year — well below the 95 percent required for herd immunity for measles.

“Our liberties and freedoms are really tied up in our community coming together to protect each other from diseases,” said Crystal Rommen, director of Louisiana Families for Vaccines, founded last year to combat growing anti-vaccine sentiment. “Individuals and our communities as a whole have a right to live a life free from vaccine-preventable diseases.”

But the share of Americans who believe vaccines are safe has fallen by six percentage points to 71 percent since 2021, while the number of those who believe the debunked claims that vaccines cause autism and contain toxins is rising, according to an Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania poll released in November.

Anti-vaccine advocates have become so vocal in legislative hearings and over social media that they routinely drown out the vast majority of Louisiana parents who do vaccinate their children, Mills said.

Medical experts have started declining invitations to testify for fear of retaliation, and Mills worries legislators will not fight the anti-vaccine fervor generated by a minority of constituents. “They’re so loud, they’re so vocal, and sometimes they’re so potentially violent, that it sways your opinion,” he said.

In Iowa, a bloc of conservatives backed by Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds to oust moderate Republicans in the 2022 election helped pass legislation in May to remove a state requirement that middle and high schools teach students about the availability of the HPV vaccine.

The bill’s success is especially worrisome for a state with the highest and fastest-growing rates of oral

cavity and pharynx cancer, which can be caused by HPV, said Megan Srinivas, a Democratic Iowa state representative and physician. “Now we’re taking away a bit more of our tools to prevent that cancer from growing,” she said.

Jeff Shipley, a Republican state representative who supported the bill, called the HPV vaccine “a shoddy big pharma medical product from companies more interested in driving revenue than improving human health” in an email, despite the fact that, according to the CDC, the vaccine can prevent up to 90 percent of HPV-related cancers.

“When we start ignoring science at the legislative level, really, the risks are endless,” Iowa House Democratic Leader Jennifer Konfrst said. “What other decisions are we making based on internet conspiracy theories versus peer-reviewed, nonpartisan, scientifically-based data?”

Legislators holding anti-vaccine views are not only growing in number but assuming positions of power. In Louisiana, Patrick McMath, the senator expected to replace Mills as head of the health committee in January, had proposed a bill last year that would have made it illegal to restrict access to public places based on vaccination status.

McMath’s office twice said he was unavailable for comment because of his schedule. In Arizona, the vice chairwoman of the Senate health and human services committee is a freshman legislator, Janae Shamp, who said she was motivated to run for office last year after being fired from her job as a nurse for refusing to take the coronavirus vaccine.

“The reason you’re seeing this surge at the legislature is because that’s what the citizens are demanding,” Shamp said, noting she plans to reintroduce her failed bill that would have exempted employees from workplace coronavirus or flu vaccine requirements. “This comes from my constituents.”

Shamp, along with more than 380 elected officials and political candidates, signed a pledge championed by the influential anti-vaccine group, Informed Consent Action Network, to fight “coerced government medicine and forced medical procedures,” referring to vaccine or other health mandates at the local, state and federal levels.

The group has successfully sued to create vaccine exemptions for schoolchildren in Mississippi, which boasts one of the nation’s highest childhood vaccination rates. Its political arm has written model legislation to expand vaccine exemptions, which the group says has already been introduced as bills in Arizona, Idaho, Oklahoma and Louisiana.

“The legislators that are interested in assuring the right to informed consent and bodily autonomy are

from all political backgrounds,” Catharine Layton, the group’s chief operating officer, said in a written statement. “We are hopeful the model bills, in some iteration that protect informed consent, will pass next year.”

In Michigan, the normalization of anti-vaccine views is also unfolding. Eleven lawmakers recently honored discredited anti-vaccine activist and former physician Andrew Wakefield, who is responsible for the retracted research falsely linking autism to vaccines. Nine of those legislators were elected after the pandemic began, including Angela Rigas, a hairdresser ticketed for protesting pandemic mandates at the state capitol.

“This is not an ‘anti-vaccine’ movement, but freedom,” state representative Rigas said in an email. “We have the ability as parents to choose what we believe is best for our children.”

At a November conference held by Children’s Health Defense, an anti-vaccine group founded by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a Michigan legislative aide cheered Rigas and her colleagues for taking a stand.

“In Michigan we have real warrior parents that have run for office that are new legislators that recognize the value of medical freedom,” Rachel Atwood, the aide, said as she presented the honor. “There is hope in politics.”

Children’s Health Defense, which did not respond to a request for comment, has sued The Washington Post and other media companies alleging violation of federal antitrust laws in suppressing “misinformation.”

## Moderating forces gone in Louisiana

Anti-vaccine forces have been gaining ground in Louisiana since the pandemic started in 2020.

In 2021, Louisiana state health officials grew alarmed when Kennedy called the coronavirus vaccine the “deadliest vaccine ever made” at a state House hearing on a health department proposal to require schoolchildren be vaccinated against the virus.

State Health Officer Joseph Kanter condemned false claims made at the hearing as “the intentional spread of health disinformation.”

Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat who has repeatedly vetoed anti-vaccine legislation, warned of the

dangerous precedent such twisting of vaccine science could create.

“One can only imagine where we would be as a state if the same overheated rhetoric from last week’s meeting was applied to Polio or Measles,” he said in a written statement to the committee following the hearing.

But political backlash effectively killed the health department’s proposal.

Kennedy had been invited to speak to lawmakers by State Attorney General Jeff Landry, a Republican who had also testified against the proposal. Kennedy’s long-standing views on vaccines found broader support among Republicans as the former Democrat launched his long-shot independent bid for president this year.

Kennedy’s press office said he is not “anti-vaccine” but stood by his previous comments about the coronavirus vaccine and repeated misleading statements about childhood vaccines.

“Statehouse legislators are reacting to the data and their constituents’ concerns that public health authorities mishandled the covid pandemic,” Robyn Ross, research director for Kennedy’s campaign, said in a written statement.

Last year, Landry sued the federal government, alleging collusion with social media companies to suppress the views of anti-vaccine activists. He also submitted an amicus brief in August supporting the Children’s Health Defense lawsuit against The Post.

This fall, Landry was elected to replace Edwards as governor. As he prepares to take office next month, his influence is already being felt.

Internal state health department documents reviewed by The Post from November and December and interviews with two health department employees show a new reluctance to promote vaccines, with Landry’s incoming administration limiting public information about vaccine availability and uptake.

The new communications team killed an effort to promote vaccination as well as the state’s high childhood immunization rates, said the employees, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they feared retaliation.

Deanna Wallace, new communications director for the state health department who had previously worked in Landry’s attorney general’s office, said it is “categorically not true” that the incoming administration blocked publicity about vaccinations.

“I don’t think anything has changed,” Wallace said. “We work with lots of different organizations to promote and help people access vaccinations across the board.”

Given the new political reality, Amedee, the Louisiana state representative whose previous anti-vaccine bills had been stymied, said she plans to reintroduce legislation next year that pushes against vaccine mandates and widens vaccine exemptions.

“I really expect that in the next four years, we’ll see a difference because we have a change in administration,” said Amedee, who invokes the Nuremberg trials in comparing coronavirus vaccine requirements to medical experimentation. “They’re more concerned about personal liberties so I expect that bills like the ones that have been run before will have a much greater chance of passing.”

And Mills and many of his moderate Republican colleagues won’t be around to stop it.