

## The Bitter Truth: There's Still No Rhyme or Reason to COVID-19

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The stats defy the spin: This pandemic does not hinge on whether the governor is a Democrat or Republican, whether restrictions are tight or loose. It does not care.

Two presidents. Fifty states. One-hundred-and-ninety-five countries. A multitude of different approaches. And still, there's no rhyme or reason to this pandemic.

Vaccines help a great deal. That much we know. Beyond that, though, the coverage of the virus has mostly been partisanship and witchcraft. Here, current as of today, is the per-state death chart per 100,000 people in the United States:

<https://infogram.com/covid-death-rate-per-100000-1h7j4dv77d83v4n>

Confusing, isn't it? Try as you might, you will not find a plausible way of blaming this on that party or region or policy that you hate.

A few days ago, the New York Times ran an excellent piece on the terrible spike in Florida. "Even a state that made a major push for vaccinations . . . can be crushed by the Delta variant," the paper observed, while noting that "Florida ranks 21st among states and Washington, D.C., in giving people of all ages at least one shot." Indeed, the Times noted, nobody is quite sure why this is happening. "Exactly why the state has been so hard-hit," it concluded, "remains an elusive question" — not least because "other states with comparable vaccine coverage have a small fraction of Florida's hospitalization rate."

Many of the Times's readers were frightfully upset by this blunt assessment of the facts. On Twitter, MSNBC's Kyle Griffin put his fingers in his ears and screamed, "This is not true." "And," he added, "you know it. Do better." Soledad O'Brien, meanwhile, went so far as to describe the piece as "journalistic malpractice." What a strange, neat little world some people have made for themselves.

What Griffin, O'Brien, and others wanted the Times to say was that Red States Are Bad and Blue States Are Good — or, perhaps, as Paul Krugman argued over the weekend, that the North Is Good and the South Is Bad, Just Like During the Civil War. But this simply isn't correct. If it were, what could possibly account for the death-rate pairings of New York and Mississippi? Of Alabama and Connecticut? Of Michigan and Arkansas? Of Texas and Delaware? Of Idaho and Colorado? For months, many in the press have banged on and on and on about Florida's governor and then been shocked to learn that, even after a terrible spike — a spike that, mercifully, is beginning to fade — Florida's record remains better than those of New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Michigan, and Illinois; that the number of children who have died in Florida (per capita) is not only exactly in line with the national average, but around five times lower than D.C.'s number, and just over half of New York's; that, far from lagging behind, Florida's vaccination rate is above the national average; and that, despite having a disproportionately old population, Florida sits in the bottom half for deaths among senior citizens. The

state of Louisiana, which seems to get hit around the same time as Florida each time there is a wave of COVID-19 infections, currently boasts many policies that Florida does not — among them, an ongoing indoor mask mandate that applies even to the vaccinated, a statewide school-mask mandate for all students over the age of five, and, in the city of New Orleans, a system of vaccine passports. Despite this, Louisiana’s death rate is the fourth worst in the nation, while Florida — which has a much older population (as of 2020, Florida has the largest senior population in the union; Louisiana’s is 42nd) — sits in 20th place. What gives?

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disproportionately old population, Florida sits in the bottom half for deaths among senior citizens. The state of Louisiana, which seems to get hit around the same time as Florida each time there is a wave of COVID-19 infections, currently boasts many policies that Florida does not — among them, an ongoing indoor mask mandate that applies even to the vaccinated, a statewide school-mask mandate for all students over the age of five, and, in the city of New Orleans, a system of vaccine passports. Despite this, Louisiana's death rate is the fourth worst in the nation, while Florida — which has a much older population (as of 2020, Florida has the largest senior population in the union; Louisiana's is 42nd) — sits in 20th place. What gives?

Last night, ABC News reported that there is bad news coming out of Oregon — yes, the same Oregon that's home to Governor Kate Brown, she of the innovative outdoor mask mandate for the vaccinated. "The death toll from COVID-19," the outfit noted, "is climbing so rapidly in Oregon in some counties that the state has organized delivery of one refrigerated truck to hold the bodies and is sending a second one." What, within our Good/Bad dichotomy, can have caused this, one must wonder? Has Governor Brown not frowned enough? Have Oregonians failed to burn a sufficient number of dead radio hosts in effigy? Does the state's health director sport a bad haircut? Or could it be, perhaps, that this is a terrible virus, that it prompts unpredictable results, and that our present political hysteria is as poor a frame for understanding what is happening in New Jersey and Oregon as it is for understanding what is happening in Texas and Alaska?

Israel, which has done everything that the loudest critics on the Left wanted America to do, is nevertheless stuck in the throes of a devastating surge. Israel has instituted repeated and draconian lockdowns (enforced by drone, no less); it has used nationwide mask mandates; it has vaccinated everyone early — and even added booster shots into the mix; and it has even instituted a system of vaccine passports. And, right now? Well, it's getting crushed. Per NPR, despite becoming "the first country on Earth to fully vaccinate a majority of its citizens against COVID-19," it now "has one of the world's highest daily infection rates. . . . Nearly one in every 150 people in Israel today has the virus." I wonder: Is Israel a Red State or a Blue State?

Much as they would hate to hear this, it remains the case that the most vitriolic voices in our COVID debates are little more than glammed-up conspiracy theorists — the sort of narrow, monomaniacal, quackish people who, in an era not that far removed from our own, would have been selling leeches by the ton. The journalist David Aaronovitch argues that such people tend to fall back on their ideas because the volatility and complexity of the real world is simply too scary for them handle. It is much easier to believe that George W. Bush ordered 9/11 than to accept that America is vulnerable and life is unpredictable, because if George W. Bush ordered 9/11 you can prevent it from happening again by imprisoning him; whereas if 19 guys with box cutters carried out 9/11, it could probably happen again. So it is with COVID-19. It is much easier to believe that, if we put the people you like in charge of everything and make them say the right words on TV, the worst pandemic in a century will bend to their will than it is to accept that human beings are alarmingly susceptible to chaos.

The uncomfortable truth is that, beyond developing, encouraging, and providing inoculation, there's not much that any government can do to guarantee success — and, even when it does what it can, a lot of

people are going to resist for reasons bad and good. In their transparent attempts to draw attention from President Biden's disastrous performance in Afghanistan, certain pundits have begun shouting loudly that we should be paying more attention to the 1,000 or so COVID-19 deaths we're seeing here in America each day. Well, okay then; let's do that. While running for president, Joe Biden said he'd "shut down the virus." It's been seven months since he took over, and, after a lull, we are now back in crisis. The obvious question, then, is: Why is Biden failing so badly?

And here's the thing: If that's an unfair question because it's a little more "complicated" than that for Biden, then it's an unfair question because it's also a little more complicated than that for Phil Murphy, for Ron DeSantis, for Gretchen Whitmer, for Greg Abbott, and for everyone else who has had the misfortune to become a talisman during this terrible time. Given how polarized we are at present, one can easily comprehend why, in its early days, so many political obsessives thought it might be efficacious to use the pandemic as a stick. But now? Eighteen months in? It's beyond time for them to shut the hell up.