

An effective (though incomplete) review of current GOP views on criminal justice reform

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Li Zhou has [this lengthy new Vox piece](#) about the state of GOP politics on criminal justice issues headlined "The Republican Party is still fractured on criminal justice reform." The piece is worth a full read, and here are excerpts:

The rhetoric in Jackson's hearing and in broader GOP messaging have seemed like a departure from the focus on criminal justice reform that the party had as recently as 2018, when the majority of Senate Republicans backed sentencing changes for nonviolent offenders in the First Step Act. The party back then was eager to show it had made progress on an issue that arose from Congress's efforts to crack down on crime decades ago. (Many of these efforts notably excluded violent offenders or sex offenders that Jackson was spuriously accused of going easy on.)

There are some Republicans who are reluctant to evangelize criminal justice reforms now, advocates say, since increases in crime have become a GOP talking point.... "I think your average conservative, or average Republican, may have supported the First Step Act, but I have the impression that the average conservative has backed off from where they were," says Clark Neily, a senior vice president of legal studies at the Cato Institute.

Experts emphasize, however, that the most aggressive moments in the hearing are not indicative of how open a segment of Republicans still is to important but limited criminal justice reforms. Just last week, 10 Republicans signed on to cosponsor the Equal Act, legislation that would reduce the sentencing disparities between crack cocaine and powder cocaine. The legislation — which would make penalties the same for the two substances — has yet to be considered on the floor but could pass with the GOP support it has....

For years, the party has been fractured on the subject with senators like Tom Cotton (R-AR) opposed to virtually any reforms, while others like Sens. Rand Paul (R-KY), Mike Lee (R-UT) and Tim Scott (R-SC) have led efforts for sentencing reforms for nonviolent drug offenses and police reforms....

At the state and local level, many Republican officials have also pushed back on progressive prosecutors, policies like changes to cash bail, and reduced prosecutions for low-level offenses.

“I think they’re often scared that if ... crime continues to increase, no one wants the blame placed on them,” says Jillian Snider, the policy director for the criminal justice and civil liberties team at R Street Institute.

There’s also the Trump factor. During his presidency, Trump’s support of the First Step Act helped to get Republicans who were on the fence on board. Without his advocacy on the issue now, some lawmakers are likely less open to this idea.

Because there are so many moving part to this story, even a strong press piece cannot cover the ground completely. For example, the piece does not discuss the conventional wisdom that the slogan "abolish the police" proved extremely unpopular with voters in the 2020 election cycle, nor does it engage much with all sorts of interesting and diverse political reform dynamics at the state level (especially on topics like marijuana reform and record clearing). Still, this piece reflects a notable moment in the ever-changing ebb and flow over crime policy and crime politics.