

Should we shame the anti-vaxxers? That can only backfire

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An email arrived from my cousin this week outlining how bad Covid cases are in her part of South Africa. Delta is surging, she wrote; their friends and neighbours were starting to die. Meanwhile, vaccination rates were terrible, with less than 5% of the population fully vaccinated. After filling me in on the rest of the family news, she assured me that she and her husband were on the waiting list for vaccines – for what it was worth. Her husband, she said, was “convinced they’re not safe”.

This was information to me. Not that a member of my extended family differed from me in his thoughts about drug trials and government-agency approval, but more broadly: wow, I had no idea my cousin was married to a lunatic.

This was a reflex response. At an odd time in the life of the pandemic, when every step forward is seemingly followed, immediately, by a jump in the numbers and a hasty step back, there is one, cast-iron certainty: that given the opportunity to call someone else crazy, it is almost impossible to turn down.

This consolation is particularly available in the United States at the moment, where a third of Americans eligible for the vaccine remain stubbornly unjabbed. (By contrast, in Britain, 88% of those eligible have received at least one dose.) That these vaccine holdouts fall demographically along existing lines of political division has made dismissing them as fanatics much easier. Under-vaccinated populations in the US skew heavily towards traditionally Republican areas in the south and midwest, particularly among those without college degrees.

Articles abound about idiots partying, for example at a lake in Missouri. (“Personally,” says an unmasked, unvaccinated bartender serving unmasked, unvaccinated patrons, “I feel like my immune system is doing a good job, so why pump it full of something that we don’t really know what it is?”) The popular image of the vaccine-hesitant American is of a Trump supporter, his limited capacities further eroded by too much time spent absorbing the work of online conspiracy theorists.

Aspects of this image may well be true. The fact remains, however, that liberal disparagement of the vaccine-hesitant rests on a double standard. If we think of vaccine holdouts as taking their cues not from neutral information but from pre-existing narratives (democrats are bad; government is bad; it’s all a hoax) this is a dynamic we’re not entirely free from ourselves. The enjoyment one gets, when confronted with an anti-vaxxer from saying “these people are nuts”, and fitting them instantly into the category of dumb asshole, clearly delivers an emotional dividend as strong as the ones being indulged on the other side.

And the Covid anti-vax demographic isn't entirely clear-cut. Lots of parents who didn't think twice about giving their children MMR vaccines, for example, are **on the fence about** what to do in the autumn, when the US Food and Drug Administration will almost certainly approve the vaccine for the under-12s. I've heard similarly anxious murmurs from pregnant women getting their shots.

The closest I've come to understanding this mindset arose one afternoon, when I thought about the assurances given to women by the British government during the thalidomide scandal in the 1960s. For a second, I could feel it: the appeal of thinking that the real credulity here is **blind faith in** the government.

It didn't last. Neither, perhaps, will the tendency among those who are vaccinated to disparage those who remain hesitant, for the simple reason that it will backfire and end up hurting us more. During the first flush of the vaccine rollout in the US, there was a collective sense among the vaccinated population of: big deal, if they're dumb enough not to get the vaccine, let them get sick. Now, thanks to the latest advances in armchair epidemiology, we understand that if large portions of the population remain unvaccinated, not only will society's reopening be compromised but it will provide **a petri dish for** possible vaccine-resistant strains of the virus to develop in.

"Let them get sick" has evolved into a refrain that was familiar during the Trump years, for different reasons: "My God, these people are going to get us all killed."

Calling them dumb assholes, therefore, while it can feel really good, isn't a helpful strategy in winning people around to your side of the argument. This week Kay Ivey, Republican governor of Alabama, which has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the US, said: "Time to start blaming the unvaccinated." And you understood her point of view. Yet **pointing the finger** doesn't work. "We all but shamed people," Johnny Taylor, head of the Society for Human Resource Management, told the New York Times this week **in reference to** private companies' initiatives to persuade hesitant staff to get vaccinated. "But now we're at a point that none of that's working and we've got to **close the gap**."

Offering people \$100 for getting your shot, as President Biden has urged states to do, may work for some people; others may **end up** being forced to take it. (Biden has announced that the country's entire civilian federal workforce – well over 2 million people – will require vaccination too.)

Meanwhile, I'm trying to **push back against** the temptation to ask my cousin what's wrong with her husband, and in the process be less shut down myself. "Why does he think that?" I said.

WORDLIST

Outline (v.) – to give the main facts about something:

- At the interview she outlined what I would be doing.
- I will begin by outlining the concept of self-ownership, and go on to explain the two main objections to the concept: one philosophical, one ideological.

Fill sb in (idiom) – to give someone extra or missing information:

- I filled her in on the latest gossip.

The rest – the other things, people, or parts that remain or that have not been mentioned:

- I've got two bright students, but the rest are average.
- I'll keep a third of the money and the rest is for you.
- Do you have anything planned for the rest of the day?

Assure (v.) – to tell someone confidently that something is true, especially so that they do not worry:

- You can rest assured (= feel confident) that I shall be there as promised.
- She assured him (that) the car would be ready the next day.

For what it's worth – said when you are giving someone a piece of information and you are not certain if that information is useful or important:

- For what it's worth, I think he may be right.
- They are, for what it's worth, the single most successful playhouse in the West.

Cast-iron (adj.) – a guarantee, alibi, etc. that can be trusted completely:

- Can you give me a cast-iron guarantee that the work will be completed on time?

Turn down something – to refuse to accept or agree to something, or to refuse someone's request:

- The bank turned her down for a loan.
- The former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman has turned down the job.

Consolation (n.) – something that makes someone who is sad or disappointed feel better:

- If it's of any consolation to you, you're not the only one he was nasty to.
- I didn't know what to say - I just offered a few words of consolation.

Eligible – allowed to do or receive something because you satisfy certain conditions:

- Nearly two-thirds of the company's current employees will be eligible to retire within five years.
- Of 9,475 students, 1,323 were eligible for a scholarship.

Jab (v.) – to use a needle and syringe (= small tube) to put a liquid such as a drug into a person's body:

- By the end of May, we will have jabbed more than 10,000 people.
- Thanks to the good folk at Queens Medical Centre for jabbing me.

Abound (v.) – to exist in large numbers:

- The streams and rivers abound in fish.
- Theories abound about how the universe began.

Popular image – appealing to the general public; widely favoured or admired.

Erode (v.) – to slowly reduce or destroy something:

- His behaviour over the last few months has eroded my confidence in his judgment.

Disparagement – criticism of, or unkind remarks about someone or something that show you do not respect them:

- Despite the media's disparagement of the leader, he remains popular.
- He spoke in a tone of disparagement.

Double standard – a rule or standard of good behaviour that, unfairly, some people are expected to follow or achieve but other people are not:

- The governor is being accused of (having) double standards in being tough on law and order yet allowing his own cabinet members to escape prosecution for fraud.

Hoax – a plan to deceive a large group of people; a trick:

- It is a cruel hoax, she said, to encourage people to think they have a real chance to win the lottery.
- A hoax led thousands to donate to a fake charity.

On the fence – not able to decide something:

- Many consumers are still on the fence, waiting for a less expensive computer to come along.
- Todd's still sitting on the fence, trying to decide which school he wants to go to.

Petri dish – a place where there are a lot of bacteria or viruses:

- Schools are Petri dishes of infection.
- A cruise ship is just a giant floating petri dish.

Point the finger – to accuse someone of being responsible for something bad that has happened:

- Unhappy tourists have pointed the finger at unhelpful travel agents.