

The Social and Political Identity of Vaccine Hesitancy

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Problem / Question

Is there a correlation between identity politics and vaccine hesitancy?

Vaccine Hesitancy defined

The World Health Organization defines vaccine hesitancy as the delay or reluctance in acceptance or refusal of vaccination despite the availability of vaccination services. Vaccine hesitancy is complex and context-specific, that varies across time. Research indicates that newer vaccines create more hesitancy (Dube, 2014)

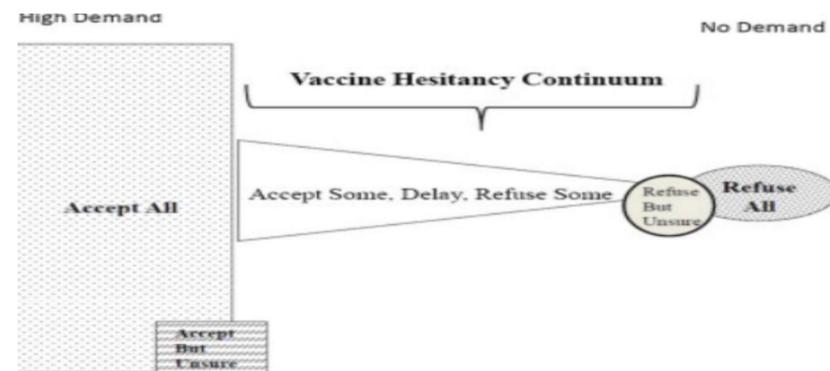


Fig. 1. The continuum of vaccine hesitancy between full acceptance and outright refusal of all vaccines.

Overview

- Opposition to vaccination dates to the 1800s with the creation of the first vaccine created by Edward Jenner. Vaccine hesitancy affects over 1/3 of our global population, being cited as one of the ten leading threats to global health cited by the World Health Organization. Vaccine rates vary by federal, state and local municipalities and by specific vaccine. (Jacobson et al, 2015)
- Longitudinal evidence suggests that political party affiliation has become a source of identity that shapes personal decision making (Van Bavel and Pereira, 2021)
- Studies have shown that politically conservative Americans are less likely than those who identify as liberal to report a willingness to get a vaccine against coronavirus disease. Using data from the Axios/Ipsos Coronavirus Survey from November 2020 to February 2021, the authors find that this partisan divide in vaccine hesitancy has increased over time (Cowan et al, 2021).

Methods

In June 2021, I performed a search for original peer-reviewed articles in the electronic databases from January 2017 to present-day on PubMed (Medline, Science Direct & Sage Pub). The key search terms were 'Vaccine hesitancy' AND 'COVID-19' AND 'Influenza'. I searched for studies published during COVID-19 pandemic and reporting information about the phenomenon of vaccine hesitancy.

Political Affiliation

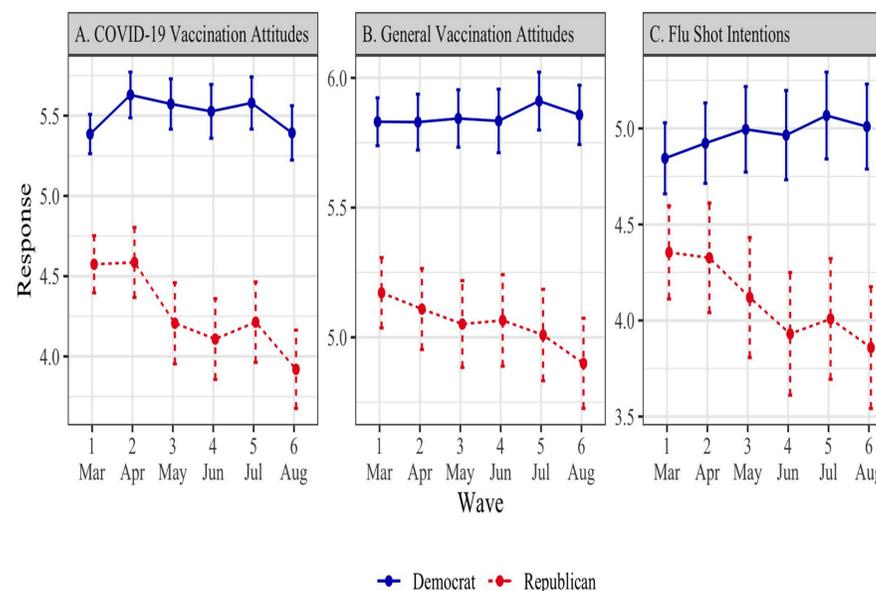


Fig. 2: Vaccination attitudes and intentions by political affiliation (March–August 2020)

Observations

- Identify political ideology is stated the best predictor of the decreasing time trend across the three vaccine-related attitudes and intentions measures. The research found that while Democrats' responses remained stable over time, Republicans shifted away from their lower initial responses and from Democrats' responses, leading to increased polarization throughout the six-month period (Cowan et al, 2021).
- Researchers have also found that individuals' sense of shared identity plays a role in promoting cooperative behavior in response to threat (Van Bavel, 2020). Considering their results in the context of these findings might suggest that respondents' sense of shared identity was dominated by their political ideology, as opposed to a broader "America" identity.

Limitations & Next Steps

- The limits of this study does not find differences in COVID-19 vaccine or any other vaccine originating as strongly from political identity rooted in traditional American conservatism, but rather in their politicization by political leadership.
- The concept of vaccine hesitancy is a broad spectrum of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that includes vaccine refusal and intentional vaccine delay. What has been less understood, however, is the nature of the relationship between ideology and trust.
- Future studies will need to demonstrate new empirical data to better gauge attitudes towards vaccine preventable diseases. Attention should be given to the socio-political context, and where possible, measures should be taken to tailor messages regarding vaccination appropriately.

Works Cited

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