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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## Coronavirus

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# Will Americans wear masks to prevent coronavirus spread? Politics, history, race and crime factor into tough decision

By **Marc Fisher**, **Clarence Williams** and **Lori Rozsa**

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Kevin Krannawitter won't wear a mask because he just doesn't think it's necessary, whatever the scientists say. Marilyn Singleton won't wear one either — and she's a physician — because she says it's un-American for the government to force people to cover their faces. You won't see Ricardo Thornton in a mask because it reminds him of a time when he wasn't free to make his own decisions about his life.

Even as governors, mayors and the federal government urge or require Americans to wear masks in stores, transit systems and other public spaces to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, the nation is divided about whether to comply. And it is divided in painfully familiar ways — by politics and by attitudes about government power and individual choice.

Almost overnight, masks have become common in some places, even as they are still rare in others.

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Laredo, Tex., a small border city, last month became one of the first in the nation to threaten steep fines — up to \$1,000 — for residents who do not, as one city councilman put it, “keep their droplets to themselves” by wearing masks whenever they are outside.

The mayor, Pete Saenz, wears a surgical mask. His spokesman, Rafael Benavides, uses a homemade one that the city manager’s wife crafted for all municipal employees.

“Now it feels weird to see someone who isn’t wearing a mask,” said Lucy DeLeon, co-pastor of New Vision Community Church in Laredo. Eager to set an example, she and her co-pastor husband have formed mask-sewing brigades to outfit as many people as they can.

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The mayor said he has fielded calls from people asking: “Where is the science behind us wearing a mask?”

“I told them I had to go with what the doctors are telling us,” Saenz said. “We are a small city, and we can be overwhelmed quickly.”

Saenz is a Democrat, as are most of the governors who have issued mask orders. President Trump announced last week that the federal government now recommends wearing masks whenever people are outdoors and social distancing is difficult, but Trump said he will not wear one. “It’s going to be really a voluntary thing,” he said. “I’m choosing not to do it, but some people may want to do it and that’s okay.”

For Trump's supporters, declining to wear a mask is a visible way to demonstrate "that 'I'm a Republican,' or 'I want businesses to start up again,' or 'I support the president,' " said Robert Kahn, a law professor at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis who has studied Americans' attitudes toward masks. "Masks will quickly become the new normal in blue states, but if social distancing continues through 2022, the mentality among Republicans could well change, too: If I can go to work and the cost of marginal improvement in my life is wearing a mask, maybe Americans of both parties do accommodate ourselves to it."

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But the political divisions contributing to the split over mask-wearing have proved to be persistent so far, and those who oppose covering their mouth and nose have comfortably fit that position into their existing world view.

“Trump supporters, many of whom may live in less-populated red states, may currently know fewer people with covid, and may therefore minimize the threat,” said Robert Klitzman, a psychiatrist at Columbia University who specializes in bioethics. “They don’t want to wear masks — they may feel they are being imposed and are ‘un-American,’ perhaps something only people in the Far East do. The fact that wearing masks suggests that the virus is a real threat to them — despite what Trump has said — may further tip the balance against masks.”

## 'God has got this'

The men hanging out around the front stoop of King City Carryout in the Anacostia section of Washington, D.C., paid no mind to social-distancing rules. None wore a mask.

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Marcus McNeely, 31, laid off from a warehouse job where he operated a forklift and stacked boxes, saw no call to wear protective gear.

“There’s a million diseases out here, and everybody is worried about this one,” said McNeely, who does not know anyone who has caught the virus.

Down the block, Terrance Griffin, 31, stood out in midday sunshine on a break from working at a corner store to talk to a friend. Neither man wore a mask. Griffin said he entrusted his cares to a higher power.

“God has got this,” he said. Griffin said he does not want to be treated like he is infected, a person to be avoided or bundled up behind a mask.

“I don’t want to be treated like a lab rat,” Griffin said. “I want to be treated like a human.”

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Not far away, Devonte Jefferson, 27, and Larry Buckner, 18, played with a 2-year-old terrier in a strip-mall parking lot. Neither had masks, gloves or any concern about the coronavirus.

Jefferson, who works demolishing properties for building renovations, said he is more worried about asbestos or lead paint on his job than about the pandemic. And, living in Southeast Washington his entire life, the toll of gun violence ranks far higher on his scale of concern.

“I’ve seen a lot of dead bodies after shootings,” Jefferson said. “We don’t worry about problems like this.”

Objections to masks can be aesthetic (they look scary or ugly), ornery (you can’t tell me what to do), or political (the pandemic is overblown by the government, the news media or the Democrats). But American history also plays a significant part in the opposition.

For black Americans like McNeely and the other men in Anacostia, “there’s a concern that an African American who wears a mask could be considered guilty of a crime,” said Kahn, the law professor. “American attitudes toward masks are fraught with questions about race.”

Wearing masks in public is illegal in about 15 states and in many cities and counties, especially in the South, where anti-mask laws were passed in the period after the Civil War and in the 1920s and 1950s to combat the Ku Klux Klan and convince people that racial attitudes in the South had progressed. Some of those laws, including Virginia's, have exceptions for medical masks or when there is a declared public health emergency. Governors have emphasized in recent weeks that no one will be arrested under old anti-mask laws.

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But masks have powerful emotional meaning that makes many people reluctant to use them, even to defend against a deadly virus.



“We don’t quite trust who’s behind a mask, in part because of the history of the Klan,” Kahn said. “And courts have often argued that someone wearing a mask is more likely to steel up the courage to commit a crime.” For that reason, courts have added years to prison sentences for criminals who wore masks.

Even now, some black Americans have reported being called out by police or security guards while they were in shops wearing masks. Two black men in Wood River, Ill., who wore medical masks inside a Walmart recorded themselves last month being followed by an officer who ushered them out of the store. A statement from the city’s police chief said the officer “incorrectly informed the individuals that the Wood River City Ordinance prohibited the wearing of masks.”

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Antipathy to masks is deeply ingrained in American culture, unlike in some Asian countries, where many people wear them whenever they are in public, as protection against bugs and air pollution.

At the height of the 1918 flu pandemic, political leaders tried to get Americans to wear masks to work, and millions did. But many refused. In San Francisco, Mayor James Rolph ordered all residents to wear masks anytime they set foot in public.

“Obey the laws, and wear the gauze,” signs said. “Protect your jaws from septic paws.”

But compliance was hard to achieve, even with the threat of fines and arrests. It did not help when Rolph and the city’s health officer were photographed at a boxing match without masks.

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Americans have proved so reluctant to put on masks that hospitals have for years used them as a cudgel to force health-care workers to get the flu vaccine, ordering employees who did not receive the shot to wear face masks at work. Such policies have been credited with boosting vaccine compliance by 20 percent to 30 percent at many hospitals.

Past health crises have demonstrated that Americans' discomfort with masks is difficult to overcome. In 2004, when a nationwide shortage of flu vaccine led to fears of an influenza epidemic, some public health officials encouraged mask-wearing, and news reports predicted masks would become standard garb on sidewalks and streets forevermore. That did not happen.

## 'Not a police state'

Carol A. Grigsby, who chairs the D.C. Developmental Disabilities Council, has hauled out her dusty, old sewing machine and set it up in her dining room in Northwest Washington. She is making masks for a population that can have a hard time grasping what is going on.

"I have to explain why the staff that works with them need to wear masks, that it's because they care about you, not because they need to be protected from you," she said.

Ricardo Thornton spent 12 years at Forest Haven, a harrowing, long-shuttered mental institution in suburban Maryland where thousands of D.C. youths were warehoused. Now 61, he and his wife live independently in Washington. He is mostly staying at home, but when he goes out for walks each evening, he will not wear a mask.

“I got my freedom back, and I’m not giving it up,” he said. “Put a mask on me and it’s like going back to Forest Haven, when people thought we were carrying some disease. There’s nothing wrong with me, so I’m not planning to wear one.”

Many decisions about wearing masks are based on people weighing risks against benefits, and those calculations are based on personal experiences, said Klitzman, the psychiatrist. Research shows that “gay men at risk of getting HIV infected are more likely to protect themselves against the virus if they personally know someone who is sick,” he said, and a similar thought process is probably determining how people protect themselves now.

Mixed messages from the government — five weeks after Surgeon General Jerome Adams tweeted that masks “are NOT effective in preventing general public from catching #Coronavirus,” he tweeted a video urging Americans to make and wear them — have muddled that decision process, many experts said.

“Initially, we were told that masks did nothing,” said Marilyn Singleton, an anesthesiologist in Los Angeles and former president of the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, a conservative medical society. “And having people wear masks while they’re walking down a road by themselves doesn’t do anything for anybody. We’re not a police state, and this should be a personal choice.”

Singleton says that “the epidemic is being used as an excuse to put restrictions on people,” and she has concluded that where people stand on mask use has much to do with where they stand on the Trump presidency.

“Politics seems to make a difference, which is so silly, but true,” she said. “Nearly everything is political now.”

Although many of the political leaders who have appeared in public wearing masks have been Democrats, such as Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam and Colorado Gov. Jared Polis (whose mask featured the state insignia), some Republicans have done so as well, including Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, who appeared before cameras in Annapolis wearing a mask on Friday. An increasing number of Republican governors, such as Ohio’s Mike DeWine, who said he will be wearing a mask that his wife made for him, have issued orders strongly recommending mask-wearing.

For many Trump supporters, the mask seems to be a symbol of an approach to the virus that weighs too heavily against relaunching the economy. Kevin Krannawitter, who lives in Lawrence, a small college town in Kansas, said he is eager to get business moving again, and although he tries to follow all sides of the issue, he worries that “in general, we are hearing the science-only side.”

Even though he has a cotton mask his niece sewed for him, he will not wear it as he makes his rounds to the grocery store and hardware store and to pick up takeout food for his family. Krannawitter, a 51-year-old salesman for a technology company, said most people he sees at shops do wear a mask, but “going to a store where there are 15 to 20 people, I don’t feel the need.”

“Things tend to get overdone, and people take things too far,” he said. “If I was in New York, I would probably be wearing a mask . . . but the problem just isn’t widespread enough in this particular area. I’m not trying to ignore or be difficult, I’m just trying to be pragmatic. I just want to make sure the medicine isn’t worse than the illness.”

## **'People want to comply'**

Amber Onkay had been so good. She had worn the mask every time she went out for two weeks.

She came out of Walmart the other day, “and I had on gloves, I had on my mask, I’m sanitizing everything,” she said. “But I hate it. It’s so hot with it on. I’m sweating, I feel like I can’t breathe. I can’t stand it.”

So when she arrived at a nearly empty Dollar Tree store in Royal Palm Beach, Fla., she entered maskless.

It was just for a couple of minutes, she said, and she still believes masks are the right move.

“I know we have to,” she said. “I’ve got my 67-year-old mother at home, and our 6-year-old son. It’s just something we’ve got to do.”

Officials in Palm Beach County, like in the rest of South Florida, last week told residents they “should” wear masks in stores, on public transit, and at construction sites and other public places. In Lake Worth, a city in Palm Beach County, Commissioner Omari Hardy pushed for a tougher ordinance that would have fined store owners who allowed unmasked patrons in to shop, but he was voted down.

Hardy’s mother gave him a stack of masks weeks ago, along with a pile of bandannas, and he started using them.

“It was strange for me, without a doubt,” he said. “But you have to get over it. This isn’t a fashion show. You’re wearing a mask to protect your family and your neighbors.”

Palm Beach Town Manager Kirk Blouin said that even without a mandate, residents of the wealthy island have been calling police to report people who have not been donning masks.

“There are people who are very rules-based, and they are inundating law enforcement with phone calls, and even pictures, of people not wearing masks,” Blouin said. “Some people drive around looking for violators. That isn’t unique to us.”

In Laredo, where masks are mandatory, those who defy the order face a visit from law enforcement. Police Chief Claudio Treviño said off-duty officers working security at grocery stores have handed out hundreds of warnings and about two dozen citations to unmasked customers. He said the reaction has not been divided by politics; the most conservative parts of town complied early and well.

Benavides, the mayor’s spokesman, said he went out for breakfast tacos and “everyone had a mask on. Only one person was there without it, and the customers shooed him out. For the most part, people want to comply.”

Back in Florida, Kim Rommel Enright, an attorney with the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County, had trouble finding masks, so she is making her own. She is also artistic director of the local Maplewood Playhouse, where she helps make costumes. She has made about 200 masks, and she is giving them away, or asking those who want to pay to donate to her theater.



Enright sports a rainbow Pride mask when out in public.

“I hate it,” she said. “I can’t stand it. Nobody can see me smile.”

But she wears it.

*Rozsa reported from Palm Beach, Fla. Annie Gowen in Lawrence, Kan., and Arelis R. Hernández in San Antonio contributed to this report.*

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Marc Fisher, a senior editor, writes about most anything. He has been The Washington Post's enterprise editor, local columnist and Berlin bureau chief, and he has covered politics, education, pop culture and much else in three decades on the Metro, Style, National and Foreign desks. Follow 

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### **Clarence Williams**

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