

Pressure builds for Biden, Democrats to move past COVID

[ABC News](#)

Americans remain deeply divided on what it means to 'live with the virus.'

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It's a move that would have been unthinkable last year: Weeks after a holiday

surge crushed hospitals and more people died in a single month than a typical annual flu season, four Democratic governors this week declared an end date to statewide mask mandates in schools.

The new changes won't take effect for several weeks. Gov. Ned Lamont's Connecticut mandate will expire Feb. 28, followed by New Jersey on March 7, and Oregon and Delaware on March 31 -- presumably after the omicron wave has ended and case counts are low. Their decisions also leave local school districts the option of keeping their mandates in place.

Still, the message from the Democratic governors to President Joe Biden was unmistakable: With the midterms nine months away, Democrats are now joining the chorus of Republicans who say the nation must learn to "live with the virus" and are pressing Biden to chart a path forward.

"Democratic voters have run out of empathy for unvaccinated people dying of COVID," said Brian Stryker, a partner at Impact Research, a Democratic polling firm. "They are ready to live their lives."

If 2021 was the year of the vaccine, 2022 is already shaping up to be the year voters demand the U.S. moves on.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy speaks to reporters during a briefing in Trenton, N.J., Feb...

For health experts, living with COVID means paying attention to local case counts and "dialing" up or down restrictions as needed. It also means taking steps to protect people who are immunocompromised and are at higher risk for breakthrough cases, as well as children under the age of 5 who still don't qualify for a vaccine.

For many Americans, though, including a growing number of Democratic voters, living with COVID means loosening restrictions regardless of case

counts or vaccination status.

According to a new Axios/Ipsos poll, two-thirds of Americans say they do not believe it's possible for the U.S. to eradicate the coronavirus within the next year, although they are divided about how to handle that.

That reality puts unique pressure on Biden ahead of his State of the Union address on March 1 -- a speech typically used by sitting presidents to declare victory and look toward the future.

"The public is saying 'enough.' The politicians are saying 'enough,'" said Frank Luntz, a longtime Republican pollster and strategist.

"If Biden doesn't say 'enough' at the SOTU, he'll be digging a hole he can't climb out. The (Democratic) governors know this because they're closer to the people," he wrote in an email to ABC News.

A Democratic official familiar with the thinking of the governors said they have been talking for a while now about offering COVID-wary Americans a "light at the end of the tunnel" after the omicron wave -- and pressing the White House to do the same in Biden's upcoming national address.

"The governors are acutely aware that there's a need to provide people some optimism and give people some sense of 'here's the path forward,'" said the official, who agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity in order to speak more openly.

"They want him to talk about his wins, and there are good ones to talk about" like job growth and infrastructure investments that aren't COVID related, the person said.

Biden's initial plan to liberate Americans from the pandemic by last Fourth of July centered on vaccinations and ensuring widespread and equitable

access. Eventually, he turned to workplace mandates. Yet one year later, tens of millions of eligible Americans remain unvaccinated and his mandates for large businesses have been scuttled by the Supreme Court.

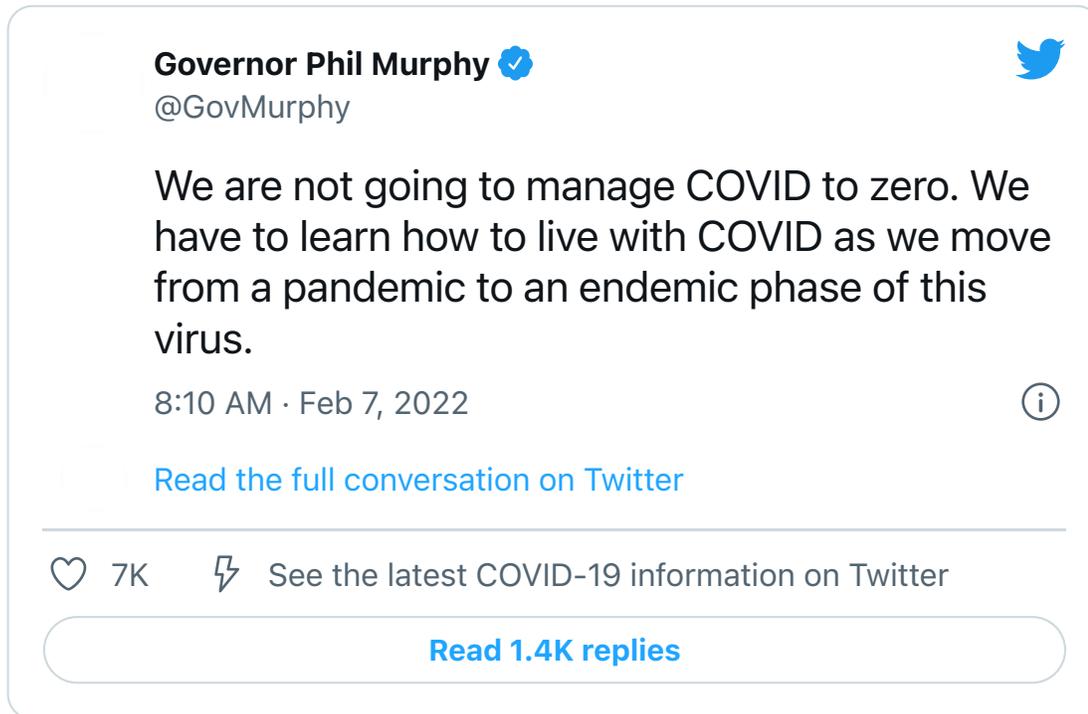
COVID hospitalizations and deaths also have eclipsed any comparisons to the flu. For example, more than 60,000 people died from complications of COVID in January alone -- one of the highest monthly COVID-19 death tolls on record. By comparison, a typical flu season might result in 20,000 to 50,000 deaths in an entire year.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. in the last week averaged about 614 new cases a day per 100,000 residents -- 61 times what the CDC considers to be low transmission. The CDC still recommends masks indoors, including in schools, for people ages 2 and up.

"I'm sure they're facing a lot of pressure, both internally and externally, to try to make sure the pandemic is over," Andy Slavitt, a former Biden adviser on COVID, said on ABC's "Start Here" podcast of the Democratic governors. "It's just not quite clear that it is."

While the Democratic governors insist public health remains the priority, it's hard to ignore this week's rollbacks as a political calculation as Democrats look toward the midterm elections. Connecticut's Lamont is up for reelection this fall. Oregon Democratic Gov. Kate Brown's term limit expires this fall, leaving her seat up for grabs.

In New Jersey, Democratic Gov. Philip Murphy is coming off a narrow victory last fall, a race that surprised many pundits by how close it was. Also worth noting was Republican Glenn Youngkin's victory in Virginia last fall, flipping enough Democratic voters to win the governor's race there by promising to keep schools open and empower parents to make education decisions.



Celinda Lake, a Democratic strategist and lead pollster for Biden in the 2020 presidential election, said she thinks the move by governors is a gamble. If cases rise, they might have to go back to the public to ask for restrictions to be imposed again.

Also, she notes, overall polling in the country still suggests strong support among Americans for masks in schools, with moms and women in particular erring on the side of caution. So Biden will have to take into account that majority of voters when addressing the nation, even if they aren't as vocal, she said.

"People are looking for certainty. They're looking for consistent leadership. They're looking for clear criteria. And yes, they express short term frustration and fatigue. But steady leadership is going to beat (going) up and down and going back and forth," she said.

Stryker said he still thinks the goal -- at least from a political standpoint -- is to move away from talking about the pandemic as much as Democrats are.

"If Democrats can stop talking about COVID every day, treat it like the long-term problem it is and start talking about more immediate concerns of voters" like the high cost of living, "the better they will do in the midterms," he said.

Arielle Mitropoulos contributed to this report.