Vaccination: a public policy issue

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On Saturday 9 October 2021, at a demonstration against the health pass in Rome, far right demonstrators attacked the offices of the main Italian trade union confederation, the CGIL. Soon afterwards, they tried to occupy the Italian Parliament building, before being pushed back by the police.

This event seems to me a sign of the potential character of the Covid-sceptic movement. It is a miscellaneous camp representing a range of political views and social groups. In some European countries, many members are from the extreme right, but that does not fully explain how the movement manages to attract such a large following.

In the absence of a better term, I am calling them “Covid-sceptics” to emphasise the continuity between a series of protests throughout the pandemic. They have changed their targets over this period. At first, they disputed that the situation was serious, claiming that the disease was no worse than flu. They can no longer do that. Such a fragmented society, where individualistic points of view with no arbitration.

Governments have directly encouraged the emergence of this protest movement through their actions. They have lost credibility by denying the seriousness of the pandemic and waver in their position on mask wearing. They have paid no heed to social inequalities and failed to make use of the grassroots knowledge that proved so vital in the AIDS crisis. That has undermined even the most worthwhile and sensible aspects of prevention policies.

Militant Covid-sceptics challenge the authoritarianism of public policies, while seeking out scientists and politicians who back their position. They often hold what are known in the United States as libertarian views. For them, individual freedom has an absolute value; they feel there is no onus on them to show solidarity. That creates an incoherent and false view of the world in which life is reduced to competing individualistic points of view with no arbitration.

However, this call only makes sense if vaccination is planned globally, and so it needs to be linked to a waiver on vaccine patents. The huge profits made in this industry are all the more shocking in that most of the research was publicly funded. We have enough production capacity now to make the vaccines available worldwide.