

For myself and many others, living through this pandemic has amounted to one big question mark hanging over the timelines of our lives. With that said, I can vividly remember only a few specific moments from the past eighteen months. One of those moments is the glimmer of hope I felt that the world would soon return to some version of normalcy when I initially heard that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the Pfizer vaccine for emergency use in December 2020. Looking back on that moment nine months retrospectively, I was naive.

Despite the monsoon of both disinformation and misinformation that immediately followed the initial announcement, I remained optimistic. By March 25, President Biden's Instagram account had reaffirmed my hope with [a post](#) that said the president's goal to vaccinate 100 million Americans by his 100th day in office was met on day 58.

Two days later and after weeks of searching for an available appointment, I received my first dose of the Pfizer vaccine on my 20th birthday – the best gift I could have received in early 2021.

Soon enough, all three of the COVID-19 vaccines approved by the FDA for emergency use were available to all Americans over the age of 16. Not only were they available, but they were in demand. These two factors fueled my confidence that I would get to enjoy my first full 'normal' year of college as a junior. However, this confidence quickly dissipated throughout the summer as [national vaccination rates stagnated](#) and both my hometown and Colorado State University reinstated mask mandates. Simultaneously, anti-vaccination rhetoric seemed to skyrocket.

While this rhetoric was nothing new and can be traced back for decades, the intensity was new. What made this ideological resurgence so frustrating is the fact that much of the "anti-vax" movement is based on a [fraudulent 1998 study](#) that claimed a link between vaccines and autism. The physician has since lost his medical license and any scintilla of medical, academic, ethical or personal credibility he may have had.

According to [Marilee Long](#), a professor and researcher at CSU whose background specializes in public health, public health communication and media effects, vaccine hesitancy is often a matter of identity.

“For some people...they think they’re a very healthy person,” Dr. Long said. “And to say they need a vaccine is kind of counter to that way of thinking about their identity or thinking about who they are.”

One question to ask yourself is who benefits from these messages. Unsurprisingly, to find the answer all you need to do is follow the money. In this case, the big red “x” on the map is over Big Pharma and insurance companies. These companies simply do not want people to be vaccinated as it will decrease COVID-19-related hospitalizations, and hence, their multi-million dollar salaries. But how do these non-governmental entities influence mass communication and public opinion? Lobbyists who [max-out campaign contributions](#) to Republican lawmakers. And which lawmakers receive the largest sums of money? Those who have a direct role in drafting health care legislation.

Many people think that as long as they are vaccinated, they are completely safeguarded from contracting the coronavirus. In thinking that, many did not see it as an issue of public health, but rather one of individual health. However, this line of thinking is precisely what led to the evolution of the Delta variant, and, consequently, the latest wave of positive cases.

To summarize the science, those who are unvaccinated are incubators for new strains of coronavirus. When they are infected with the virus, genetics do what they have always done and they mutate. This mutant version of coronavirus is carried with the unvaccinated individual and spread to more unvaccinated people and infects those who are vaccinated, as they are only protected from strains that existed when the vaccines were developed. This cycle continues indefinitely and more strains develop as people continue to choose to be unvaccinated. As more variants are introduced, vaccine development simply cannot keep up — unless people really do want a rushed testing period.

According to the [Larimer County Public Health Department](#), roughly every two out of three residents have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine as of Sept. 23. At the same time, one in every 10 residents has had a confirmed or probable case. Fort Collins comfortably leads any other city in the county with 19,843 total cases. Loveland comes in second place with only 9,055.

To a certain extent, I understand the initial hesitancy to get the vaccine. I get that not everyone is as trusting of the government as I am. Maybe you thought everyone else would get one so you wouldn’t have to. Maybe you weren’t able to find a vaccine

appointment at first because of the high demand. Or maybe you understandably mistook an opinion article as a legitimate story or thought that commentary was fact-based reasoning. Whatever the reason for initial speculation though, not being vaccinated at this point is reckless and oblivious.

"You look at what other countries do that are more collective, we're more of an individualistic country," Dr. Long said. "And at times like this, [that is] something that can really, I would argue, hurt us when we're thinking about public health issues because public health really relies on everyone doing their part."

Many will defend themselves and say that a vaccine should be a private, personal and autonomous matter and that government has no right to tell them what to do with their body (an undeniably ironic stance to take when your party is passing legislation limiting what a woman can and cannot do with her body — but I digress).

To these people, I would ask if they ever attended public school. If so, they likely have already submitted to vaccine mandates. While immunization requirements vary by state, in [Colorado specifically](#), anyone who wishes to attend a K-12 public school must show proof of vaccination against six different transmittable diseases. Moreover, if you attend CSU or any other Colorado college or university, you have already submitted to at least one.

Why now that the preventable disease is more deadly are people putting up a fight over a rule that they have already lived in accordance with for years, if not their entire life? Dr. Long believes it is because people are not used to vaccine mandates for adults. When a health crisis is framed in a way that paints children as the most vulnerable population, people care more.

Ultimately, though, the 'my body, my choice' argument as it relates to vaccines is simply selfish. It differs from the pro-choice argument for abortion because in this case, not only are you putting your own life at risk or a fetus's 'life' at risk, you are putting the lives of everyone else around you at risk.

"Public health is really looking at things from more of a greater-good situation," Dr. Long said. "It is a public good that is realized from each of us individually being healthier. We don't cost as much, we're more productive, we're happier."

In the midst of the debate as to whether or not the government should be allowed to mandate a vaccine, another debate as to whether or not the government should be allowed to tell unvaccinated people where they can and cannot go has arisen.

Dr. Long reasons that if the government does not enact ‘vaccine passport’ policies, the marketplace inevitably will have to. If people are understandably too scared to shop, eat at restaurants or go to shows because they could potentially contract a deadly virus, then they won’t participate in the economy. Once businesses realize that, they will be forced to choose between creating a safe environment for consumers by mandating vaccines for entry, or shutting out a large portion of potential customers, and thus lose money.

Another problematic claim is that the FDA’s emergency approval was too rushed by modern medical standards. This has no factual basis. The coronavirus vaccine has actually [been in developmental stages for 20 years](#), which is longer than most medical standards call for. Further, the trials had “way more people than we typically have in a trial,” according to Dr. Long.

Okay, maybe I’ll grant hesitation without *full* FDA approval. After all, that is what millions of Americans claimed they were waiting for. But, the [FDA fully approved](#) the Pfizer vaccine on Aug. 23. So, if I can echo [President Biden](#): “The moment you have been waiting for is here – and the time to get vaccinated is today.”

The next argument I would like to dissect is the one that claims “My body is a temple, and hence, I will not put anything unnatural in it.” Have you ever injected alcohol? Consumed nicotine or any other synthetic drugs? Ate processed food? Fast food? Antibiotic-treated meat? Literally any other medicine? Or – my personal favorite – bought into the conspiracy that injecting yourself with disinfectant, monoclonal antibodies or hydroxychloroquine would treat coronavirus?

Now, an argument I can sympathize with in some circumstances: “I don’t trust the medical field.” If you belong to a historically marginalized or oppressed group, this is valid given the history of medical racism in the U.S., not to mention the [Tuskegee Syphilis Study](#).

“Government is trying to do more at getting more diverse groups of people into medical trials,” Dr. Long explained. “But historically it was white males and it took a while to get women, and it’s taking longer to get people of color.”

While I have no intention of downplaying the effects of a systemic issue that I have not experienced firsthand, there is no evidence to suggest that any of the FDA-approved vaccines have had a negative medical impact specifically on communities of color. While Black, Latinx and Indigenous groups have made up a disproportionate number of positive COVID-19 cases, that is because, through no fault of their own, [vaccine distribution to those communities has lagged](#) behind that of white communities.

Next up on the list are the enablers, who are better known as 'The Republican Party.' Does anybody wonder why so many conservative lawmakers throughout all levels of government privately and happily accepted their doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, most before the general American public, all while spewing anti-vaccine rhetoric? Because [some of them](#) own stock in Big Pharma and by keeping vaccination rates low and hospitalization rates high, they make a pretty profit.

However, this scheme wasn't sustainable as cases began to rise and a recovering economy was put at risk. So accordingly, many of them did a complete 180 on their vaccine platforms, taking up the opinion that the vaccines are safe and effective, but that it is still a personal choice free of any public health consequences. Donald Trump did it, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell did it, Texas Republican Sen. Ted Cruz did it and Colorado Republican Rep. Lauren Boebert did it. When a party's top officials are all in agreement, the party's platform has been established.

Maybe boiling it down to political affiliation is rash. After all, the liberal 'granola' and 'all-natural' culture can be correlated with low vaccination rates as well, as is apparent with [pockets in Boulder County](#). This has created an interesting coalition between groups who seem to be in disagreement about everything else.

However, this strange ideological relationship is representative of a problem larger than the coronavirus. To Dr. Long, it is an example of how widespread and deep-seated misinformation and a lack of scientific comprehension are across the country.

"People will say about science, 'Well you keep changing your mind. You don't know what the answer is,'" Dr. Long said. "Part of that is, I would argue, a lack of scientific literacy from the standpoint of remembering from when they were in school that science changes over time as we learn more. And the fact that we learn more is a good thing."

For my parting thought, I will again pose you with a question: When was the last time you met someone with polio? You haven't because it has been [eliminated from the U.S.](#) since 1979 thanks to a vaccine that was relatively widely accepted.

"It's hard for people to remember a time when you were more likely to die," Dr. Long said. "So we are kind of the victims of our own success."