

The Covid Emergency Must End

Ross Douthat :: 23/2/2021



Christmas of 2021: According to both President Biden and Dr. Anthony Fauci, together the two most prominent voices on public health in America right now, that's when we can hope for a return to normalcy, the beginning of life after the emergency.

Even that not-exactly-optimistic prediction comes with hedges and caveats. Next Christmas won't necessarily be the end of pandemic restrictions, [according to Biden](#) — just a time when “significantly fewer people having to be socially distanced, having to wear a mask.” Likewise, Fauci has [described](#) his hope as “a degree of normality” by the end of 2021, with the possibility of widespread masking persisting into the following year.

I am not vested with Biden's authority or Fauci's expertise, but I can read trend lines and vaccine studies, and at this moment both their takes look way too pessimistic. A major setback is always possible, but right now, the conditions for the end of the emergency seem likely to arrive sometime in the summer, not at Christmastime. Those conditions don't require the coronavirus to disappear entirely. They just require its dangers to diminish to the point where the reasons for suspending ordinary life no longer obtain, and the emergency measures taken against Covid-19 no longer justify their cost.

The looming arrival of herd immunity is part of this story. In a report over the weekend, two of my colleagues [estimated](#) that a combination of infections and vaccinations could deliver us into the herd-immunity range by July. If we speed up vaccination, the date might arrive even sooner. Alternatively, if social distancing declines rapidly in the interim or a more infectious variant spreads, then we'll get a last

spike of cases and more people will die — but more infections also means more immunity, so even in that grim scenario herd immunity could actually arrive sooner still.

A variant that is more infectious *and* much more vaccine or immunity-resistant could alter this timeline. But the leading candidate for that role, the South African variant, [appears at least somewhat vulnerable](#) to the vaccines that we already have. And even in South Africa itself, it only appears to have caused a [temporary spike](#) in cases, followed by a swift decline.

The other part of the optimistic story is vaccine availability. By [sometime](#) in the summer, if not [sooner](#), everyone in the United States who wants a vaccine should be able to get one. This will create new challenges as public health authorities try to woo vaccine skeptics. But even if the uptake rate isn't as high as it needs to be and it takes longer than hoped to fully clear the herd-immunity threshold, the simple availability of vaccines will change the moral calculus around the disease. What has been up till now a collective-action problem, justifying restrictions and closures and mask mandates, will become more of a matter of individual responsibility, where people who don't get a vaccine are primarily putting themselves rather than society at risk.

At that point, with herd immunity close and vaccines generally available, the arguments marshaled by Covid skeptics and lockdown critics, which have been mostly wrong or misguided up till now, will begin to make more sense.

It's not much worse than the flu, skeptics have argued. Well, no, Covid isn't remotely like normal influenza. But under conditions of mass vaccination, with vaccines that reduce the risk of death and severe illness even among the small share of vaccinated people who get sick, the coronavirus will actually [look a lot more like the flu](#).

We can protect seniors and other vulnerable people while otherwise continuing with normal life, skeptics have argued. Well, no, we can't, because the elderly and vulnerable are a huge population that can't be easily segregated from the rest of society (and the segregation we've pursued has been quite cruel enough). But once you can *vaccinate* the elderly and others who are vulnerable, the disease can still circulate among younger and healthier people without it being a constant mass-fatality threat.

The damage to the economy and mental health from closures and restrictions outweighs the threat of the disease itself, skeptics have insisted. Well, maybe in certain cases, like elementary school closures — but in general a disease that has killed [at least 500,000 Americans](#) more than justified a robust attempt to stop its spread. However: Once the old and vulnerable are genuinely protected, the death toll drops, and vaccines are generally available, the toll that emergency measures take on just about everyone — business owners, college kids, churches, parents, school-age children, the lonely and the old — really will become worse than whatever coronavirus threat remains.

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But because *some* threat will probably endure — perhaps through the winter, perhaps indefinitely — there may be pressure on anxious governments to keep the emergency measures in place or lift them ver-r-r-y slowly, and similar pressure on public health officials to overstate the continuing risks.

For instance, the fact that a vaccine might not be approved for kids until 2022 could become a reason for schools to extend virtual learning for yet another semester — even though teachers can be vaccinated and the coronavirus does not appear to be more dangerous for children than the flu.

Or again, the fear that a deadlier or vaccine-evading variant might come along could become a reason to maintain restrictions on restaurants, church services or private gatherings through the fall or winter — even though the possibility of a new variant could easily be with us every year, for decades, and we might as well start adapting now.

Or the fear of [long-haul, chronic-seeming Covid](#) — which is a [genuinely frightening](#) part of this disease — could be cited as a reason restrictions need to remain in place until the virus is entirely eradicated. But other illnesses can have chronic consequences, too, and yet life continues around them: We don't close schools for the Epstein-Barr virus, despite its link to chronic fatigue syndrome, or expect New England state parks to shut down all spring and summer because of the risk that Lyme disease turns chronic.

To be clear, I can imagine scenarios for 2021's fall or winter involving a particularly deadly variant or one that's more dangerous to kids, where reimposing emergency measures might be necessary. And if we end up maintaining mask mandates a little longer than needed, and there's more mask-wearing in the winter months and on public transportation going forward, then that's hardly the greatest burden in the world.

But the danger of the overcautious, wait-for-Christmas public rhetoric from Biden and Fauci is that it provides cover and encouragement for fearful officials to extend the whole suite of emergency measures for many unnecessary months.

No doubt both men have strategic reasons for their approach. Biden presumably hopes to underpromise and overdeliver, while Fauci clearly has a theory of his own role that involves steering public expectations rather than just saying flatly what he thinks.

But after a year of misery, death and sacrifice, the public has a right to know in advance when the emergency should reasonably be over. People who are struggling or despairing right now need a sense of hope, of light at the end of winter's tunnel. People who are unsure whether to be vaccinated deserve to be told that it can actually change all of our lives, and quickly. And officials struggling to balance risk aversion and the reopening imperative need to be given a permission structure that encourages them to choose normalcy, and soon.

Just under a year ago, Donald Trump was justifiably pilloried when he suggested, without evidence, that the worst of the pandemic might be over by Easter.

But today the situation is radically different. And Joe Biden would be doing our struggling, freezing country a great service if he suggested, *with* evidence, that with continued effort and reasonably good fortune, the era of emergency might be over by the Fourth of July.

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