

Anti-vaccine activists march in D.C. — a city that mandates coronavirus vaccination — to protest mandates

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Thousands of protesters from across the country — including some of the biggest names in the [anti-vaccination movement](#) — descended on the nation's capital Sunday for a rally against vaccine mandates.

Almost two years into a [coronavirus pandemic that has killed more than 860,000 Americans](#), the gathering on the National Mall was a jarring spectacle: A crowd of demonstrators, many unmasked, decrying vaccine mandates in the middle of a city that has adopted mask and vaccine mandates to reduce sickness and death from the surge of the virus's omicron variant, which has battered D.C. for weeks.

Organizers had estimated that 20,000 people would attend the rally, marching from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, according to a permit issued by the National Park Service. A smaller crowd of several thousand had arrived on the Mall by early Sunday afternoon.

Some were white-haired; others were being pushed in strollers. Most were White and many wore gear with slogans supporting former president Donald Trump. A group of men in front of a cart with a Don't Tread on Me flag started

chants of “Let’s go Brandon” and “F--- Joe Biden” to cheers. The few who wore masks risked the tirades of a man screaming “Take those masks off!” and “It’s all a lie!”

Later, about 10 men wearing the insignia of the Proud Boys, an extremist group involved in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack at the U.S. Capitol, lingered on the Lincoln side of the Reflecting Pool. They briefly engaged in a shouting match with a small group of counterprotesters at the edge of the rally, then walked away.

The marchers carried posters and flags that included false statements such as “Vaccines are mass kill bio weapons” and “Trump won.” A bus was parked beside the Washington Monument, wrapped in “Arrest or Exile” signs and displaying pictures of Anthony S. Fauci, Bill Gates and Jacob Rothschild — the last an echo of antisemitic conspiracy theories involving the Rothschild family. A speaker blared Kelly Clarkson’s “Stronger (What Doesn’t Kill You).”

Justin Perrault was demonstrating in D.C. for the first time. The 38-year-old from Fairhaven, Mass., said he had watched his body therapy and spiritual counseling business dry up as clients — afraid of catching the virus from an unvaccinated practitioner — stopped coming. He said he started using food stamps for the first time in his life but was ashamed and worried what his 8- and 4-year-old children would think of him. He said he came to D.C. with his wife and her best friend not only to protest vaccination mandates, but also to take a stand against the scientific consensus that the vaccines are safe.

Jaedyn Wetzel, 12, stood nearby holding a sign that read “I have natural immunity.” She said she was infected with the coronavirus over Thanksgiving. She stood with her sister, Jessie, 14, and their parents, who didn’t want to be named for fear of discrimination based on the family’s unvaccinated status. They drove to the District for the day from Warfordsburg, Pa., for their first protest in the nation’s capital.

They said they haven’t faced coronavirus vaccine mandates in their schools or workplaces but wanted to protest because they are fearful mandates may be imminent. The mother heard about the protest through Telegram channels, including one she said calls for auditing the presidential election results for Pennsylvania, and doesn’t like using Facebook or Twitter because she says those companies employ “censorship.”

Police reported no arrests or significant incidents. Law enforcement had a visible but not overwhelming presence on the Mall with about 10 mounted officers lining the march route and U.S. Park Police vehicles parked nearby. Officers

the main, with about 10 mounted officers lining the march route and U.S. Park Police vehicles parked nearby. Officers were also at the Lincoln Memorial, where fences had been erected to prevent people from walking up the steps. A Metro transit police officer paced the area around the exit of the Smithsonian station as march participants carrying signs passed barefaced in violation of the transit system's mask mandate.

Metro officials said they are investigating an alleged assault Saturday night aboard a Red Line train in the District. In a Reddit post, the victim reported being attacked for wearing a mask by a man without a face covering.

The march was billed as a protest of mandates rather than the medicines themselves. But similar rhetoric — emphasizing individual autonomy rather than untenable scientific ideas — has long characterized the broader anti-vaccine movement, and the march's speakers included movement veterans such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Del Bigtree, founder of the anti-vaccine group Informed Consent Action Network. The event was being live-streamed on Bigtree's website, the High Wire, which includes a prominent link that allows viewers to donate to ICAN.

Other speakers included physician Robert Malone, a prominent critic of the coronavirus mRNA vaccines. Public employee associations that have formed to protest their employers' vaccine mandates, such as Feds for Medical Freedom and D.C. Firefighters Bodily Autonomy Affirmation Group, also participated.

"The goal is to show a unified front of bringing people together — vaccinated, unvaccinated, Democrats, Republicans, all together in solidarity," said organizer Matt Tune, an unvaccinated 48-year-old from Chicago. He said he wants the event "to help change the current narrative ... which is basically saying that we're a bunch of weirdos and freaks who don't care about humanity. And that's not true at all."

As speakers took to the stage — including a group of doctors in white coats — the crowd roared its approval at lines comparing vaccine mandates to the actions of authoritarian regimes such as Nazi Germany and the former Soviet Union and railing against the news media for its reporting on the scientific evidence supporting the coronavirus vaccines. (The Washington Post, like many other large employers, requires its workers to be vaccinated against the virus.)

Two days after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released its first studies based on real-world data showing that the vaccines continue to provide strong protection against hospitalization related to the omicron variant, Malone stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and falsely told thousands of cheering spectators that "the science

Marone stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and loudly told thousands of cheering spectators that “the science is settled. They’re not working.”

Anti-vaccine activist Kevin Jenkins, who is Black, invoked the spirit of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as he stood on the same site where the civil rights icon delivered his best-known speech.

“The people in this crowd are on the right side of history,” Jenkins declared.

By the time Kennedy addressed the crowd, many participants were drifting away. The group had dwindled to a few hundred by midafternoon, when one speaker recited long-debunked claims about a link between a common childhood vaccine and autism.

Suzanne Robertson, 52, traveled from New Jersey for the anti-mandate march, carrying a sign that said she was a lifelong liberal Democrat until this past year. Robertson, who works in sales, said she contracted the coronavirus in March 2020 but only had mild symptoms. She said she campaigned for Bernie Sanders and voted for President Biden and had never before voted for a Republican until recently — when she stopped identifying with any political party, disappointed in Biden’s chastisement of those who choose not to get the shot.

“This is not a political thing,” Robertson said. “If you want to get the vaccine, get it.”

Lindsay Mikus, 38, came from Westchester County, N.Y., to oppose the mandates. Her 14-year-old son lives with his father and is vaccinated, she said, but her 7-year-old son — whom she home-schools — is not.

“I have children, and I believe they should live in a free country,” Mikus said.

Mikus and Robertson, who are both vegan, said they are not vaccinated. Robertson said she has chosen to remain unvaccinated because she is allergic to one of the ingredients, but also because she does not believe it is effective.

“I would die first,” Robertson said.

An overwhelming body of evidence demonstrates that the coronavirus vaccines are safe and effective for most who receive them. As of October, according to the most recent estimates from the CDC, those who received two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines and a booster were 40 times less likely to die of the virus than the unvaccinated.

The CDC on Friday released studies showing that the vaccines continue to provide robust protection against hospitalization from the omicron variant, even if they no longer ward off infection as effectively.

Nevertheless, national surveys show about 1 in 5 U.S. adults remain unvaccinated. Among children ages 5 to 11, who became eligible for the shots in November, fewer than 20 percent are vaccinated.

The rally benefited extensively from publicity in recent weeks on prominent social media and podcasting platforms. Tune said the march’s website saw a “huge spike” in traffic after Malone mentioned it on Joe Rogan’s popular podcast. Malone’s appearance provoked a condemnatory letter to Spotify, which hosts the podcast, from hundreds of doctors and public health experts. Tucker Carlson also plugged the event during an interview with Malone.

More than 15,000 people joined a Facebook group for the rally, with many saying they would stay overnight and eat in Northern Virginia to avoid the District’s vaccine mandate. Some commenters on the group’s page have compared vaccine mandates to the Holocaust and urged people not to get tested for the virus.

Aaron Simpson, a spokesman for Facebook parent Meta, said that because the page is ostensibly opposed to vaccine mandates rather than vaccines it does not violate the platform’s policies on covid-19 and vaccine misinformation, which prohibit “content calling to action, advocating, or promoting that others not get the COVID-19 vaccine.”

However, some individual posts and comments that contain misinformation have been removed, he said.

“Voicing opposition to government mandates is not against Meta’s policies,” Simpson said. “What we don’t allow is content that promotes harmful false claims about the vaccines themselves and we remove those posts — including in this group.”

CORRECTION

An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that Lindsay Mikus has a 7-year-old daughter. She has a 7-year-old son. The story has been corrected.

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