**Headline:** How to Cure America’s Vaccine Paranoia

**Teaser:** The pandemic won’t end until we overcome our fear and loathing of scientific remedies and achieve “herd immunity”—but of the kind that is possible through mass vaccinations, not inaction.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

**Author Bio:** Sonali Kolhatkar is the founder, host and executive producer of [“Rising Up With Sonali,”](https://www.risingupwithsonali.com/) a television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Economy for All*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Economy, Opinion, News, North America/United States of America, Health Care, Time-Sensitive, Media, History, Trump, Politics, Social Justice, Social Benefits

**[Article Body:]**

The end is in sight, we are told. The cavalry has arrived in the form of safe and effective vaccines for COVID-19 on the verge of approval and being manufactured for widespread distribution. The [stock market has surged](https://www.wsj.com/articles/after-pfizers-vaccine-bullseye-stock-market-euphoria-is-sensible-11604935802) in response to every pharmaceutical company’s press release of its latest successful clinical trial. Americans are expecting an end to this traumatic chapter of our history and are ready to turn the page on the year 2020.

Except that if the United States has led the world in per capita infections and deaths because of deep skepticism from an intransigent population toward even the mildest of safety precautions, do we expect the same people refusing to wear a face mask to take not one, but [two doses](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2020/12/09/covid-vaccine-timing-second-pfizer-and-moderna-shots-not-critical/3867521001/) of a brand-new vaccine? We may have safe and effective vaccines soon enough, but through a cruelly ironic twist of our nation’s perverted political climate, society may simply refuse to save itself.

Several key segments of the American population have varied reasons for vaccine skepticism. Among Black and brown communities, there is a deep-seated and justifiable mistrust due to historical government-sanctioned medical abuse that is [reflected in new polls](https://salud-america.org/study-most-black-and-latino-adults-hesitant-to-take-a-covid-19-vaccine/) about the COVID-19 vaccine. On the American left, mistrust of large pharmaceutical companies putting [profits above the public health](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2019/08/30/473911/big-pharma-reaps-profits-hurting-everyday-americans/)—again justifiable—is driving cynicism about the motives of private corporations that have had piles [of taxpayer cash](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/letters-to-the-editor/pharmas-billions-sprang-from-the-taxpayer-dime/2020/11/16/6e44a4f0-25d2-11eb-9c4a-0dc6242c4814_story.html) thrown at them.

Among liberal elites, the growing popularity of “[clean eating](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/aug/11/why-we-fell-for-clean-eating),” “[wellness](https://daily.jstor.org/the-false-promises-of-wellness-culture/),” and taking [personal responsibility](https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204251404574342170072865070) for one’s health through expensive diets and rigorous exercise regimes has seeded an insidious movement that strives for purity as a pathway to well-being and health. Part of that movement includes prizing natural remedies over chemical ones, including for such life-threatening diseases as cancer. It has also fueled the idea that medications including vaccines are “[dangerous](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-medication-can-be-dan_b_643690)” contaminants to our bodies. Quack doctors like [Andrew Wakefield](https://www.vox.com/2018/2/27/17057990/andrew-wakefield-vaccines-autism-study), celebrities like [Jenny McCarthy](https://www.latimes.com/business/hiltzik/la-fi-mh-jenny-mccarthy-antivaxxer-public-menace-20150127-column.html), and political figures like [Robert Kennedy Jr.](https://www.texasmonthly.com/politics/an-afternoon-with-robert-f-kennedy-jr-and-the-texas-anti-vaccine-movement/) have caused serious damage to trust in vaccine safety. Before the pandemic, one of the biggest fears among public health experts was the resurgence of measles [fueled by falling vaccination rates](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2769677).

On the right, a similar vaccine skepticism has emerged as anti-vaccination activists [court conservatives as allies](https://www.thedailybeast.com/anti-vaxxers-are-cozying-up-to-the-far-right-online), creating an [unlikely coalition](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/vaccine-skeptics-find-unexpected-allies-conservative-gop). Republican Senator Ron Johnson went as far as inviting [an anti-vaccine doctor](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/06/us/politics/anti-vax-scientist-senate-hearing.html) to testify before a Senate committee recently. Also prevalent is the notion that “herd immunity”—which is a term used to describe the threshold of safety that vaccines achieve if enough people take them—can be achieved simply by [enough people catching the disease](https://www.foxnews.com/media/california-doctor-questions-stay-at-home-orders). President Donald Trump has been one of the [chief proponents](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/08/trump-cant-kick-his-coronavirus-herd-immunity-kick/) of this thoroughly [debunked](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02948-4) idea.

Scientists have estimated that at least [two-thirds of the population](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-immunity-analysis/analysis-can-first-covid-19-vaccines-bring-herd-immunity-experts-have-doubts-idUSKBN27Y124) need to be vaccinated in order to stop the spread of COVID-19. In August, [less than half of the population](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/poll-less-half-americans-say-they-ll-get-coronavirus-vaccine-n1236971) was willing to take a vaccine—an unsurprising number considering the widespread mistrust of vaccines in general. Republicans are [more skeptical](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/12/04/price-republicans-war-reality-vaccine-denial/) than Democrats, which is also not surprising given that a [majority of GOP voters](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/24/poll-republicans-support-trump-2024-439757) still support Trump—a president whose relentless lies and science skepticism form the basis of his leadership. A nation so steeped in misinformation that it ushered in a charlatan to take power for four long years is naturally susceptible to suspicion of vaccines.

Some of the fear stems from disbelief that an effective vaccine could be produced in such a short period of time. Indeed, past efforts at developing effective vaccines have taken [many years](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/30/opinion/coronavirus-covid-vaccine.html). In that context, the federal government’s “[Operation Warp Speed](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/trumps-promise-of-warp-speed-fuels-anti-vaccine-movement-in-fertile-corners-of-the-web/2020/05/20/c2b3d408-9ab2-11ea-89fd-28fb313d1886_story.html)” vaccine project has sparked fear. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, explained, “People don’t understand that, because when they hear ‘Operation Warp Speed,’ they think, ‘Oh, my God, they’re jumping over all these steps and they’re going to put us at risk.’” But in fact, decades of [critical medical research](https://apnews.com/article/years-research-groundwork-covid-19-shots-f204192f07cfcc3503dc9c7687ae6269) formed the foundation upon which companies like Pfizer and Moderna have developed the mRNA type of vaccines that have thus far exceeded scientists’ expectations in clinical trials. Fauci explained, “The speed is a reflection of years of work that went before.”

There is another insidious obstacle to a vaccination program. We live in a nation enamored by libertarian ideals. The concept of collective action to protect the common good flies in the face of “individual liberty” and the [Ayn-Rand-inspired notions](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/column-this-is-what-happens-when-you-take-ayn-rand-seriously) that each American is solely responsible for their own happiness and well-being. This idea forms the basis of our health care system—or lack thereof. The coronavirus pandemic hit the United States at a time when we have no publicly funded universal health care system to speak of. The U.S. government’s message to Americans is essentially that, unless you fall below the poverty line, have a disability, or are over the age of 65, you are on your own to seek health insurance and health care wherever you can find it. Once the novel coronavirus entered the picture, the [frailties](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/health-care-experts-say-coronavirus-exposes-major-flaws-medical-system-n1194391) of this disjointed, disorganized, profit-based, and frankly cruel system were exposed like never before in recent memory.

Now, this same flawed system is expected to undertake a mass vaccination program to a skeptical public while at the same time struggling to treat ever-growing numbers of COVID-19 patients needing hospitalization.

True [herd immunity](https://theconversation.com/what-is-herd-immunity-and-how-many-people-need-to-be-vaccinated-to-protect-a-community-116355) can only be achieved when enough of the population has been inoculated that vulnerable populations (infants, adults with vaccine allergies and elderly people) are protected. Vaccines don’t just protect the individuals who take them; they offer collective safeguards for society as a whole. A population that has been conditioned to think about health as a solely individual concern has been hard-pressed to swallow such an idea. Think about the obstinate [mask-refusers](https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/02/study-refusal-to-wear-face-mask-associated-with-psychopathy-traits.html) among us.

As a journalist, every time I address vaccine skepticism on my broadcast program, I receive vitriolic hate mail claiming that I am a shill for “big pharma” or simply too stupid to see the light. But we cannot let misinformation, fear, and individualistic thinking discourage reporting on this issue. In some ways, vaccines have become a victim of their own success. Because we have lived (until this year) in a world relatively free of preventable but horrific diseases like smallpox and rubella—achieved through mass vaccination—many Americans have taken for granted the quality of life made possible through inoculation efforts.

The good news is that new polls show growing support for vaccination amidst an [unfathomable rate of COVID-19 infections and deaths](https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/08/coronavirus-live-updates.html). According to one new survey, [63 percent of Americans](https://news.gallup.com/poll/327425/willingness-covid-vaccine-ticks.aspx) are now willing to get vaccinated—close to the minimum threshold that could curb the spread of the disease. Outreach and education efforts on accepting vaccinations in [Black](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/black-vaccine-trust/2020/12/07/9245e82e-34c2-11eb-b59c-adb7153d10c2_story.html?fbclid=IwAR0cq74SKxDgTc2Ox5uaKNpVRpmqTsGnYQb90trwhbDFRZUzqsLVEkBuo5Y) and [Latino](https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2020/12/07/hilda-ramirez-umass-memorial-pfizer-trial) communities that have been hardest hit by the disease are underway. Unfortunately, the vaccine refusers among us will likely continue to benefit from living in a largely vaccinated community, mooching off of the herd immunity they refuse to contribute to.