

White House faces new pressure to back lifting mask rules

The White House is facing pressure to revise its position on wearing masks, as declining COVID-19 cases and pandemic fatigue among voters leads an increasing number of Democratic states to lift requirements on public masking.

Some governors and local health officials are calling for the White House and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to release guidance for an off-ramp for mask usage.

Mask requirements are one of the only remaining COVID-19 restrictions in place in many areas of the country. But agency director [Rochelle Walensky](#) is insistent that it's not yet time to lift mask requirements anywhere.

Public health experts said the administration risks losing credibility as more and more states go at it alone.

"No one is expecting the CDC to say that mask mandates need to end overnight. But where are the metrics for when restrictions can be lifted? With each passing day, the CDC is making itself less relevant, not only for COVID-19, but for other public health matters as well," said Dr. Leana Wen, a professor of health policy and management at George Washington University.

During a White House briefing Wednesday, Walensky was reluctant to describe what metrics the agency would want to see before recommending loosening mask recommendations.

"We certainly understand the need and desire to be flexible," Walensky said.

"But at this time, we continue to recommend masking in areas of high and substantial transmission. That's much of the country right now, in public indoor settings."

According to the CDC, 99 percent of U.S. counties still have high levels of coronavirus transmission, based on case rates.

Walensky said the agency is working on updating its guidance.

"And so we're of course taking a close look at this in real time and we're evaluating rates of transmission as well as rates of severe outcomes as we look at updating and reviewing our guidance," Walensky said.

The CDC has faced criticism throughout the pandemic for being too slow and cautious to react to changing situations, and public health experts warn the administration is getting left behind.

"I think it's the lack of guidance that has created this void, and states and communities and school districts, by necessity because they're on the front lines, are moving in to try to address the void," said Glen Nowak, co-director of the University of Georgia's Center for Health & Risk Communication and former head of media relations at CDC.

As of Wednesday, Democratic governors in states like Delaware, Illinois, California and New York either outlined an off-ramp for indoor mask requirements or lifted them completely. Other states like Connecticut, New Jersey and Massachusetts are lifting mask requirements in schools.

Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker (R) said the CDC is dealing with 50 states worth of data and varying virus situations, while the situation in his state is different. Massachusetts has one of the lowest hospitalization rates and the lowest positivity rate in the country.

"Most states don't have the kind of surveillance testing program that we have in place," Baker said. "Most states don't have pool testing. Most states don't have take-home tests."

Julie Morita, executive vice president of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and a former public health director of Chicago, agreed.

"It's not too surprising to me that, at the national level, their guidance is less sensitive to the changes that are happening on the ground. And so for states and locals to be customizing or adjusting the guidance based on how high disease activity is or how high vaccination coverage levels are ... it's not necessarily in conflict," Morita said.

Yet the decisions states are making are just as political as they are scientific, and Democratic strategists said the Biden administration should recognize that.

"As the challenges around managing COVID evolve, the challenges around managing the pandemic messaging have also evolved," said Democratic strategist Joel Payne. "And the White House has to balance the abilities to be good public messengers while allowing their allies to deal with the pandemic as they see fit."

Payne pointed to New Jersey Gov. [Phil Murphy](#)'s decision this week to eliminate the state's mask mandate in schools beginning next month.

Murphy barely won reelection in November against Republican Jack Ciattarelli, as many voters in the state disapproved of his COVID-19 policies during the pandemic.

"It's hard not to draw a straight line between what happened in the governor's race and Murphy taking a more nuanced approach," Payne said.

Another Democratic strategist said the White House is also sending a message with its silence on the issue.

"Where is Biden on this? He would be sending a clear message if he wanted to send a clear message. But he's letting folks read between the lines and trying not to piss off the base."

There are ongoing discussions at the White House about what the next phase of the pandemic looks like as omicron wanes, but officials have stayed tight-lipped about those conversations.

"The president has been clear and has said that we are moving toward a time when COVID won't disrupt our daily lives, a time when COVID won't be a constant crisis," White House press secretary [Jen Psaki](#) told reporters Wednesday, adding there is an "active and ongoing work plan to develop a path forward."

Psaki said that the federal government has a responsibility to stick with Biden's commitment on the campaign trail to follow science and data.

"That doesn't move at the speed of politics. It moves at the speed of data," she said.

Public opinion is also shifting towards treating COVID-19 as a part of normal life, though there are barely any restrictions on people's activities. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll found that substantial majorities of Democrats, Republicans and independents reported feeling tired and frustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Governments at every level have to pay attention to this shift and if people are saying that they're willing to accept an increased measure of risk in return for increased normality in their daily lives, that is not a question that is

answerable in scientific terms," said Bill Galston, who chairs the Brookings Institution's Governance Studies Program.

Bars, restaurants and entertainment venues have been open at full capacity in many states for almost a year — and some states never imposed restrictions. A handful of cities require proof of vaccination, but masks in schools and public indoor settings are often the most ubiquitous sign of the ongoing pandemic that has killed more than 900,000 people.

A new Axios-Ipsos poll showed the public is divided on how to handle the pandemic going forward. Only 21 percent of Americans said the country should eliminate all restrictions, 21 percent said the country should still take some precautions, 23 percent favored keeping requirements in place, and 21 percent voiced support for more mask mandates and vaccine requirements.

But Galston, who served as a domestic policy adviser to former President Clinton, argued that it wouldn't do much good for the White House to release comprehensive guidance.

"I think that increasingly states will be making these decisions for themselves," Galston said. "The idea that there will be a single national guidance that all of the states will heed, at this point, I think is a fantasy."

Still, some strategists are advocating for a more cautious approach, particularly as so many unknowns remain.

- [Biden says states easing mask mandates 'probably premature'](#)
- [Boston mayor says city's school mask mandate won't be lifted when...](#)

Democratic strategist Brad Bannon said it's "better to be safe than sorry" in Biden's case.

“The Biden administration would be wise to maintain its national guidance until there is proof that a relaxation in the requirements doesn’t lead to another new wave of the pandemic,” Bannon said. “At that point and only then, should the CDC act. Better for the administration to take the immediate political heat than invite another wave.

“Fool me once, shame on you,” he added. “Fool me twice, shame on me.”