***Vaccine Skepticism Was Viewed as a Knowledge Problem. It’s Actually About Gut Beliefs.***

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For years, scientists and doctors have treated vaccine skepticism as a knowledge problem. If patients were hesitant to get vaccinated, the thinking went, they simply needed more information.

But as public health officials now work to convince Americans to get Covid-19 vaccines as quickly as possible, new social science research suggests that a set of deeply held beliefs is at the heart of many people’s resistance, complicating efforts to bring the coronavirus pandemic under control.

“The instinct from the medical community was, ‘If only we could educate them,’” said Dr. Saad Omer,director of the Yale Institute for Global Health, who studies vaccine skepticism. “It was patronizing and, as it turns out, not true.”

[About a third of American adults](https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/dashboard/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-dashboard/?utm_source=web&utm_medium=trending&utm_campaign=COVID-19-vaccine-monitor) are still resisting vaccines. Polling shows that Republicans make up a substantial part of that group. Given how deeply the country is divided by politics, it is perhaps not surprising that they have dug in, particularly with a Democrat in the White House. But political polarization is only part of the story.

In recent years, epidemiologists have teamed up with social psychologists to look more deeply into the “why” behind vaccine hesitancy. They wanted to find out whether there was anything that vaccine skeptics had in common, in order to better understand how to persuade them.

They borrowed [a concept from social psychology](https://moralfoundations.org/) — the idea that a small set of moral intuitions forms the foundations upon which complex moral worldviews are constructed — and applied it to their study of vaccine skepticism.

What they discovered was a clear set of psychological traits offering a new lens through which to understand skepticism — and potentially new tools for public health officials scrambling to try to persuade people to get vaccinated.

[Dr. Omer and a team of scientists found](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-017-0256-5) that skeptics were much more likely than nonskeptics to have a highly developed sensitivity for liberty — the rights of individuals — and to have less deference to those in positions of power.

Skeptics were also twice as likely to care a lot about the “purity” of their bodies and their minds. They disapprove of things they consider disgusting, and the mind-set defies neat categorization: It could be religious — halal or kosher — or entirely secular, like people who care deeply about toxins in foods or in the environment.

Scientists have found similar patterns among skeptics in [Australia](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953619300395?casa_token=ct4wM61SCgsAAAAA:XdKpYKbMxy6Jp5JapJ2gk7elucEUtdoHp3KoGhgjjDaBoQavCQM7YTQuJL3hvGuYAFKGppa5#!) and [Israel](https://plus61j.net.au/panel2/unholy-vaccine-israelis-afraid-getting-covid-vaccine/), and in a broad sample of vaccine-hesitant people [in 24 countries](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-03974-001) in 2018.

“At the root are these moral intuitions — these gut feelings — and they are very strong,” said Jeff Huntsinger, a social psychologist at Loyola University Chicago who studies emotion and decision-making and collaborated with Dr. Omer’s team. “It’s very hard to override them with facts and information. You can’t reason with them in that way.”

These qualities tend to predominate among conservatives but they are present among liberals too. They are also present among people with no politics at all.

Kasheem Delesbore, a warehouse worker in northeastern Pennsylvania, is neither conservative nor liberal. He does not consider himself political and has never voted. But he is skeptical of the vaccines — along with many institutions of American power.

Mr. Delesbore, 26, has seen information online that a vaccine might harm his body. He is not sure what to make of it. But his faith in God gives him confidence: Whatever happens is God’s will. There is little he can do to influence it. (Manufacturers of the three vaccines approved for emergency use by the Food and Drug Administration say they are safe.)

The vaccines have also raised a fundamental question of power. There are many things in Mr. Delesbore’s life that he does not control. Not the schedule at the warehouse where he works. Or the way he is treated by the customers at his other job, a Burger King. The decision about whether to get vaccinated, he believes, should be one of them.