

Pop-Up Case: Global Vaccine Inequity

With the majority of the world still struggling to get access to COVID-19 vaccines, how should the United States prioritize domestic and global vaccination efforts?

Use the following hypothetical case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:

The majority of the world is still struggling to get access to COVID-19 vaccines. With worldwide supply limited, many wealthy countries have focused on their own citizens, securing the majority of global doses and leaving low- and middle-income countries without access. As of February 2021, ten countries have distributed 75 percent of the world's available vaccine supply while over 130 countries have not received a single dose. Concerned by this inequity, the World Health Organization (WHO) has partnered with other international organizations to develop COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), a global initiative that purchases and equitably distributes vaccines to low- and middle-income countries in need. COVAX accepts both donations of doses that wealthy countries have already purchased and donations of money that it uses to purchase doses on the open market. When buying doses, COVAX has to compete with wealthy countries, and purchases often cannot be delivered for months. COVAX has a stated goal to deliver over two billion doses by the end of 2021. However, some global health experts worry that goal is not enough to make a significant impact, and as of February 2021, COVAX does not have the funds to accomplish even that goal.

Some policymakers argue that the United States should prioritize domestic vaccination over global initiatives. The United States has been a hotspot for the virus, suffering over 20 percent of global COVID-19 deaths despite constituting only 4 percent of the global population, with tens of thousands more dying every week, disproportionately in communities of color. A swift vaccination campaign, they say, could save lives, protect against the spread of more dangerous variants, and allow onerous public health measures to be lifted sooner. Many U.S. politicians, who are elected by and responsible to U.S. citizens, argue that the country should do everything to vaccinate Americans as quickly as possible before donating doses to COVAX. Donating funds could also delay a return to a more normal life in the United States by diverting necessary funding at a time when the country faces significant costs fighting COVID-19 and strengthening a battered economy.

Some health experts counter that without combating the COVID-19 pandemic globally and equitably, the United States could be at risk. They believe that without an equitable global vaccine supply, many low- and middle-income countries could see the spread of more dangerous variants that could be less responsive to vaccines and threaten already-vaccinated countries. Other supporters of a more equitable response believe that the United States and other wealthy countries bear a moral obligation to help low- and middle-income countries. Donating doses or funds could also benefit the United States. Until the pandemic is widely under control, global supply chains will continue to be compromised, hindering economic recovery and possibly costing Americans billions of dollars. Significant support for COVAX could also earn the United States diplomatic capital and global goodwill at a time when U.S. standing in the world has been waning.

Learn more:

1. ["Vaccine Nationalism Harms Everyone and Protects No One" \(Foreign Policy\)](#)
2. ["Vaccine Spheres of Influence Tracker" \(Think Global Health\)](#)
3. ["COVAX and the United States" \(Kaiser Family Foundation\)](#)



Decision Point

The COVAX initiative is still not set to meet its goal of vaccinating two billion people by the end of 2021, in spite of financial commitments from the United States and others. Moreover, the global vaccine rollout is already deeply inequitable and, without additional funding for COVAX, is likely to remain so. A donation of additional doses from the United States could quickly make vaccination more globally equitable, but it could slow U.S. vaccinations, leading to a delay in the return to a more normal life in the United States. Donating funds would have less of an impact on vaccination in the United States, but it risks a less equitable vaccination effort and is not without tradeoffs at home, given the high costs of the domestic fight against the pandemic. Countries with the money to do so are quickly buying up vaccine doses—so if the United States decides to act, time is of the essence. The president has called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) to decide if and how the United States should give COVAX the additional help it needs to effectively combat the continued global spread of COVID-19. NSC members should consider whether an increased donation of funds, a commitment to share U.S. doses, or both would advance U.S. interests and values or whether the United States should maintain the status quo.

NSC members can consider any combination of the following policy options:

- *Donate vaccine doses previously reserved by the United States to COVAX and potentially encourage other wealthy countries to do the same.* Such a donation would delay the date by which Americans could resume a more normal life, but it could have the most immediate effect on making the global vaccine rollout more equitable by allowing COVAX to deliver vaccines to those who are most at risk in low- and middle-income countries. More equitable distribution also could lower the risk of new variants arriving in the United States and lead to diplomatic and reputational benefits for the country.
- *Donate additional funds to COVAX and potentially encourage other wealthy countries to do the same.* Donating funds avoids disturbing the U.S. vaccination schedule and could help COVAX to supply low- and middle-income countries, but its effects will be more gradual than donating doses.
- *Maintain current commitment to COVAX.*

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Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.



Simple NSC simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president.

NSC simulation with assigned opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign opinions. For example, assign one-third of the class to be isolationist, one-third to favor a military response, and one-third to favor a diplomatic response. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or a student) as president.

Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students imagine they are advising a generic president rather than a specific one.

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