

Opposition to Anti-Pandemic Measures in Florida, 2020 - 2022

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Robert (Chen) Bao

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

Robert (Chen) Bao

STS Advisor: Peter Norton

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Until 2020, developed countries such as the United States seemed fairly secure from large-scale epidemics. However, since January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic showed this is not the case. The outbreak has caused large social and economic damage in many states in the US, most notably Florida. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued recommendations, but the authority to adopt or forego them lay with the states. Florida's state government elected to implement relatively few mandates and even restricted local governments' responses. Eventually, about 34 percent of Floridians contracted coronavirus, compared to 31 percent of Americans generally (CDC, 2023).

The groups that opposed anti-pandemic measures in coalitions include grassroots organizations such as the Florida Freedom Alliance, Children's Health Defense, and numerous other local, loosely organized groups. They found support from state government offices, including Florida's governor, surgeon general, and attorney general, augmenting their impact. These critics of anti-pandemic measures resisted recommendations from US health agencies such as the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which administers public health policies and vaccine examinations, respectively. They also include grassroots groups like the pro-masking parents in Florida, who aimed to restore the pandemic-related mandates.

The failure of anti-pandemic measures in Florida was no accident. It was largely due to organized opposition to the anti-pandemic measures, and the political support opponents achieved. Through litigation and media campaigns, the opponents weakened the measures in Florida.

Review of Research

Studies have been conducted on multiple topics related to the interest groups' approaches. They include research on groups focused on COVID-19-related policies, as well as groups targeting similar governmental policies in the past.

Researchers have investigated how groups opposing pandemic-related policies advanced their agendas. Researchers have found that the groups have used demonstrations to raise their visibility (Gerbaudo, 2020; Kishi, 2021). McNeil-Willson (2020) has also shown that the groups have used propaganda to gain popular trust, helping them achieve their goals. Studies have also shown that the groups have used social media to spread contested information that fits into their narratives (Schulman, 2020; Sobo, 2021). Additionally, Maréchal (2020) has found that the groups have utilized targeted advertising services, provided by technology companies like Twitter and Meta (formally Facebook), to draw larger audiences to their claims.

In addition to these approaches adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, studies have also analyzed the general approaches interest groups took against restrictive measures from the government. Hussain, et. al (2018) showed that anti-vaccine interest groups – years before the pandemic – have used propaganda to instigate fear and distrust against the public health measure. Additionally, Andrews (2015) showed that pro-Prohibition activists have framed alcohol as a threat brought by immigrants, thus gaining support from anti-immigrant rural, white residents in the 1920s. Studies have also shown that interest groups – US-based and international – have engaged in practices like media and political spending to reach more audiences and make larger impacts (Bloodgood, 2011; Steidley, 2017).

Lastly, studies have been conducted on the psychological factors that help determine the success of the groups advancing their agendas. Evans (2020) has shown that a strong sense of

cohesion among group members can help determine whether it may successfully advance its agenda. In addition, effective leadership is a crucial factor for success (Boerner, 2006; Filippidou, 2014). In addition, Hall (1988) has shown that a high level of commitment of group members is a deciding factor in the success of a group's agenda. Shared group identities between group members are also shown to increase the likelihood of the group succeeding in the long term (Wagner, 1995).

And for interest groups that aim to spread their message to a broad audience, Cialdini (2009) has shown that testimonials or statistics that suggest that many other people agree with the message – termed social proof – increase the chance of persuading people. Lastly, Putnam, et. al (1992) has shown that framing – the way that information is presented – can impact the persuasiveness of the message significantly.

Grassroot Support

To advance their agenda, anti-pandemic measures groups in Florida gained grassroots support. They leveraged ordinary people's influence mainly in two ways: mobilizing demonstrations, and shaping school board decisions.

Grassroots Efforts against Anti-pandemic Mandates through Demonstrations

As the interest groups worked to oppose anti-pandemic measures, they voiced their concern by hosting protests. And among the protests, many were organized by grassroots organizations like Florida Freedom Alliance. The alliance is an anti-vaccine group founded by Florida citizens. Since 2020, it has argued that the vaccine mandate is a “violation of citizens’ personal medical choices,” and an “ultimate overreach” from the government. To resist and

repeal them, the alliance held Rally in Tally, a demonstration in Tallahassee, drawing attention from well-known media outlets like ABC (ABC 27, & Alliance, 2019b). Similarly, Children’s Health Defense, another organization against pandemic measures like masking, hosted events named “Worldwide Walkouts.” Through the event, they urged people to protest anti-pandemic mandates by taking a day off from work, thereby putting pressure on businesses (Defense, 2021a). The organization argued that such demonstration is necessary to protest the “unprecedented loss of freedom” since the pandemic and that they refuse to comply with the mandates that, in their opinion, were “allowed to trump individual rights and freedoms” (Defense, 2021b). As these organized efforts continued, the interest groups gained media coverage, amplifying their voice to the general public.

Meanwhile, most grassroots demonstrations against pandemic measures were unorganized, and many of them were minimally planned. For example, in April 2020, a group of protesters marched in Tallahassee, demanding the state allow businesses to return to work. One protester stated that they want to send a message to the governor, that he should “open Florida,” and “get Florida back to living and back to working and back to producing” (Spencer, 2020). And in May 2020, a group of 20 to 30 protesters called for the gym to reopen outside a courthouse in Clearwater, by doing squats and sit-ups (Klar, 2020). And during a 2021 protest at the Broward School Board headquarters, a protester set a dozen face masks on fire in protest of the mask mandates at local schools. He can be heard saying in the video, “It is time to cast off this symbol of tyranny, this symbol of child abuse – we will not stand for it anymore” (CBSMiami, 2021). Although these protests lack planning or backing from powerful individuals, they popularized the interest groups’ opposition, helping them succeed.

Grassroots Efforts Against the Measures in School Boards

Grassroots efforts to oppose anti-pandemic measures went beyond protests. In 2020 - 2022, ordinary people used their power in local school boards to shape the policy against strict anti-pandemic mandates, voiding them for K-12 schools in Florida. For example, in August 2021, a parent on the School Board at Pinellas spoke against school mask mandates because she viewed it as a government overreach. She opined, “It’s our right as parents to make the medical decisions. What is the government going to try to take away from us next?” (Solochek, 2021b). In November 2021, Florida’s governor signed a ban on mask mandates into law; and since then, many parents opposed mask mandates for fear of violating the state rule (Lewis, 2021). Referring to the ban, parent and school board member Rich Levinso stated, “The majority of the board would like to implement [the mask mandates] for students and staff. But due to the [ban] that was passed in November, our hands are tied” (NBCMiami, 2021).

Still, some parents on school boards decided to defy the ban. Parents on the school board in Sarasota implemented a mask mandate despite the governor’s ban, citing the need to protect children from COVID-19 during “a crisis like we have never seen before” (Cassels, & Brown, 2021). Another parent in Broward county said that the board decided to defy the ban because they “believe that we have a constitutional obligation to protect the lives of our students and staff” (Delkic, 2021). Still, the rule-defying boards were a minority: among all 67 counties in Florida, only 12 of them carried through a mask-mandates by early 2022 (Luscombe, 2022). The groups opposing strict anti-pandemic measures largely achieved their goals with grassroots support at school boards.

Support from the State Government Authorities

Support from the Governor of Florida

Interest groups also gained support from the state government's executive authority to counter anti-pandemic measures. Namely, they were supported by the Governor and the Surgeon General. With their backing, the group directly shaped the state's pandemic reaction, nullifying federal anti-epidemic measures at a local level.

Among all government support to groups that oppose anti-pandemic measures, the support from the Governor of Florida was the most significant. As the head of the state government, the official shaped local policies to counter federal-level measures like mask and vaccine mandates. Since the early months of the pandemic, the official has criticized strict measures proposed by the CDC as a "violation to constitutional freedoms" (Government of Florida, 2021a). He also suggested that the measures lead to job losses; claiming that "nobody should lose their job due to heavy-handed COVID mandates," the official led the state government to work against them to "protect Floridians from losing their jobs." He approved bills to penalize employers for enforcing vaccine mandates, with fines ranging from \$10,000 to \$50,000 per employee involved (Government of Florida, 2021b). He also asserted that the measures violated "Parents' Freedom to Choose," proposed legislation barring mask mandates in schools, and later signed it into law (Cohen, 2021).

Support from the Florida Surgeon General

The groups opposing strict anti-pandemic measures also obtained support from Florida's surgeon general, a public health official appointed by the governor. The surgeon general led public health operations in the state; and since his appointment in early 2022, he has used his

authority to oppose and revoke anti-pandemic measures at the local level, and publicize potential downsides of the anti-pandemic policies.

First, the surgeon general has invalidated strict health policies from the federal government by issuing lenient state-level guidelines. By doing so, he lifted requirements to follow the strict anti-pandemic measures, helping the interest groups advance their goal. For example, in 2021, he issued an order to exempt private employers from COVID-19 vaccine mandates, becoming the first state to contradict the CDC's guidelines (Surgeon General of Florida, 2021). And in early 2022, he recommended against immunizing healthy children with the COVID-19 vaccines (NBCMiami, 2022). Later that year, the surgeon general also published guidelines suggesting men aged between 18 to 39 not to immunize with the vaccines (Department of Health, 2022). These guidelines mean fewer businesses and residents will need to follow the federal vaccine and mask mandates. They have also made a visible impact, contributing to the over 7.5 million COVID-19 cases in Florida (Johns Hopkins University, 2022).

Besides invalidating the measures, the surgeon general has supported the interest groups by promoting contested information on the vaccine's effectiveness, helping fuel public distrust of the anti-pandemic measure. When the surgeon general issued guidelines against vaccinating healthy children, he cited studies to support his position. The scientists that authored the studies, however, disagreed with his position and claimed that their work has been misrepresented. One of the authors stated that she believes "there is cherry-picking of sentences to support what (the state) wanted," and another said he was "distressed that [his] quote was used to support ... a bad policy decision" (Hodgson, 2022). Additionally, when suggesting against men between 18 to 39 from getting the vaccines, the surgeon general highlighted an anonymous, non-peer-reviewed

study that showed an 84% increase in cardiac-related deaths following vaccinations. This research, however, was later contested by federal health agencies like FDA and CDC for lack of standard scientific practice or conclusive evidence (Department of Health & Califf, 2022). As Florida's leading public health official, the surgeon general had significant authority and backing from the state government; therefore, his promotion of the contested public health information was particularly effective in fueling distrust of public health measures, which helps the interest groups oppose them.

Use of Legal Actions against Anti-Pandemic Measures

Interest groups have also used legal actions – by filing lawsuits, for example – to further their goal against anti-pandemic measures. By challenging the measures in courts, the interest groups could potentially overturn them completely, thereby achieving their objectives. The lawsuits made significant impacts in some cases, and they represented a notable aspect of the effort to oppose the anti-pandemic measures.

Lawsuits against Anti-Pandemic Measures

Among the lawsuits filed against the anti-pandemic measures, nearly all were from Florida's attorney general, an elected state official. The chief legal officer of the state, the attorney general sued the federal government for enacting strict mask mandates. In mid-2021, she led the state's legal challenges to a federal vaccine passport requirement for cruise ships. She stated that the lawsuit “is absolutely essential for the future of what the CDC is permitted to do and allowed to do,” and that the state “had to bring suit before [the CDC] could even start moving along” (Gancarski, 2021). In November 2021, she filed lawsuits challenging the White

House's vaccine mandates on medical workers. The attorney general claimed that the vaccine mandates will "exacerbate the healthcare worker shortage crisis," and that her office filed the lawsuit to "protect doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals ... against this power-hungry administration's unlawful mandate" (Attorney General of Florida, 2021). Finally, in 2022, the attorney general filed another lawsuit against CDC's mask mandate on public transportation, calling the measure "shortsighted, heavy-handed and unlawful," and suggesting that they "have no scientific backing" (Attorney General of Florida, 2022). These examples demonstrate the breadth of the legal challenges to the anti-pandemic measures, and they aligned well with the interest groups' agenda.

Although the lawsuits were sometimes unsuccessful, they were often able to help the interest groups achieve their goal. In 2021, US supreme court blocked Florida's challenge against the vaccine mandate on healthcare workers, marking a loss for the attorney general; the office has since dropped its appeal (Saunders, 2022). The latter two lawsuits on mask mandates on cruises and public transportation, however, were successful. In both cases, they forced the CDC to "redraft the guideline" to meet the state's demand (Benitez 2021, Bendix 2022). These results showed that legal actions are at least sometimes effective, and they played a considerable role in advancing the interest groups' agenda against anti-pandemic measures.

Lawsuits for Stricter Anti-Pandemic Measures

Although the vast majority of the legal actions are used by Florida elected officials, against the anti-pandemic measures, there are some notable examples of lawsuits supporting the mandates. They are often filed by groups and regular citizens that were impacted by the repeal of the measures.

Parent groups played a visible role in advocating for stricter anti-epidemic measures using lawsuits. These groups are usually composed of parents who have school-age children who would likely become infected with COVID-19 without anti-pandemic measures like vaccine and mask mandates. These parents have a vested interest in protecting their children; and thus, they were motivated to challenge the anti-pandemic measure Florida officials in court. Pro-masking parents in Florida, the plaintiff in a lawsuit against the Florida governor, are one notable example (District Court Of Appeal, 2021). In the filed motion, the parents cited that the state constitution guarantees their right to send their kids to “safe, secure” public schools, arguing that Florida’s mask-optional policy failed to protect people and their children” (Ebrahimji, 2021). Some of the plaintiffs also stated that their children have special medical conditions and that the Florida government’s resistance to implementing mandates violated their Constitutional rights protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act. One parent rejected Florida’s hands-off approach, asserting that the government “can’t leave the Americans with Disabilities Act up to parents individually ... These are decisions that need to be made at a local level” (WFLA News, 2021). The parents’ lawsuits, however, failed to achieve a satisfactory legal outcome. While one of the lawsuits was heard and ruled favorably to the parents (Solocheck, 2021a), the ruling was later overturned by the appeal court, reinstating the governor’s mandate ban (Atterbury, 2021). And eventually, most Florida school districts opted not to enact a mask mandate, which means that the groups opposing anti-pandemic measures accomplished their stated goals.

Leverage of Internet Media to Amplify the Influence

The interest groups needed to gain a large number of followers to advance their goal; mass media has been crucial in helping them do so. The groups have leveraged both novel forms

of media like websites, and Social Media extensively to advance their agenda. By orchestrating these channels of communication, they gained momentum and a broad audience for their goal.

The advent of the Internet gave many small groups a channel to spread their views and gain an audience. And during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Internet has continued to play such a role. Many groups opposing anti-pandemic measures created their websites, which enabled them to gain more followers. For example, The Florida Freedom Alliance, an anti-vaccine mandate group, created a dedicated website to advertise their rally, Rally in Tally, to oppose the widely-used anti-pandemic measure (Alliance, 2019a). Similarly, Children’s Health Defense, an influential anti-mandate group, has also used websites to publicize their views and events (Defense, 2021a & 2021b). The group has also used a dedicated page to highlight its objectives; asserting “the greatest crisis that America faces today is the chronic disease epidemic in America’s children,” the organization used its site to gain followership and call for donations for its cause. (Defense, n.d.). Through the website and its other advertising channels, Children’s Health Defense gained over \$21 million in revenue, gains, and other support in 2020. Such a financial foundation enabled it to oppose anti-pandemic measures effectively along with other groups in Florida (Defense, 2020).

In addition, social media has played a crucial role in interest groups’ success. One prominent example of such is Reopen Florida, a group aimed to oppose pandemic-related lockdowns, which used Facebook extensively to share news posts and to organize rallies against pandemic restrictions. Claiming that it was “time to stop this nonsense and get Floridians back to work” (Reopen Florida, 2020a), the group shared endorsing information on politicians that opposed lockdowns, as well as alleged misuse of authority from federal agencies that imposed them (Reopen Florida, 2020b & 2020c). The group has also used Facebook to organize a rally

endorsing the then-US president, a prominent anti-lockdown politician (Reopen Florida, 2020d). Using Facebook, a well-known social media platform, the group was able to reach more audiences within months. Although its actions have drawn criticism from local news outlets (Wolf, 2020), the group has largely succeeded in amplifying its message.

Conclusion

The opposition to anti-pandemic measures was not a crude attempt against the existing social institutions; rather, it was a well-orchestrated effort from a diverse set of groups with a clear agenda, leveraging a wide array of approaches. This is significant for future policymakers, as they need to keep the impacts of the groups' actions in mind when creating public health policy frameworks to reduce further opposition. Political scientists also need to further study these actions' long-term impact on the democratic institution, to mitigate the potential damages and better protect American citizens' health.

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