

# Commentary

## The Case for Crisis Conservatism

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For decades, Gallup has found that the number of Americans who self-identify as conservative substantially outpaced the number of those who claim to be liberal. That may be changing.

Over the course of the 2010s, a declining number of self-described “moderates” has accompanied an uptick in the number of liberals while the percentage of conservative Americans has remained relatively stable—between 35 and 40 percent. As recently as February, 40 percent of Americans described themselves as conservative. But a paralyzing pandemic, its economic hardships, and a pervasive sense of crisis amid prolonged displays of civil unrest and disorder have taken their tolls. Today, the number of self-described conservatives has declined to just 34 percent.

Though this is doubtlessly bad news for the Republican Party, those who would lean into this data to suggest a historic withering of American conservatism could risk overstating the case. The marked decline in conservative self-identification in 2020 may be no more complicated than the fact that conservatism is closely associated with the right, and the right is closely associated with Donald Trump—both of which have fallen out of favor with a substantial number of voters. The left’s opportunists will no doubt leverage this moment to make the case that the public has rendered a negative verdict on the ideas espoused by the American right. But it would be a mistake to presume, as many have, that conservatism cannot make the case for itself in the wake of the assorted crises presently afflicting the country.

Two of modern conservatism’s most foundational premises have, in fact, been rather thoroughly vindicated by the pandemic. Those being, first, that the public sector is notoriously lethargic and unresponsive, and, second, that those conditions get worse the larger that sector becomes. There is substantial overlap among those who clamored for a more proactive and competent response to the pandemic from the federal government and those who believe that the federal government has hopelessly mismanaged this crisis. It seems that only a conservative can identify the logical deficiencies contained in this line of thinking.

Another conservative principle—the smaller the government’s remit and the closer it is to its constituents, the sounder its governance—also seems particularly resonant. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll found that nearly half of all respondents—48 percent—gave the federal government’s handling of the coronavirus outbreak “poor” marks while only 29 percent and 24 percent said as much of their state and local government, respectively. Indeed, this White House has largely deferred to states to manage their outbreaks as they saw fit. The result has been a flowering of experimentation and, by and large, public support for their local elected officials. We don’t know what a truly nationalized response to the coronavirus would look like but, if Joe Biden assumes the presidency in 2021, we may know soon enough. And a one-size-fits-all

application of federal power to break the back of this outbreak, the scale of which varies widely from region to region, may quickly become a source of bitter resentment.

Of course, the immediate recognition that both local and federal governments would have to maximize nimbleness to address this crisis early on also meant shedding the burdensome regulatory frameworks that the pandemic quickly rendered unaffordable luxuries. Federal and state-level regulatory agencies moved fast to scrap regulations that capped hours that truck drivers could work, slowed the approval process for therapeutic drugs, prevented the sharing of personal medical information, restricted access to supplemental nutritional programs, prevented medical personnel from practicing across state lines, and bogged down businesses in a legal morass just so they can have permission to produce goods and services.

An unanticipated consequence of the oppressive lockdowns to which many states and cities appealed—a summer characterized by civil disorder and riots in American cities, which no longer have much to do with police violence or the liberties of black Americans—contributes to the case for conservatism in a period of crisis. For months, the polling has been clear: The public supports the demonstrators protesting in favor of fairer treatment for American minorities but also rejects street violence and wants to see it put down. And yet, in Congress, both House and Senate Democrats blocked entirely cosmetic resolutions condemning mob violence and opposing “autonomous zones and efforts to defund the police.”

It would be quite foolish if Democrats allowed conservatism to capture an issue as unrelated to ideology as the need for municipalities to preserve public safety. And yet, operating under the apparent presumption that to unequivocally condemn street violence would be to abandon the cause of police reform, the progressive left has been reluctant to condemn those most deserving of condemnation. Democratic officeholders have followed their lead—an outgrowth, perhaps, of the tangible consequences that are meted out against iconoclastic liberals who challenge the preferred (usually progressive) consensus that prevails within the Democratic Party’s activist class. A Cato Institute survey quantified this phenomenon when it found that a culture of fear and self-censorship has taken hold for a majority of every ideological contingent in America save one: “strong liberals.” This, too, presents inroads for conservatism as a new venue in which the exploration of ideas, even objectively bad ideas, remains a virtue.

If the stage is set for a political backlash, don’t expect it to materialize in November. Donald Trump is in particularly bad odor, as is the party over which he presides. Even if they’re disinclined to reward chaos, Americans do not have a pillar of stability and sobriety around whom they can rally. But if progressives overperform in November, the story they will want to tell themselves is that voters cast a ballot against localism and in favor of disorder on city streets and a stifling regime of self-censorship. In absence of any functioning mechanism for self-criticism within the progressive movement, we can expect that to be the left-leaning activist class’s takeaway if Democrats have a good night on November 3. Conservatives should prepare accordingly.