Case 17: What Pants Shall We Put on Today?

In a now famous interview in April with an Indianapolis radio station, thirty-seven-year-old Republican congressman Trey Hollingsworth argued for opening up the economy, despite the predicted loss of human life. “But it is always the American government's position to say, in the choice between the loss of our way of life as Americans and the loss of life of American lives, we have to always choose the latter.” In an oft-quoted remark he said that policymakers have to “put on our big boy and big girl pants and say, ‘This is the lesser of these two evils.’”

Other Republican officials echoed this sentiment. In an interview with Tucker Carlson, seventy-year old Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick claimed that “those of us who are 70 plus, we'll take care of ourselves, but don't sacrifice the country.”

Critics were quick to jump on remarks like these, calling the GOP a death cult, and reducing the trade off to choosing between letting people die and going to the movies or to bars. But policymakers have always had to make tough choices that involve risk to human life. In order to make such decisions, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Department of Transportation (DoT), are among the governmental agencies that regularly weigh the economic costs involved in saving lives. The EPA, for instance, currently places the value of a statistical life at $7.4 million in 2006 dollars, or $9.4 million in 2020 dollars. By placing a dollar value on every human life, it becomes possible to weigh the costs and benefits of certain risks and precautions.

One of the most contentious debates centers around K-12 schools. Schools have made an extraordinary effort to convert in-person classes into online classes, in many cases donating or loaning the necessary technology to families that lack it. However, there are obvious drawbacks to schooling from home. Parents who are not tech savvy or who are themselves working from home are unable to give the sort of assistance necessary. Parents who work outside the home may not be able to afford child-care. In many cases, the school is a much safer place for children to be than at home with abusive parents. In many other cases, school meals are almost the only meals students will eat during the day. For these and other reasons, schools are under intense pressure from politicians and parents to open their doors wide to all students whose parents wish them to attend in person.

While schools, for non-COVID reasons, may be safer for the students, they are much riskier places for teachers and staff. Many schools have taken strenuous precautions in conducting in-person classes, with varying degrees of success. Regular disinfection of surfaces, strict enforcement of mask-wearing, plastic barriers at desks, six feet of separations between students, and improved filtration on the air flow have been some of the precautions put in place at some schools. Nevertheless, safety precautions are only as good as their enforcement, and no one who’s ever dealt with small children seriously expects them to follow all the rules strictly.

Teachers in many states have little or no power or influence. In states like Texas, for instance,
where Governor Gregg Abbott has imposed no mask mandate yet has forced schools to reopen, teachers who protest by striking may be fired, lose their certification, and even lose their pensions. One Texas teacher interviewed by *The New Yorker* compared the state’s response to COVID-19 to its response to gun violence, claiming the state was telling teachers, in effect, “No, we shouldn't fix the gun problem; we should make teachers stand in front of bullets. We shouldn't fix the virus; we should make teachers be willing to die.” It’s no wonder that many teachers feel as though they are up against a united army of parents, administrators, and legislators—people who never set foot in a classroom—who sit safely at home and berate teachers for not putting on their big boy and big girl pants and choosing “the lesser evil,” namely, death.

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