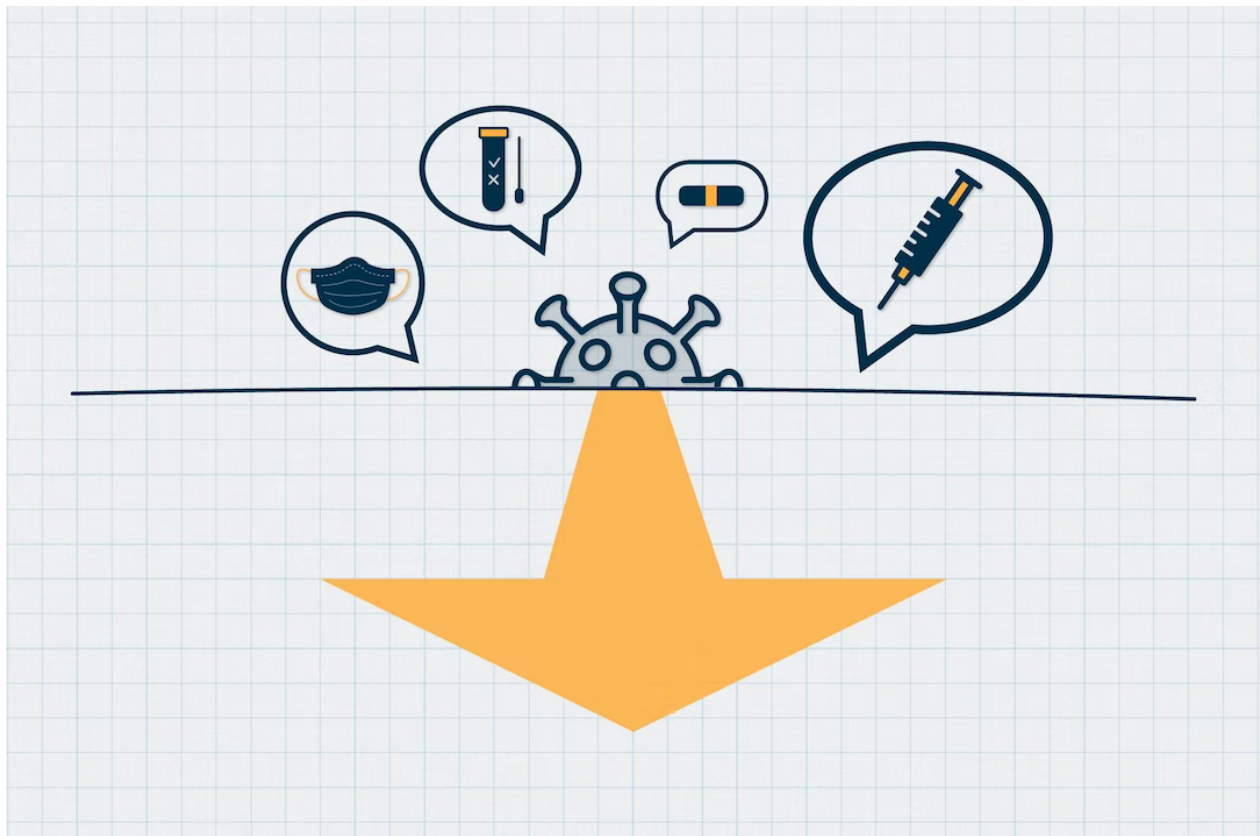


The Way Forward on COVID

**Third Way**

It has been a long two years in the thralls of COVID-19, with nearly a million American deaths and unquantifiable hardship from economic losses, learning losses, and mental health impacts. Americans are tired and looking for ways to turn the page. They are weary of the pandemic and perhaps even more weary of talking about it. However, as many in the Democratic Party point out, the pandemic is not over—older Americans, communities of color, those with serious health conditions, and the very young who cannot yet be vaccinated still face higher risks, not to mention the millions of Americans who have refused the lifesaving vaccines. To underscore, 11,784 Americans died of COVID in just the last 7 days. At the same, the brutal Omicron wave has largely passed us as daily caseloads are now at their lowest level since last July.

As the Biden administration, Congress, and Democrats at the state level look to chart a path forward and determine that it is safe to end many pandemic restrictions, it is of the utmost importance that they understand voters' state of mind and current understandings of the pandemic. That's why Third Way and Change Research conducted a poll of 2,224 US registered

voters to gauge sentiments around COVID today and find out what Americans think about winding down pandemic restrictions.

Our survey found, unsurprisingly, that Americans remain divided on many questions surrounding COVID. The survey results lead us to believe, however, that Democrats can appeal to a robust majority if they embrace personal responsibility as the primary value driving pandemic safety and move away from controlling the behavior of the small slice of anti-vax voters who have decided to reject science and put themselves and others at risk. Most voters have been vaccinated and have been acting responsibly for the past two years. They have done what's been asked of them, which has saved countless lives. And they are ready to get back to normal.

Where Voters Stand on Vaccine Mandates

Vaccine mandates for both health care workers and large businesses do have majority support, albeit by smaller margins than polling conducted by other groups showed earlier in the pandemic.

Today, among all registered voters, 55% support vaccine mandates for health care workers, while 51% support vaccine mandates for businesses with over 100 employees. This issue, as with most responses in the survey, falls on stark party lines, with 94% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents in support of vaccine mandates for businesses with over 100 employees, along with 49% of Independents, and only 10% of Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents. Vaccine mandates for health care workers are equally popular with Democratic voters and have somewhat higher levels of support with Independent voters compared to mandates for businesses, with 54% in support of these mandates and only 42% opposed.

In our poll, vaccines were widely supported and used. Over seven-in-ten (72%) respondents said they were fully vaccinated, which corresponds to government data showing a similar vaccination rate among all adults. What is most striking in these numbers is that only 1% of those not yet vaccinated expressed a willingness to be vaccinated in the future. This could change with a future COVID variant, but at this point this minority does not seem to be movable, and it is likely that much of the rest of America knows it.

Meanwhile, voters are starkly divided in their attitudes towards the unvaccinated. When asked whether “getting vaccinated is a personal choice” or “refusing to get vaccinated is irresponsible,” respondents were split cleanly down the middle, with 51% saying getting vaccinated is a personal choice and 49% saying refusing to get vaccinated is irresponsible. Clearly there is a bigger swath of voters willing to take responsibility for the safety of themselves and their communities than willing to castigate others for not doing the same.

Attitudes Toward the Unvaccinated



Q: Which of the following comes closer to your opinion, even if neither is exactly right?

Refusing to get vaccinated is irresponsible, and the unvaccinated are putting the entire community at risk and prolonging the pandemic.

49%

Getting vaccinated is a personal choice. It shouldn't be anyone else's business because it doesn't affect anyone besides that individual person.

51%

Source: Third Way partnered with Change Research to conduct an online survey of 2,224 registered voters from February 19–22, 2022. The margin of error is +/- 2.4%.

Where Voters Stand on Mask Mandates

Perhaps the most contentious debate surrounding continuing COVID restrictions at the moment is the debate around students and teachers wearing masks in schools. There are understandably strong feelings on both sides of these arguments, and Republicans have increasingly deployed them to divide parents and create political havoc in school board races.

Previous polling has shown majority support for mask mandates in schools, and our survey results were no different—just over half (53%) of voters expressed support for mask mandates in K-12 schools. To account for the nuanced views voters may hold on this sensitive and complex issue, however, we asked the same question another way—offering three answer options. While a plurality (43%) of voters still said they supported mask mandates in schools in this three-part question, another 25% said they did not support continuing mandates but said they nonetheless thought choosing to mask in schools was a smart move to keep children and teachers safe.

While school mask mandates were divisive, with voters closely divided in a generic support/oppose question, asking a more nuanced question revealed a broad coalition to which Democrats can appeal on this issue, if they focus on the value of personal responsibility for choosing to mitigate risks and keeping oneself and others safe from COVID. Democrats can support and encourage people to do what they want and need to keep themselves and others safe, without mandating compliance from those who are strongly opposed. Those who support mask mandates together with those who support masking but without mandates total a supermajority: 68% of voters. Embracing

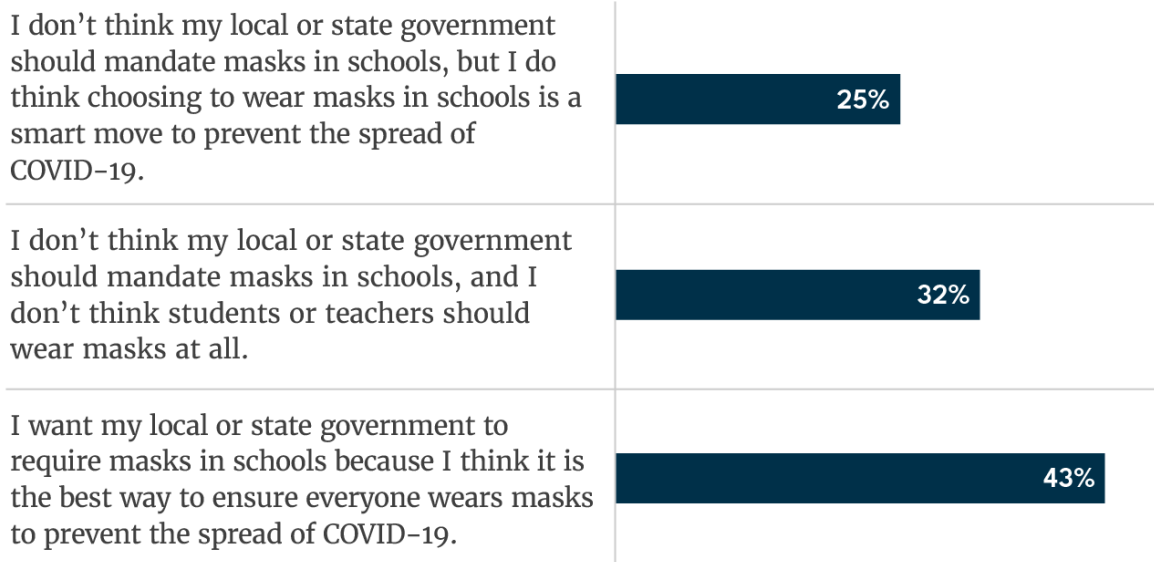
responsibility for oneself when it comes to masking in schools and elsewhere is Democrats' best bet.



Attitudes Toward School Mask Mandates



Q: Which of the following comes closer to your opinion, even if neither is exactly right?



Source: Third Way partnered with Change Research to conduct an online survey of 2,224 registered voters from February 19–22, 2022. The margin of error is +/- 2.4%.

How Voters are Responding to Easing Restrictions

It is unclear exactly how reopening and easing COVID restrictions has impacted Democratic governors' support, but our survey indicates that easing of restrictions correlates with higher approval ratings for statewide elected Democrats. We asked voters their perception of the status of reopening in their state—whether their state is greatly easing up on restrictions, moderately easing up on restrictions, or whether there has been no change in restrictions. Voters with Democratic governors who said their state is greatly easing restrictions gave their governor higher approval ratings, while those who said their state has not eased restrictions gave their governors significantly lower approval ratings. While we cannot assert causation from this data, there is a clear correlation between voters perceiving their governor as greatly easing restrictions and their approval of their governor.

Approval of Dem Governors by Perception of COVID Reopening Status

■ Total approve ■ Total disapprove

Dem-Gov & No Change



Dem-Gov & Moderately easing up on restrictions



Dem-Gov & Greatly easing up on restrictions



Source: Third Way partnered with Change Research to conduct an online survey of 2,224 registered voters from February 19–22, 2022. The margin of error is +/- 2.4%.

Similarly, when asked if they approve of the direction their governor is going on COVID, among those who perceive that their Democratic governor is greatly easing restrictions, 58% approve of the direction they are going on COVID. Among those who perceive no change from their Democratic governor, 26% approve of their governor’s direction on COVID.

Conclusion

While COVID policies remain a contentious issue, Democrats have a clear path forward as the Administration has shown with its updated COVID strategy. They should thank the broad swath of the country which has taken personal responsibility for protecting themselves, their families, and their neighbors. It is because of their actions and vigilance that the need for restrictions has largely passed. They made it possible to return to normalcy. It’s time for a new chapter where COVID “need no longer control our lives,” as President Biden has articulated.

Methodology

Third Way partnered with Change Research to conduct an online survey of 2,224 registered voters from February 19–22, 2022. The margin of error is +/- 2.4%. [Click here](#) to see results.

TOPICS

PUBLIC OPINION 195