# A CONSERVATIVE GOVERNING VISION

YUVAL LEVIN

As Americans attempt to adjust to the challenges of twenty-first-century life, our government has too often been getting in our way rather than helping us along. Many families now face stagnating wages, excessive tax burdens, rising health and higher education costs, barriers to mobility and work, disincentives to marriage and childbearing, and an economy increasingly held back by over-regulation, cronyism, institutional sclerosis, and mounting public debt. All of these burdens have left Americans uncharacteristically pessimistic about the country's prospects. And in each case an overreaching, hyperactive, unwieldy, and immensely expensive federal government lies near the root of the problem.

This has often led conservatives to appeal to the public by calling first and foremost for restraining that government—restricting its reach, reducing its scope, cutting its cost. These are surely essential goals, but a failure to put them in the context of a larger vision of the proper role of government risks leaving the public with the impression that what conservatives want is less of the same: the liberal welfare state at a lower cost. This is in fact how many on the Left would like Americans to understand our public debates.[1]

But the size and cost of the liberal welfare state are a function of its basic character, and it is that character that is really at issue in most policy debates between liberals and conservatives. The fundamentally prescriptive, technocratic approach to American society inherent in the logic of the Left's policy thinking is a poor fit for American life at any scale. The liberal welfare state ultimately cannot be had at an affordable price. It is not the architecture of one or another particular program that makes it unsustainable. It is unsustainable because the system as a whole must feed off of the innovative, decentralized vitality of American life, yet it undermines both the moral and the economic foundations of that vitality.

This is in part because the Left tends not to see the decentralized, boisterous character of American society—with its uneasy but constructive tension between moral traditionalism and economic dynamism—as a great good to be protected and nurtured but rather as at best an unruly source of material wealth and at worst a barrier to the achievement of

important social objectives. The means of the liberal welfare state are centralizing and consolidating mechanisms intended to bring order to this chaos. And liberals rarely offer a defense of that managerial outlook. They take both its means and its ends for granted and defend the welfare state as though it were identical to the broad social objectives it purports to advance.

They therefore treat attempts to alter or eliminate liberal programs as attempts to abandon the most general objectives of those programs—to provide a safety net for the poor, say, or a foundation of economic security for the elderly and the vulnerable. Even alternatives that would achieve those goals in less heavy-handed ways and at a lower cost are assumed to be less committed to the goals, and so are taken to be steps in the wrong direction. It hardly seems to matter how well the Left's favorite programs actually work: What matters is that they exist, and must not be undone.

Criticisms aimed purely at the size or cost of those programs only contribute to this baleful dynamic. Conservatives must instead help the public see that the agenda they offer is rooted not just in fiscal concerns but in a political, moral, and social vision much better aligned with the realities of American life and the character of Americans' aspirations.

At the core of this difference of visions are quite different ideas of just how human beings prosper and thrive and therefore of the proper relationship between American society and its government.

To begin with, the Left's social vision tends to consist of individuals and the state, so that all common action is state action, and its purpose is to liberate individuals from material want and moral sway.[2] The premise of conservatism has always been, on the contrary, that what matters most about society happens in the space between the individual and the state—the space occupied by families, communities, civic and religious institutions, and the private economy—and that creating, sustaining, and protecting that space and helping all Americans take part in what happens there are among the foremost purposes of government.

Progressives in America have always viewed those mediating institutions that stand between the individual and the government with suspicion, seeing them as instruments of division, prejudice, and selfishness or as power centers lacking in democratic legitimacy. They have sought to empower the government to rationalize the life of our society by clearing away those vestiges of backwardness and putting in their place public programs and policies motivated by a single, cohesive understanding of the public interest. This clearing away has in some cases consisted of crowding out the mediating institutions by taking over some of their key functions through direct government action. In other cases, it has involved turning elements of civil society and the private economy into arms of government policy—by requiring compliance with policy goals that are foreign to many civil-society institutions or consolidating key sectors of the economy and offering protection to large corporations willing to act as public utilities or advance policymakers' priorities.

In each case, the idea is to level the complex social topography of the space between the individual and the

government, breaking up tightly knit clusters of citizens into individuals but then uniting all of those individuals under the national banner—allowing them to be free of the oppressive authority of family or community norms while building solidarity through the common experience of living as equal citizens of a great nation.

Dependence on people you know is oppressive, this vision implies, especially because it always comes with moral and social strings. But dependence on larger and more generic and distant systems of benefits and rules is liberating, because it frees people from the undue moral influence of traditional social institutions even as it frees them from material want. A healthy dose of moral individualism combined with a healthy dose of economic collectivism make for a powerful mix of freedom and equality. And this mix is to be achieved through public programs and institutions that address material problems by applying technical knowledge—that organize and rationalize the economy in accordance with social-scientific expertise.

Conservatives have always resisted such gross rationalization of society, however, and insisted that local knowledge channeled by evolved social institutions—from families and civic and fraternal groups to traditional religious establishments, charitable enterprises, private companies, and complex markets—will make for better material outcomes and a better common life. The life of a society consists of more than moving resources around, and what happens in that vital space between the individual and the government is at least as much a matter of character formation as of material provision and wealth creation.

Moral individualism mixed with economic collectivism feels like freedom only because it liberates people from responsibility in both arenas. But real freedom is possible only with real responsibility. And real responsibility is possible only when you depend upon, and are depended upon by, people you know. It is, in other words, possible only in precisely that space between the individual and the state that the Left has long sought to collapse.

What happens in that space generally happens face to face—between parents and children, neighbors and friends, buyers and sellers. It therefore answers to immediately felt needs, and is tailored to the characters, sentiments, priorities, and preferences of the people involved. That kind of bottom-up common life, rather than massive, distant systems of material provision, is what makes society tick and what holds it together. While it can certainly be reinforced by public policy, it could never be replaced with centralized administration, however capable or rational it might be.

And what is more, centralized administration really cannot be all that capable or rational. Just as conservatives tend to differ with liberals about the sorts of circumstances in which people thrive, we also differ about the sort of knowledge that can help address social problems. The Left tends to champion public programs that consolidate the application of technical expertise: that try to take on social problems by managing large portions of society as if they were systems in need of better organization and direction. Again, it views government as organizing the interactions of individuals.

The Right tends, instead, to champion public policies that draw upon decentralized, dispersed social knowledge by empowering and incentivizing people nearest to the problems to find and apply solutions that work for them. This still involves a crucial and active role for government, but it is a much less intrusive and managerial role. It involves enabling and sustaining markets and other arenas of common action, ensuring competition, aiding the development of physical infrastructure and human capital, protecting consumers and citizens, and allowing the poor and vulnerable to participate along with everyone else. It is about creating the circumstances in which society can thrive and improve, not prescribing everyone's place and function. And it proceeds not through the concentration of power but through its dispersal.

In practice, the conservative approach to public policy therefore points toward putting in place programs that enable a kind of bottom-up, incremental, continuous learning process, rather than imposing wholesale solutions from above. Generally speaking, this is an approach to problem-solving that involves three steps: experimentation (allowing service providers to try different ways of solving a problem), evaluation (enabling recipients or consumers of those services to decide which approaches work for them and which do not), and evolution (keeping those that work and dumping those that fail).

Markets are ideally suited to following these steps. They offer a huge incentive to try new ways of doing things, the people directly affected decide which ways they like best, and those ways that are rejected are left behind. Government programs on the model of the liberal welfare state, however, generally do not allow for any of these elements. Administrative centralization and regulation proscribe experimentation, beneficiaries of services are not the ones who decide what is working and failing, and interests grow around existing programs making it very hard to eliminate failures.

That is why conservatives often reach for the model of markets in public policy—not necessarily always for actual markets, but for a process that follows these three steps to the extent possible in various policy arenas and so achieves incremental improvements by learning from experience. Conservatives tend to think society is much too complicated to be amenable to consolidated technical solutions that assume we already have all the answers and just seek to impose them. We therefore believe that long-evolved, decentralized social institutions are more likely to be able to help and that public policy should reinforce such institutions, should help all citizens take part in them, and should sustain the space in which they can function.

This involves not a return to some fabled past but a modernization of our antiquated, lumbering, bureaucratic, mid-twentieth century governing institutions that enables a leaner and more responsive twenty-first-century government to help a complex and diverse twenty-first-century society solve its problems. By recovering the animating principles of American government, we can overcome the flabby lethargy of the progressive welfare state.

Many of the social and economic problems for which we seek public-policy

solutions require us to balance competing needs in very complex circumstances. In health care, for instance, we must find a way to simultaneously pursue broad access to coverage, high-quality care, and affordable cost. In primary and secondary education, we need quality instruction that meets the needs of enormously diverse groups of students in a vast array of circumstances. In welfare policy, we need to help low-income people meet their basic needs and rise out of poverty without creating perverse incentives for poor choices.

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In each of these cases, and many others like them, the Left's ideal approach is to put enormous faith in the knowledge of experts in the center and empower them to address the problem—to enable a single public payer to command the appropriate arrangement of resources to yield the desired outcome. The Right's ideal approach, meanwhile, is to put some modest faith in the knowledge of the people on the ground and empower them to try ways of addressing the problem incrementally. Thus conservative policy ideas often seek to enable countless individual consumers to follow their individual preferences, allowing the resources they bring to the table (with the help of public subsidies for those who lack market power) to create incentives for producers and providers to try different ways of meeting their needs and so of addressing the underlying problem.

The first approach takes power out of the space between the individual and the state and has the state use it on behalf of individuals. The second puts power into that space and has the state build platforms and arenas to help society address its problems through localized trial and error.

What has come lately to be called the conservative reform agenda, some elements of which may be found in the chapters that follow, consists in many instances of efforts to transform the first sort of public policy or program into the second, and so to move from the model of consolidated technocracy toward the three-part process of dispersed, incremental learning in one policy arena after another. And it consists in every instance of efforts to strengthen and reinforce the space between the individual and the state and to enable people to thrive and flourish in that space. That is what conservatives generally take the proper role of government to be.

It is also what America's government was originally designed to do. Our constitutional system builds a frame around the space between the individual and the state—empowering the government to sustain that space while restraining the government from invading or collapsing that space. That is why the system often feels liberating to conservatives (who tend to think liberty is what happens in that protected space) and constricting to liberals (who tend to think the system binds government's

hands far too much and keeps it from acting in ways essential to enabling social progress).

The liberal welfare state envisions a role for government that goes far beyond these bounds, and that in practice has involved both invading and collapsing that space to various degrees. And while the conservative response has focused on pulling back that overly expansive state, the vision motivating conservatives should compel us also to reinvigorate the original American political vision: a government that treats us fairly and seeks to sustain the circumstances in which we might thrive—rather than one that insists on strictly defining and managing the outcomes of our national life. This means that conservatives must advance a concrete public-policy vision and agenda, and not just a set of restraints on the Left's vision and agenda. Friends of the idea of free and limited government have long found it difficult to do this in America. "A good government implies two things," James Madison wrote in Federalist 62. "First, fidelity to the object of government, which is the happiness of the people; secondly, a knowledge of the means by which that object can be best attained. Some governments are deficient in both these qualities; most governments are deficient in the first. I scruple not to assert, that in American governments too little attention has been paid to the last."[3]

Conservatives today need to pay more attention to the means by which our vision of government should be advanced—more attention, that is, to the details of public policy. It is not hard to understand why some conservatives have been reluctant to do that: The federal government has grown so large and complicated that any attempts to transform it into a far more bounded, decentralized, nimble set of institutions must begin from an understanding of its particulars, and this feels to some conservatives like a concession to technocracy.

But conservatives today must develop some technical policy expertise precisely to combat the technocratic impulse and to advance an anti-technocratic, genuinely constitutionalist vision of American government. As Friedrich Hayek put it, "Liberty in practice depends on very prosaic matters, and those anxious to preserve it must prove their devotion by their attention to the mundane concerns of public life and by the efforts they are prepared to give to the understanding of issues that the idealist is often inclined to treat as common, if not sordid."[4]

The chapters that follow enter into just such prosaic matters and mundane concerns of public life. They are about concrete policy questions—about how we can help the poor to rise, lift burdens off the shoulders of working families, end cronyism and special privileges for those well connected at the top, and prepare America to flourish again. But they are also about advancing a vision of American life in which government does not use society as an instrument to advance progressive aims but rather sustains and strengthens the space in which society can thrive and enables all Americans to take part in what happens in that space.

Such a government would no doubt be much smaller, more restrained, and less expensive than the one we have today. It would be fiscally sustainable, averting the catastrophe we face if our entitlement programs are not reformed

and reinforcing the private economy rather than draining it of resources. That is certainly part of what should appeal to us about it. But more important still, it would be far better suited to our society, our Constitution, our needs, and our nature—far better suited to serving and sustaining our republic in the twenty-first century.

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# SOURCES

## The Problem: The anxieties and worries of Middle America PETER WEHNER

1. Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor Poll XVI, conducted April 5–9, 2013.
2. James Carville and Stan Greenberg, *It's the Middle Class, Stupid* (New York: Plume, 2012), 34.
3. "Being In the Middle Class Means Worrying About Falling Behind," *National Journal*, April 25, 2013.
4. Pew Research Center, "The Middle Class: Key Data Points from Pew Research," January 27, 2014.
5. Eduardo Porter, "America's Sinking Middle Class." *New York Times,* September 18, 2013, B1.
6. Carville and Greenberg, 49.
7. Jim Tankersley, "Economic mobility hasn't changed in a half-century in America, economists declare." *Washington Post,* January 22, 2014, A1.
8. It is worth noting the party and ideological self-identification of these respondents: Thirty-four percent identified themselves as Democrat, 25 percent Republican, and 35 percent independent, but 39 percent said they were conservative, 22 percent liberal, and 35 percent moderate.

## The Solution: A conservative governing vision to restore America's promise YUVAL LEVIN

1. So, for instance, Paul Krugman can write: "Start with the proposition that there is a legitimate left-right divide in U.S. politics, built around a real issue: how extensive should we make our social safety net, and (hence) how much do we need to raise in taxes? This is ultimately a values issue, with no right answer." Like many on the Left, he takes the essential question of our politics to be exactly how much of the Left's agenda should be adopted. ("The Closing of the Conservative Mind," *New York Times*, May 25, 2013, http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/25/the-closing-of-the-conservative-mind/.)
2. As former representative Barney Frank put it at the Democratic National Convention in 2012, "There are things that a civilized society needs that we can only do when we do them together, and when we do them together that's called government." Similarly, in his second inaugural address, in 2013, President Obama sought to depict individual action as the only alternative to government action, saying: "No single person can train all the math and science teachers we'll need to equip our children for the future, or build the roads and networks and research labs that will bring new jobs and businesses to our shores. Now, more than ever, we must do these things together, as one nation and one people."
3. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers,* Clinton Rossiter, ed. (New York: Signet Classics, 2003), 378.
4. Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* in Collected Works of F.A Hayek Edition, Vol. 17 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 53.

## Health-care reform to lower costs and improve access and quality JAMES C. CAPRETTA

1. See Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar and Dennis Junius, "Poll: Obama Health Law Fails to Gain Support," *Associated Press,* March 28, 2014, and David Nather, "The Obamacare Enthusiasm Gap," *Politico*, March 31, 2014.
2. "The Budget and Economic Outlook: 2014 to 2024," Congressional Budget Office, February 2014, 117–27.
3. Congressional Budget Office, "Insurance Coverage Provisions of the Affordable Care Act—CBO's February 2014 Baseline," February 2014.

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