

Document 1.

Why Calling RFK Jr. 'Anti-Science' Misses the Real Point

Rachael Bedard, The New Yorker, 9 July 2025

1. America is in the midst of an epistemological crisis, one most visible and most urgent in the realms of health and medicine. Issues previously contested at the fringes of politics without clear ideological valence — vaccines and fluoridation, nutrition and the chronic-disease epidemic, whether and how to fund cancer research — have become central to a polarized debate not just about what's right but about what is real. If the Obama era represented the peak of expert culture, a decade when data-knowers rose to prominence as pundits in every field from happiness to economics to baseball, the Trump era has represented its downfall. According to a Kaiser poll, nearly one in four Americans report they have "not too much or no confidence at all" that scientists operate with the best interests of the public in mind, and nearly half think scientists should play less of a role in policy debates. After a period when science was largely treated as synonymous with truth, this amounts to a loss of consensus about how to distinguish fact from falsehood. [...]
2. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and the Make America Healthy Again movement marched through that rift as they rose to power. As secretary of Health and Human Services, Kennedy has replaced all the members of a vaccine advisory board with his preferred consultants, DOGE'd the NIH, and suggested he'll bar federal scientists from publishing in top medical journals. Any of these actions would have been politically unthinkable even during Trump's first term. Now, the majority of Republicans say their confidence in public health has increased under Kennedy's leadership, and according to a recent USA Today poll, he currently enjoys a 51 percent approval rating, which is higher than most Democrats and that of the president he serves.
3. The internet disrupted experts' monopoly over knowledge by offering competing channels of information that could provide distinct stories about reality. These shifts came to a head in 2020. During the pandemic, authorities made hard decisions in real time in full view of a suddenly attentive public: whether to presume the virus was airborne, whether to require masks, whether to prescribe ivermectin, whether to keep schools closed, whether to mandate vaccines, whom to vaccinate first, whether to pursue concerns that the virus had originated from a lab leak. Out of conviction that people needed clarity in order to act, and under pressure from real-world political constraints, officials communicated recommendations with great certainty based on little more than best estimates. Following along at home, amateurs in public health noticed flaws in the data, disagreed with how it was being interpreted, or doubted the government's good intentions.
4. The pandemic effectively shattered any illusion that public-health guidelines and truth are always the same. It made visible how interpretations of evidence often get laundered, through expert claims to authority, as evidence itself. When this happens, it's easy for differences in perspective to be miscategorized as arguments over facts. But whether a person should wear a mask on the subway, for example, isn't really a question that hinges on objective data but on how one balances concerns about germ transmission against the social impact of wearing a mask. It's not just a question about whether masks "work." It's a question of work for whom, to do what?
5. Most public-health debates are about these kinds of tensions and trade-offs. They are questions about how we weigh values, not facts, even if facts are relevant to the debate. The science vs. anti-science framework misses this nuance. It obscures the inherent fungibility and subjectivity of policy science, which the public has instinctively come to recognize even if they don't know how to articulate it. And it ignores the political constraints that now define the challenges facing public health. [...]
6. There are already some high-stakes questions about health and medicine that we are accustomed to treating head-on as political battles about ideas and values, rather than as debates about truth. Whether people ought to be able to get abortions, and under what circumstances, is one of these: Facts certainly play into the debate and are shared to persuade, but the contours of the discourse fundamentally presume that people believe opposite things to be true. Similarly, whether health care should be guaranteed by the government or obtained via work and payment is a perennial debate in American politics. It is a fact that lack of health insurance kills people every year in this country; but the health-care discourse is about people's firmly held opposing values, not about what's true.
7. Health care access and abortion are two of the crucibles of American politics. Vaccines are now also an unsettled topic where power, values, and science interact. But vaccines are only the tip of the spear.

MAHA's rise represents the fact that body politics are now, very much, party politics. Experts would do better to talk about the values implicit in these fights more explicitly and argue about facts less doggedly. This doesn't mean living in a post-truth world; it means assigning science its rightful place in policymaking. Kennedy doesn't tolerate much uncertainty and nuance, but his opponents should. Governing through disagreement is the hard task of democracies. Science can help us seek truth, but it cannot tell us what to do when we find it.

Document 2.

How Covid Remade America

Opinion, By David Wallace-Wells, The New York Times, March 4, 2025

Five years after the pandemic began, Donald Trump is president again, but he's presiding over a very different country now. America is a harsher place, more self-interested and nakedly transactional. We barely trust one another and are less sure that we owe our fellow Americans anything — let alone the rest of the world. [...]

We tell ourselves we've moved on and hardly talk about the disease or all the people who died or the way the trauma and tumult have transformed us. But Covid changed everything around us. This is how. [...]

It broke our faith in public health.

The vaccines were miraculous, derided and dismissed. From viral genome to mRNA design in two days; from design to drug in two months; from drug to clinical trials in less than a year. By the end of 2020, when less than a quarter of the country had been infected, people were getting shots. All told, vaccines saved the lives of three million Americans, and yet hardly anyone tells the story of the pandemic in triumphant terms. Instead, conservatives turned against Trump's vaccine and, after blaming them for not getting the shots, liberals eventually took it for granted, forgetting the terror of the months before it arrived.

After the shots, we argued much more strenuously about everything else. At the start of the pandemic, red America and blue America were following more or less the same mitigation strategy, though they began drifting apart that fall. But once vaccines were available, partisan gaps really began to open up. With risk reduced, guidance on cloth masking and face covering for toddlers, debates about the relative strength of natural immunity or about the value of boosters each started to look less like the precautionary principle and more like a safetyist outrage.

Covid minimizers now run the Department of Health and Human Services and will soon run the National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration. In many states, laws block future public health restrictions, and some surveys show an even larger drop in trust in government than for scientists and doctors. Routine vaccinations for children have dipped only slightly, but the country's first measles death in a decade already shows the costs. [...]

It shattered our cities and disordered society.

Homicides jumped nearly 30 percent in just a single year, nationally, and in certain megalopolises — New York, Los Angeles — homelessness surged as the pandemic wore on. Drinking problems shot up, as did drug overdose and traffic accident deaths and a host of other antisocial behaviors. And while many of these effects were temporary, the memories stuck around — as have the politics of crime and disorder. [...]

It changed the geography of work, probably forever.

Compared with 2019, five times as many Americans were working from home in 2021, and, corporate exhortations aside, four times as many still do. Many white-collar workers now routinely encounter colleagues only some days of the week while mostly working as atomized nodes in a distended network.

It shackled the U.S. with debt.

The decade of populist unrest that began in the aftermath of the global financial crisis was also an era of unprecedented low interest rates, which made the cost of borrowing for public investments almost literally zero. [...]

As we unleashed a flood of money to insulate us from Covid, U.S. debt grew from \$22 trillion to \$36 trillion.

It untethered happiness from the traditional barometers of the economy.

In America, economic fundamentals, like G.D.P. growth, prices, wages and employment have long been pretty good predictors of consumer sentiment. But the pandemic seems to have broken that relationship, perhaps permanently.

It redrew our border politics.

Americans might not have found their postpandemic economy attractive, but immigrants did. Asylum rules played a role in the border surge, but so did the demand for jobs. And it is probably not a coincidence that a plague gave way to panic about "invasion" and "poisoning" of the country.

It destabilized and undermined politics almost everywhere.

Covid itself created an inflation spike more clearly than the spending we responded to Covid with did. The surge in prices was global, not national, and began in the sectors of the economy we know were pinched hardest by supply shocks: used cars, electronics, housing construction. Later, there was some corporate price gouging, and the cost of living crisis was made worse by the higher cost of borrowing money. It was only when inflation hit that voters truly turned on politicians.[...]

It left us sicker

Long Covid proved real but less catastrophic than once feared. Over time, most sufferers eventually recovered, but as recently as 2023, as many as one million American children suffered from it — at least for a time.

But there are about four million more newly disabled Americans now than there were before the pandemic, and the number reporting cognitive disabilities alone has grown by 43 percent since 2019 — an increase significantly larger than in the five years before Covid.

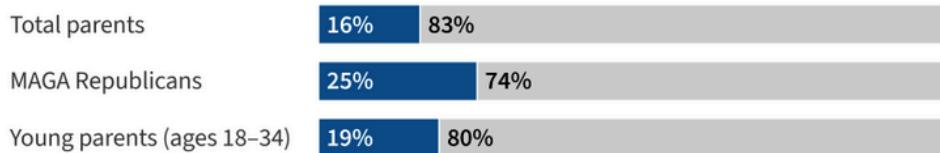
Document 3.

Why 1 in 6 U.S. parents say they skipped or delayed their kids' vaccines, The Washington Post, Sept. 15, 2025

1 in 6 Parents Report Skipping or Delaying Childhood Vaccines, Including Larger Shares of Young Parents and MAGA Republicans

Not counting COVID-19 or flu vaccines, have you ever skipped or delayed a recommended childhood vaccine for any of your children, or have you always kept all your children up to date with recommended childhood vaccines like MMR and polio?

- Have delayed or skipped some vaccines
- Kept children up to date with recommended childhood vaccines



Note: Among parents of children under age 18.
See topline for full question wording.

KFF | The Washington Post

Document 4. Illinois Health and Hospital Association, August 2025

