

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

The Vaccine Velvet Rope

Source: Jeva Lange, TheWeek.com, December 31, 2020

Note: This is an opinion essay, not a news story.

On the surface, it's great news: Turns out people really, *really* want to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Over the summer, only about half of Americans had said they were "likely" to get their shots, a concerning number that has grown, in one recent poll, to as high as 84 percent. It's an exciting development: Every inoculation brings us one step closer to establishing herd immunity, and finally seeing an end to this tragic chapter of our history.

But the jostling for the jab has come with some elbow-throwing. And par for the pandemic course, it is America's elites — people deemed, for one reason or another, more "important" than the rest of us — who are given the opportunity to jump in line.

The pandemic, sadly, has been divided in such terms since the start. Back in mid-March, when COVID-19 tests were in short supply, "politicians, celebrities, social media influencers, and even NBA teams" who often weren't even showing symptoms still managed to get tested even as "health care workers and many sick people [were] unable to get diagnoses," *The New York Times* reports. Far from being a "great equalizer," the pandemic has done nothing if not cement the differences between the haves and the have-nots as it's continued to run its course. Most obvious of all was the president's case of COVID-19: One can't help but wonder how his illness might have ended if he hadn't had access to a helicopter airlift, a small herd of world-class doctors, experimental drug treatments, and a luxury hospital suite. Meanwhile, now, mere months later, public hospitals in L.A. are so overwhelmed with dying patients that gurneys are being wheeled into gift shops in order to make space for everyone who needs to be seen.

Disparities in the health care system are disappointing, but not revelatory. What's infuriating about the vaccine rollout in particular is that there is clear guidance about who should be the priority for getting the shots, since vaccinations that go to the most vulnerable directly reduce the number of expected deaths. Guided by concerns about ethics, science, and implementation, the CDC recommends frontline health care personnel and nursing home residents and caregivers be first, followed by essential workers (police, transportation, agriculture workers, etc.), followed by adults over the age of 65 or with high-risk medical conditions, before eventually moving on to the younger, healthier population.

The problem, though, is in the gray areas around the categories. Members of Congress and their office staff, for example, were deemed "critical" employees whose jobs are essential for the "continuity of operations," leading them to jump the line in front of, say, someone's 80-year-old grandfather with comorbidities. And while there's a logic to vaccinating the president and vice-president and their incoming counterparts, because of the potential national security threat of having any one of them seriously ill for a long period of time, would the country *really* grind to a halt if 49-year-old Sen. Marco Rubio or 31-year-old Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez needed to take sick days? Besides, what does it say if the members of the governing body making the decisions that affect the rest of our lives are doing so while comfortably immune to the disease, even as the majority of regular Americans won't be until spring or summer?

Though even younger politicians are not immortal — 41-year-old Louisiana congressman-elect Luke Letlow died this week from COVID-19 — allowing members of

Congress to jump their natural place in line ahead of their own elderly or vulnerable constituents seems at risk of the deeply un-American suggestion that our leaders are somehow more valuable than the people they're elected to represent. "Congress needs to stop treating itself as a special political class, and the mere suggestion that members of Congress are in any way more important than the very people who gave us the privilege of serving in Congress is appalling," argued Republican Rep. Brian Mast of Florida.

Still, an argument can — and is — being made that having influential people get the vaccine will help demystify it and speed us toward herd immunity faster. A vaccine given to, say, 39-year-old Beyoncé, might deprive one vulnerable member of the population of life-saving protection, but ultimately inspire hundreds more who were on the fence. Still, does such a PR campaign *really* have the efficacy that we think it does? Americans already saw right through celebrities who preached about staying home while quarantined in their 30,000 square foot cliff-side mansions; seeing an NBA star get his shot might convince *some* people that the vaccination is safe, but to many others it will just reaffirm that in America, there are winners and losers and if you don't have money, you're in the bucket with the latter.

Perhaps nothing illustrates that more than Moderna, the manufacturer of one of the two vaccines approved so far in the U.S., which has announced its intention to give "board members as well as adult household members" of its employees early access to the vaccine. While it makes sense that workers involved in the actual manufacture of the vaccine be inoculated, as to not in any way slow production while we're already limited on doses, there's no rationale for why *board members* get to cut in line in front of other Americans who will otherwise die. As Judd Legum, the writer of the *Popular Information* newsletter, pointed out on Twitter, even though Moderna is responsible for the creation of the vaccine, it did so with "\$2.5 billion from the federal government." In other words, board members who used *our* money to help develop their drug are now slipping in line in front of us. (Pfizer, which created the competing vaccine, said it intends to vaccinate employees as they become eligible per the CDC guidelines and has "no plans to prioritize the vaccination of our executives or board members ahead of other high-risk groups," CNBC's Meg Tirrell reports).

Shenanigans, though, are likely only to increase as it becomes harder and murkier to evaluate who is deserving of the vaccine, and when, according to the CDC's loose criteria. Absent clearer and firmer leadership, it means there are only going to be increasing opportunities for the affluent and important and well-connected to bypass waiting their turn in line. Already there are reports of the wealthy attempting to buy (or bribe) their way to an earlier vaccination, or of people leveraging relations to friends and family who are a "big deal" in order to cut — and calls to shame such people, when they do.

Unfortunately, all the shaming in the world won't do much to prevent the elite from getting vaccines before their rightful turn, even as it is people of lower socioeconomic status who remain the most vulnerable to the outbreak in the first place. But make no mistake, COVID-19 *itself* isn't elitist; the disease doesn't choose who it infects. We do all the discriminating for it.

Possible Response Questions:

- This is an argument. What do you agree with? Disagree with? What is not said? Explain
- Who should get the vaccine first? Second? Third? What should the sequence be? Explain.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.