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How Trumpian politics stoke the coronavirus pandemic

A party led by the base is a party that isn't leading

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A simplified history of the Republican Party over the past 15 years goes like this.

Until 2009, it was largely directed by party officials and elected leaders. The emergence of the tea party movement, a reaction to the presidency of Barack Obama given energy by conservative media and organizations, forced the GOP to consider (if not integrate) far-right ideas and candidates into its agenda. With his presidential candidacy in 2015, Donald Trump gave primacy to those ideas and the fights that propagated over right-wing media. It was a recognition that media held more sway over voters than the establishment and one that, for obvious reasons, the establishment couldn't make. It worked as a political tactic in 2016, allowing Trump to consolidate the establishment around him. And then he left office, and all that was left was the base.

Leaders driving the base became leaders being pressured by the base became leaders following the base became the base leading. That evolution explains a great deal about where the country is at the moment, particularly in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

Three things happened over the past few days that are easily explained by that framework.

The first was Trump's appearance at a rally in Alabama during which he encouraged the audience to get vaccinated against the virus. Recent polling shows that Republicans are among the most hesitant to receive a dose of a coronavirus vaccine, with most of the unvaccinated being Republicans. So Trump's endorsement of the process yielded some audible boos, prompting him to backtrack a bit. He said that it was also important to protect his audience's "freedoms," the term that's become a standard rationalization for vaccine hesitancy. Recommending someone get vaccinated is now seen in some quarters as some sort of affront to civil liberties, so Trump quickly softened his already-soft pitch.

Trump has fought hard to take more credit than he's due for the genesis of the vaccines and would be happy to see them widely embraced so that he could amplify those claims. But, at the same time, his political success was a function of following what the base — generally as manifested on Fox News or right-wing websites — wanted. Hence the quick backtrack at his rally to acquiesce to what the loud voices wanted, if not the actual majority. (More than half of Republicans, though likely not of Republicans who attend Trump rallies, have been vaccinated.)

The former president probably deserves more credit for poisoning the well of vaccine acceptance than he does for encouraging their development. He calculated last year that his reelection depended on the health of the economy, so he pushed to move the pandemic to the background

even as it repeatedly refused to acquiesce. He insisted that government experts were not trustworthy even as he made repeated claims about various quick-fixes that loomed just over the horizon and that never emerged: the virus vanishing in summer, hydroxychloroquine, the “cure” of antibody treatments that he pledged would be made available to everyone. He fostered a base that rejected the idea that it needed to take steps to address the pandemic and then found himself needing to maximize turnout from that base to have a shot at winning reelection. Now he’s reticent to fully endorse vaccination in part, it has been reported, because he knows that much of his base is skeptical of the vaccine and he wants to keep from alienating them with a possible 2024 bid looming.

Trump’s approach both politically (follow the base’s lead) and on the pandemic (question the experts) has made things much trickier for state-level executives. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R), for example, is one of a handful of state leaders who want to emulate Trump’s political approach but also finds himself suddenly tripped up by it.

This is the second recent development that fits into the GOP framework articulated above. DeSantis got into a fight with the Associated Press over an article suggesting that his promotion of a drug called Regeneron — the “cure” to which Trump had referred — was a function of a major donor having a stake in the drug’s manufacturer. What’s important for our purposes is that DeSantis is focused on Regeneron in the first place.

Now, DeSantis made a bet earlier this year that the pandemic was on its way out. It seemed like a good bet in May, with cases plunging and vaccinations increasing. With 2024 looming, he wanted to position himself as the laissez-faire governor, the guy who let his state do its thing during the pandemic without consequence. (He was being challenged for this title by South Dakota Gov. Kristi L. Noem (R), whose legitimate indifference to taking steps to containing the virus led to her state being one of the hardest-hit in the country.) So he took a tough stance against any sort of vaccine or mask mandate, even using the country’s top infectious-disease expert, Anthony S. Fauci, as an explicit foil (as had Trump). He encouraged vaccinations, yes, but encouraged “freedom” more.

When the delta variant hit, he was in a bind. Cases started to surge, pulling up covid-19 deaths a few weeks later. But he’d already staked his position as being anti-mandate and pro-freedom, so he found it politically infeasible to support masking or limits on economic activity. He encouraged vaccinations, but the results of an uptick in vaccinations wouldn’t be seen for weeks. So he again followed Trump’s lead: The state would encourage the distribution of treatments for covid. Hands dusted off, DeSantis could head back to the culture wars.

Again, this is a function of a broad unwillingness to challenge a base that is willing to quickly turn on nearly anyone, particularly those who tell them what to do. Trump’s emergence in 2015 was energized by telling the base what it wanted to hear; DeSantis’s emergence as a gubernatorial candidate was energized by telling Trump what he wanted to hear. Now both are in thrall to a base that has been encouraged to reject the simplest defensive measures.

To a base, in fact, that has been encouraged to look for any solution *besides* the one recommended by experts it doesn’t trust. Which brings us to the third recent development: the emergence of ivermectin.

You've probably heard about this drug recently. Promotion of ivermectin as a treatment or preventive for covid on Fox News and elsewhere has led to it being used broadly in places where the disease is rampant. Feed stores are selling out of the drug — since it's commonly available as an anti-parasite treatment for livestock. In Mississippi, poison control centers have seen a spike in people reporting that they'd ingested the drug, with severe adverse effects.

Again, ivermectin is not the first drug for which we've gone through this same pattern. Last year, Trump and Fox News hailed hydroxychloroquine as something akin to a cure-all; in fact, many still are. It's empowering for the base/viewers in precisely the same way that Trump was, treating them as the experts instead of granting the actual experts that authority. This was a theme of Trump's, in fact, insisting to his rally audiences that they were the real "elites" in American society. It makes no sense that the FDA would reject one effective treatment for covid while approving others (save for various manufactured conspiracy theories that crumble easily when poked) but it is a lot more fun to think that you're doing your own research and staking out your own opinion than to simply follow the advice of eggheads in Washington. (I'll again point to this great thread from the Cato Institute's Julian Sanchez, walking through the way in which the illusion of people "doing their own research" inculcates a misguided sense of ownership.)

It is all of a piece! A Republican leadership that has abdicated authority to the base is therefore subject to being buffeted around as the winds shift. Right-wing media outlets such as Fox News, empowered further by the hollowing out of the establishment, help decide — as they long have — the direction of those gusts. Elected leaders willing to challenge the vocal parts of the base know that the media and their intraparty opponents will leap at the chance to cast them as heretics, probably with some effect.

And meanwhile hundreds more people die each day from covid, nearly all having embraced their God-given freedom to reject a simple injection that could have saved their lives.