

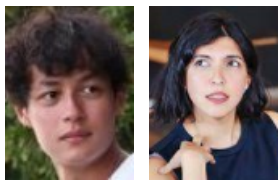


Daniele Sudsataya

Manna Mostaghim

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How Robert F. Kennedy Jr's counter narratives on public health found a home in America's disconnected communities



Robert F. Kennedy Jr. was able to transform an unsuccessful 2024 presidential campaign into his current role as Secretary of Health and Human Services in Donald Trump's administration. Daniele Sudsataya and Manna Mostaghim look at how RFK Jr. has used his own position as an institutional outsider to speak to those in often socioeconomically disadvantaged rural communities, who feel that they have been forgotten by the healthcare system and offer them the freedom of personal choice about their own health.

Despite being a member of an American political dynasty, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the nephew of President John F. Kennedy, and son of senator and US attorney general, Robert F. Kennedy (both assassination victims), remained largely outside of mainstream American political discourse, instead becoming a prominent voice in the niche sphere of environmental policy and law. But as a member of a rich family that was not of the people but for the people, RFK Jr did eventually try to cast his image in the Kennedy archetype.

In April 2023, he **announced** his run for the Democratic Party nomination for president. By October 2023, he had decided to run as an **independent candidate** – and polls projected that he would not win. Courted by the Republican Party, he withdrew his candidacy for president and became an acolyte for Trump's 'Make America Great Again' campaign. For his newfound loyalty to MAGA, RFK Jr. was nominated and later confirmed as Secretary of Health and Human Services.

In this role, RFK Jr.'s discourse on health has been a confused tension between his own skepticism for the rigorous science of medical systems and the promise to rebuild a better health system that undermines medical institutions. In RFK Jr.'s health system, ideological aspersions are hurled against scientists whose science proves him wrong. He tells individuals that they – not medics and experts – have the power to interpret the science on their health.

But how can someone who, just a few days ago, was on the receiving end of an unprecedented Senate hearing grilling session, and is currently being urged to resign by **even his own family members**, have become the top public health official in the United States?

Why RFK Jr. can appeal to the “Basket of Deplorables”

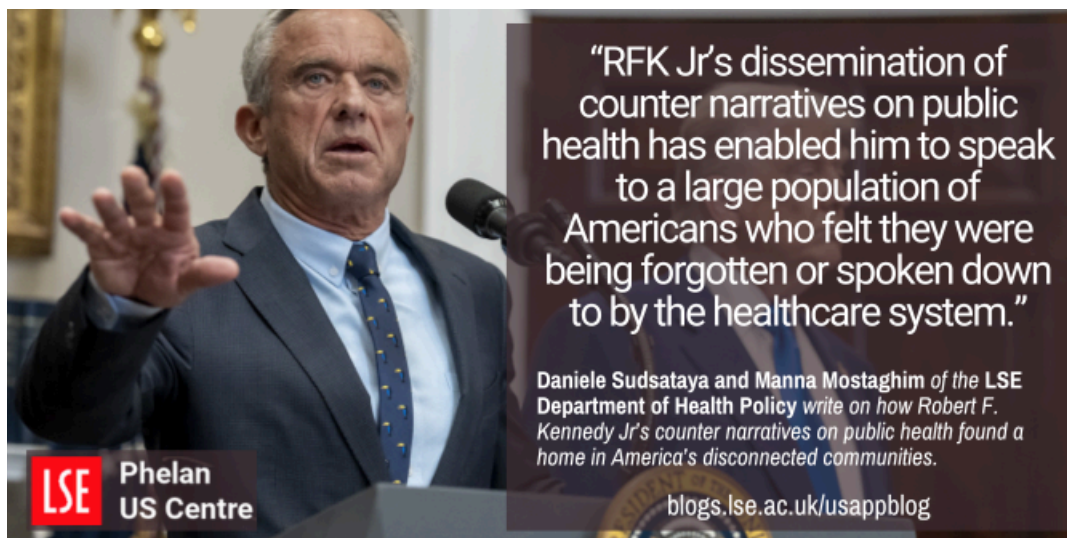
RFK Jr. frames his approach to public health as someone who knows your pain because power and status could not inoculate his own family from the machinations of a government pitted against your ultimate interests. If they hadn’t been protected, then how could you be? RFK Jr. presents himself as someone who could have been a wealthy, content and self-satisfied cog but chose to speak for the people instead.

During his failed 2024 presidential campaign, and afterwards, RFK Jr. was widely criticized and even ridiculed **for his pseudo-scientific views**, his interaction with **roadkill**, and even for having a **dead worm in his brain**. But do his supporters care about any of this?

A large portion of RFK Jr’s supporters are individuals that a Democratic Party voter living in New York or California may never know or meet. In the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton once called this group of people a “**Basket of Deplorables**”. They reside in **rural communities** which are distant from busier, more affluent cities. These places are often found in those states colloquially referred to as “flyover” by those living in these well off, international hubs, and are precisely the states that tend to vote Republican in US elections.

People in “flyover” states are often blamed or talked down to by the dominant political rhetoric. Attacking and alienating people this way, however, was damaging, and has been compounded by a **socioeconomic disparity** that sees a comparatively smaller household income compared to that of the coastal elites.

Fake or misinformed news also easily proliferates in these disconnected communities when delivered by charismatic leaders that speak to them rather than down to them. In 2016 and 2024, Donald Trump appealed to these communities because he elevated them from a basket of deplorables to misunderstood patriots. Subsequently, **echo chambers** that ignored rigorous scientific information by supposed elites were cultivated for people who had been dismissed by elites.



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The health treatment of “deplorables”

RFK Jr’s dissemination of counter narratives on public health has enabled him to speak to a large population of Americans who felt they were being forgotten or spoken down to by the healthcare system. His advocacy of preventative healthcare for a population that has been subject to a prohibitively expensive healthcare system brought together a discourse of empowerment and victimization for a population that is underserved and undervalued by an imagined elite in the American political system.

Rural communities in the US have always been underserved by the healthcare system, within a wider infrastructure of broken and under resourced civil infrastructure. These regions lack services necessary for adequate care, with individuals often having to travel outside their states. Pair this with the exorbitant prices of health insurance, and healthcare then becomes something largely **inaccessible** for these communities. These regions also face critical levels of physician shortages: 65 percent of primary care **shortages** are found in rural areas, yet only nine percent of primary care providers in the entire US practice in these communities. Thus, the already steep financial burden of healthcare in the US, compounded by lower median incomes and higher rates of uninsured individuals common in rural counties, creates “**healthcare deserts**” where access to quality care becomes a luxury not many can afford.

RFK Jr’s campaign on individuals’ right to medical freedom has resonated with the legitimate frustrations of the American people about a healthcare system that appears to prioritize profit over patients. His emphasis on alternative health strategies and skepticism of the established healthcare and pharmaceutical institutions offered a solution to groups of people who perhaps felt disempowered by a medical establishment that seemed out of touch from their lived experiences. RFK Jr describes himself as a “freedom of choice” person: his rhetoric has effectively reframed what many viewed as a systemic failure of the healthcare system that is too gargantuan to change,

into a narrative of personal empowerment that has resonated with the **lack of governmental and institutional trust** already present in rural communities.

COVID-19 and skepticism of health authorities

The COVID-19 pandemic may not have been perceived in rural communities as having the same intensity as felt by the heavily populated and affluent cities of coastal elites. During the pandemic, rural communities were subject to dramatic media headlines, rising death tolls, and the need to live through strict restrictions with many not actually perceiving the threat of disease in their local community, and therefore adopting lower risk-perceptions, which had often been fueled by media echo chambers. A clear example of this relates to **how vaccines were politicized** in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic (something that is still present today).

A stark information unevenness was born in rural communities from a top-down approach to healthcare communication. The mandatory imposition of vaccines and the proliferation of inaccessible and hard to understand scientific information relating to COVID-19 created a powerful gap in risk perceptions, and **fragmented trust** between individuals and institutions. However, what was tangible was the economic effects of lockdowns on local businesses, the frustration of travel bans, and the social distancing rules that fundamentally changed life. These factors made COVID-19 a justifiably frustrating experience for the “basket of deplorables”.

So, following this comes RFK Jr, who advocates freedom of personal choice. You no longer need to vaccinate; you should do what you think is best. This rhetoric mirrored Trump’s in that it spoke to those who felt left behind. But the effects of this are now starting to show: cases of the **measles** have seen a resurgence, and rubella, polio and diphtheria may make a **return** as well. And with RFK Jr’s **ongoing siege of the US Centers for Disease Control** causing a string of high-profile firings within the institution to ensure agenda loyalty, a dark cloud of confusion continues to loom over the American healthcare world.

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About the author

Daniele Sudsataya is an MPhil/PhD candidate in Health Policy and Health Economics in LSE's Department of Health Policy. His PhD research is focused on the formation of health care behaviours and heterogeneity in incentive receptiveness. He aims to understand the political and social formation of patient and provider preferences for health care use, particularly on vaccination, financial and behavioural incentives, and health insurance.

Manna Mostaghim

Manna Mostaghim is a PhD student in LSE's Department of Health Policy and a researcher on the provision and politics of sexual and reproductive health in the UK. She has researched the access and rights that individuals have within the frameworks and institutions that govern contraception and assisted reproductive treatments within the NHS.

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