

Oregon among blue states slow at lifting COVID restrictions

May 23 2021, by Sara Cline



In this Sept. 21, 2020, file photo, Vanessa Mendez hugs her son, Evan Seppa, as he prepares to head into Elizabeth Page Elementary School for his first day of kindergarten in Springfield, Ore. Even as the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention moved earlier this month to ease indoor mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people, states like Oregon and Washington are still holding on to certain longtime coronavirus restrictions. Credit: Andy Nelson/The Register-Guard via AP, File

The sand was packed on a recent sunny day at this upscale beach town on Oregon's coast, but signs of the state's cautious approach to the pandemic were still everywhere. Almost all the beachgoers wore masks—those that didn't got nasty looks—and lines for a seat at the many local cafes and restaurants snaked down the sidewalk because of rules limiting capacity to 25%.

It was a sharp contrast to places such as Florida or Texas, where many COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted for weeks. But even as the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention moved earlier this month to ease indoor mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people, some blue states like Oregon and Washington are still holding on to some longtime [coronavirus](#) restrictions.

After [public pressure](#), Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, last week lifted a requirement for masks outdoors and put the onus on businesses to decide if fully vaccinated patrons would be required to mask up inside.

But enforcement of business capacity limits, publicized cases of student athletes passing out while competing or practicing in a mask and a widespread shut-down of indoor dining earlier this month continue to stoke resentment among those who feel Brown's rules go too far as the rest of the U.S. returns to normal.

In Oregon, pushback has been particularly strong in rural areas—which is much of the state outside Portland—and has included an effort by at least one county to become a "vaccine sanctuary" where people wouldn't have to mask up regardless of their vaccine status.



In this April 11, 2021, file photo, residents wearing masks walk in downtown Lake Oswego, Ore. Even as the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention moved earlier this month to ease indoor face mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people, states like Oregon and Washington are still holding on to certain longtime coronavirus restrictions Credit: AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus, File

"We are just so done with this," said Tootie Smith, chairwoman of the Clackamas County Board of Supervisors and a former Republican Oregon State House Representative. "There's a huge amount of frustration that people have."

Smith made national news when she said on Twitter that she would host a large Thanksgiving dinner despite capacity rules on indoor gatherings

in place at the time—and now she says she's astonished when she travels outside Oregon and sees what it looks like to live with fewer public COVID-19 restrictions.

Texas Rangers' fans recently returned to Globe Life Field that was open for 100% capacity, droves of college students crowded Florida beaches for spring break and Walt Disney World has reopened its gates.

"Everything was open. People were happy, because they had the freedom to go out to restaurants (without a mask)," said Smith, who cited Florida, South Dakota and Idaho as examples. "Some of the businesses wanted you to wear a mask. And it might have been mandated indoors at certain points—but the attitude was different. You weren't shamed for not wearing a mask."



A woman wearing a face mask loads groceries into her car after shopping at a Zupan's grocery store in Portland, Ore., on Friday, May 21, 2021. As the federal government and many states ease rules around mask-wearing and business occupancy, some blue states like Oregon and Washington are still holding on to some longtime coronavirus restrictions. Credit: AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus

Those who support the Northwest's more cautious approach, however, point out the region has had lower infection rates throughout the pandemic—likely because of the stricter rules over the past 14 months.

"The benefit of 50 different states is you sort of get a natural experiment of what happens when states take a different approach," said Dr. Jennifer Vines, the health officer for Multnomah County, the state's most populous county and home to Portland.

"I've watched as some (states) have had various surges or rejected certain restrictions. I think for the most part Oregon got it right," Vines said. "Even though it may seem like there's no problem, it's those same restrictions that are preventing the problem."

In Oregon and Washington, state health authorities have recently rescinded requirements to wear masks outside but are mostly maintaining indoor capacity restrictions, likely through the end of June.



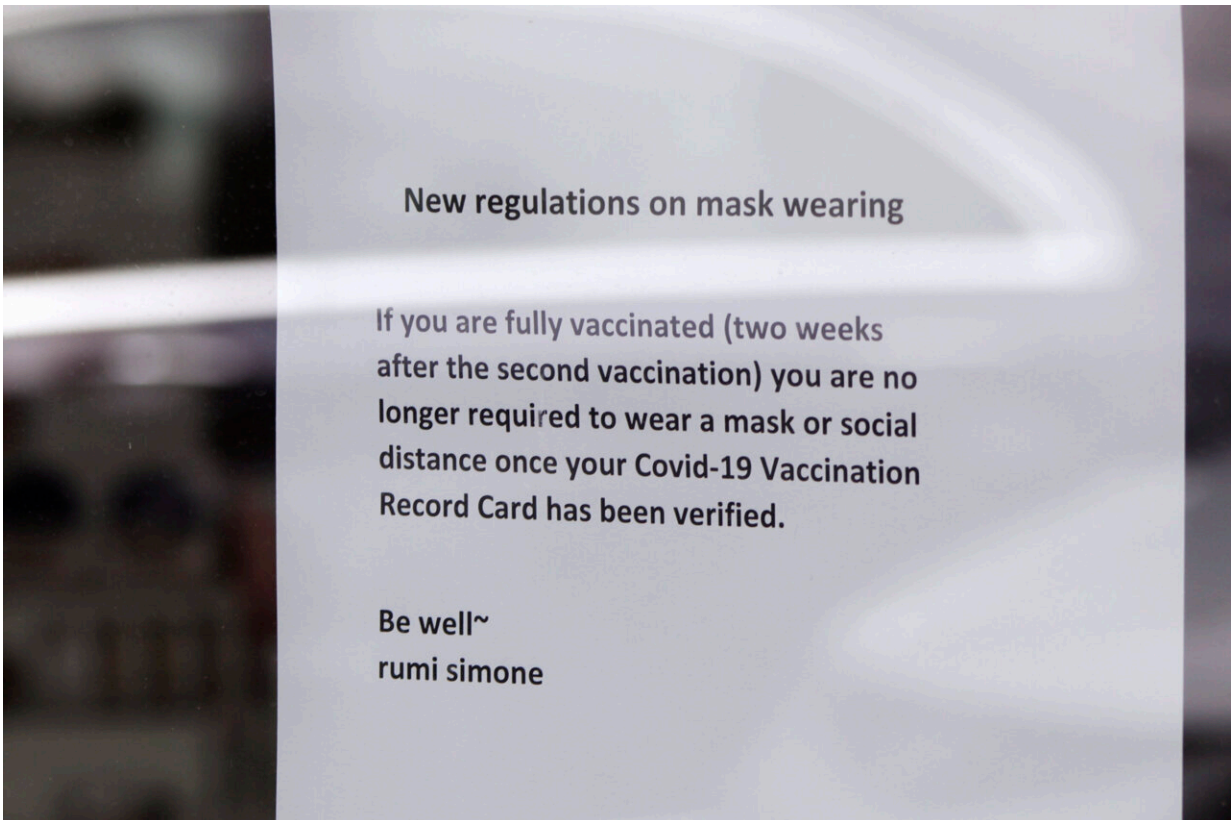
This Thursday, May 28, 2020, file photo shows Haystack Rock is seen in the distance from a balcony of The Ocean Lodge, in Cannon Beach, Ore., during the coronavirus outbreak. The sand was packed on a recent sunny day at this upscale beach town on Oregon's coast, but signs of the state's cautious approach to the pandemic were still everywhere. It was a sharp contrast to places such as Florida or Texas, where many COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted for weeks. Credit: AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus, File

Most of Oregon's counties still have limits on capacity for businesses and as of this week, businesses that want to let customers enter their stores without a mask must ask the customer to prove they've been fully vaccinated. State health authorities this week said young athletes no longer have to wear masks while competing in outdoor settings, but students must still mask up while playing close-contact sports indoors,

such as basketball and wrestling.

And earlier this month, state workforce safety regulators extended indefinitely a rule requiring employees to wear [masks](#) at all times, regardless of their inoculation status.

As the state crested its fourth COVID-19 surge this month, Brown announced a reopening plan: Statewide restrictions on capacity and masking will be lifted when 70% of Oregon residents 16 and older have at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.



A sign at a spa and beauty salon in Lake Oswego, Oregon on Friday, May 21, 2021, advises that only customers who can prove they are fully vaccinated may enter without masks on. As the federal government and many states ease rules around mask-wearing and business occupancy, some blue states like Oregon and

Washington are still holding on to some longtime coronavirus restrictions.
Credit: AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus

Currently, more than half of Oregon's eligible population has received a first vaccine and health officials say they believe the state will reach the governor's vaccination goal by the end of June—although many individual counties are lagging far behind.

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee made a similar reopening announcement, saying his state is on track to fully reopen by June 30, and a full reopening could happen even sooner if 70% or more of residents ages 16 and older have gotten at least one dose of vaccine by then.

It is time to begin "the next chapter of post-pandemic life," Brown said—something Republicans have been asking for since last year, from reopening the economy and lifting mask mandates completely to students returning to in-person learning full time.

"What happens if we get another virus?" Smith said. "We can't keep shutting down our society for months,"



A sign reminds customers to wear their masks at a bakery in Lake Oswego, Ore., on Friday, May 21, 2021. As the federal government and many states ease rules around mask-wearing and business occupancy, some blue states like Oregon and Washington are still holding on to some longtime coronavirus restrictions.
Credit: AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus



Two women wearing masks wait to be seated at a restaurant in Lake Oswego, Ore., on Friday, May 21, 2021. As the federal government and many states ease rules around mask-wearing and business occupancy, some blue states like Oregon and Washington are still holding on to some longtime coronavirus restrictions. Credit: AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus

But even once restrictions are lifted in Oregon, not everyone may opt to return to a pre-coronavirus life.

"We all have kind of different levels of risk tolerance," Vines said. "I think for people who are really intolerant of risk they may choose to continue to mask and I think that is okay."

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