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**POLITICS**

# Nearly one-third of Americans believe a coronavirus vaccine exists and is being withheld, survey finds

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Nearly one-third of Americans believe a vaccine already exists to prevent coronavirus infection but is being withheld from the public, while nearly half believe the COVID-19 virus was created in a lab.

As the coronavirus pandemic nears 50,000 deaths in the U.S. – around half don't believe that figure either – new data suggests many Americans hold misinformation about the virus. It signals their mistrust in institutions as citizens are being asked to rely on government, health and other leaders amid the outbreak.

Twenty-nine percent said it's either probably or definitely true that a vaccine that prevents coronavirus infection exists and is being withheld, according to the Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape Project with USA TODAY. An even greater percentage, 32%, said they believe treatment that cures coronavirus infection exists but is being withheld. Around 7 out of 10 Americans said those statements are untrue.

"To see about a third of people give that some level of, 'Yeah, that might be true,' that was pretty shocking to me," said Robert Griffin, research director for the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group. "That's a pretty dark type of thought to be floating around the public. There's an undercurrent of a lack of trust in society, a lack of trust in elites."

He added: "You could sort of see how that could suggest sort of a rather nefarious bit of actions on the part of a wide variety of actors within society if people are truly holding onto that idea."

**More:** More people change their behavior during coronavirus as concern ticks up, survey says

The Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape Project, with USA TODAY, is a large-scale study of the American electorate. Throughout the 2020 election cycle, the researchers aim to conduct 500,000 interviews about policies and the presidential candidates.

The latest survey – a sample of more than 6,300 Americans taken April 2 to 8 – came as most of the country was approaching one month into stay-at-home orders and before anti-quarantine rallies started popping up at state capitals. Results have a margin of error of 2.2 percentage points. The project intends to track responses on coronavirus misinformation over time.

"There's a variety of battlegrounds in a public health crisis like this," Griffin said, pointing to on-the-ground logistics and unexpected problems that arise. "But another one is just how to convince people of the truth about a variety of things."

Views on the existence of a vaccine are virtually the same among Democrats and Republicans.

No vaccines or treatments are approved for COVID-19. Volunteers in Seattle who got shots in the first trial of a possible coronavirus vaccine are now getting the second shot – an indicator the early trial is progressing well. But health experts have said a vaccine could be 12 to 18 months away, and even that timeframe could be ambitious.

In terms of treatment, Trump has repeatedly touted the potential of hydroxychloroquine to treat the virus. But Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has said its effectiveness is inconclusive.

**More:** 'He's answered that question.' Trump interrupts when reporter asks Fauci about hydroxychloroquine

The survey found 44% of Americans believe the coronavirus was probably created in a lab while 56% said this is likely or definitely untrue. Fifty percent of Republicans surveyed said they believe coronavirus was created in a lab compared with 37% of Democrats who said they believed that.

"The key word there is 'created,' Griffin said. "It is a question that points toward intentionality."

The World Health Organization this week said there's no evidence to support the idea that the coronavirus was created in a lab and that it was "probable, likely that the virus is of animal origin."

**More:** WHO says coronavirus came from an animal and was not made in a lab

President Donald Trump, who has condemned WHO and vowed to pull funding, said the U.S. is investigating whether the novel coronavirus began spreading after an accident at a Chinese high-security biomedical laboratory in Wuhan.

Forty-eight percent of Americans said the U.S. is "concealing" the number of coronavirus deaths – a sentiment that's more prevalent among Democrats. More than half of Democrats, 55%, said it's probably or definitely true that the number of deaths is being concealed while 38% of Republicans said it is likely so.

Despite survey results that show mistrust, the Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape Project has found that the public is generally following social distancing measures recommended by experts.

Eighty-one percent of Americans said they have not left their home for a prolonged period of time, a 9-percentage point jump compared with 72% two weeks before.

"Not all of this is necessarily conspiracy-thinking," Griffin said of the misinformation the survey explored. "Some of it might just might purely be misunderstanding or things that people don't know yet, a lack of education."

Other new survey findings include:

- 35% of Americans said they believe the coronavirus is probably or definitely being "exaggerated" for political purposes. Forty-four percent of Republicans said they believe this, 26% of Democrats said they do.
- 39% said it's definitely or probably true that people 30 years old or younger are less likely to get infected by the virus. This outlook is most prevalent among people 44 or younger. Although young people have a far greater ability to recover from the disease, they can get infected just the same.
- 36% said they believe the coronavirus is no more dangerous than the seasonal flu for people under 30 years old. This outlook is most prevalent among people 44 or younger.

*Follow Joey Garrison on Twitter @joeygarrison.*