

Opening Statement
Chair Diana DeGette
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Pathway to a Vaccine: Ensuring a Safe and Effective Vaccine People Will Trust”
September 30, 2020

Today, the Energy and Commerce Committee continues its oversight of the nation’s COVID-19 pandemic response, examining the pursuit of a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine that the American people can trust.

In the eight months we have battled COVID-19, over seven million Americans have had the virus and more than 200,000 of them have lost their lives.

Millions of people face unemployment and have lost their health insurance, and families are juggling childcare and virtual classrooms. The lives of those more vulnerable to COVID-19 are especially on the line as the virus continues to spread around the country.

We know a safe, effective, and trusted COVID-19 vaccine will be a critical tool to contain this pandemic. I believe I am joined by everyone in hoping that such a vaccine is available as soon as feasible.

This summer, we held a hearing with five of the leading companies who are working to develop a COVID-19 vaccine.

The companies assured us that, while the pace of vaccine development is unprecedented, safety and science are not being sacrificed for speed.

Last month, these companies joined four other manufacturers in a rare joint pledge stating they would “stand with science” and not put forward a vaccine until it had been thoroughly vetted. Honoring this commitment will be crucial as the future success of a COVID-19 vaccine depends on the American people having confidence that it is safe and effective.

Alarming, the public’s trust in a future COVID-19 vaccine has declined dramatically in just a few months.

Nearly two-thirds of Americans worry that political pressure will rush approval of a COVID-19 vaccine and more than half say that even if it were free, they would not get vaccinated before Election Day.

One doesn’t have to search far to find the source of the public’s distrust. Time and again throughout the pandemic, the Trump Administration has politicized science, undermining its own public health experts at every turn.

The White House and HHS leadership have reportedly interfered with CDC guidance and other scientific publications for political purposes. The White House has publicly pressured FDA to

issue emergency use authorizations for prospective COVID-19 treatments, despite objections from FDA scientists.

And, the President has attacked the credibility of his own public health leaders. For example, just hours after CDC Director Redfield testified on the effectiveness of wearing face coverings and the potential timeline for a vaccine, President Trump told the press that Dr. Redfield was [quote] “confused” and had made [quote] “a mistake.”

The President has politicized the pursuit of a COVID-19 vaccine by repeatedly claiming it will be available in October, before, a [quote] “special date,” obviously referring to Election Day.

The President has even accused his own FDA of being part of the [quote] “deep state” suggesting it was slow walking a vaccine to hurt his political prospects.

And, just last week, following reports that FDA would be publishing additional standards for emergency use authorization of a COVID-19 vaccine, President Trump falsely claimed that the guidance was politically driven. The reported guidance was praised by external experts, but it may never see the light of day—all because of President Trump’s political whims. The Committee has been sounding the alarm on the Administration’s dangerous politicization of science for months, and we are not alone in our concern.

Last week, the National Academies of Medicine and Sciences took the unusual step of issuing a statement warning that the repeated politicization of science [quote] “undermines the credibility of public health agencies and the public’s confidence in them when we need it most.”

Fortunately, as we’ll hear from our witnesses, there are reasons to be optimistic that the search for a COVID-19 vaccine is, and will continue to be, driven by science. And, there are steps we can take to restore the American people’s trust in a COVID-19 vaccine.

Namely, this Administration must allow career scientists at FDA do their jobs free from political interference—such as allowing the time necessary to conduct robust review of clinical trial findings. And it must let FDA release the additional standards for emergency use authorization of a COVID-19 vaccine it has already developed.

The Committee is rooting for a safe, effective, and trusted COVID-19 vaccine that is accessible to all Americans, and we will continue to conduct oversight to ensure these goals are met. We will also continue to call for a comprehensive COVID-19 vaccine plan—something the Trump Administration has failed to develop in the four months since this Committee first urged them to do so.

I look forward to hearing from our panel today. Hopefully, these experts can help guide us on ways to ensure that the public has full confidence in a COVID-19 vaccine once it is made available. I hope they can also provide additional solutions and suggest guardrails that will ensure that science, and not politics, guide the way.

The health of our nation depends on it.