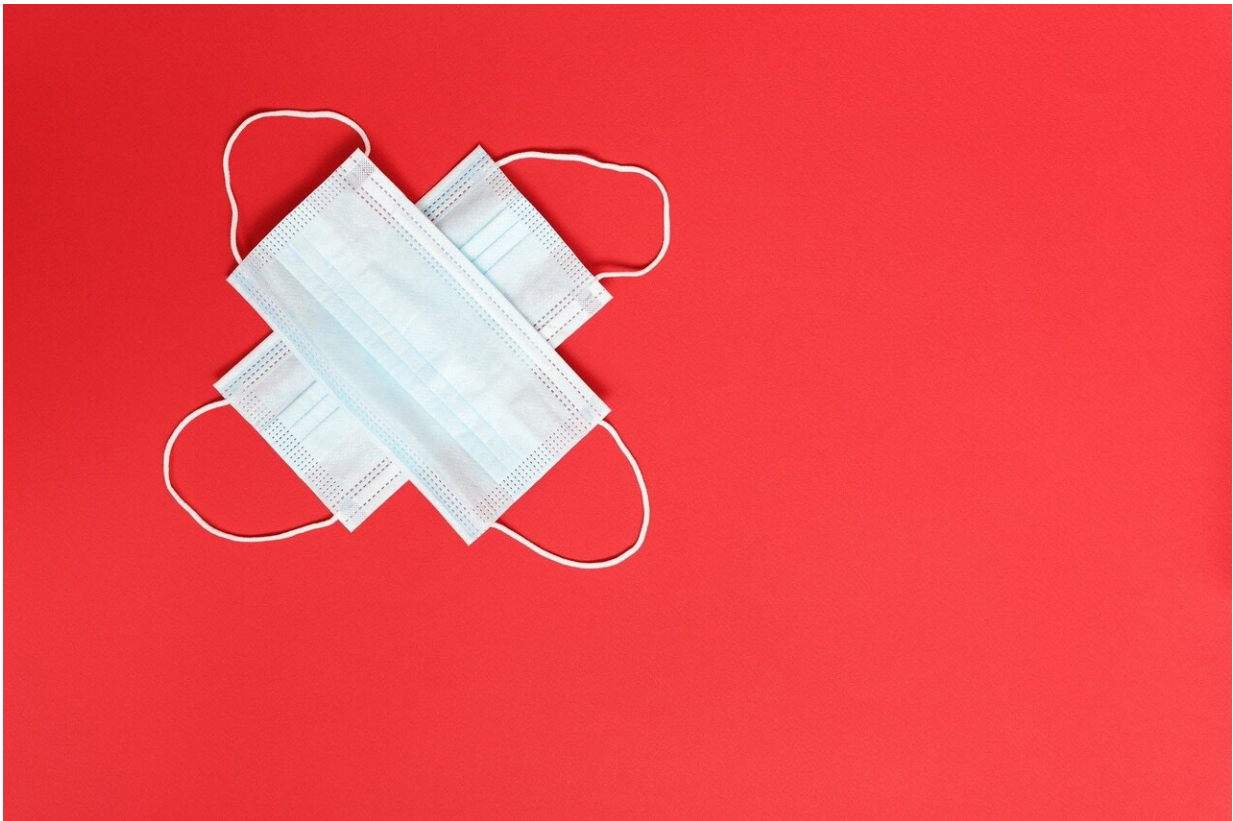


# Trump's COVID-19 diagnosis is not slowing virulent anti-mask movement on Facebook

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

President Trump and the First Lady testing positive for COVID-19 has not slowed the anti-mask movement on Facebook.

Despite growing evidence that face [masks](#) prevent the spread of the virus, dozens of public and private groups with hundreds, even thousands, of members are still urging people not to wear them.

Among the anti-mask groups spreading on Facebook is "The Free Face Society," which has 5,400 members and believes "no government or Tyrant should control our faces! A man cannot be free if he does not control his or her own face!"

The cover photo for "Umask America!!" is a black mask that reads: "This mask is as useless as Joe Biden." A sample post from one of its 6,200 members reads: "Well Target has the mask police out and they are handing out masks at the door. My husband and daughter sent me a picture saying courtesy of Target. Bunch of communist sheeple. I told my husband and daughter I would've just left. They are better sports than I am. This makes my blood boil!"

Another anti-mask group with nearly 1,000 members goes by the name "Anti-Mask Lives Matter." "Today, it seems as if being in public without a mask on, is comparable to experiencing racism at its core," the group's description says.

Anti-maskers say being forced to wear a face mask in public violates their constitutional rights. They also claim that wearing a mask does not protect from the virus and could do more harm than wearing one. And some of them believe that the coronavirus ("the scandemic") is also a hoax.

"Having worked for Trump personally years ago, it was made clear to me in those occasions that he is not an idiot. I believe that he knows this is a farce and a hoax," one COVID denier wrote in one of the public anti-mask groups. "Trump will take the hydroxychloroquine, he will be 'cured' and the masses will know it via an official press conference."

The number of people joining public anti-mask groups has increased 1,800% to more than 43,000 users since the beginning of August, according to an analysis by the New York Times, using data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned by Facebook.

But much of the anti-mask activity is taking place in private groups. For example, "Mask Off" has 2,000 members and describes itself as a group "to connect with others who refuse to bow down to the corrupt government and wear a muzzle." Its cover photo is a black #PizzaGate mask.

The 1,100 members of the "Indiana anti-mask coalition" rally around their hatred of masks. "Whether you just don't like being told to wear one, have a medical condition or think this is all a hoax. I don't care," the group's description reads.

Since late January, Facebook has been aggressively cracking down on the spread of coronavirus-related misinformation, removing harmful content that it deems could contribute to physical harm, including posts that make false claims about cures, treatments, the availability of essential services or the location and severity of the outbreak.

Between April and June, Facebook said it took down 7 million pieces of [coronavirus](#)-related misinformation and put warning labels on nearly 100 million other posts.

One anti-mask group, "Say NO to [face masks](#)," which had grown to 3,500 members, was taken down by Facebook late this week.

"We have clear policies against promoting harmful misinformation about COVID 19 and have removed this group for violating our Community Standards," the company told U.S. TODAY.

But even before that public group was deleted, a private group sprang up in its place.

"No shock there, they really are getting desperate to shut down the truth now," one member of the new group, "We do not consent," commented. It already has more than 400 members.

And that's worrying to Jennifer Grygiel, a communications professor at Syracuse University. Earlier this week, Facebook announced it will start surfacing public group discussions in people's News Feeds and search results, part of an effort to encourage more people to join groups.

Promoting content from these groups could backfire for Facebook if more people are exposed to misinformation or extremism, said Grygiel, who studies social media.

"Some may not see public groups as an issue, but they are often used to recruit users to private groups and in this way act as a feeder to more secretive Facebook spaces and problematic activities and content," she said. "We also need to be concerned about the timing of this all as amplifying Facebook groups could further minimize the amount of legitimate and independent news people are receiving on Facebook during a presidential election."

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