

FORUM

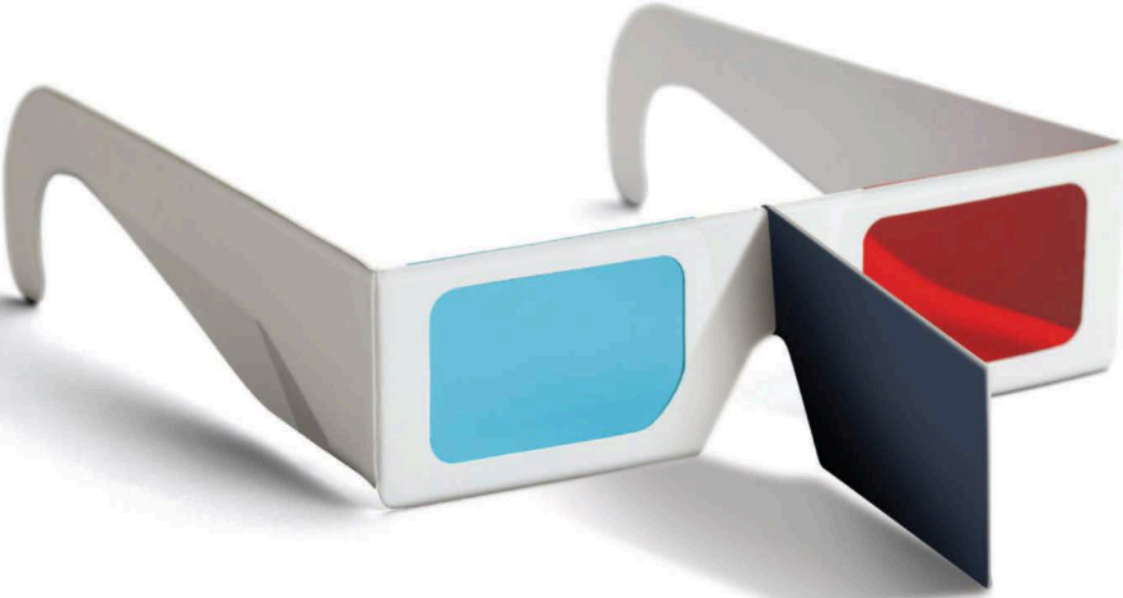


Illustration by Chris Morris, Advance Local

COMMENTARY

Learning from COVID requires being honest about the blind spots

During the pandemic, red states and blue states failed to learn from the other's different policies and experiences.

Richard M. Perloff

We're at the apex of the five-year mark, the fifth anniversary of the COVID pandemic, when pundits take the measure of our nation's policy decisions and evaluate how well the nation performed.

Although the United States did some things well, succeeding in getting most of its citizens vaccinated, several new accounts offer a darker, more nuanced picture.

As a social scientist who looks at the confluence of research and policy, I believe it is important to take a hard look at how our policy establishment and citizenry performed during the dark, difficult days of COVID. This can offer lessons for how the United States can do a better job in future health crises.

Let's begin with a trenchant critique of the U.S. performance during COVID. In their recent book, "In COVID's Wake: How Our Politics Failed Us," Stephen Macedo and Frances Lee note that the states, as laboratories of democracy, failed to learn from the different policy experiments that different states adopted.

In an important new finding, Macedo and Lee report that blue states that adopted more stringent rules to contain the pandemic — such as longer workplace and school closures — did not have lower COVID

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mortality rates than red states that adopted more limited regulations. Yet blue states, where more people got COVID vaccines of their own volition, reported significantly lower rates of COVID mortality.

But in both cases, neither group learned from the other's experience. Blue state policymakers dismissed or tried to explain away the mixed record of their policies, and red state policymakers played down the positive effects of blue state residents' increased compliance with vaccine recommendations.

As a result, we had a decidedly "partisan pandemic," where disagreement was stigmatized, and the opportunity to learn from

the other side fell by the wayside.

What's more, in sharp contrast to earlier pandemics, there was a noteworthy reduction in respect for public health expertise. Some of this was due to populist, psychological resistance to government authorities' vaccine rules, even when these were medically necessary. But the decline in perceived credibility of science and public health also stemmed from public health officials' failure to be transparent with the public in acknowledging the limits in their certainty about the effectiveness of their policy recommendations, as former National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins noted in a public forum in 2023.

But again, both groups — reactive anti-vaxxers, but also medical experts — failed to listen to the objections of the other side, contributing to a breakdown in effective, trustful communication between government medical authorities and the public.

An effective public health system is founded on public trust. But when government implements mandates that curtail people's freedom — a core value in the United States, for good or for ill — citizens resent authorities' expertise.

Egged on by misinformed social influencers, people can regard vaccines as a matter of personal choice rather than social obligation — forgetting that their choice not to get vaccinated redounds to affect vulnerable others, so the nation's public health suffers.

It's happening right now, with more than 730 measles cases nationwide, primarily in unvaccinated children, placing them and others at risk for a disease that can cause devastating effects. We need to avoid the mistakes made during COVID. Policymakers need to appreciate the many sources of vaccine hesitancy. Skeptical citizens must learn to place more faith in real doctors than Dr. Google. Experts must advocate, but not go beyond their facts.

We don't live on islands, but in a society founded on social obligations. Trust and mutual respect aren't mere platitudes; they are foundational values a society needs to preserve its physical and psychological health.

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