

**YOUR-VOICE | Opinion**

*This piece represents a collection of opinions from various sources, separate from those of this publication.*

# Opinion: Politics, not public health, drives dangerous COVID bills

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The third called session of the Texas Legislature convened in September with instructions to pass legislation regarding whether any state or local governmental entities in Texas can mandate that an individual receive a COVID-19 vaccine, and if so, what exemptions would apply to such a mandate. The Immunization Partnership is concerned that a broad interpretation of Gov. Greg Abbott's proclamation could put Texas lives, businesses and families at risk at a time when more than 68,000 Texans have died since the start of the pandemic. That is more than the population of Georgetown.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, some Texas politicians have made public health experts the common political enemy, instead of the virus. A Kaiser Health News analysis found legislators in Texas and 25 other states are moving with great force to weaken the abilities of public health experts to protect the public health.

We oppose several bills introduced in the current special session because they fail to protect Texans and further erode the vital role of our state's public health and medical experts in combating this pandemic.

Bills in the Senate, such as SB 11, would prohibit a governmental entity from requiring proof of a COVID-19 vaccination for access; prevent employers from requiring proof of vaccinations or immunization; and expand non-medical vaccination exemptions.

Several House bills have similar language, such as HB 39. Others would make it a misdemeanor crime and a licensure suspension for a company or hospital to require a COVID immunization; prohibit or restrict private and public health plans, schools, government agencies, and private universities from requiring a COVID vaccination; and prohibit students with a non-medical vaccine exemption from being excluded from school during a declared emergency or pandemic.

All of the above measures would result in lower overall vaccination rates and make Texas a less safe place to live. They would also cause economic and academic turmoil as Texans are forced to undergo surge after surge of COVID-19. Political considerations, not public health interests, drive these harmful bills.

Dr. Peter Hotez, a member of The Immunization Partnership Scientific Advisory Council, and Rekha Lakshmanan, our director of advocacy and public policy, are among the authors of an article published last month in *The Lancet*, which called for uncoupling vaccination from politics. They correctly point out that Texas Republican and Democratic lawmakers have frequently worked together to pass vaccine legislation to protect and improve our state's public health.

We expect our elected officials to represent the best interests of their constituents, and not just the vocal few who push agendas harmful to Texans. We encourage you to contact your state representative and senator to tell them to oppose these dangerous bills.

The power of the people comes from the voice of the people. It is time Texas lawmakers hear our voices.

*Dugan is the incoming chair, and McGee is an incoming member of the executive committee of The Immunization Partnership, a statewide nonprofit organization that seeks a community free from vaccine-preventable diseases.*