

“CHANGING THE COVID CONVERSATION” FOCUS GROUP: Building Trust in COVID Vaccines

The de Beaumont Foundation held a focus group, led by pollster Frank Luntz, on March 13 to understand why many Republicans say they are reluctant to take a COVID-19 vaccine. The session supplemented polling that Luntz and de Beaumont have done to identify [effective language about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines](#) for all audiences.



While this was a single session with 19 participants, it provided unprecedented insights into the concerns of some Republicans and revealed messaging and language that can serve as an effective roadmap for building acceptance and uptake of COVID vaccines. These insights are being used to inform a national poll with Republicans and national and local efforts to build confidence in the safety and effectiveness of the COVID vaccines.

The 19 people recruited for this focus group met the following criteria:

- They identify as Republican.
- They voted for President Trump in the 2020 presidential election.
- They identify as “conservative” in their political ideology.
- They responded “maybe” or “probably not” when asked if they will get a COVID vaccine. They are not “anti-vaxxers” – they have taken other common vaccines in the past, such as vaccines for measles, polio, or hepatitis.

Key Takeaways

- **Politicians are ineffective messengers – the mistrust of government and political leaders is significant.** Participants said they would be much more receptive to their personal doctor’s recommendation over any politician or government agency, including President Trump. The group was unanimous in their mistrust or skepticism of government organizations and officials, which has been shaped in part by what they see as shifting guidance.

“Forget celebrities, forget politicians, you’re not going to get through to people. The people who are going to be receptive to that message delivered by those people are already convinced that they’re going to do it anyway. So get rid of politicians and celebrities.”

- **Decouple the science from politics.** Participants said the science and data surrounding the virus has become politicized, but objective information is essential to shaping an informed opinion about the vaccine. It would be an understatement to say Dr. Fauci is not a messenger that this audience connects with, in large part due to guidance that has changed over time. The participants said they want to be informed, but they don’t want to be told what to do.

“We want to be informed, not emoted to. We want to be educated, not indoctrinated. We don’t want to see platitudes about bipartisanship and ‘we’re all in this together.’ We want to make informed decisions with our free will -- not be coerced into something. And so that’s really where the messaging should be.”

“If you really want us to trust the science, politics has to be taken out of it.”

- **Data about the confidence of doctors and the lack of negative outcomes were persuasive.** Among the facts that participants found compelling: at least 90% of doctors who have been offered the vaccine have taken it; the development of mRNA has built upon decades of research; phase 3 trials involved a large number of participants with no hospitalizations or deaths; and the COVID vaccines are even more effective than the flu vaccine. Many favored clinical and analytical evaluations of the virus rather than emotional ones.
- **Unknown side effects are a major concern.** The number one reason participants questioned the vaccine was the worry of long-term side effects that we may not know for months or years. They were receptive when medical professionals first acknowledged this fact and then asked: “Would you be more concerned about the potential, yet unknown side effects, or the proven symptoms and long-term side effects of a COVID-19 infection?” The other key hesitation was the speed of the development of the vaccine. This was diffused by emphasizing that the speed and approval was not due to cutting corners or compromising safety but cutting “red tape” and administrative bureaucracy that typically impedes other innovations that require government approval.
- **Good stories help.** Participants were moved by stories that demonstrated the randomness and unpredictability of how the virus affects different people, including those who have no pre-existing conditions.
- **The ability to travel was a strong motivator for getting a vaccine.** Several of the participants said they would accept the vaccine if it were a requirement for air travel. They see travel as an essential aspect of life returning to normal.

Themes and Sample Quotes

1. Perceptions of the Pandemic and the COVID-19 Vaccine

One word or phrase to describe COVID-19?

- Controversy
- Isolation
- Government manipulation
- Very real illness has been manipulated by the government for political reasons
- A serious illness
- Weapons used in many different ways
- Potentially bad virus, but still a lot of questions about the exact details of it
- Say real virus but it's been overplayed or used for political gain
- A hyped-up version of the flu
- Opportunistic and exhausting
- Deadly but manageable

"It's like people have decided that they want to be afraid. They want to overreact to everything. It's amazing how many people who should know better have fallen into the trap of being afraid to go into a restaurant, to be around their family. Logical people who you thought were intelligent have just bought the hype, and it's almost become its own obsession."

"It's not about the virus. The virus is real, the virus is dangerous, especially to certain groups of people. It's the manipulation and the opportunistic politicians that have used it to complete their laundry list that they've had for 50 years of socialization of society."

Personal Experiences

"My sister and brother-in-law have COVID right now, and they're pretty critically ill. So I know it's a serious disease. However, we are a family that are proponents of personal freedom and choice. They've made the choice. You go to restaurants to go out without masks, and they own that choice. And even as they're suffering from COVID right now, they wouldn't have it any other way. Yes, it is a serious disease. I know, because I see them going through it. But we still stand strong on the side of freedom and personal responsibility."

"My husband and I both survived COVID. Last month, he almost died. I would I rather it be my choice than it be forced upon me by other entities. He was in intensive care for three weeks. I believe that our bodies naturally can fight off infections, although he did need assistance to get better. For us personally, I am highly doubtful that we'll ever get vaccinated for this, even though it almost killed him."

One word or phrase to describe the COVID vaccine?

- A miracle but suspicious
- Too many questions
- Rushed
- Experimental
- Impressive but hesitant
- Unknown long-term side effects
- Unproven
- Don't hold my freedom hostage
- Experimental and maybe not necessary
- Not enough history
- Unknown
- Not sufficiently tested
- Side effects
- Untrustworthy

"We don't know the long-term side effects. My fear of the vaccine is more than my fear of getting the illness."

"I just have too many questions about it. It was made way too quickly. Down the road, I might take it once more research is done and see how other people do, but right now I'm just not ready to take it."

"I do believe in the science. It's just that I'm still skeptical. It's just so new for me to take the chance. I do see it, people have died from the vaccine and people are having extreme side effects and it's scary. I think I'm going to get there. I'm just not ready yet."

"I'm using my best friend as a guinea pig, because he didn't really express any strong desire to take it. But he got the vaccine, and he's done the two shots now. I'm gonna wait and see what happens to him. But I've never even taken a vaccine for the flu. And I'm 65 years old. And I just don't feel it's necessary. Why not let nature take its course -- herd immunity? What's wrong with that?"

Who would agree that your fear of the vaccine is greater than your fear of getting the virus?

(12/19)

2. Trust in Government

Are you more inclined to trust or distrust the CDC?

11/19
"distrust"

"I think the CDC has a bunch of dedicated professional people who are doing the best thing they can with what they have. But I think the message is filtered. There's too many instances where the message that was filtered wasn't the true message. So where I trust the CDC, I don't trust everything that is reported about the CDC."

"On the one hand, we do trust the science, the doctors, the scientific community, we think the vaccine is great. It's this generation's moonshot in a lot of ways. The randomness certainly is compelling. I certainly don't want to get sick, I don't want to give it to my mother or anything like that. But on the other side of the scale, there is such a deep distrust from our supposedly trusted institutions, in the media, in politics, and I feel like that, in some ways, you, infects the scientific community."

One word to describe Dr. Anthony Fauci?

- Liar
- Flip-flopper
- Inconsistent
- Self-serving
- Opportunistic

3. Trust in President Trump

One word or phrase to describe President Trump's handling of the COVID virus?

- Amazing
- The best he could with what he was given
- Impressive
- Backed our freedom
- Leadership
- Excellent
- Good except for the "warp speed" part of Operation Warp Speed
- Unprecedented
- Very impressive
- Pretty good, overall
- The best he could do. But I wish he wouldn't have tweeted as much.
- Underrated

Who's going to have a greater influence on whether or not you get the vaccine -- Donald Trump or your own doctor?

0
Trump

4. Motivating Arguments and Statements

Dr. Tom Frieden's Five Facts:

Dr. Frieden, former CDC director, shared five simple facts with the group:

1. If you get infected with the virus, it will go all over your body and stay there for at least a week and be much more likely to cause you long-term problems than the vaccine.
2. If you get the vaccine, it will prime your immune system, but then the vaccine is gone. It will not be with you anymore.
3. More than 90% of the doctors who have been offered this vaccine have chosen to get it.
4. The more we vaccinate, the faster we can get back to growing our economy and doing the things we want to do.
5. If people get vaccinated, we're going to save at least 100,000 lives of Americans who would otherwise be killed by COVID.

Reactions:

"The first fact was the most impressive. I'm 65 years old. Like I said, I've been hesitant. Both my wife and I think that we probably had COVID at the end toward the end of last year. But neither one of us have been diagnosed. We haven't had the vaccine. I don't see the need for it right now. But that was pretty impactful to me."

"If 95% of doctors have gotten it, I find that very reassuring. And then the number of trials, the people they did the trials on, I didn't know the number was that high. And then when they were talking about the reason it went so fast was more of a red tape issue. That makes me feel a lot better."

"I think it was compelling, and I think what I've learned is I probably need to just separate my reaction to the government involvement in this and look at just the science. I'm a pharmacist. I used to work for Merck. I know their vaccines are good products, I trust them. What I don't trust is the government telling me what I need to do when they haven't led us down the right road, in my view. So if I can set the government aside and just look at the science and think about it from a medical standpoint, I think I'm okay."

"From the very beginning, this has all been politicized. And it seems like we're still trying to go with the celebrities and the politicians to tell us what to do. The most compelling thing I've seen today was the doctor from the CDC giving us some facts with no filter, no agenda, nothing just giving us facts."

"It's like, 'Get the vaccine because we're telling you to get it and even after you get it, you won't get to do the things you used to do.' I think there has to be more realistic hope and show that it will reduce the episodes of death and severe illness, because I think that's what scares people when they think about COVID."

"He just he sounds very genuine. It's apolitical. I don't feel like he's telling me what I should do. He's just presenting the facts. The things he said have definitely given me a little bit more perspective on things today. But at the same time, I don't feel like he's telling me that I have to do something."

Conclusion

At the end of the session, when asked if they were more willing to take the vaccine, most participants raised their hands.

16 yes

"I would say I was 50/50 when we started. I'm maybe 75% in favor now of getting it. If it means I can get into the nursing home to see my mother, that would probably push me a lot quicker."

"I was unlikely to get it unless I was forced to start with so maybe 2 out of 10. And now I'm probably 9 out of 10 that I'll get it when it becomes readily available."

"The facts that have been shared are definitely moving me in the direction of getting it. Especially the randomness of it – as a younger person, the likelihood of me having severe consequences or dying or are less. But I've still heard stories of people my age or younger getting it and passing away, or having a weird reaction to it. So, the randomness is concerning to me, and probably helps move the needle towards getting the vaccine."

"I'm probably about 80-85% sure that I will get the vaccine. Coming in, I was 99% opposed to getting the vaccine."

"I was 50/50 when I came in. And sitting here, this was just an honest conversation that we all had. And it was just very compelling to me. And I think we were all pretty skeptical. And I think that for most of us, just having this conversation made a real difference. I just think the doctor was very compelling and just those facts with no agenda, and no politics really changed me. So I'm pretty sure I'm gonna get the shot now."

"Trump Republicans remain the last significant holdout in embracing the COVID-19 vaccine -- but we now have hope. A combination of key medical facts, enumerated clearly without any political undertones, and a human story of just how random and deadly the virus has been, is a convincing, motivating message. If the elected officials and the public health experts adopt this strategy, they will save thousands of lives."

- Frank Luntz

For more information, visit changingthecovidconversation.org.

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de Beaumont Foundation
7501 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 1310e
Bethesda, MD 20814
www.debeaumont.org