

Make America Healthy Again: An Unconventional Movement That May Have Found Its Moment

RFK, Jr. aims to promote healthy eating and address chronic diseases, but many experts are concerned about his vaccine skepticism.

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Within days of Donald Trump's election victory, health care entrepreneur Calley Means turned to social media to crowdsource advice.

"First 100 days," said Means, a former consultant to Big Pharma who uses the social platform X to focus attention on chronic disease. "What should be done to reform the FDA?"

The question was more than rhetorical. Means is among a cadre of health business leaders and nonmainstream doctors who are influencing President Donald Trump's focus on health policy.

Trump's return to the White House has given Means and others in this space significant clout in shaping the nascent health policies of the new administration and its federal agencies. It's also giving newfound momentum to "Make America Healthy Again," or MAHA, a controversial movement that challenges prevailing thinking on public health and chronic disease.

Its followers couch their ideals in phrases like "health freedom" and "true health." Their stated causes are as diverse as revamping certain agricultural subsidies, firing National Institutes of Health employees, rethinking childhood vaccination schedules, and banning marketing of ultra-processed foods to children on TV.

Public health leaders say the emerging Trump administration's interest in elevating the sometimes unorthodox concepts could be catastrophic, eroding decades of scientific progress while spurring a rise in preventable disease. They worry the administration's support could weaken trust in public health agencies.

Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association, said he welcomes broad intellectual scientific discussion but is concerned that Trump will parrot untested and unproven public health ideas he hears as if they are fact.

Experience has shown that people with unproven ideas will have his ear and his “very large bully pulpit,” he said. “Because he’s president, people will believe he won’t say things that aren’t true. This president, he will.”

But those in the MAHA camp have a very different take. They say they have been maligned as dangerous for questioning the status quo. The election has given them an enormous opportunity to shape politics and policies, and they say they won’t undermine public health. Instead, they say, they will restore trust in federal health agencies that lost public support during the pandemic.

“It may be a brilliant strategy by the right,” said Peter McCullough, a cardiologist who has come under fire for saying COVID-19 vaccines are unsafe. He was describing some of the election-season messaging that mainstreamed their perspectives. “The right was saying we care about medical and environmental issues. The left was pursuing abortion rights and a negative campaign on Trump. But everyone should care about health. Health should be apolitical.”

The movement is largely anti-regulatory and anti-big government, whether concerning raw milk or drug approvals, although implementing changes would require more regulation. Many of its concepts cross over to include ideas that have also been championed by some on the far left.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., an anti-vaccine activist Trump has nominated to run the Department of Health and Human Services, has called for firing hundreds of people at the National Institutes of Health, removing fluoride from water, boosting federal support for psychedelic therapy, and loosening restrictions on raw milk, consumption of which can expose consumers to foodborne illness. Its sale has prompted federal raids on farms for not complying with food safety regulations.

Means has called for top-down changes at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which he says has been co-opted by the food industry.

Though he himself is not trained in science or medicine, he has said people had almost no chance of dying of COVID-19 if they were “[metabolically healthy](#),” referring to eating, sleeping, exercise, and stress management habits, and has said that about 85% of deaths and health care costs in the U.S. are tied to preventable foodborne metabolic conditions.

A co-founder of [Truemed](#), a company that helps consumers use pretax savings and reimbursement programs on supplements, sleep aids, and exercise equipment, Means says he has had conversations behind closed doors with dozens of members of Congress. He said he also helped bring RFK Jr. and Trump together. RFK Jr. endorsed Trump in August after ending his independent presidential campaign.

“I had this vision for a year, actually. It sounds very woo-woo, but I was in a sweat tent with him in Austin at a campaign event six months before, and I just had this strong vision of him standing with Trump,” Means [said recently](#) on the Joe Rogan Experience podcast.

The former self-described never-Trumper said that, after Trump’s first assassination attempt, he felt it was a powerful moment. Means called RFK Jr. and worked with conservative political

commentator Tucker Carlson to connect him to the former president. Trump and RFK Jr. then had weeks of conversations about topics such as child obesity and causes of infertility, Means said.

“I really felt, and he felt, like this could be a realignment of American politics,” Means said.

He is joined in the effort by his sister, Casey Means, a Stanford University-trained doctor and co-author with her brother of “Good Energy,” a book about improving metabolic health. The duo has blamed Big Pharma and the agriculture industry for increasing rates of obesity, depression, and chronic health conditions in the country. They have also raised questions about vaccines.

“Yeah, I bet that one vaccine probably isn’t causing autism, but what about the 20 that they are getting before 18 months,” Casey Means said in the Joe Rogan [podcast episode](#) with her brother.

The movement, which challenges what its adherents call “the cult of science,” gained significant traction during the pandemic, fueled by a backlash against vaccine and mask mandates that flourished during the Biden administration. Many of its supporters say they gained followers who believed they had been misled on the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines.

In July 2022, Deborah Birx, COVID-19 response coordinator in Trump’s first administration, said on Fox News that “we overplayed the vaccines,” although she noted that they do work.

Anthony Fauci, who advised Trump during the pandemic, in December 2020 called the vaccines a game changer that could diminish COVID-19 the way the polio vaccine did for that disease.

Eventually, though, it became evident that the shots don’t necessarily prevent transmission and the effectiveness of the booster wanes with time, which some conservatives say led to disillusionment that has driven interest in the health freedom movement.

Federal health officials say the rollout of the COVID vaccine was a turning point in the pandemic and that the shots lessen the severity of the disease by teaching the immune system to recognize and fight the virus that causes it.

Postelection, some Trump allies such as Elon Musk have called for Fauci to be prosecuted. Fauci declined to comment.

Joe Grogan, a former director of the White House’s Domestic Policy Council and assistant to Trump, said conservatives have been trying to articulate why government control of health care is troublesome.

“Two things have happened. The government went totally overboard and lied about many things during COVID and showed no compassion about people’s needs outside of COVID,” he said. “RFK Jr. came along and articulated very simply that government control of health care can’t be trusted, and we’re spending money, and it isn’t making anyone healthier. In some instances, it may be making people sicker.”

The MAHA movement capitalizes on many of the nonconventional health concepts that have been darlings of the left, such as promoting organic foods and food as medicine. But in an environment of polarized politics, the growing prominence of leaders who challenge what they call the cult of science could lead to more public confusion and division, some health analysts say.

Jeffrey Singer, a surgeon and senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian public policy research group, said in a statement that he agrees with RFK Jr.'s focus on reevaluating the public health system. But he said it comes with risks.

"I am concerned that many of RFK Jr.'s claims about vaccine safety, environmental toxins, and food additives lack evidence, have stoked public fears, and contributed to a decline in childhood vaccination rates," he said.

Measles vaccination among kindergartners in the U.S. dropped to 92.7% in the 2023-24 school year from 95.2% in the 2019-20 school year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The agency said that has left about 280,000 kindergartners at risk.

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