

KYRIE IRVING, ATHLETE VOICE, AND VACCINE HESITANCY

Olivia S. Gellar and Michael L. Butterworth

Kyrie Irving is no stranger to the spotlight. He played for one of college basketball's signature programs at Duke, was the first overall pick in the 2011 National Basketball Association (NBA) draft, won an NBA championship alongside LeBron James with the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2016, and now plays for what many consider to be the league's most talented team in Brooklyn. Beyond his obvious talents and accomplishments, Irving has earned attention for his refusal to conform and his at times controversial opinions. For example, his declaration in 2017 that the "earth is flat" prompted widespread criticism. He later apologized, acknowledging that the public outcry was an instructive lesson about the "[power of voice](#)." Then, over the course of 2020, when the emergent pandemic and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter activism converged in the NBA "bubble," Irving exercised the power of his voice in conversations about whether a league built on the labor of Black athletes should be playing games in the midst of a national reckoning with racism. As ESPN's [Adrian Wojnarowski reported](#), he "has forged a reputation as a disruptor within his career."

In 2021 Irving once again found himself at the center of controversy, this time about COVID-19 vaccine mandates. Celebrated so recently for his principled stands against racial injustice, he faced substantial criticism for refusing to abide by [New York's policy](#) prohibiting unvaccinated people over the age of 12 from entering "certain covered premises." Irving insisted that he wanted his decision to [remain "private," even as others around the league](#) and outside observers pleaded with him to comply with the mandate. In the ongoing controversy, Irving's individual right to make decisions about his own health was juxtaposed against the reality that the pandemic is a [matter of public health](#). The impasse reflects a long-standing tension in American culture between individualism and collectivism.

A notoriously "individualistic" society, the United States has celebrated a mythic "American Dream" that relies on upward mobility and personal freedom. Yet, as scholars such as [Walter Fisher](#) and [Robert Rowland and John Jones](#) have noted, the strength of the American Dream lies in the balance between individual prosperity and the collective good. [Robert](#)



Irving provided political capital for those who have used the vaccine as a litmus test in an ongoing culture war."

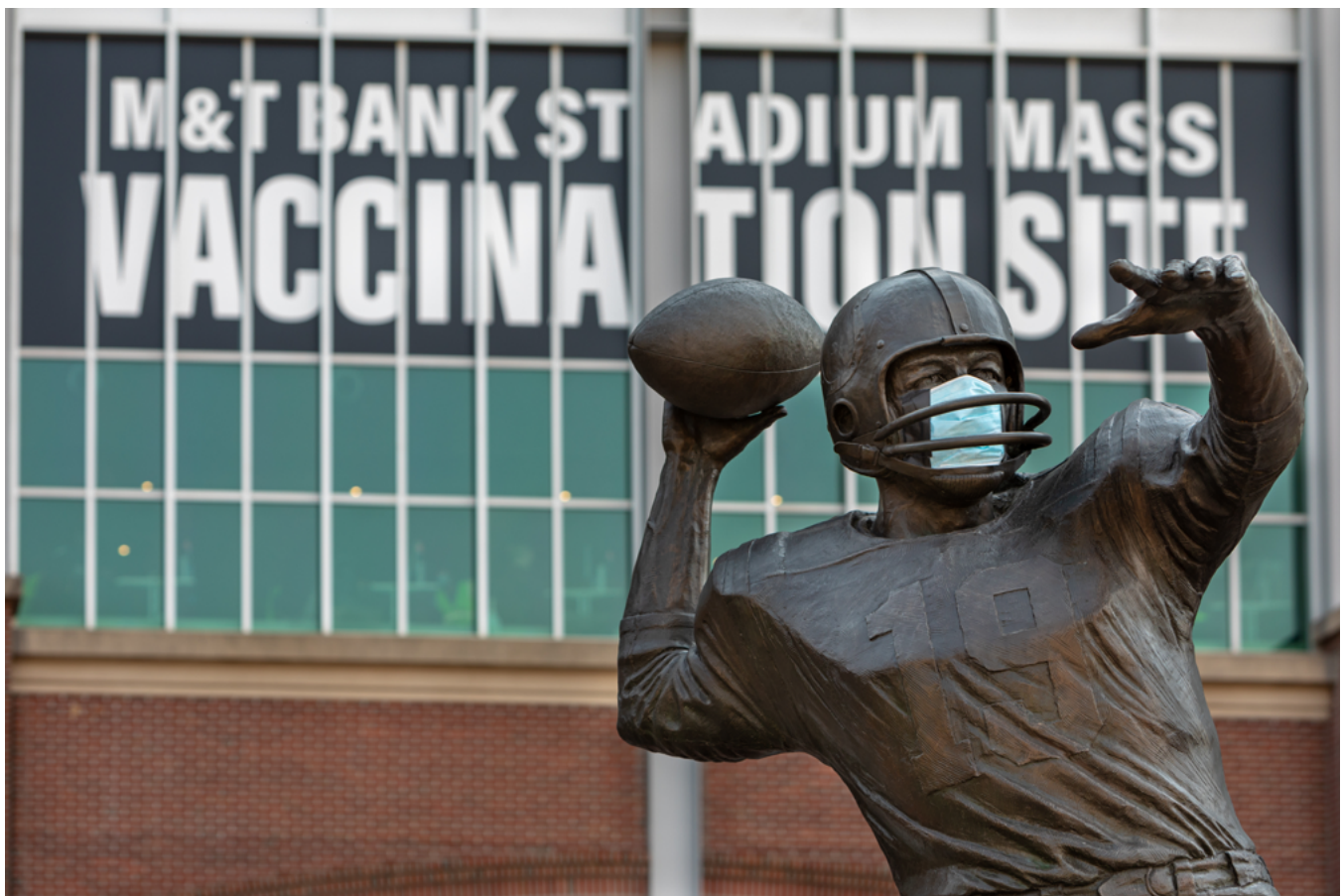


Leonard Zhukovsky/Shutterstock.com

NBA superstar Kyrie Irving (shown in 2016).

[Wuthnow adds](#), "there is a kind of *both-and* quality ... a balance between the autonomous individual who pursues individual happiness and the responsible individual who contributes to the common good." Irving's public comments about racial injustice have shown his capacity to see how discrimination and inequity are products of our mutual dependence on one another—i.e., allowing ourselves to believe that racism is merely an individual pathology rather than a social structure too often prevents us from seeing how disenfranchised and minoritized communities experience daily life. Irving's more recent turn reverses course, substituting collective well-being for his individual comfort ("privacy").

This retreat into radical individualism is perhaps the best explanation for the sudden embrace of Irving's resistance by [conservative pundits and elected officials](#) who had been



christianthiel.net/Shutterstock.com

Talk of the virus and vaccines has become inseparable from sports.

openly critical of “woke” athletes and their advocacy for Black Lives Matter. Senator Ted Cruz tweeted, “I stand with Kyrie,” along with the hashtag, “#MyBodyMyChoice.” Fox News commentator Will Cain applauded athletes who are “standing up for critical thinking and individuality and standing against popular thought.” And, conflating racial justice activism with anti-vaccine expression, Donald Trump, Jr. tweeted, “Kyrie just sacrificed more than [Colin] Kaepernick ever did!” These comments, along with many others, equate Irving’s stance with abstract notions of “freedom” and “liberty,” implicitly arguing that those concepts can only be attained by rejecting any notion of shared, public goods (“socialism”). The point isn’t that conservative political commentary on the matter is hypocritical because a once-denigrated activist athlete could suddenly be seen as a hero; rather, the point is that Irving provided political capital for those who have used the vaccine as a litmus test in an ongoing culture war. Regardless of how these conservatives feel about Irving himself, they appeared more than happy to use him as a vehicle to manufacture controversy and distrust.

[As others have noted](#), the emphasis on Irving’s vaccine refusal and his subsequent inability to play professional basketball

distracted from the fact that 95% of NBA players were vaccinated by the beginning of the 2021-22 season. Public health campaigns and vaccine mandates for other workers associated with the league were largely successful, with some superstars such as Jrue Holiday and Karl-Anthony Towns [leading advocacy efforts](#). There is little reason to conclude that Irving’s turn to radical individualism should cast doubt on the power of athletes’ voices. As [Professor Courtney Cox explains](#), what made the participation of players in Black Lives Matter activism so meaningful is that they spoke from direct experience and embodied knowledge. They had a kind of expertise that lent credibility and weight to their voices. Irving has made it clear that he lacks any similar kind of expertise regarding the coronavirus or vaccinations. From this point of view, we might see Irving’s resistance—or [Aaron Rodgers’, for that matter](#)—as expressions of rugged individualism, rooted in a heroic model of masculine toughness and independence. In short, Irving failed to grasp what [the players in the WNBA have](#), that, in the [words of Eugene Robinson](#), “there are occasions . . . when individual rights are outweighed by collective duty.” ■

**Read (and download) the complete
2022 Report: Politics in Sports Media**

Visit www.politicsinsportsmedia.org