

The Washington Post

Opinion: It's time to bury the myth of Texas exceptionalism

Opinion by **Karen Attiah**



Feb. 17, 2021 at 5:01 p.m. CST

Leave it to a blackout to shine a big, bright spotlight on the problems lying deep in the heart of Texas.

I grew up in a suburb south of Dallas, and even though my parents were immigrants from West Africa, I was conditioned to believe in Texan exceptionalism. In high school debate, the question of whether the Lone Star State should secede from the union was a yearly issue. I argued absolutely yes. “We are fine on our own! We have our own power grid!”

Well, I was wrong.

This week, wrapped in multiple blankets and layers, I could only laugh at my past faith in Texas’s supposedly mighty grid. A winter storm might have been the precipitating event that left millions of Texans struggling without power in record-low temperatures. But what really has brought my home state to its knees is a chilling mix of unfettered deregulation, partisan gaslighting and leadership failure.

Was *anyone* prepared? Though utilities knew the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, the state-energy regulator known as ERCOT, planned possible outages, residents did not get advance warning. Many of us in Dallas scrambled to try to find shelter and warmth, only to run into hotels that were full or also without power. Snow and ice on the roads caused fatal car accidents. In Fort Worth, residents were advised to boil water, because power had been shut off to treatment facilities.

Texans caring for newborns, the elderly or sick family members — covid-19 takes no time off for bad weather — tweeted in anger and desperation. Hospitals faced an influx of hypothermia cases. A woman and young girl in Houston died after being poisoned by carbon monoxide from a car being run in an effort to generate heat. There had been at least 10 deaths in the state as of Tuesday.

And underneath it all was this shocking question: How could this happen in America's largest energy-producing state?

Deregulation is clearly a central part of the answer. In the 2000s, Texas leaders opted to deregulate our independent power grid, leaving providers with no incentive to prepare for infrequent risks. After a 2011 cold spell produced a crisis, federal regulators warned that the state needed to invest in winterizing the energy supply infrastructure. That advice went unheeded. You can draw a direct line from there to market absurdities such as those we saw this week, when the wholesale price of electricity in Houston spiked from \$22 a megawatt-hour to about \$9,000, while 4 million Texas homes had no power.

Deeper is the failure of leadership, which the present crisis has placed on full display. Though Judge Clay Jenkins of Dallas County has definitely been a steady hand in the crisis, a number of other Texas politicians have been busily employing shameless gaslighting and partisan scapegoating to keep their partisan bases warm and toasty. In a now-deleted Facebook post, former Colorado City mayor Tim Boyd blasted his city's residents for being "lazy" and instructed them to "quit crying and looking for a handout!"

Gov. Greg Abbott (R), a day before he gave a formal address to Texans on the disaster on his watch, popped up on Fox News to assert that the blackouts were somehow evidence that Democrats' Green New Deal would not work. Abbott joined a chorus on the right blaming frozen wind turbines for the shambolic power situation — though wind accounts for only about 10 percent of the state's winter power supply.

But Republican former governor Rick Perry, also a former U.S. energy secretary, was the one who boiled it all down to that Texas mythos, saying, "Texans would be without electricity for longer than three days to keep the federal government out of their business." Talk about a Texas-size delusion. Our suffering is worth it, so long as we can stick it to the feds!

And this is what's so agonizing about this moment. Our culture of rugged individualism puts the burden on vulnerable Texans to survive together, as best we can, overlaying crises caused by systemic failures of leadership. We were already struggling with covid-19. We were already having to cope with reduced incomes and job loss. Families were already having to keep up with distance learning. Given these interlocking challenges, real leadership should have meant acting with foresight, and sparing no expense, to ensure that Texans could access power and heat through the winter.

Instead, our suffering is compounded by Republican leaders who would rather serve up stale, partisan talking points than do what is best for Texans. We deserve so much better.

At the time of this writing, I still do not know when power will be restored to my apartment. In the meantime, my friends in Africa, with experience with public health crises and load shedding by utilities, are sending me tips on how to manage.

Texan exceptionalism? I love my home state, but it's time for that myth to come to a cold, dead end.

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