

I've watched in alarm as my fellow Republicans shun masks. It's selfish.

Opinion by **Karen Hughes**

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I've watched in alarm and dismay as the course of action recommended by almost all of our nation's infectious-disease experts has been shunned by many of my fellow conservatives and Republicans. [President Trump](#), Vice President Pence and many governors either refuse to wear a mask or wear one only occasionally, sending inconsistent messages about the [importance of citizens wearing masks](#) even as [covid-19 spreads at record levels](#).

I live in Austin, where our state pushed to reopen absent clear communication and guidelines about the concerted individual and collective actions that would be essential to reopening safely. When leaders said "We are open for business," too many citizens heard "Life is back to normal." Although some Republicans are [now speaking up](#), for weeks there were mixed or no messages about everyone's personal responsibility to don a mask in public.

I understand the need to get the economy moving. People have to work to feed their families; small businesses and restaurants must be open to pay their rent and employees. But reopening successfully requires deliberate precautions. When I did curbside grocery pickups in the weeks before Texas reopened, most customers I saw wore masks and were careful to maintain safe distances. In the weeks after reopening, things changed shockingly quickly: More than half the people I saw walking in and out of stores, both young and gray-haired, failed to wear masks.

The people most at risk from those without masks are not the individuals themselves. The risk is highest for grocery workers in the store, those who are keeping America fed by stocking shelves, operating checkout registers and slicing deli meat. These front-line workers spend long hours in contact with hundreds and sometimes thousands of people; these interactions are indoors, where health experts say the coronavirus [can most readily spread](#). Texas grocery chain H-E-B stepped up and did the right thing for its employees by instituting precautions: installing plastic shields at registers, strictly enforcing social distancing guidelines and requiring employees to wear masks. But government failed to do its part to protect these employees from the customers who eschewed masks.

In recent days, as covid-19 [cases have spiked](#), local government mandated businesses to [require all customers to wear masks](#), but the damage may be done. Many mask-free weeks and the back-to-normal cavalier attitude appear to be driving the [skyrocketing number of cases](#) in Texas and many other states. When local news showed crowds at public events, beaches, bars and restaurants, with most attendees neither social distancing nor wearing masks, one could practically see the virus spreading.

With some infected individuals, the [coronavirus](#) can lurk undetected, for days or weeks, without any sign or symptom that they are carriers. Wearing a mask is not about protecting *you*; it protects others from the possibility that you are exhaling virus particles at them. A recent University of Washington study [projected](#) that [33,000 fewer people](#) will die by October if 95 percent of us wear masks in public. That is reason to label failure to wear a mask as what it really is: an incredibly selfish act that puts other people's lives at risk. Like yelling "fire!" in a packed theater or brandishing a loaded gun in a crowd, failing to don a mask greatly increases the risk that one person will endanger others. Wearing a mask is also an important reminder that life is not normal and that a deadly disease stalks our society and we all need to take other precautions, including social distancing, regular hand-washing and minimal face-touching.

Ideally, all our national, state and local leaders would clearly and consistently communicate this message. Failing that, Americans can come together in common purpose to protect each other.

Yes, we enjoy personal freedom, but we can also choose to do something better for the common good.

Wearing a mask should not be a [political issue](#). Calls for masks are grounded not in politics but in lifesaving public health practices and the science behind how covid-19 spreads. Like too much else in our country, this issue has been politicized, egged on by a president whose inexplicable refusal to wear a mask sets a terrible example. Unfortunately, his actions gave cover for too many Republican governors to bow to the strident voices opposed to government restrictions on personal liberty, rather than calling on all of us to act on our personal responsibility to protect others.

While wearing a mask is not a political issue, it is a moral one. The choice and stakes are clear: the minor inconvenience of donning a mask vs. potentially threatening other people's lives. The options are not equal on any scale of duty, honor, citizenship, or service to God and others. Amid a deadly viral pandemic, wearing a mask is the only responsible course of action.