

Political hues shape vaccine stance

People's views on how central and state governments handled the covid-19 pandemic seem to be shaping trust in the vaccines about to be deployed

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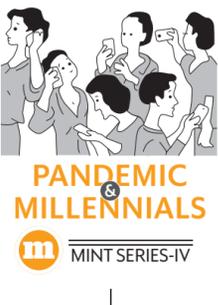
NEW DELHI

The recent controversy over the Indian government's approval to the Covaxin vaccine being produced by Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech in collaboration with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has polarized India's polity, with several Opposition politicians attacking the government for approving a vaccine whose efficacy is not clear yet. There was criticism earlier about the approval given to the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine being produced by the Serum Institute of India (SII) as well. However, that was milder than the backlash following the Bharat Biotech announcement. That the heads of SII and Bharat Biotech traded barbs publicly did not help matters. Aware that such controversies can dent confidence in both vaccines and his own government, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has tried to invoke national pride, highlighting how two "Made-in-India" vaccines have made the country proud even as the health ministry nudged the two key vaccine makers to bury the hatchet.



Haryana health minister Anil Vij volunteers in the trials for potential coronavirus vaccine Covaxin in Ambala district on 20 November 2020.

Even before the latest controversy, opinion on the covid-19 vaccination drive was polarized, an analysis of the latest **YouGov-Mint-CPR Millennial Survey** shows. Views on the government's performance during the pandemic seem to influence attitudes towards vaccination, the survey conducted online during October-November 2020 shows. Those rating the government favourably are more willing to take the vaccine immediately. This is true of those who rated the central government's performance favourably and those who rated the state government favourably (see chart 1).



The YouGov-Mint-CPR Millennial Survey was conducted jointly by the Indian arm of the global market research firm YouGov, Mint, and the Delhi-based think tank Centre for Policy Research (CPR). It solicited the views of nearly 10,000 respondents spread across 203 cities and towns on a broad range of questions. Roughly half of the respondents were millennials (aged 24 to 39). The rest were post-millennials (aged 18 to 23) and pre-millennials (above 39). The survey is the fifth of a series of bi-annual online surveys aimed at examining the aspirations, anxieties, and attitudes of India's digital natives.

The good news from the survey is that only a small minority of respondents (6%) were vaccine-sceptics. The rest wanted to take the vaccine. As much as 44% said they would take the vaccine immediately, while 50% said they would wait to see reports about the effectiveness of the vaccines before they take it. The share of those who won't take the vaccine even after more information is available is much lower than in countries such as the US, where roughly 20% reportedly said they will not take a vaccine, according to a recent Pew survey.

Indians have generally been more trusting of vaccines than their US counterparts. However, the latest survey reflects the attitudes of only urban online Indians and may not be representative of the entire

country. Among the respondents, the share of those who said they will not take the vaccine is slightly lower among the better-educated. However, education levels don't seem to strongly impact the decision on whether people would take the vaccine immediately or after waiting for early reports on effectiveness (see chart 2).

Age, gender, religion and region also did not seem to influence attitudes towards vaccination strongly, the analysis shows. Those reporting higher anxiety and poorer mental health because of the pandemic are more likely to take the vaccine immediately, the analysis suggests.

One strong predictor of attitudes towards vaccination seems to be political affiliations. Those who said they support the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are most likely to take the vaccine immediately but those who support the Congress are not far behind. Those who do not support any party are most sceptical about taking the vaccine immediately. It seems scepticism about political ideologies go hand in hand with scepticism about the effectiveness of the vaccines that are about to be deployed (see chart 3).

Political preferences and views about government performance remained strong predictors of attitudes towards vaccination even after controlling for variations in class, age, and geography, a probit regression model that we estimated on the survey data shows. Views on government response to the pandemic had the most significant impact on determining vaccination attitudes.

Where one got their information from was also an important determinant, the model results suggest. Avid social media users were more likely to

immediately want vaccination. In contrast, in countries such as the UK and US, those who use social media for information are more likely to be hesitant towards vaccination.

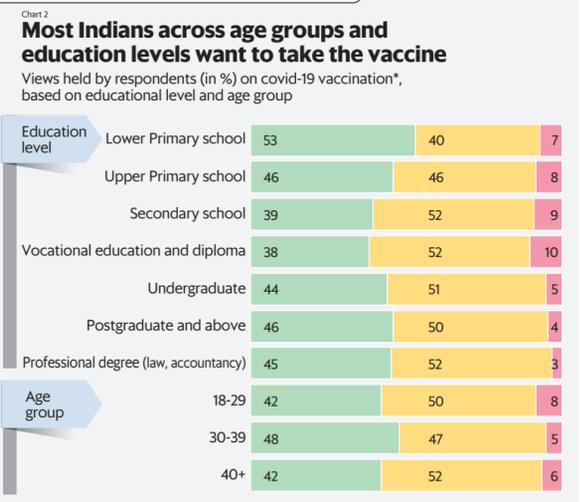
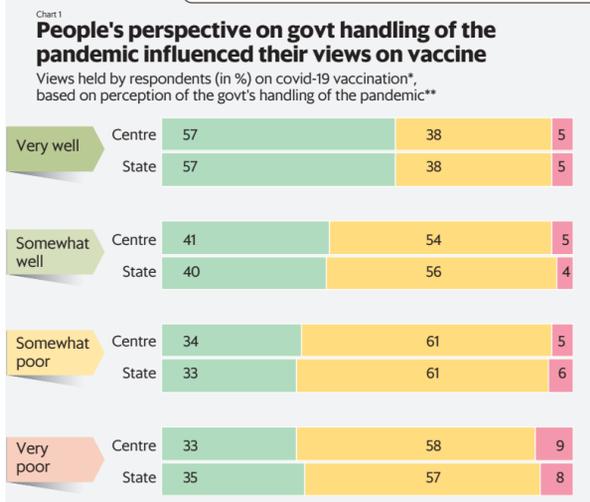
The older generations are more vulnerable to the pandemic, but it is the younger lot that shows greater enthusiasm for vaccination, our model suggests. Post-millennials had a preference for taking the vaccine immediately, while pre-millennials wanted to wait to see its efficacy first. Those who were more anxious and those still working from home were likely to take vaccines immediately.

Income levels do not seem to determine attitudes towards vaccination. In contrast, the decision to purchase health cover in the form of medical insurance is driven by income levels. One in five respondents said they bought a health or covid-19-specific insurance plan during the pandemic. However, a third said they do not have an insurance cover and don't intend to purchase such cover. Most of them are relatively poorer (see chart 4 and 5).

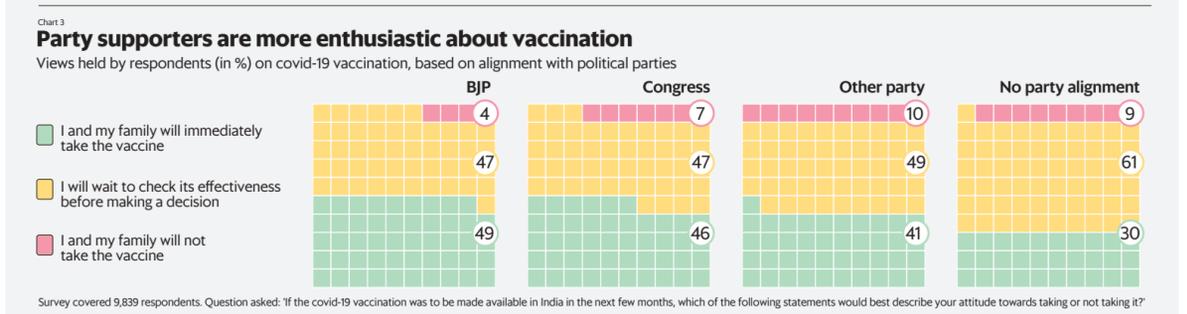
Unlike medical insurance, most people perhaps expect vaccination to be publicly funded. Given that vaccination is close to what economists would term as a "public good", with herd immunity rising for every additional vaccinated person, the expectation that vaccines should be fully or partially subsidized by the state may be justified.

However, it is not enough for the government to simply budget for the vaccine. It is imperative that decisions on vaccine approval are transparent and clearly communicated so that the ranks of the vaccine-sceptics dwindle, rather than grow. The vaccination drive will be a litmus test for the Indian state's capacity to remain efficient and equitable at the same time.

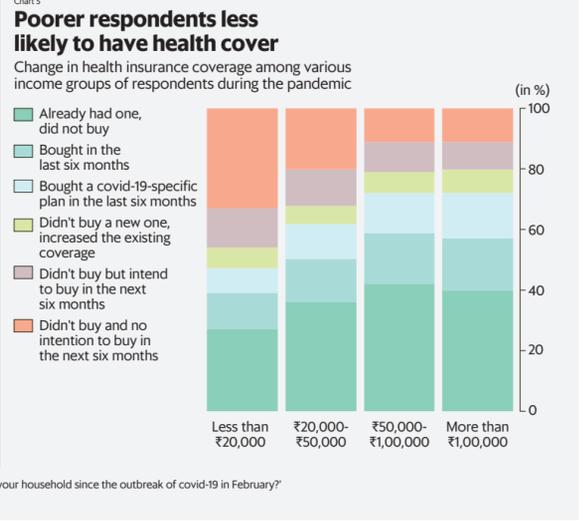
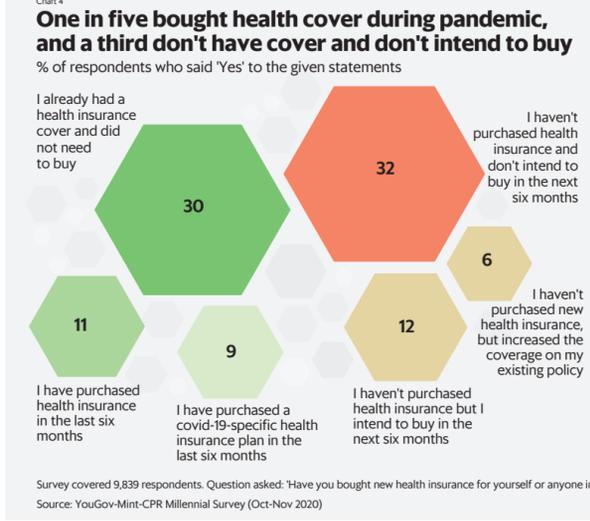
This is the fourth of a five-part data journalism series on how the pandemic has impacted India's digital natives. The authors are with the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi. feedback@livemint.com



Survey covered 9,839 respondents. *Question asked: 'If the covid-19 vaccination was to be made available in India in the next few months, which of the following statements would best describe your attitude towards taking or not taking it?' **Question asked: 'Thinking about the way covid-19 pandemic was handled in our country, how well do you think your state and central governments managed the situation?'



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Survey covered 9,839 respondents. Question asked: 'Have you bought new health insurance for yourself or anyone in your household since the outbreak of covid-19 in February?' Source: YouGov-Mint-CPR Millennial Survey (Oct-Nov 2020)