

## ARGUMENT

# The Real Reason France Is Skeptical of Vaccines

The French public hasn't stopped believing in science. They've stopped believing in the state.

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*French President Emmanuel Macron visits an industrial development laboratory at French drugmaker's vaccine unit Sanofi Pasteur plant in Marcy-l'Etoile, near Lyon, central France, on June 16, 2020.*

LAURENT CIPRIANI/POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

In the past few months, France's relationship to vaccines has come under unexpected scrutiny. First, a flurry of surveys and opinion polls seemed to show that the French were deeply suspicious about the possibility of taking any of the new vaccines against COVID-19. International media reported with horror that the land of Louis Pasteur—who first explained the science of vaccination in the late 19th century—was apparently filled with people who did not trust their own state to administer a safe vaccine.

Second, and seemingly related to the first, France began to fall behind dramatically in the race to vaccinate its population. The latest [figures](#), released on Jan. 30, showed that only 2.34 percent of French people had received one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, compared with 3.16 percent in Italy, 8.94 percent in the United States, and 13.95 percent in the United Kingdom.

Finally, the French medical research and pharmaceutical sector has had to admit to serious difficulties with its own attempts to produce a vaccine. In early December 2020, Sanofi and GSK announced that their vaccine had not passed initial clinical trials and would need to be

redeveloped; and, on Jan. 25, the Institut Pasteur and Merck abandoned their vaccine candidate altogether.

Much of the commentary about these problems in the English-language media has focused on the rising tide of anti-vaccine sentiment in France. There is some truth to this. Confidence in medical science has declined in recent years after a series of scandals. The most famous of these relates to the diabetes drug Mediator, which was marketed as a weight loss pill and has been linked to the deaths of as many as 2,000 people. French prosecutors accuse both the drug manufacturer Servier and the government agency in charge of drug approval of negligence and manslaughter. After a trial that lasted for almost seven months, a verdict in the case is expected on March 29.

Nor has France been immune to the kind of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories that have made the headlines in the United States. Facebook groups promoting baseless theories about the so-called dangers of vaccines and 5G phone towers have proliferated since the start of the pandemic. Moreover, it was the controversial French doctor, Didier Raoult, who first championed the use of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19, an idea that has since been discredited.

Nevertheless, open hostility to conventional science remains a marginal phenomenon in France. Very few parents refuse compulsory vaccines for their children, and the French have long ranked among the world's top consumers of painkillers and antibiotics. The cliché of the French hypochondriac who pops a pill at the first sign of a cough remains true, despite sustained efforts on the part of the French state to curb this often needless—and expensive—addiction. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, to see that [some](#) of the most recent opinion polls show a distinct uptick in the number of people willing to take the COVID-19 vaccine. The prestige of scientific knowledge has already begun to quash the conspiracy theories and rumormongering.

Still, it would be wrong to write off France's multifaceted vaccine fiasco as a mere flash in the pan. It highlights much deeper ills.

The most obvious of these is a deep crisis of trust in the French state and its representatives. At least since World War II, the French have been locked in a conflictual relationship with their state. This has most often expressed itself as a cat-and-mouse game over reform. The script will be familiar to regular observers of France. A government or administration indicates its intention to change some aspect of the welfare system or the economy; in response, people react with hostility, sometimes pouring out onto the streets in protest.

Depending on the size of the protests and the political reaction, the government chooses either to press ahead with the reforms—sometimes with substantial amendments to placate the crowds—or abandon them altogether. In the most dramatic cases, the minister in charge of presenting the reform is fired.

There are myriad historical examples of this conflictual relationship, from the Poujadist movement of the 1950s that was driven by opposition to tax reforms through to the enormous public sector strikes over pension reforms that brought the country to a standstill in 1995. More recent examples include protests against changes to labor laws in 2016 and, most famously, the yellow vest movement in 2018-19.

Traditionally, these moments of protest have served an important function by allowing citizens to vent their frustrations without, in most cases, threatening the foundations of the state. But, since the end of the postwar boom in the 1970s, trust in the French state has declined steeply. Stubbornly high unemployment, the globalization of the economy, and the penetration of neo-liberal ideas of governance have sapped the legitimacy of the state and its representatives. Many French people no longer believe it capable of protecting them from the vagaries of global capitalism, nor are they convinced by politicians who claim they will restore France's lost grandeur.

One of the consequences of this crisis of trust is a parallel loss of nerve on the part of French technocrats and political leaders. Where once they would have breezily dismissed vaccine skeptics as irrelevant naysayers and pushed ahead with a centralized, state-led vaccine program, they now find themselves looking nervously over their shoulders.

The figure of Emmanuel Macron, who is the archetype of the 21st-century technocrat, embodies these tensions. Although the French president has variously styled himself as the Roman god Jupiter, Louis XIV, and Charles de Gaulle, the reality is that he is far more concerned with public opinion than any of the figures to whom he has compared himself.

This was already apparent at the time of the yellow vest protests. In addition to a flurry of concessions, he responded to this outpouring of dissatisfaction by embarking on a mass process of civic engagement by initiating a “great national debate” in 2019. This led to more than 10,000 town hall meetings in the space of a few months, in which citizens were encouraged to discuss some of the major political issues of the day. Macron himself made several cameo appearances at these events, the concrete outcomes of which remain rather opaque.

It is presumably this experience that inspired Macron to create a citizens’ collective to advise on the vaccine rollout in November. The idea was to allay French fears about vaccination by inviting 30 citizens to give their opinions about the process. Macron’s ministers suggested that it would be a good way to take the temperature of public opinion. Others poured scorn on the initiative, decrying it as a travesty of the democratic process.

Whatever the value of a citizens’ collective, one thing is clear: it will not be able to address the key challenges that France faces. A vaccine campaign is an opportunity to show leadership. If Macron wants to be de Gaulle, he should prioritize rousing narratives over the everyday grumbling of an unhappy people. The fact that he seems unable to do so is a sign that the dynamic interplay between the French and their state is coming apart.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Europe is moving into a new phase. In the early stages of the outbreak, government responses were characterized by panic, last-ditch health measures, and emergency bailouts. Most people accepted that states and leaders were flying blind. Today, with multiple vaccines available, the politics of delivery have moved center stage. France would appear to have exceptional assets in the form of a strong health system, outstanding medical research, and cutting-edge hospitals. In time, these will no doubt ensure that the vast majority of French people get a COVID-19 vaccine.

Yet early delays, botched vaccine candidates, and an inability to find a unifying vaccine-positive narrative could do lasting damage. With new protests sure to come in the wake of further restrictions and lockdowns in the coming year—and with a presidential election a little over a year away—they could sound the death knell of Macron’s presidency.

Even if he survives a reelection campaign in 2022, the technocrat-turned-president will have to contend with state institutions whose legitimacy and authority have been hollowed out as never before. Vaccine skepticism is unlikely to stop the French from getting a COVID-19 vaccine, but it will make it even harder to govern a country that has been battered by the pandemic.

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