Republicans Fret Over RFK Jr.'s Anti-Vaccine Policies While MAHA Moms Stew

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Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is fielding pressure from the White House to relax his controversial approach to vaccine policies as the midterms near, but his most steadfast supporters are pressing for more aggressive action — like restricting COVID-19 vaccines and pesticide use — to carry out the Make America Healthy Again agenda.

The tensions risk fraying Kennedy's dynamic MAHA coalition, potentially driving away critical supporters who helped fuel President Donald Trump's 2024 election win.

The movement's grassroots membership includes suburbanites, women, and independents who are generally newer entrants to the GOP and laser-focused on achieving certain results around the nation's food supply and vaccines.

Promoting healthy foods tops their list and will be at the center of the White House's pitch to voters during the midterm election cycle.

"President Trump's mass appeal partly lies in his willingness to question our country's broken status quo," White House spokesperson Kush Desai said in a statement. "That includes food standards and nutrition guidelines that have helped fuel America's chronic disease epidemic. Overhauling our food supply and nutrition standards to deliver on the MAHA agenda remains a key priority for both the President and his administration."

At the same time, with most Americans opposing efforts to undermine vaccines, the White House has cooled on Kennedy's aggressive policies to curb vaccines and MAHA's interest in tamping down environmental chemicals that are linked to disease.

The result: Republicans are realizing just how demanding the MAHA vote can be. Moms Across America leader Zen Honeycutt warned that Republicans are facing their biggest setback yet with the MAHA movement, after Trump signed an executive order to support production of glyphosate,

a herbicide the World Health Organization has linked to cancer.

“It has caused the biggest uproar in MAHA,” Honeycutt said during a CNN interview in late February.

A White House Warning

Trump’s top pollster, Tony Fabrizio, cautioned in December that an embrace of Kennedy’s anti-vaccine policies could cost politicians their jobs this year.

Eight in 10 MAHA voters and 86% of all voters believe vaccines save lives, his poll of 1,000 voters in 35 competitive districts found.

“In the districts that will decide the control of the House of Representatives next year, Republican and Democratic candidates who support eliminating long standing vaccine requirements will pay a price in the election,” a memo on the poll stated.

The White House has since shaken up senior staffing at HHS, including removing Jim O’Neill from the deputy secretary role and his job as acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in which he curtailed the agency’s childhood vaccination recommendations. Ralph Abraham, a vaccine skeptic who as Louisiana’s surgeon general suspended its vaccination promotion program last year, stepped down as the CDC’s principal deputy director in late February.

Jay Bhattacharya, a doctor who said in congressional testimony that he doesn’t believe vaccines cause autism, is now running the CDC in addition to directing the National Institutes of Health.

Though Trump himself has frequently espoused doubts and mistruths about vaccines, polling around anti-vaccine policy has undoubtedly shaken the White House’s confidence during a tough midterm election year, said former U.S. Rep. Larry Bucshon, an Indiana Republican and retired doctor who left Congress last year.

Bucshon said Republicans can’t risk alienating voters, especially parents of young children who might be moved by Democratic attack ads on the topic at a time when hundreds of measles cases are popping up across the U.S.

“That’s the reason you’re seeing the White House get nervous about it,” Bucshon said. “This is just the political reality of it.”

Kennedy built some of his MAHA following with calls to end federal approval and recommendations for the COVID vaccines during the pandemic. The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, a federal panel of outside experts who were handpicked by Kennedy to develop national vaccine recommendations, is expected to review and possibly withdraw its recommendation for covid shots. Its February meeting was postponed and is now scheduled for March 18-19, when the panel plans to discuss injuries from COVID vaccines, HHS spokesperson Andrew Nixon confirmed on March 11.

“I’m not deaf to the calls that we need to get the COVID vaccine mRNA products off the market. All I can say is stay tuned and wait for the upcoming ACIP meeting,” ACIP Vice Chair Robert Malone said on MJTruthUltra, a conservative account on the social platform X, before the meeting was postponed. “If the FDA won’t act, there are other entities that will.”

No Fury Like Scorned MAHA Moms

Bipartisan support is also extremely high — above 80% — for another core tenet of the MAHA agenda: eliminating the use of certain pesticides on crops.

But MAHA leaders were incensed when Trump issued a February 18 executive order promoting the production of glyphosate, a chemical used in weed killers sprayed on U.S. crops and which Kennedy has railed against and sued over because of its reported links to cancer.

“There’s gonna be ups and downs, and there is zero question that this week was a down,” Calley Means, a senior adviser to the health secretary and a former White House employee, told a MAHA rally in Austin, Texas, on February 26. “I am not going to gaslight or sugarcoat it: This glyphosate thing was extremely disappointing. Bobby’s disappointed.”

Despite deep unhappiness from MAHA followers, Kennedy endorsed Trump’s executive order defending access to such pesticides.

“I support President Trump’s Executive Order to bring agricultural chemical production back to the United States and end our near-total reliance on adversarial nations,” Kennedy wrote on social media.

Without offering policy changes, Kennedy promised a future agricultural system that “is less dependent on harmful chemicals.”

White House officials are now trying to downplay the executive order.

“The President’s executive order was not an endorsement of any product or practice,” Desai said in a statement.

But that’s done little to dampen criticism from leading MAHA influencers who had hoped, with Kennedy’s influence in the administration, that the chemical would be banned.

Some Democrats see an opening.

Rep. Chellie Pingree of Maine earned cheers from MAHA loyalists for co-sponsoring legislation with Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) to undo the executive order.

“The Trump Admin. cannot keep paying lip service to #MAHA while propping up Big Chemical like this and choosing corporate profits over Americans’ health,” Pingree said on X.

Vani Hari, a prominent MAHA influencer who promotes healthy eating, responded on X with a

“HELL YES.”

‘Eat Real Food’

The White House and Kennedy are refocusing their messaging to emphasize one of the most popular elements of the MAHA platform: food.

At the start of the year, Kennedy unveiled new dietary guidelines that emphasize vegetables, fruits, and meats while urging Americans to avoid ultraprocessed foods.

Kennedy has leaned into his new “Eat Real Food” campaign, launching a nationwide tour in January. Ahead of the late-February MAHA rally, he stopped at a barbecue joint in Austin where he took photos with stacks of smoked ribs and grilled sausages. Large “Eat Real Food” signs have been provided for crowds of supporters to hold up during major announcements at HHS’ headquarters this year.

Focusing on nutrition will please MAHA moms, suburban swing voters, and conservatives alike, said Michael Burgess, a physician and former Republican representative from Texas.

“They keep them happy by talking about the food pyramid,” Burgess said. “That’s an area where there is broad, bipartisan support.”

Indeed, Fabrizio’s poll shows equal support — 95% — among respondents who voted for former Vice President Kamala Harris and those who voted for Trump for requiring labeling of harmful ingredients in ultraprocessed foods.

Trump is keenly aware that Kennedy’s MAHA movement is key to his political survival. At a Cabinet meeting in January, Kennedy rattled off a list of his agency’s efforts researching autism and tackling high drug prices.

Trump leaned in at the table.

“I read an article today where they think Bobby is going to be really great for the Republican Party in the midterms,” Trump said, “so I have to be very careful that Bobby likes us.”

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