

# An Aspirational Path for American Conservatism

Steve Goldsmith and Ryan Streeter

---

SEPTEMBER 2023



HARVARD Kennedy School

**ASH CENTER**  
for Democratic Governance  
and Innovation

# An Aspirational Path for American Conservatism

Steve Goldsmith and Ryan Streeter

---

SEPTEMBER 2023

## About the Authors

Stephen Goldsmith is the Derek Bok Professor of the Practice of Urban Policy and the Director of the Innovations in American Government Program at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He currently directs [Data-Smart City Solutions](#), a project to highlight local government efforts to use new technologies that connect breakthroughs in the use of big data analytics with community input to reshape the relationship between government and citizen. He previously served as Deputy Mayor of New York and Mayor of Indianapolis, where he earned a reputation as one of the country's leaders in public-private partnerships, competition, and privatization. Stephen was also the chief domestic policy advisor to the George W. Bush campaign in 2000, the Chair of the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the elected prosecutor for Marion County, Indiana from 1977 to 1989. He has written *The Power of Social Innovation: Governing by Network: the New Shape of the Public Sector*; *Putting Faith in Neighborhoods: Making Cities Work through Grassroots Citizenship*; *The Twenty-First Century City: Resurrecting Urban America*, *The Responsive City: Engaging Communities Through Data-Smart Governance*; *A New City O/S: The Power of Open, Collaborative, and Distributed Governance* and most recently *Growing Fairly, How to Build Opportunity and Equity in Workforce Development*.

Ryan Streeter is the executive director of research and publications for the Civitas Institute at the University of Texas at Austin, a nonpartisan center that supports independent scholarship and analysis to advance the principles of a free society, including individual liberty, constitutionalism, and private enterprise. He was previously the director of domestic policy studies and the State Farm James Q. Wilson Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). Before joining AEI, he was executive director of the Center for Politics and Governance at the University of Texas at Austin. Streeter has previously served as a special assistant for domestic policy to President George W. Bush at the White House, deputy chief of staff for policy for Indiana Governor Mike Pence, and policy adviser to Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith. He has also served as a senior fellow at the Legatum Institute in London and as a research fellow at the US-based Hudson Institute. He is the author of *Transforming Charity*, coauthor of *The Soul of Civil Society*, and a contributor to the Stephen Goldsmith book, *Putting Faith in Neighborhoods*.

Dr. Streeter's articles have been widely published in outlets including the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Review*, the *Guardian*, the *Dispatch*, and many others. His numerous television and radio appearances include CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, CNBC, and BBC News. Streeter has a PhD in political philosophy from Emory University and resides in Washington, DC.

## About the Ash Center

The Mission of the Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation is to develop ideas and foster practices for equal and inclusive, multi-racial and multi-ethnic democracy and self-government.

This paper is one in a series published by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors) and do not necessarily reflect those of the John F. Kennedy School of Government or of Harvard University.

This paper is copyrighted by the author(s). It cannot be reproduced or reused without permission. Pursuant to the Ash Center's Open Access Policy, this paper is available to the public at [ash.harvard.edu](https://ash.harvard.edu) free of charge.

---

### A PUBLICATION OF THE

#### **Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation**

Harvard Kennedy School  
79 John F. Kennedy Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138

617-495-0557

[ash.harvard.edu](https://ash.harvard.edu)

# Contents

Foreword.....	1
Introduction.....	2
No Longer the Party of Ideas.....	2
Three False Choices .....	3
A Different Choice: Aspirational Conservatism.....	5
Aspirational Conservatism: A Pre-History .....	5
Key Features of Aspirational Conservatism.....	7
Aspirational Conservatism: A Domestic Policy Agenda .....	7

## Foreword

Donald Trump's 2016 insurgent campaign transformed the American Republican Party. Suddenly, a party that stood largely for free enterprise, individual liberty, small government, probity, and America's strength in the world shifted on all of these dimensions. Many conventionally conservative leaders became never-Trumpers and never-Trumpers were soon relegated to the outskirts of the Party. The demarcation between Republicanism and traditional conservatism grew into a chasm.

In this important and original paper, Steve Goldsmith and Ryan Streeter offer a new vision of what conservatism requires today. They develop a proposal for "aspirational conservatism" that rejects the waves of populism, nationalism, and culture war that now dominate so much of Republican politics. Though Goldsmith and Streeter owe much to the compassionate conservatism of George W. Bush, their aspirational proposal offers a further-reaching and more ambitious vision that speaks to our times.

As the class basis of the Democratic Party has shifted to the college educated, aspirational conservatism starts with the hopes and well-being of what Marxists called the petite bourgeoisie—in the authors' words, the "'little-guy,' self-starters, and aspirational workers . . . 30 percent of workforce who own or work for small enterprises." It replaces populist cynicism about government and institutions with what Goldsmith and Streeter believe is a pragmatic and hopeful desire to reconstruct them for the sake of the little guy.

Goldsmith and Streeter make the case that aspirational conservatism is not just good policy but also good politics. It builds upon the populist rejection of government by elites, for elites without giving-into its destructive temptations. They also argue it addresses the desires of many Americans for increasing employment opportunity and affordability of housing, education, and other basic needs.

Perhaps even more than improving politics or policy, aspirational conservatism has the potential to enhance the quality of our democracy. A good democracy is a contest of values and ideas about how to organize our society for the sake of everyone in it. Offered as an alternative to a politics of populism and nationalism that risks descending into existential group conflict, aspirational conservatism is an especially important contribution to the democratic contest of ideas.

—Archon Fung,  
Winthrop Laffin McCormack Professor of Citizenship and Self-Government  
Director, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation

## Introduction

The Republican Party is philosophically adrift, and it has been for a while. This is not only bad for the Party's political future but bad for the country. The United States' socioeconomic progress over the past 250 years, however uneven, can be attributed to the interplay of competing ideas on how to achieve progress. Central to the competition is how we understand individual rights and responsibilities, fairness and justice, and the definition of progress itself. When our political parties lose their ability to articulate governing principles and resort instead to defining themselves as the opposite of their enemies, the competition of ideas stagnates—and so does the condition of the country.

## No Longer the Party of Ideas

It was not long ago when Republicans described themselves as the “[party of ideas](#),” and some high-profile liberals lamented that modern-day Democrats lack a similar canon of texts and a coherent set of guiding principles. Over the second half of the 20th century, conservative intellectuals, writers, activists, and politicians rooted many of their policy ideas in principles that were fundamentally American: the individual rights enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, the federalism of the U.S. Constitution, and the freedom to pursue dreams and build a life that both documents presupposed.

In contrast to British and European conservatism, American conservatism was commonly understood to focus primarily on conserving the founding principles of the United States. A complementary understanding of conservatism emphasized the importance of protecting individual liberty at the most local level, including within the fundamental unit of democracy: the family. This viewpoint also stressed the necessity of maintaining optimal health for the institutions responsible for cultivating the habits and virtues of democracy—the family, the neighborhood, the school.

If progressivism has long been idealistic (too much so in our view) about government's ability to improve society, conservatism's underlying rationale has always had an aspirational element—not with regard to society as a whole but rather to individuals' ability to make a life for themselves.

People can argue (and have for years) that Republicans have strayed from true conservatism on this or that policy issue, but the more important point is that Republican policymakers typically felt compelled to justify policy decisions by appealing to these fundamental principles of conservatism. Whether it was tax reform and military build-up in the 1980s, school choice and welfare reform in the 1990s, or compassionate conservatism and the war on terror in the early 2000s, Republican leaders consistently tied their justifications to a common understanding of what conservatism requires. This meant preserving our liberty at home through strength abroad, attaining upward mobility through individual effort and the removal of government barriers, entrusting individuals with their hard-earned money, and so on. There was a coherence to the conservative worldview, even if the conservative movement itself was always characterized by feuding factions, each claiming the mantle of true conservatism. And despite the feuding, most significant Republican policy achievements during this era were arguably expressions of a conservative worldview.

Beginning at some point after the Tea Party movement of 2010 and culminating during the presidency of Donald Trump, the coherence gave way to incoherence. Republicans became more rhetorically antagonistic to Washington, D.C. than in the past while ironically arguing that fixing the country could only be accomplished by wielding federal power in Washington. They spoke of shutting down federal agencies and undoing the Affordable Care Act while showing little interest in more complex solutions to enduring socioeconomic problems. During the Trump years, the term “federalism” was scarcely uttered, or perhaps even understood, by newly elected GOP members of Congress. Republicans began

[embracing](#) full-blown federal power as the solution to the nation’s social and [economic](#) problems, ranging from [protectionist](#) trade policy to the regulation of [social media companies](#). During the same period, America went through a social media revolution that gave rise to the performative politics that still plague the nation, rewarding antagonists for their antagonism alone rather than for the unglamorous work involved in achieving policy goals.

Alongside these political developments, new projects have sprung up aiming to provide a philosophical basis for this “[new right](#)” in America. While no crisp lines exist between them, three basic camps—or manners of thinking—have emerged as a result. Each of them is a false choice for the GOP.

## Three False Choices

The first false choice for the Republican Party is the culture-war populism that refined itself during the Trump years and evolved into an oppositional platform for hot-button issues such as gender, race, and leftist ideologies more broadly. This form of populism is cultural more than economic, uniting those with and without a college education who feel alienated from the elite institutional drivers of American culture: big media, universities, corporate boardrooms, and union-controlled public education.

Anti-elitist populism has long been a productive sentiment in America’s public life. And there is a lot of good in this sentiment, which extends back more than two centuries before more recent iterations, such as the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements. Put simply, when populist sentiment results in political pressure to improve working conditions and wages for ignored or alienated people, or when it challenges the groupthink of powerful elites, those are often good outcomes.

But when populist beliefs and sentiments harden into a doctrinal populism, they become corrosive, especially when antagonism to elites becomes its leitmotif. When the [Tea Party began](#), it embodied much of the former type of populist sentiment, but by the Trump era, it had reified into a perpetual state of hostility for its own sake. Over the past decade, as Republican voters grew jaded about big banks and corporations following the financial crisis, watched the country move leftward on same-sex marriage and gender politics, and perceived a glaring condescension from cultural influencers in the media, academia, and entertainment, they found themselves attracted to the blunt oppositional force embodied by Trump more than anyone.

Cultural conservatives have valid concerns. Not only has the country become more secular but elite [attitudes](#) are often openly anti-religious and condescending toward traditional mores. But rather than prompting leaders to advocate for reform within elite institutions, which has led to [successful renewal](#) in the past, culture-war populism has opted for a different approach. Now, condemning institutions such as universities and the media from the outside has become its modus operandi.

The one exception to this pattern is politics. Having lost influence in other “commanding heights” of American society, today’s culture-war populists, like economic populists of the past, endorse a strong federal power to serve their objectives. Historically, [populists](#) have been both skeptical of government authority and supportive of heavy-handed federal government to enforce their interests when their team is in power. The angsty version of populism in today’s GOP combines these two dangerous elements: antagonism for its own sake and the goal of using federal power to “own the libs” and enforce their own cultural values. This animus explains why, in 2021, six months into the new Biden administration, the chairman of the Republican Study Committee—historically the policy caucus for House Republican conservatives—[urged](#) its members “to lean into the culture wars” rather than focus on policy solutions to big economic and social issues.

Heartland conservatives have legitimate concerns about liberal elites imposing their social views on them. However, moving from resisting government pressure to supporting book bans and punishing



big tech companies for perceived discrimination against conservatives is more than a mild policy shift. It is a change in political philosophy. Moreover, [polls](#) and surveys consistently show it is [out of step](#) with the average voter's concerns. The idea that valid concerns could justify such illegitimate policy solutions was unthinkable until recently. But when culture-war populists have given up on institutions altogether, they see political power as their sole means of getting their way.

The second false choice facing the GOP is [nationalism](#). Today's Republican nationalists share the culture-war populists' concerns about a range of moral and cultural issues, but they also have more formally embraced policy objectives that contradict conventional Republican principles. They have refined the nativism of Trump's thoughts on immigration, the protectionism of his trade views, and the isolationism of his foreign policy instincts into viable policy ideas.

National conservatives are pessimistic about American institutions, and, in some circles, it has even grown fashionable to assert that small "L" liberalism has been corrupt from the [very beginning](#). Their belief that rampant secularism and individualism have been America's undoing predisposes many of them to embrace the idea that traditional, or even explicitly biblical, values should be enforced through federal agencies and legislation. They believe that since the left has used state power to impose its values on the country, force can only be met with force in the same way.

Like the culture-war populists, nationalists' views on policies such as immigration and trade are rooted as much, if not more, in culture than economics. They typically believe that immigration has both reduced employment for American-born workers and contributed to multiculturalism's denigration of traditional American values. Even amidst declining birth rates and a shortage of productive workers, they show little interest in immigration as a policy solution. They also criticize America's trade and foreign policy as expressions of elite interest in putting "[Davos crowd](#)" values above the well-being of American workers. When they do articulate economic policies, they generally support renewed industrial policy, wage subsidies for the working class, trade restrictions, and expanded financial support for families with children. In all of this, they agree with culture-war populists that their goals can only be achieved using strong federal power.

Individually, most of their policies merit debate, but taken together, they may add to stagnating trends in America's socioeconomic condition rather than contributing to the promised improvement in quality of life for working families. Nobel laureate Edmund Phelps [has documented](#) how the corporatist policies endorsed by the nationalists have led to more stagnation and less upward mobility for working-class people in the developed world. There is little evidence to suggest that the situation would be different in the U.S. if the nationalists' policy wishes all came true.

Finally, the third false choice facing the GOP is a return to what we call "conservatism light." After the Republican Party's poor showing in the 2022 midterm elections, some members have advocated for downplaying culture-war issues and refocusing on important policy issues—a positive development, as far as it goes. But given the Party's lack of direction on policy issues since the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (recall that the GOP even [dispensed](#) with a platform in the 2020 presidential election), there is insufficient agreement on major policy matters. As a result, Republicans can offer little more than a conventional vision of smaller government, tax cuts, deregulation, and cutting discretionary government spending.

Conservatism light's default operating system is anti-government rather than reform-minded. It believes strangling government through [cost-cutting](#) is the only way to get a growing public sector under control. This approach lacks a positive vision for optimal governance, such as replacing burdensome regulations with growth-oriented rules or modernizing the IRS into a customer-centric agency instead of just cutting budgets.

Because conservatism light is a kind of lowest-common-denominator conservatism, it falls short when it comes to dealing with today’s big issues, such as [geographic inequality](#), the high cost of housing and health care, entrenched poverty, working-class job prospects, and the impact of low immigration and falling birth rates on future economic growth—to mention just a few. As such, it offers little inspiration to individuals and families aspiring to overcome obstacles through their good efforts as they pursue the American Dream.

## A Different Choice: Aspirational Conservatism

The GOP faces these “false choices” precisely because their core weaknesses make them self-defeating. Culture-war populism requires catastrophizing and apocalyptic thinking about the left to justify its proposals, but in the end, too few Americans share its leaders’ acute anxiety. National conservatives ignore the obvious question about what happens when their political opponents gain control over the enhanced regulatory power they seek, and they are vague about the quantifiable benefits of their economic policies for the average working-class person. And the conservative-light Republicans’ ideas are too limited to address the scope of today’s challenges and too far out of step with most Americans’ biggest concerns. Tax cuts, unfocused deregulation, and reducing spending without modernizing and reforming government will not fix the problems they claim, nor will they likely win elections.

Aspirational conservatism, on the other hand, is populist in spirit while rejecting the view that American institutions no longer offer upward mobility for ordinary individuals. It is pro-opportunity for grassroots doers and makers, such as shop owners, small-scale entrepreneurs, and new business owners with aspirations to grow. It is pro-worker in its focus on boosting wages by modernizing training, increasing access to the fastest-growing sectors for skilled work, and removing job barriers that have accrued over time. Additionally, it strikes a healthy balance by upholding the character and values inherent in American institutions and celebrating the diverse viewpoints and lifestyles that share those core values.

Aspirational conservatism holds that agency still matters in America and that most working-class and lower-income people want to live in a country that respects and rewards their efforts. It aligns with a majority of Americans’ views on a range of important household issues, prioritizing the building blocks of upward mobility, such as education, job preparedness, housing and health care affordability, and widespread entrepreneurial activity. Aspirational conservatives still promote cultural values that are important to them—from gender identity to abortion, for example—but they tend to avoid using state power to promote unpopular, extreme policies related to those views.

This strain of conservatism has an established history within the Republican Party. It has not gone by a single name or been “owned” by a consistent congressional caucus, but its adherents have consistently argued for the central role of aspiration, opportunity, and personal responsibility in upward mobility. Its followers display a strong preference for locally devolved problem solving, a safety net that incentivizes skill development and employment, and a commitment to removing barriers that disadvantage those with little financial and social capital.

## Aspirational Conservatism: A Pre-History

In their 1977 book *To Empower People*, Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus renewed policymakers’ interest in the centrality of “mediating structures”—family, local voluntary organization, congregation, neighborhood—to public life. In an era of big corporations and big government, they argued, democratic well-being is best achieved when these engines of associational life exist, allowing people to shape

and fulfill their public obligations. At the same time, Ronald Reagan, in his many radio addresses before his presidency, often spoke admiringly of small-town entrepreneurs and underscored the importance of certain community preconditions for their success.

During the 1980s, conservative thought leaders approached their critiques of Great Society welfare programs and failing public education bureaucracies from two angles. First, they chronicled the programs' failure to achieve outcomes in line with typical American values, such as workforce preparedness and participation in American democratic and civil society. Second, they demonstrated that these failures disproportionately affected people with little financial and social capital.

By the time the 1990s arrived, the reform ideas that germinated in the 1980s had taken root. Milwaukee enacted the first school voucher law in 1991, Minnesota established the first charter school law in 1992, public housing transitioned toward a [community-based](#) model in 1992, community policing practices expanded in 1994, and work-oriented welfare reform occurred in 1996. This was not a centrally coordinated set of policy reforms, but they were all cut from the same policy fabric. Each had its political champions—for example, Congressman and eventual HUD Secretary Jack Kemp supported public housing reform and Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson advocated for welfare reform—but they were united by a shared understanding among think tanks, civil society, philanthropy, and various national associations that federal and state policy could promote opportunity at the community level by equipping people and neighborhoods to improve their condition.

This era of pragmatic urban reforms also brought a set of Republican mayors to big cities. This trend increased optimism and enhanced quality of life in urban centers throughout the country, transcending partisan divides. During this time, one of the authors of this paper, Steve Goldsmith, played a role as mayor and national policy advocate. In the mid-1990s, half of the 20 largest cities in America had Republican mayors, something that today seems unthinkable.

The 1990s also saw a surge of interest in civil society and community solutions. New research, led primarily by political scientist Robert Putnam, increased awareness about the role that social capital, volunteerism, and community networks play in improving individuals' social and economic outcomes. Conservative lawmakers in particular tried to operationalize these findings in public policy. Senator Dan Coats of Indiana, for instance, launched the [Project for American Renewal](#) to expand social policies that fight poverty and create opportunity by empowering grassroots organizations, welcoming faith-based groups into public programs, and launching programs to boost incomes and personal savings.

George W. Bush's "[compassionate conservatism](#)" built upon these principles and policy ideas. Although his efforts were overshadowed by 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror, his philosophy produced lasting achievements: it normalized the rules and regulations around faith-based organizations' involvement in public programs (evidenced by how uncontroversial the issue is today compared to then); created programmatic innovations, such as voucher-based substance abuse treatment; and incentivized a host of new community partnerships across the country.

During Barack Obama's presidency, many conservatives grew concerned that the GOP was neglecting the everyday concerns of working families to its detriment. Reform conservatism (its adherents were known as "Reformacons") arose as a set of ideas aimed at making child-rearing more affordable, increasing rewards for lower-skilled work, and spreading awareness about the shortcomings of traditional Republican solutions to economic growth.

These various strands of conservative thinking share a focus on prioritizing upward mobility for ordinary people, especially those with lower levels of social and financial capital. This stands in contrast to other common objectives of Republican policymakers over the years, including economic growth for its own sake or policies that are generally regarded as favoring large corporations.

## Key Features of Aspirational Conservatism

Aspirational conservatism builds upon these schools of thought with a belief that the pursuit of happiness should be available to everyone. This core unalienable right, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, is central to our understanding of what has come to be called the American Dream. Anyone who works hard should be able to fulfill their potential and build a life for themselves and their family. A large and growing body of research has found that fulfilling our potential and making progress toward goals is a greater source of happiness than achieving the goals themselves or the financial rewards that might follow. We are built to pursue happiness, and our policies should make that their top priority.

Compassionate conservatism concentrated on rallying the “[armies of compassion](#)” on behalf of low-income, socially marginalized people, while reform conservatism primarily targeted the neglected working class. In contrast, aspirational conservatism focuses on non-elite, everyday people without pigeonholing them into a specific class. For instance, a Main Street business owner with three employees might earn more than someone who is technically “low-income” yet labors day in and out against the headwinds of an economy that impedes upward mobility. In addition, too often policies aimed at those with lower incomes address more immediate needs without considering which policies matter most for longer-term mobility prospects.

Aspirational conservatives therefore disagree with nationalists, who over-emphasize stability and security, and conservative-light Republicans, who hold simplistic beliefs about economic growth. Instead, they recognize that people need to face a variety of challenges in order to fulfill their potential and experience upward mobility. This is in keeping with social science research that finds a positive relationship between facing challenges and achieving personal [success](#) and [well-being](#).

While an overemphasis on economic security can lead to stagnation, an issue now facing a number of European countries, blunt tax cuts and unfocused regulatory changes for economic growth are also insufficient to improve individual happiness. Rather, aspirational conservatives believe that upward mobility stems not only from a dynamic economy but also from educational environments that drive success, strong families and neighborhoods, workplaces that reward conscientiousness and achievement, and values-shaping institutions such as congregations and private charities.

## Aspirational Conservatism: A Domestic Policy Agenda

If the Republican Party hopes to be more successful in the next 10 years, it will need to adopt an aspirational conservative agenda. An inspired and hopeful policy agenda should recognize the dignity of all people, especially those who have been neglected and disrespected, and aim to help struggling Americans find a way up life’s ladder. Any successful agenda needs to be guided by these overarching principles:

1. *The pursuit of happiness should be understood as fulfilling our potential and having the ability not only to dream dreams but to achieve them.* Policymaking that focuses on “life” and “liberty” without acknowledging the declaration’s third unalienable right, “the pursuit of happiness,” is incomplete and wrong. Aspirational conservatives should put aspiration, potential, and achievement at the heart of all they do.
2. *Policy should prioritize “the little guy,” self-starters, and aspirational workers.* It should be populist in its support of the underdog without succumbing to the statism that is often prevalent in formal populism. Prioritizing the 30 percent of the workforce who own or work for small enterprises has a ripple effect, benefiting hourly workers as well as the more affluent business class. When new firms start every year, wages improve for lower-skilled workers, and working-class people embrace the idea that anyone should be able to start and build something great in America.

- Regulation should be based on creating a fair, competitive playing field, with a goal of eliminating barriers to market access, whether they have been put in place by organized labor or incumbent businesses.
3. *Policymakers need to prioritize the institutions that empower individuals for success: families, congregations, neighborhoods, and schools.* Conservatives have long served as a valuable counterbalance to the leveling tendencies of progressive policies by prioritizing essential non-governmental local institutions in policy deliberations. Part of the Republican Party's current confusion stems from its neglect of this core principle.
  4. *Policies need to be based on—and able to answer questions about—governing effectiveness and efficiency.* It is well-known that Republican voters have less confidence in government than Democrats. However, [according](#) to the Pew Research Center, many Republicans believe government plays a major role in a range of issues, from managing the economy to infrastructure to immigration. Voters prioritize everyday concerns, such as affordability, jobs, and crime, over hot-button issues, and they recognize that government institutions are integral to addressing those concerns. Ironically, too many political campaigns seek to erode trust in the governing institutions candidates are hoping to lead. Republicans should learn from the high approval ratings of results-oriented governors, such as Mitch Daniels, Larry Hogan, Brian Kemp, and Mike DeWine, all of whom emphasized effective delivery of government services over waging culture wars.

What might these principles mean for aspirational conservative policies?

1. *Aspirational conservatism should enhance upward mobility by freeing up more household disposable income, starting by making housing and higher education more affordable.* There is now widespread agreement that restrictive land-use and zoning practices limit the availability of affordable housing. More abundant housing directly relates to increased productivity and wage growth. While housing policy decisions are mostly a local and state function, federal policies can lead on affordability by requiring agencies to certify that environmental and infrastructure rules do not restrict housing or add costs. Funding for transportation, infrastructure, and housing can also be tied to state and local land-use plans.

Regarding education costs, policymakers should call attention to the regressive nature of federal student aid and promote alternatives targeting those most in need. This includes a blend of [income-share agreements](#), need-based [direct vouchers](#), and inclusive accreditation for education providers outside the formal system. Next, aspiring learners should have access to better, more comprehensive information to help them assess sub-baccalaureate options for optimal job placement. In addition, federal policies should be tied to results. If the government subsidizes education through loans or grants, it should support training and education that produces a return on investment for the learner.

2. *Supporting upward mobility should involve a set of practical, multi-pronged solutions that ease job transitions.* With housing affordability and lower-cost education in the foreground, aspirational conservatives should also support reducing licensing requirements; limiting mobility constraints, such as noncompete agreements, for hourly and lower-income workers; investing in person-based vocational and technical funding; and implementing portable benefits to encourage job-hopping.

For most Americans, climbing the ladder at a big company is a thing of the past. Instead, upward mobility is usually achieved by moving from one job to another, pursuing one opportunity and then building upon it. Republicans should support efforts to [reduce occupational](#)

[licensing](#) and [noncompete agreements](#). They should also reform federal workforce policies, starting with converting federal funding for community colleges and vocational schools into vouchered support for workers themselves, including funding to cover expenses such as transportation, childcare, and temporary housing support. Finally, health care and related workplace benefits should move with workers from job to job rather than being [tied to employment](#) at a company.

While nationalists have increased their support for overly restrictive trade policies, promoting upward mobility by enhancing employability is not at odds with maintaining more carefully crafted trade relations with free nations while tightening the screws on China. If we care about the economic prospects of working- and middle-class families, we should prioritize household economic well-being rather than trying to revive an industrial policy that reduces standards of living.

3. *An opportunity-based safety net should become the norm among policymakers.* The safety net should aim to keep people attached to work and help them re-attach to work as quickly as possible if they are laid off or are increasingly unemployable. Drawing inspiration from the best of the [Nordic model, the U.S.](#) should [combine](#) benefits where possible to help people cover living and housing costs while enrolled in school or looking for work. Conservatives who once supported requiring young single mothers to work during the welfare reforms of the 1990s have become much less interested in imposing similar requirements for middle-aged, underemployed men in the heartland in recent years. Either employability should guide policy or not. If it does, as we think it should, the entire welfare system should be focused on helping people increase their employability, except in cases of genuine physical or mental inability.
4. *Schooling should be pro-parent, pro-innovation, and obsessed with excellence.* Aspirational conservatives don't oppose public schools but rather prioritize students as individuals. We have grown too accustomed to forcing our kids to be members of a collective that we would never accept for ourselves (and which more affluent parents do not accept for their own children). As the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown through [de-enrollment](#) data, there is a breaking point at which parents will not tolerate their children being subjugated to a system that doesn't prioritize their needs. The National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that eighth graders are performing at record-low levels, erasing gains made since the 1990s. All parents, not just the wealthy ones, should have the choice to educate their children elsewhere if they are unhappy with their school.

As a result of the pandemic, education savings accounts have gained popularity, and they should find increasing support throughout the country. In addition, federal funding should support a range of schooling options, from hybrid to co-op schools, to disrupt and modernize stagnant state schooling systems. Individual public-school districts should have the option of becoming charter or charter-like, and parents, mayors, principals, and community leaders should be given more authority to charter existing schools. Our schooling systems in America can be both universal and innovative, but they won't become so on their own without incentives and positive disruption, as seen in the [positive effects](#) of charter schools. Accountability should be the guide across all types of schools.

5. *Public safety should be rooted in both strong policing and high levels of community-level trust in police.* This is not only critical and possible but [what voters want](#). Conservatives should continue to support consequences for criminal conduct. However, aspirational conservatives should promote the recovery of [community policing](#) as the best way to overcome racial strife, boost trust and financial support for law enforcement, and allow marginalized communities to voice

- their concerns. They should also advocate for public funding for preventative and rehabilitation services, including violence interruption programs and efforts to help reintegrate people returning from jail or prison.
6. *Immigration policy should focus on the three-legged stool of skills, assimilation, and flexibility.* U.S. border policy should be recognized as the national security and border control issue that it is. Immigration policy's priority should be to increase visas for skilled immigrants in important economic sectors and areas where we need higher levels of new business formation, given that immigrants are historically more entrepreneurial. Assimilation should also be a clear goal, served by proficiency standards for language and U.S. civic knowledge. And flexibility is best served by allowing states and municipalities to apply for [heartland visas](#), accommodating regions that desire higher immigration levels while respecting the preferences of those who prefer lower levels.
  7. *Mandatory spending needs to be rebalanced in the interests of younger Americans and those beginning their journey toward upward mobility.* Conservatives are often reluctant to admit that federal entitlement policy, from the New Deal to the Great Society, has substantially reduced elderly indigence in America. They are also reluctant to change the policy. Aspirational conservatives, true to their name, need to rebalance these programs in the interests of the young, which means getting deficit spending under control through [reforms](#) while proposing a new social contract that most people under age 30 or 40 can support. While there are a number of [good ideas](#) out there, they need courageous and compassionate political leaders to promote them. This effort would benefit from Republicans developing a theory of government efficiency that has been absent for a long time—namely, prioritizing the best use of taxpayer dollars rather than a blanket anti-government ideology that is neither practicable as a governing agenda nor appealing to the voters whose support they increasingly need.

The far left and far right both believe the path forward involves undermining the authority of legitimate institutions, making governing difficult when either side gains power. The far right's growing distrust of authority has morphed into a worldview in which anything the left does is immediately disqualified, and the use of federal power is legitimized only when the right is in power. The left has been antagonistic longer, sowing seeds of distrust in the private and public institutions that contribute to the high quality of life and freedom that Americans enjoy—and that is the envy of the world. Both the far right and far left have concluded that American institutions are corrupt, eroding their standing as examples for the rest of the world.

A [number of surveys](#) show that the majority of Americans care most about basic issues, such as personal financial well-being, public safety, and education. These core issues contrast with the top concerns Americans express to pollsters, such as the cost of living and crime. In the end, most Americans lean a little right on policing and a little left on immigration but agree that the political class should focus on the bread-and-butter basics. While our electoral system seems locked in a perpetual primary election, most of us wish it were not so.

Aspirational conservatism can win both primaries and general elections. There is plenty of anti-elitism in its economic policies to appeal to populist sentiment without resorting to culture-war populism or heavy-handed top-down populism. Aspirational conservatism focuses on the younger and non-traditional voters that the GOP needs, not just as a political tactic but because these policies are what the country needs right now if it hopes to maintain the dynamism of its past.

We argue here for conservative governance that is respectful of its citizens, supportive of America's underlying values, mindful that significant challenges remain, and aware that good politics and good policy require an effective government that helps individuals achieve their aspirations.

A PUBLICATION OF THE

Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation  
Harvard Kennedy School  
79 John F. Kennedy Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138

617-495-0557  
[ash.harvard.edu](http://ash.harvard.edu)



**HARVARD** Kennedy School

**ASH CENTER**  
for Democratic Governance  
and Innovation