

OPINION

How anti-vaccine activists are using COVID-19 to boost their movement

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While most of the world hungers for a vaccine to put an end to the death and economic destruction wrought by COVID-19, some anti-vaccine groups are joining anti-lockdown protesters to challenge restrictions aimed at protecting public health.

Vaccine critics experienced serious setbacks in the United States in the past year, as states **strengthened immunization laws** in response to **measles outbreaks** sparked by vaccine refusers. California tightened its vaccine requirements in 2019 despite protests during which anti-vaccine activists **threw blood on state senators, assaulted** the vaccine bill's sponsor and **shut down the legislature**.

Now, many of these same vaccine critics are joining a fight against stay-at-home orders and business shutdowns intended to stem the spread of the coronavirus, which had **killed more than 47,000** Americans as of Thursday afternoon.

"This is just a fresh coat of paint for the anti-vaccine movement in America, and an exploitative means for them to try to remain relevant," **Peter Hotez**, professor of pediatrics and molecular virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas.

Hotez says anti-vaccine groups are seizing on the anti-government sentiment stoked by conservative-leaning protesters to advance their cause.

"Unfortunately, their strategy may work."

A group calling itself the **Freedom Angels**, whose members last year **stood on chairs and chanted** at public hearings on the California vaccine bill, says governors are abusing their power

by shutting down gun shops and other businesses.

Many anti-vaccine activists -- who have claimed that diseases such as **measles aren't that serious** -- now contend the coronavirus isn't dangerous enough to justify staying home. They agree with **President Donald Trump** that the 'cure' for the pandemic could be worse than the disease itself.

That's led some vaccine foes to join the protesters -- whom Trump has encouraged on Twitter -- in staging demonstrations in state capitals to "reopen America."

"This is the time for people to take notice and really evaluate the freedoms they're giving up, all in the name of perceived safety," said Freedom Angels co-founder Heidi Munoz Gleisner in a Facebook video.

The group **organized a rally on 20 April** in Sacramento, California, called "Operation Gridlock."

"People need to get back to work, get back to life, get back into contact with their loved ones who they're isolated from; they need to be able to have a paycheck," group co-founder Tara Thornton told **The Sacramento Bee**, which interviewed her during the demonstration. "This is the grounds they will enslave us upon."

Freedom Angels did not respond to requests for interviews. The group's website mentions **plans for additional rallies** and includes photos from last week's demonstration, such as one in which a protester holds a sign proclaiming "No Mandatory Vaccines."

But after the 20 April event, the California Highway Patrol announced it had revoked the group's permit for future protests because the gathering -- which included dozens of people -- violated the governor's social distancing order. The highway patrol has now **banned all group events at the Capitol** during the pandemic to avoid spreading the coronavirus.

'Medical freedom':

The anti-vaccine movement has never been limited to one political party. Left-leaning vaccine critics -- such as Children's Health Defense, led by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. -- include environmentalists who are suspicious of chemical pollutants, corporations and 'Big Pharma.' The Kennedy group's website attacks Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, for rushing "**risky and uncertain coronavirus vaccines**" into development as part of a "sweetheart deal" for drug companies.

On the other side of the political spectrum, many anti-vaccine conservatives oppose state immunization requirements because they distrust 'big government.'

- A group called **Texans for Vaccine Choice** has called on the governor of Texas to promise that no one will be forced to get a coronavirus vaccine in order to go to work or school.
- Posts on the Facebook page of **Californians for Health Choice**, which also opposed California's vaccine laws, question stay-at-home orders and accuse government officials of refusing to admit the orders are a mistake.
- In a **video on the Freedom Angels' Facebook page**, its founders describe stay-at-home orders as an abuse of government authority, and the closure of California gun shops as an assault on the Second Amendment. The group notes that guns could be essential for protection from rioters and looters looking to steal food during the pandemic.

In many ways, the conservative arm of the anti-vaccine movement is a natural ally for those leading "reopen America" rallies, says David Gorski, an oncologist and managing editor of **Science-Based Medicine**. Both harbor suspicions about government authority.

Vaccine critics, for example, have long championed the false claim that vaccines cause autism, and that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has tried to cover up that information, Gorski says. Trump has at times linked vaccines with autism, although he came out **strongly in favor of vaccinations** during the 2019 measles epidemic.

Anti-vaccine groups are now rebranding themselves as advocates of 'medical freedom.'

Protests against social distancing began in Michigan but have spread to state capitols in Texas, Colorado, Nevada, Maryland, Wisconsin and elsewhere, with more planned. Most protests have been small, limited to a few hundred or fewer people.

Yet the anti-vaccine movement doesn't speak for everyone on the right.

Stephen Moore, senior economic contributor for FreedomWorks, a conservative advocacy group that has been helping publicize the protests, says he's unfamiliar with the Freedom Angels or their rallies.

"I'm personally pro-vaccine," says Moore, a member of the White House council to reopen the economy. "Especially when it comes to coronavirus."

And some heroes of the anti-vaccine movement say they support coronavirus lockdowns.

Jay Gordon, a Santa Monica, California, pediatrician popular among vaccine foes for **downplaying the risks of measles**, says the risk of COVID-19 is real. Gordon says he approves of the lockdown, "and we have to keep it up."

Containing the pandemic:

Richard Pan, a pediatrician and California state senator who has championed stronger vaccine mandates, has described anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown protesters as “essentially selfish” because they put other people at risk.

“One of the hallmarks of the anti-vaccine movement is this sense of selfishness and lack of concern for other people’s health,” Pan says. “They like to talk about rights and freedom. But what they really want is freedom without consequences.”

Both anti-vaccine parents and those who want to relax social distancing assume that the medical system will come to their rescue if they become sick, says Pan, who notes that thousands of healthcare workers have died while fighting the pandemic.

Fauci has said that relaxing stay-at-home orders is dangerous as long as the virus -- for which there are no approved treatments or vaccines -- is actively spreading. Reopening businesses too soon could spark a second wave of infections.

More than 75 companies and research groups worldwide are trying to develop vaccines, which are seen as a key weapon against the novel coronavirus.

In the meantime, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that **social distancing** measures -- such as working from home and avoiding large gatherings -- are critical to **slowing the spread of the coronavirus** and preventing infected people from overwhelming hospitals. **Health leaders** say it won’t be safe to reopen the county until widespread testing shows the coronavirus has died down.

Americans overwhelmingly support vaccination, according to surveys, and polling by **the Kaiser Family Foundation** found that 80 percent of Americans want lockdowns to continue. Only 19 percent said social-distancing orders placed an unnecessary burden on the economy. (*Kaiser Health News* is an editorially independent program of the foundation.)

Neither the anti-vaccine nor anti-lockdown demonstrators represent the opinions of most Americans, Pan says.

“Let’s put this movement into proper context,” he says. “They’re loud, they’re noisy and they’re small.”

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