

Opinion **Covid-19 vaccines**

## Tragic fallout from the politicisation of science in the US

Many countries had partisan divides on Covid vaccination, but they were more lethal in the US than anywhere else

**JOHN BURN-MURDOCH**

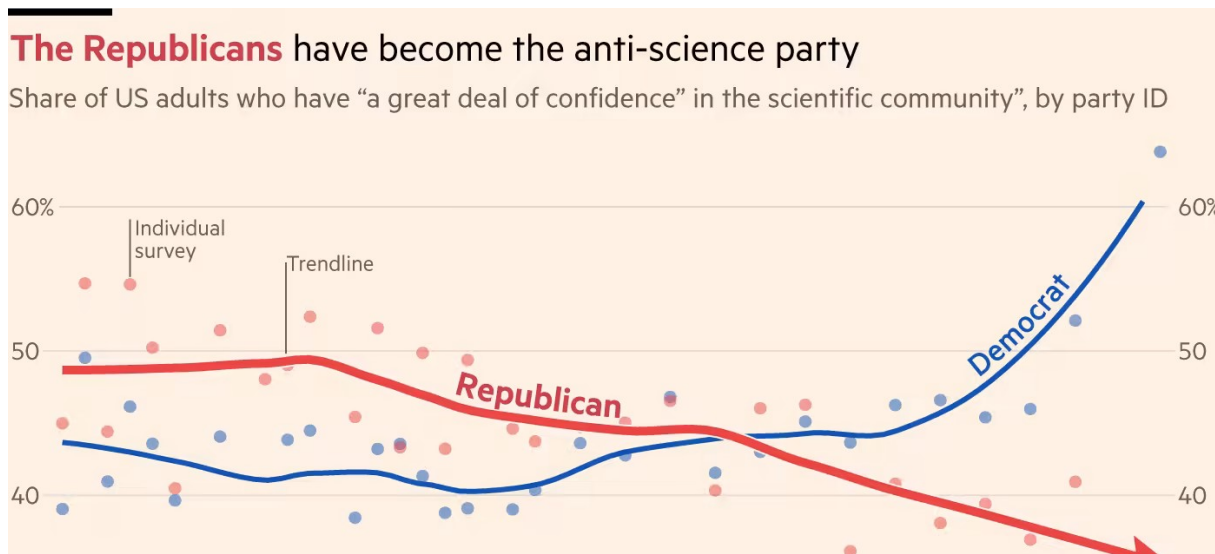


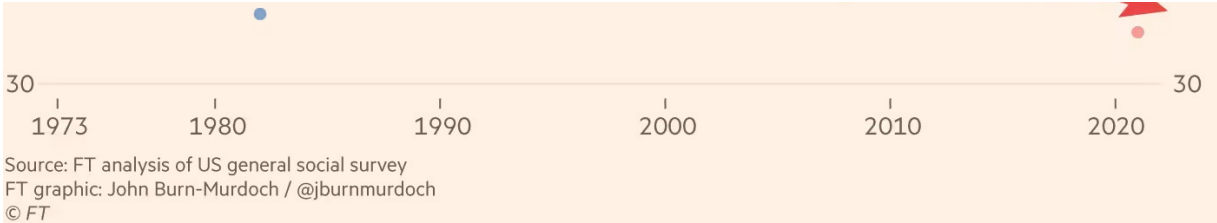
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**John Burn-Murdoch** 20 HOURS AGO

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly when the Republican party became the anti-science party, but the process probably began in the 1980s, when the Christian right first emerged as a major force in conservative American politics.

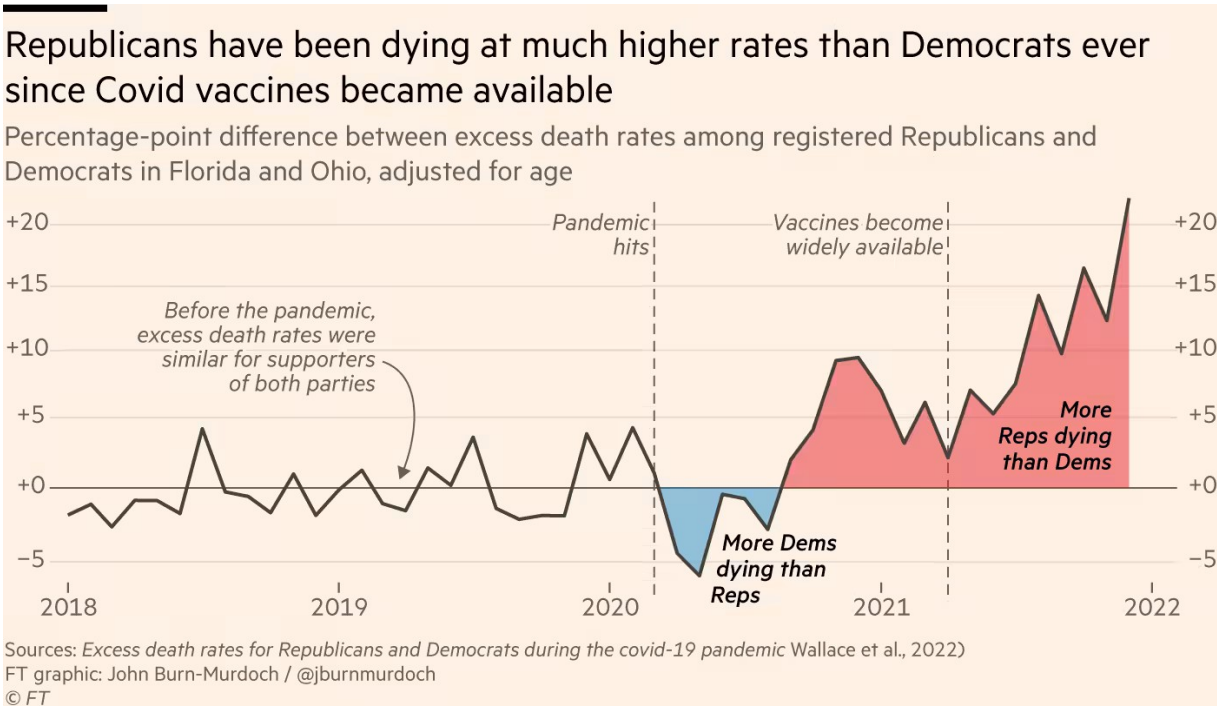
Since then, the journey has been smooth and swift. In 1982, 50 per cent of self-identified Republicans told the US general social survey they had “a great deal of confidence” in the scientific community. Twenty years later 50 per cent had become 40, and last year just one-third of Republicans held that view, compared to two-thirds of Democrats.





It would be easy to dismiss this trend as merely exasperating — an obstacle to progress on climate change and a source of irritation at extended family gatherings — but over the past 18 months, the politicisation of attitudes to science may have directly cost as many as 60,000 American lives.

This is the stark implication of [a new study from the Yale school of public health](#), which found that since [Covid vaccines](#) became widely available in the US, the mortality rate of registered Republicans in Ohio and Florida climbed by 33 per cent during America’s winter Covid wave last year, compared with just a 10 per cent rise among Democrats.

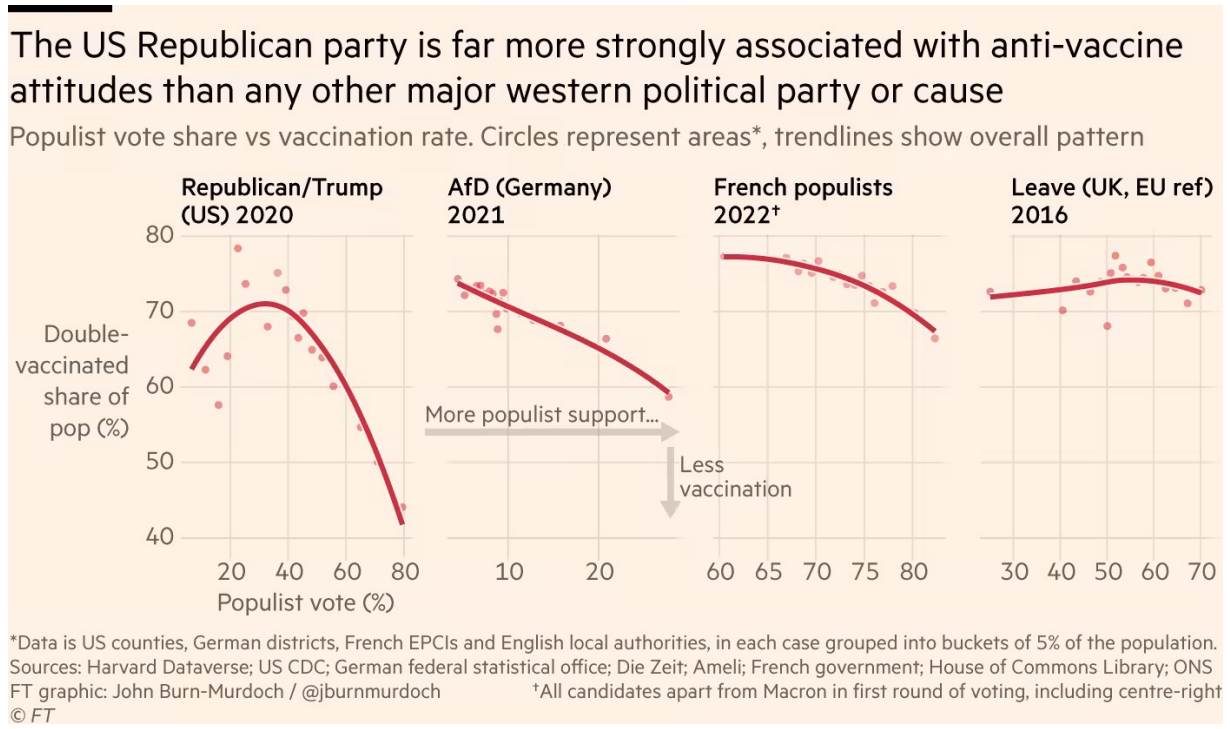


Mortality trends for the two groups had tracked one another closely before the pandemic, and both spiked together in 2020, but when science presented the world with a protective shield, [Republicans](#) were loath to accept it.

To be clear, anti-vaccine attitudes are hardly the sole preserve of the American right, but the breadth and depth of politicisation and polarisation in the US far outstrip what we see anywhere else in the developed world. By May 2021, with all US adults

eligible for vaccination, less than half of Republicans had taken up the offer, compared to 82 per cent of Democrats. Across the Atlantic, Britain put on a much more united front: Labour and Conservative voters alike turned up in droves, with 90 per cent of eligible adults inoculated. Even among backers of the populist, anti-establishment Reform party, 70 per cent came forward.

French and German politics didn't escape the politicisation. According to the latest data, 40 per cent of people in the areas that most strongly back Germany's Alternative fur Deutschland have yet to be vaccinated, compared to a third of people in the areas that voted most strongly for French populist parties — but these pale in comparison to the GOP's heartlands, where more than 55 per cent are still vaccine holdouts.



Since vaccines became available, Covid death rates are now almost three times higher in Republican areas than Democrat-dominated ones.

With pandemics likely a recurring part of our future, anti-vaccine attitudes and the populist movements that carry them will continue to hamper public health campaigns across the world. But no developed country has a problem as entrenched and as lethal as the US.

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