

Conservatives see freedom as progress

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Although the definition and priorities of American conservatism have been the subject of much debate among the chattering classes in recent years, most actual American conservatives will readily tell you what unifies their sometimes-raucous ranks: freedom.

Consider the latest political typology produced by the Pew Research Center. Assembling hundreds of survey responses and then looking for clusters of like-minded voters, Pew came up with nine discrete groups — four on the Right, four on the Left, and a group in the middle, “Stressed Sideliners,” whose swings back and forth often determine electoral outcomes.

The four right-of-center groups — Committed Conservatives, Faith & Flag Conservatives, the Populist Right, and the Ambivalent Right — exhibit notable differences in demographics, political engagement, and views on specific issues. What draws them together as a coalition, however, is their preference for individual freedom and voluntary solutions over government paternalism and compulsion.

Pew asked respondents, for example, whether “government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals” or “government should do more to solve problems.” The Committed Conservatives (87%), Faith & Flag Conservatives (88%), Populist Right (77%), and Ambivalent Right (67%) picked the first response. The four left-leaning groups picked the second response by comparably large majorities.

Similarly, the right-leaning groups all favored “a smaller government providing fewer services” while the left-leaning groups preferred “a bigger government providing more services.” And while the conservatives agreed “it’s not the government’s job to protect people from themselves,” the progressives said “sometimes laws to protect people from themselves are necessary.”

Yes, some conservatives deviate from the general principle in specific cases. Some progressives do, too. Humans are messy creatures who create complicated problems that resist easy solutions. But that doesn’t mean we’re all an indistinguishable mass when it comes to political behavior. For some, our strongest impulse is for government, an inherently coercive institution, to butt out of our private affairs and decisions. For others, the strongest impulse is to butt in.

These differences help to explain why the conservative movement tends to evaluate its progress with measurements of freedom. Here in North Carolina, my colleagues and I at the John Locke Foundation look at state-by-state rankings to gauge how far we've come — and how far we still have to go.

One popular metric is the Fraser Institute's annual Economic Freedom of North America study, which integrates information on taxes, regulations, expenditures, and related concerns. Using the most-recent data available, for 2018, North Carolina ranks 10th in economic freedom. On the Tax Foundation's narrower measure of the "tax costs for doing business," North Carolina ranks 3rd best for new firms and 5th for mature ones.

In the latest edition of the Cato Institute's sprawling study Freedom in the 50 States, North Carolina's best rankings are in labor freedom (11th) and educational freedom (6th). Speaking of which, North Carolina ranks 10th in funding for school-choice programs and 8th in the share of elementary and secondary students enrolled in schools other than those run by districts, which are a useful proxy for the extent of freedom and competition in education.

When conservatives see such results, we're heartened but hardly satisfied. For North Carolina to move into the top five in economic freedom, for instance, state lawmakers will have to do more to deregulate our health care system, insurance markets, and occupational licensing. When it comes to personal freedom, North Carolina is egregiously out of step when it comes to gambling (45th in the Cato study) and alcohol (40th), the latter of which suggests we ought to sell our government-owned ABC stores.

Those last two examples illustrate the larger point. I would never deny that addictions to gambling and alcohol can be disastrous. I simply believe such problems are best combatted by families, friends, and religious communities, not by state compulsion. Some conservatives disagree. They see these issues as exceptions to the general rule.

So the debate continues — but *not* about that general rule, you see. Not about the primacy of freedom. It remains the primary dividing line between Left and Right.