

NEWSLETTER

**On Politics**

# *Trump's Anti-Vaccine Problem*

The anti-vax sentiment coursing through his die-hards shows how Trump takes his cues from his base.

**By Jess Bidgood**

June 14, 2024

**You're reading the On Politics newsletter.** Your guide to the 2024 elections. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Former President Donald Trump's chaotic and denial-filled response to the Covid-19 pandemic turned off independent voters and arguably cost him the 2020 presidential election.

Four years later, a different aspect of his handling of the pandemic has emerged as a sensitive subject with another slice of the electorate: his own die-hard supporters.

Over the past year, as I have listened to Trump's devotees sing his praises all over the country, I have noticed that they've shown a rare willingness to criticize Trump over the speedy development of the Covid-19 vaccines, which he had celebrated as one of his administration's major successes. The vaccines, a scientific breakthrough, have been given to 270 million Americans and are estimated to have saved millions of lives.

“I’m not real thrilled with the accelerated rollout of the vaccine,” said Amaris Angell, the owner of a recently shuttered food truck business, who went to see Trump in Las Vegas on Sunday. “He still seems to be proud of himself for that.”

“It’s poison,” Nanette Finazzo said of the Covid vaccine.

“I don’t believe in the shots,” Jeanette Reineck said as she waited for Trump to take the stage on Sunday. “Never have.”

The anti-vaccine sentiment coursing through Trump’s fan base has not yet emerged as a major political liability for the former president. Most voters I’ve spoken to quickly excuse Trump for listening to the people around him at a time when no one understood much about Covid. And attempts by Ron DeSantis, the Florida governor, to attack him over his handling of the pandemic during the primary and caucus season never really caught on.

It’s worth understanding this dynamic, however, because it is an example of how Trump takes his cues from his base. Anti-vaccine sentiment has shaped his campaign, as well as the kind of president that his supporters would like him to be, should he win. Right now, Trump appears to be taking careful steps to ensure that he doesn’t lose any of them to the decidedly anti-vax Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who is running as an independent and who has attacked Trump over his handling of the pandemic.

“His signature achievement (for which he deserves credit), Operation Warp Speed, is something that he now runs from as he considers it a liability to the group that he wants to pander to,” said Dr. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, in an email.

### **A long and complicated history with vaccines**

Trump has long had an uneasy relationship with vaccines, as my colleague Jan Hoffman wrote about in March 2020. In 2007, she wrote, he suggested there is a link between autism and childhood vaccines, an idea scientists have forcefully discredited. And in 2015, he told an interviewer that he had never had a flu shot.

“I don’t like the idea of injecting bad stuff into your body, which is basically what they do,” Trump said then.

As president of a nation in the throes of a pandemic, however, who came down with a bad case of Covid himself, Trump backed the speedy development of a Covid-19 vaccine even as he pushed scientifically unproven Covid remedies, like hydroxychloroquine, and once suggested bleach injections. He celebrated when the vaccines were approved, and talked them up after he left office.

“I handed the new administration what everyone is now calling a modern-day medical miracle,” Trump said in February 2021. “Some say it’s the greatest thing to happen in hundreds of years.”

That August, in a sign of how anti-vaccine sentiment was hardening on the right, his boasts about the vaccine were met with jeers at a rally in Alabama.

“I recommend taking the vaccines. I did it, it’s good. Take the vaccines,” Trump said, as boos rose from the crowd.

“You’ve got your freedoms,” he parried, “but I happened to take the vaccine.”

### **Politics at play**

Trump has since backed away from hailing the vaccines — a shift that appears to have been shaped by politics.

By early 2023, DeSantis was gearing up for a presidential run. He downplayed the public health measures Florida instituted in the early days of the pandemic. He constantly berated Trump for not firing Dr. Anthony Fauci as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who spent much of 2020 urging people to stop the spread of Covid by taking precautions like the wearing of masks. Moving to neutralize those attacks, Trump began to portray DeSantis as a fake vaccine skeptic.

“Wake me when DeSantis apologizes for vaccinating more people than Trump and Fauci combined,” read a social media post written by someone else that he amplified on his Truth Social account that August.

In September 2023, he told Megyn Kelly, the former Fox News host who now hosts a show on SiriusXM, that he wasn't proud of the vaccine and didn't intend to talk much about it, even though some people had suggested that he should.

"I'm not talking about it," he said. "But what I did do is I got something done for that specific thing."

As Kennedy's presidential bid has gathered steam, Trump has tried to depict him as inauthentic on the subject, too.

"He said that 'No Vaccine is safe and effective,' and then said 'I would never say that, I'm not anti-vaccine!' Where did that come from?" Trump wrote on Truth Social in April.

These days, when Trump brings up vaccines at all, it is usually to express his opposition to vaccine mandates.

"I will not give one penny to any school that has a vaccine mandate or a mask mandate," he said in Waukesha, Wis., a Milwaukee suburb, in May.

### **A fight over mandates**

Public health experts are worried about the way anti-vaccine sentiment could shape a second Trump administration, whether by limiting investments in vaccines or by appointing vaccine skeptics to public health agencies.

"One has to worry he is not going to try to think about who is the person who's the most scientifically competent and who's going to adhere more closely to scientific evidence," said Dr. Ashish Jha, the dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, who spent more than a year working on President Biden's Covid response. That work involved setting up a White House office of pandemic preparedness, which he's worried Trump will try to dismantle.

Jha said vaccine requirements have helped lower childhood illnesses all over the country, including in Republican-led states like Mississippi.

“We are increasingly tying political identity with vaccine mandates for our kids, and that is a bad thing for our country,” Jha said.

Joe Grogan, who directed the Domestic Policy Council in the Trump administration, said Trump had “moved heaven and earth” to get vaccines developed and approved quickly, and blamed the Biden administration for instituting federal mandates that had made them politically toxic.

“We’ve just squandered so much trust over the last few years that it’s going to be very difficult to earn it back,” Grogan said in an interview, specifying that he was not speaking on behalf of the Trump campaign.

A spokesman for the Trump campaign did not respond to a query about the former president’s public health plans for a second term.

### **‘We didn’t know’**

Trump is also getting some outside political pressure on vaccines. The podcaster Joe Rogan, who has been vocal about his anti-vaccine beliefs, said this week that Trump hasn’t “corrected course” on the matter.

The supporters I spoke with in Las Vegas, however, weren’t inclined to punish Trump over the vaccine and his handling of the pandemic — but they suggested that it’s something they’ll pay attention to in the future.

“I wish he would have fired Fauci,” said Ashley Wehner, 35, a stay-at-home mother who home-schools her children. “With everyone just being scared, we didn’t know.”

Wehner, whose husband is a bartender whose work was affected by the lockdowns, said the pandemic had eroded her trust in pharmaceutical companies and in the government. As a result, she said, she pays a lot more attention to politics now.

“Our eyes were opened a lot during Covid,” she said. Ever since then, she said, she votes in every election.



## What to read this weekend

- How a Hollywood heavyweight became Biden's secret weapon against Trump.
- Trump's aides usually downplay his debate prep. But he spent some time brushing up on policy this week, Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan report.
- In pivotal West Michigan, voters are exhausted and overwhelmed, writes Mitch Smith.



Robert F. Kennedy Jr. speaking during the first edition of “A Night of Laughter With Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Friends” in April. Nic Antaya for The New York Times

## A night of Covid comedy

*Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the independent presidential candidate, spent much of the past year downplaying his anti-vaccine views. But those views have long galvanized his supporters, according to my colleague, Rebecca Davis O'Brien, who covers his*

*campaign. She tells us about how the campaign's allies brought up the pandemic in the unlikeliest of venues: a comedy club.*

It was a campaign fund-raiser, billed as a “Night of Comedy.” But as one comedian after another roused the audience with jokes about the pandemic, it was clear how much the politics of Covid and the vaccine still resonate with die-hard Kennedy fans and even Kennedy-curious voters.

During his set, the comedian Dave Landau used his history of drug use to crack jokes about the vaccine. “I’ve shot heroin, but I don’t know about that vax,” Landau said, to applause. “The reason was that my friends kept getting vaccinated and they kept getting Covid, and I kept not getting Covid.”

Rob Schneider, a former “Saturday Night Live” cast member who in recent years has become an anti-vaccine activist, made fun of “health officials” who recommended two, then three, then four shots for Covid immunity. “Now,” he said, “the new thing is you need to have a syringe in your ass 24 hours a day.”

Finally, Russell Brand, a comedian who has been largely cast aside by the mainstream entertainment world after being accused last year of sexual assault, allegations he has denied, closed out the night. He denounced, among other things, the pharmaceutical and tech industries and Dr. Fauci.

Most of the comedians argued their freedom of speech had been curtailed by the news media, even though at least a dozen reporters, including me, were covering their remarks.

— Rebecca Davis O’Brien

**Jess Bidgood** is a managing correspondent for The Times and writes the On Politics newsletter, a guide to the 2024 election and beyond. More about Jess Bidgood