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Why is Florida's governor ramping up his anti-vaccine rhetoric?

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On 13 December 2022, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis held what he ominously called a “Covid-19 mRNA vaccine accountability roundtable.”¹ The event featured his surgeon general, Joseph Ladapo, and Martin Kulldorff and Jay Bhattacharya, authors of the Great Barrington Declaration and now senior scholars at the Brownstone Institute, a libertarian think tank.

The roundtable was a high visibility opportunity for the governor to escalate his opposition to covid-19 vaccines. As Dylan Scott, health care reporter for Vox noted, the roundtable was part of an intensifying campaign by DeSantis to “discredit the covid-19 vaccines, the drug companies that produced them, and the public health officials and government leaders who urged Americans to get them.”²

The event did not come out of the blue. DeSantis and Ladapo have previously alarmed the public health community, both in Florida and nationwide, with their sceptical statements about covid-19 vaccines and their suggestion that the public has been misled about the value of vaccination.³ In February 2021, Ladapo called universal covid-19 vaccination “a chimera” and questioned the vaccine’s safety and effectiveness.⁴ In March 2022, the two men stood side by side as Ladapo proudly announced that Florida would be the first US state not to recommend covid-19 vaccination for children.⁵

DeSantis ramped up the rhetoric even further at the roundtable, announcing the formation of a statewide grand jury investigation into alleged “crimes and wrongdoings” related to the vaccines, though he offered few details on what the jury would examine. Asked what he thought DeSantis hopes to accomplish with the investigation, Anthony Fauci, outgoing White House medical adviser, told *The Hill*: “I don’t have a clue ... what he’s asking for. I mean, we have a vaccine that, unequivocally, is highly effective and safe and has saved literally millions of lives.”⁶

Benjamin Mazer, assistant professor of pathology at the Johns Hopkins University, pushed back against the Florida governor’s suggestion that the public has been misled. “To believe the covid vaccines have serious hidden safety issues,” he wrote, “is to believe in conspiracy theory. It requires not just distrusting FDA (they’re fallible) but regulatory agencies around the world, all of whom have approved the vaccines and recommended them for the general population. This is to say nothing of the broad peer reviewed literature supporting vaccination, and an almost universal consensus among doctors and scientists. There are specific vaccine policy questions in which there is real debate, but not about their fundamental safety and efficacy.”⁷

Why, then, is the Florida governor taking his vaccine scepticism to the next level? It only makes sense as a political ploy. As Albert Lin, cardiac

electrophysiologist at North western Medicine, said, the grand jury investigation is “a purely political exercise that is 99% likely to not enlighten public policy over C19 [covid-19] vaccination.”⁸ DeSantis is widely expected to run for US President in 2024, and pushing vaccine scepticism plays well with the conservative base who he will need to win over if he is to beat Donald Trump to be the Republican presidential nominee.

DeSantis holds an early lead over Trump in polling among Republican primary voters.⁹ He could shore up this lead if he can pry away more conservative voters. Pushing a message that government vaccine campaigns—in cahoots with companies—are over reaching is likely to play well with voters who reject “big government.”

This anti-vaccine message also helps to detract from the Florida governor’s own disastrous performance in averting covid-19 deaths. As Oliver Johnson, mathematician at the University of Bristol, noted, if Florida were a country, its covid-19 death rate (3,874 covid-19 deaths per million) would put it at “10th worst in the world, behind Peru and various East European countries that got slammed pre-vaccine.”¹⁰

As the US heads into winter, and is seeing rising covid-19 hospital admissions and deaths, concentrated in older people, Florida is doing particularly poorly at protecting its most vulnerable citizens from death.¹¹ Booster coverage rates among residents of nursing homes in Florida are the second lowest among all states in the country—which is entirely unsurprising given the stances of the Florida governor and his public health team. It is a great irony that the Florida governor enthusiastically adopted the debunked Great Barrington Declaration, which argued for “focused protection” of older people; a strategy that, without vaccination, has not been proven to work.¹²

And there’s another irony. On the day DeSantis held his roundtable, a new study was published by researchers at the University of Maryland, York University, and Yale School of Public Health that estimated that the US Covid-19 vaccination campaign prevented over 18 million hospital admissions and over three million deaths.¹³ The study authors also noted that the campaign “saved the U.S. more than \$1 trillion in medical costs, and has preserved hospital resources, kept children in school, and allowed for reopening of businesses and other activities.”

DeSantis could have embraced the study’s findings. But instead of encouraging more Florida residents to get vaccinated, or announcing a strategy to get boosters to older Floridians in nursing homes, he doubled down on his anti-vaccine rhetoric. It’s a political stunt that plays well to the right wing of the

party, but leaves many of the most vulnerable people unprotected.

Competing interests: GY has received four doses of mRNA vaccination, and believes that Covid-19 vaccines are very safe and effective. He was a member of an unpaid advisory group during the design of COVAX, the global multilateral mechanism that aimed to achieve global vaccine equity. He has received research funding from the Carnegie Foundation for a two-year study aimed at understanding key design features of a future global pandemic vaccine facility.

Provenance and peer review: commissioned, not peer reviewed.

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