

# THE WEEK

## If you want Americans to act like liberals, govern like a conservative

*First, stabilize. Then, reform.*

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Despite efforts by the Biden administration to end the policy, formally known as Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), a federal judge in Texas ruled proper steps have not been taken to shut it down. As of Monday, some migrants who arrive at the southern border will be sent back to Mexico to await processing of their asylum claims, not admitted to the United States with orders to appear in court at a later date.

Pro-immigration and humanitarian activists denounced MPP when it was imposed under former President Donald Trump, and some aid groups have refused to participate in the modified program under President Biden. But if it's successful in lowering record border crossings and preventing spectacles like the Del Rio encampment, the policy could have counterintuitive effects. In a new paper circulated on Twitter by *Slate* writer Will Saletan, social scientists Ryan C. Briggs and Omer Solodoch argue that "allocating more government resources to border control increases desired levels of immigration."

That is: Americans become more open to immigration when border security is already strong, which in turn may mean loosening immigration restrictions becomes politically viable only when it doesn't feel like a step toward disorder.

The relationship between crackdown and openness may seem surprising, but it makes sense when you consider how most people respond to disorder. As Cato Institute scholar Alex Nowrasteh told my colleague Bonnie Kristian, Americans "hate chaos and want to stop it by using the government." A sense of stability and control assuages fears and encourages people to relax.

It's risky to draw big conclusions from a single working paper, but Briggs and Solodoch's finding is consistent with other scholarship in social psychology. In a comparative study of the U.S., U.K., and Canada, researchers found people who believed that they were in charge of their own lives and that their government had a handle on immigration were less hostile toward immigrants. Importantly, the study found these attitudes were not explained by partisanship. The

effect held for both Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. and Conservative and Labour voters in the U.K. (the data for Canada did not include party affiliation).

And this effect isn't limited to immigration. The politics of criminal justice follow a similar pattern. Harsh measures like the 1994 crime bill and the Rockefeller drug laws in New York State were popular responses to successive crime waves. As crime rates dropped and the public felt less threatened — whether because of those policies or not — movements for policing and penal reform gathered strength, including on the right. Although they drew on criticisms of the criminal justice system that had been circulating for decades in leftist and progressive circles, conservative politicians and voters played a major role in bringing these changes to fruition. Just ask former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (R) — or Trump.

On that point, if security is a necessary condition of reform, criminal justice reformers should be very worried. Even if the present epidemic of murders and shootings were not real (and it is) dismissing fears of crime as unfounded or racist simply won't work. Politicians and parties who convince voters they're taking problems seriously may be able to sell less punitive policies. Those who ignore and minimize the issues can't.

You can tell a similar story about economic matters, too. A new paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research found a surge of support for protectionism followed adoption of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The shift, which correlated with support for the GOP, was particularly intense among white men without a college degree and in counties that experienced the largest job losses.

Scholars continue to debate the aggregate benefits of globalization, as well as the role of trade compared with technological change and other factors, in reducing industrial employment. For many of the affected workers, though, it didn't matter. Rapid and unfavorable changes in the economy produced not only material deprivations but also (and perhaps more importantly) a sense that the situation was out of control. Under the circumstances, it's not surprising that blue-collar workers and regions turned to populists who promised to restore order to a chaotic world. Insecurity leads to illiberalism.

Granted, this is a simplified story, and some of these developments can be attributed to the basic "thermostatic" tendency that characterizes American politics. When policy swings too far in one direction, voters tend to pull it back closer to the center of public opinion. But there's a specific paradox here that moderate Democrats like Biden, who sponsored the 1994 crime bill, used to understand: If you want Americans to act like liberals, you need to govern more like conservatives.