



Understanding Anti-COVID-19 Vaccination Protest Slogans in the US

Tim F. Liao*

Department of Sociology, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL, United States

This study aims to investigate public protest slogans in response to the Biden Administration's announcement of two COVID-19 vaccination regulations on November 4, 2021. We identified three protest themes: (1) support for individual freedom/rights, (2) opposition to government's control, and (3) anti-science reasoning/misinformation/disinformation. Major policy recommendations include implementing efforts to dispel unscientific misinformation/disinformation and to emphasize individuals' civic responsibilities for vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially considering the current spreading of the Omicron variants and the relaxing of mask mandates across the US.

OPEN ACCESS

Edited by:

Mesfin Bekalu,
Harvard University, United States

Reviewed by:

Rita Gill Singh,
Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong
Kong SAR, China

*Correspondence:

Tim F. Liao
tfliao@illinois.edu

Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Health Communication,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Communication

Received: 12 May 2022

Accepted: 31 May 2022

Published: 30 June 2022

Citation:

Liao TF (2022) Understanding
Anti-COVID-19 Vaccination Protest
Slogans in the US.
Front. Commun. 7:941872.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2022.941872

Keywords: anti-vaccination, vaccination, slogan, protest, COVID-19, misinformation/disinformation, health policy

INTRODUCTION

The efficacy of mRNA vaccines, the most common form of COVID-19 vaccination in the US, is well established via clinical trials (Gilbert et al., 2021). To increase vaccination coverage, the Biden administration announced on November 4, 2021 two major policies (The White House, 2021). On January 13, 2022 the Supreme Court blocked the vaccine-or-test regulation but upheld the policy of requiring Medicare and Medicaid healthcare workers vaccinated (National Public Radio, 2022). Anti-vaccine protests spread across the US between the two dates. The objective of this research is to analyze media-reported protest slogans during this period in the US although vaccine mandates were also proposed in December 2021 by the European Union (Burki, 2022), with ensuing anti-vaccine protests there. An important feature of such anti-vaccine (and anti-mask) protests across the globe is a surge of misinformation (Ahinkorah et al., 2020; Das and Ahmed, 2021; Martin and Vanderslott, 2021), assisted by mass media and social networks (Tagliabue et al., 2020). Spreading such anti-vaccine misinformation deliberately could be considered criminalizable (Mills and Sivelä, 2021). Here, however, we distinguish between "misinformation" and "disinformation," following Das and Ahmed's (2021) lead. "Misinformation" is best conceptualized as "a piece of information that is inadvertently false and circulated without a clear cynical intention" whereas "disinformation" is information "strategically manipulated and circulated with a clear purpose to cause socio-political unrests and disruptions" (Das and Ahmed, 2021, p., 147). Both "misinformation" and "disinformation," as types of fake news, are relevant concepts for understanding anti-vaccination protests.

TABLE 1 | Three themes in the 150 anti-vaccine protest slogans.

Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
Freedom to choose	Stop all the tyranny	COVID=scam
We are voices for freedom	Say no to vaccine passport	Natural immunity
Dockworkers support freedom of choice	No murder mandate	Vaccines are not placebo safety tested
Freedom fighters unite	Governor, we are not your subjects	By definition messenger RNA shots are not vaccines
Let me call my own shots	The jab only aid the oppressor	This vaccine is experimental
No mandate my body my choice	Defy fascist lockdown	Vax free and thriving
I will not comply	Ban the mandate	Protect our religious freedom
Faith freedom over fear	We do not consent to tyranny or forced vaccines	Covid-19 mandates threaten first responders
Freedom is not negotiable	Build up immune system not vaccine schedule	Vaccines are made with aborted fetal cells
Freedom not force	Forced  is battery	Isaiah 53:5 by his stripes endured on the [†] we are healed
Freedom of choice	No forced vaccines	Covid-19 makers are exempt from liability
Medical freedom is a human right	Stop forced vaccine	Come get your depopulation vaccine
We will not comply	Forced vaccination is inhuman	Vaccines kill
My body my choice	No mandates	Covid vax is poison
Let me call my own shots	No vaccine mandates	Vaccines known to cause seizures
I call my shots my body my choice	Don't let them vaccinate you	
Medical freedom	Stop medical tyranny	
Vaccine mandates violate bodily autonomy	No vax mandate	
When you trade liberty with security you lose both	Americans! No forced experimental shots!	
There is no freedom without medical freedom	No vaccine passports	
My body my choice	Terminate the mandate	
Stand for medical freedom	Is this the future you want for your kids?	
Choice over mandate	No nazi vaccine passport mandates	
Yes to freedom	Stop the mandates	
My body my choice	No medical mandates	
We won't get vaxd freedom of choice	No medical tyranny mandates	
No jab no job no choice	Job or jab is illegal	
Don't give us the axe for not taking the vax	No medical mandate	
Mandate freedom	End medical tyranny now	
Our kids our choice	We are the same heroes from last year	
No jab for jobs	Stop mandatory vaccines	
Medical freedom	Vaccine mandates are unconstitutional	
When there's a risk there must be a choice	I don't coparent with the government	
Don't use fear to steal our freedom	End segregation now	
Freedom not force	Is this the future you want for your kids?	
No matter what the situation, remind yourself "I have a choice"	No mandates	
I will not comply	No vaccine mandate	
No jab mandate for my body	No forced vax no mandate united we stand	
My body my rights my choice	Stop the mandate	
My body my choice nothing suspends the constitution	No to mandatory vaccines	
Freedom is essential	529 days we worked w/ no  and now face termination	
Honk for medical freedom	No medical mandate	
They won't vaccine me alive	Crimes against humanity	
We will not comply	This is America the free! Not a communist dictatorship	
Freedom of choice	Stop the mandate	
Parents call the shots	The final variant is communism	
Our body our choice	Keep America free no to socialist government	
We stand for medical freedom	Revoke vaccine mandate	
Medical freedom	No forced vax	
Don't jab on me	No forced vaccine	
We will not comply	Cancel the mandate	
Medical freedom is a human right	Medical apartheid is wrong	
U.S. out of my body	Unmask our children now	
My medical decisions are not your business	Stop the mandate	
It's my choice	Unmask our kids	
Freedom not force	Fpl doesn't care about our rights	
I call the shots not you	Prohibit mandatory vaccines	
Freedom to choose	No medical mandates	
Where is the respect for my autonomy?	Keep your drugs to yourselves	
Fight 4 choice like you fight 4 toilet paper	Educate, don't mandate	
We will not comply	I don't coparent with the government	
My body my choice	Terminate the mandate	
My body my choice	Say no to mandatory vaccines	
My body my choice	No vaccine mandate for students	
My body my choice	Don't touch our children	
Freedom of health	No to masks or vaccines	
Freedom over force		
Where there is a risk there must be a choice		
Medical freedom is a human right		
Freedom over fear		

 = vaccine syringe symbol; [†] = cross symbol.

first three associated with theme 3 and the other four, theme 2. The complete sample of the protest slogans are presented in **Table 1**. While theme 3 slogans are fewer in number than themes 1 and 2, the theme contains various anti-science, disinformation slogans such as false claims about the safety and the origin of vaccines and of conspiracy theories.

DISCUSSION

Words in **Figure 1** suggest some popular slogans, “My Body, My Choice,” “Medical Freedom,” “Stop the Mandate,” and “No Forced Mandates,” showing either strong support for individual rights or opposition to the government’s mandates. It is important to note that the two themes can be viewed as the two sides of the same coin: One believing in individual freedom often opposes the government’s control. Theme 3 slogans may reveal the underlying reasons for attitudes of themes 1 and 2. If someone believes “Vaccines Kill” (a slogan of disinformation), the person will naturally oppose the government’s proposal while favoring individual rights. Sometimes slogans of different, sometimes all three, themes coappear at a protest. Thus, some of the slogans of different themes in **Table 1** may appear together in a single image, and one such image with five displayed slogans of all three themes is reported in Woodall (2021). When all three themes are present at the same protest, there is strong indication of disinformation about vaccination beyond simple misinformation, where disinformation is considered as the deliberate and strategic spread of false information or misinformation (Jaswal et al., 2020).

As previously observed, vaccine uptake can be lower among Republicans (Liao, 2021); anti-vaxxers in America tend to be on the far right (Hotez, 2020). To form an effective COVID-19 public health policy in the US, we suggest a two-pronged approach. Anti-scientific misinformation (Martin and Vanderslott, 2021) must be vehemently corrected; the spread of misinformation has reached such a level

that the World Health Organization warned of an ongoing “infodemic” or an overabundance of information, especially misinformation/disinformation, that may harm societal response to the pandemic, and to counter that infodemic calls for psychological inoculation (van der Linden et al., 2020). Furthermore, the Federal Government must highlight the importance of all citizens’ civic responsibilities, including that for vaccination, for the benefit of society and its collective future. All these policy considerations will now be even more relevant because, with the spreading of the various Omicron variants and the relaxing of mask mandates across the US, vaccination will be the main defense against the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The recent spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 Omicron variants especially among the unvaccinated highlights the importance of vaccination even more, and the US is a country where these variants are still spreading, with roughly only two-thirds of its population fully vaccinated (with two doses) by May 24, 2022. This study helps us understand the public sentiment among those who are against COVID-19 vaccination. The only way forward is to correct the misinformation/disinformation about vaccination and to emphasize each citizen’s civic responsibilities for the collective good.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original data analyzed in the study are included in the table of the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

TFL contributed to all aspects of the reported research.

REFERENCES

- Ahinkorah, B. O., Ameyaw, E. K., and Hagan, Jr. J. E., et al. (2020). Rising above misinformation or fake news in Africa: Another strategy to control COVID-19 spread. *Front. Commun. Health Commun.* 5, 45. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2020.00045
- Burki, T. (2022). COVID-19 mandates in Europe. *Lancet Infect. Dis.* 22, 28–28. doi: 10.1016/S1473-3099(21)00776-3
- Das, R., and Ahmed, W. (2021). Rethinking fake news: disinformation and ideology during the time of COVID-19 pandemic. *IIM Kozhikode Soc. Manag. Rev.* 11, 146–159. doi: 10.1177/22779752211027382
- Gilbert, P. B., Montefiori, D. C., Mcdermott, A. B., Fong, Y., Benkeser, D., Deng, W., et al. (2021). Immune correlates analysis of the mRNA-1273 COVID-19 vaccine efficacy clinical trial. *Science* 375, 43–50. doi: 10.1126/science.abm3425
- Hotez, P. J. (2020). Anti-science extremism in America: escalating and globalizing. *Microb. Infect.* 22, 505–507. doi: 10.1016/j.micinf.2020.09.005
- Jaswal, J., LoSchiavo, C., and Perlman, D. C. (2020). Disinformation, misinformation and inequality-drive mistrust in the time of COVID-19: Lessons unlearned form AIDS denialism. *AIDS Behav.* 24, 2776–2780. doi: 10.1007/s10461-020-02925-y
- Liao, T. F. (2010). Visual symbolism, collective memory, and social protest: the case of the 2009 London G20 protest. *Soc. Altern.* 29, 37–43. Available online at: <https://search.informit.org/doi/epdf/10.3316/ielapa.201103042>
- Liao, T. F. (2021). Social and economic inequality in Coronavirus disease 2019 vaccination coverage across Illinois counties. *Sci. Rep.* 11, 18443. doi: 10.1038/s41598-021-97705-6
- Martin, S., and Vanderslott, S. (2021). “Any idea how fast ‘It’s just a mask!’ can turn into ‘It’s just a vaccine!’”: From Mask Mandates to vaccine mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Vaccine*. doi: 10.1016/j.vaccine.2021.10.031
- Mills, M., and Sivelä, J. (2021). Should spreading anti-vaccine misinformation be criminalised? *BMJ* 372, n272. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n272
- National Public Radio (2022). *Supreme Court blocks Biden’s Vaccine-or-test Mandate for Large Private Companies*. NPR. Available online at: <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/13/1072165393/supreme-court-blocks-bidens-vaccine-or-test-mandate-for-large-private-companies> (accessed January 13, 2022).

- Tagliabue, F., Galassi, L., and Mariani, P. (2020). The pandemic of disinformation in COVID-19. *SN Comp. Clinic. Med.* 2, 1287–1289. doi: 10.1007/s42399-020-00439-1
- The White House (2021). *Fact sheet: Biden Administration Announces Details of Two Major Vaccination Policies*. The White House Briefing Room. Available online at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/11/04/fact-sheet-biden-administration-announces-details-of-two-major-vaccination-policies/> (accessed November 4, 2021).
- van der Linden, S., Roozenbeek, J., and Compton, J. (2020). Inoculating against fake news about COVID-19. *Front. Psychol.* 11, 566790. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.566790
- Woodall, C. (2021). “Everybody Needs to fight.” *Anti-vaccine Mandate Advocates Protest at Pa. State Capital*. *GoErie*. Available online at: <https://www.goerie.com/story/news/2021/11/09/pa-capitol-vaccine-protest-mastriano-harrisburg/6350841001/> (accessed May 28, 2022).

Conflict of Interest: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher’s Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Copyright © 2022 Liao. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.