



'I'm a Full Anti-Vaxxer Now': How the Conspiracists Are Winning Over Fresh Converts

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US-politics-health-virus-MANDATES-PROTEST - Credit: AFP via Getty Images

When thousands of protesters gathered on the National Mall on Sunday morning to protest Covid [vaccine mandates](#), they did so, they insisted, to preserve personal freedoms. "No more mandates!" they shouted as they marched, serpentine and coiled, like the snakes on the "Don't Tread On Me" flags hoisted above their heads. "This is not about vaccine or anti-vax," JP Sears, a comedian known for [spreading conspiracy theories](#) through sarcastic comedy, told the crowd. It was, he asserted, as Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."

But it was, very much, about vaccines. Children's Health Defense Fund, the political wing of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s anti-vax organization, hosted the event. Kennedy, who has been [vocally spreading false claims](#) about vaccine safety for decades, addressed the crowd to offer unsubstantiated warnings of the [Covid-19 vaccines'](#) dangers. So did several doctors, wearing their physician whites, who also touted ivermectin to prevent Covid (it won't) and rehashed long-debunked studies suggesting vaccines cause autism (it doesn't). Just days after the [CDC released its first study](#) showing vaccine boosters help protect patients against hospitalization from Omicron, Dr. Robert Malone, a virologist and well-known vaccine skeptic, falsely told the crowd: "The science is settled: they're not working."

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'Gutless'



The rhetoric took an extremist turn as the speakers addressed the group. Kennedy called the mandates “a *coup d’etat* to democracy” and compared vaccine passports to slavery.

“Even in Hitler’s Germany, you could hide,” Kennedy said, referring to Anne Frank’s ultimately unsuccessful flight from the Nazis. Del Bigtree, a prominent anti-vax podcaster who spoke at the rally, [invoked](#) the Nuremberg trials to threaten Dr. Anthony Fauci and the press — a sentiment also made clear on many of the signs in the crowd.

The rally’s permit had predicted 20,000 attendees. A much smaller, mostly maskless crowd gathered on Sunday, filling in from the Lincoln Memorial only to the closest edge of the Reflecting Pool. Even so, those who made the trek to Washington on a bitter January afternoon proved this point: The anti-vax movement has migrated from the fringes to the mainstream, due to the many who joined its ranks since the pandemic began. And now, by drilling down on vaccine mandates, the long-standing movement is recruiting new allies.

The crowd, as expected, was filled with the MAGA faithful, a core constituency that has railed against any and all government mandates since the pandemic’s inception. There was no shortage of “Let’s Go Brandon” paraphernalia, as well as its less polite cousin, “Fuck Biden.” A woman wearing a knit hat emblazoned with Trump’s “45” told me she’d had it with government overreach. “What other vaccine have you gotten that you still have to wear a mask for?” she said.

There were also many whose anti-vax activism predated the pandemic. I walked toward the Lincoln Memorial with Liz, who’d traveled from San Diego to attend the rally. Liz, who declined to give her last name, had raised her children partially in Japan, where doctors had [stopped recommending](#) adolescent women receive the HPV vaccine after it “killed some girls, maimed some others,” she explains. (The claim is unsubstantiated; reported side effects include muscle pain, sleep disorders, and light and sound sensitivity.) She struggles to find trustworthy news sources, she tells me, relying mostly on Children’s Health Defense, LifeSiteNews, a Catholic far-right advocacy and news site, and what she reads on Telegram, an encrypted messaging app favored by the right.

But I met many more who are new to the movement, like Stefan, a teacher from Santa Cruz, California, who carried a “Teachers Against Vaccines” sign. He and his children were “traditionally vaccinated,” he says, but his faith in vaccines changed during the pandemic. He cites Kennedy’s latest book, *The Real Anthony Fauci*, as key to that conversion. “I’m a full anti-vaxxer now,” he says. Like Liz, he trusts Children’s Health Defense for information — a neighbor he trusts had turned him onto it. Most of the rest of his news comes from conspiracy-adjacent podcasts: *The Joe Rogan Experience*, *No Agenda*, and *HighWire*, whose host, Bigtree, spoke at the rally.

A man from the New York area who declined to give his name told me that though he is new to anti-mandate activism, his ex-wife had taken him to court over his refusal to vaccinate their child. “I won’t let children become clinical trials,” he says. Zhane, a 26-year-old from Virginia, told me she nearly lost her job as a hospital nurse for refusing to get the vaccine. She’s worried it could harm her reproductive health, even though studies [indicate](#) otherwise. Katie, a Virginia resident, had an adverse reaction to a vaccine as a child and had survived her bout with Covid. She carried a “Recognize Natural Immunity” sign in protest of the mandates in Washington, D.C., where she works, even though people who have previously had Covid can become reinfected with the virus and spread it.

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likely to get seriously sick than their unvaccinated counterparts. They feel, as many signs



stated at Sunday's rally, that Fauci should go to prison.



But many others I spoke with didn't linger on the outlandish claims. At the core of the responses I gathered was something more nuanced: An enduring fear of the virus,



frustration with the governments' response, and a feeling that they lack control over the choices they make for themselves and their families. In taking up mandates as their cause,



the anti-vax movement had found a powerful conduit for those feelings — a circumstance that could make Sunday's rally a potent breeding ground for misinformation.

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