One meme that seems to be popping up is that the "evils" of the COVID response reveal some dark reality behind climate policy. There's obviously some kinship: public health responses to COVID and climate policy are both efforts to head off serious global risks — one that, in the case of COVID, has killed over a million Americans. But this doesn't explain the conspiratorial overtones.

The conspiratorial view of COVID policy popped up in a speech by Vice Presidential candidate Nicole Shanahan on May 13. As reported by the NY Times, "'I often said Covid was the truth serum . . . Because it showed us things that people have been trying to hide from us for a really long time." She added, 'We can't unfeel it — that raging sense of being controlled and captured and manipulated and herded. We're not going to stand that anymore.'"

Shanahan's running mate, RJK Jr., has made the link between this dark view of public health precautions and climate policy. Kennedy has said that "climate issues and pollution issues are being exploited by, you know, the World Economic Forum and Bill Gates and all of these big, you know, mega-billionaires, the same way that Covid was exploited, to use it as an excuse to clamp down top-down totalitarian controls on society."

Kennedy expanded on that thought in an interview. He said that the climate crisis "has been, to some extent, co-opted — by Bill Gates and the World Economic Forum and the billionaire boys' club in Davos — the same way that the Covid crisis was appropriated by them to make themselves richer, to impose totalitarian controls." He continued, their goal was "to stratify our society, with very powerful and wealthy people at the top, and the vast majority of human beings with very little power and very little sovereignty over their own lives. Every crisis is an opportunity for those forces to clamp down controls."

Kennedy has also spoken about what he sees as the link in the minds of the public: ""Americans had enough of that during Covid, of people using the crisis — that many people believe now was manufactured — in order to clamp down totalitarian controls and shift wealth upward. And they see a mirror of that in climate."

Of course, this disturbing view isn't limited to these two novice politicians. Most of their followers may share it. It also popped up earlier with rumors of "climate lockdowns" and muttering about the threat of climate policy to basic freedoms. Behind this is a raging distrust of all authorities, government or scientific, and a terror that one's life is being shaped by dark forces outside one's control.

This sentiment has always existed, but COVID seems to have brought it closer to the surface. And as the examples of Kennedy and Shanahan show, it’s easy enough for people who buy into conspiracy theories about COVID to apply the same distrust to climate policy.

Better understanding the psychological roots of this destructive response to crises would be helpful in addressing future crises. That understanding wouldn’t, unfortunately, provide any comfort to the future generations who will suffer the most from climate change — or to those whose family members died from COVID because others wouldn’t take elementary public health precautions.