

[Dan wants to know](#) why conservatives would oppose market-based solutions to climate change that avoid greater government intervention down the road. [I asked last week](#) why traditional conservatives, who make much of preserving traditions through different generations and respecting institutions through time, would also oppose such policies.

The answer to both questions lie in their fundamental misunderstanding of what American conservatism is, at least as it is institutionalized within the Republican Party.

It is not about market-based solutions. It is not about avoiding government regulation. It is not about preserving tradition.

American conservatism is fundamentally about the preservation and creation of the maximum feasible amount of social and economic inequality.

[Jonathan Chait explained this in a wonderful piece a few days ago](#). Conservatives, he notes,

believe that all success is earned success. They do not believe that luck or life circumstance play an important part in economic success. They believe that wealth and poverty are essentially moral categories, interchangeable with “hard work” and “sloth.” They decry government, but they don’t really oppose government per se. They oppose those government functions that transfer resources from the rich to the non-rich.

It’s rare for Republicans to come out and say this — and Cantor hints at it but does not quite do so explicitly. The core of the Republican agenda is to reduce the progressivity of the tax code.... [and] the reason Republicans stick to these policies so doggedly even when the rationales for them are repeatedly proven false is that those rationales are not the real reason. The real reason is that they think it’s fundamentally, deeply unfair for rich people to bear the cost of helping the non-rich.

This is why conservatives complain bitterly about government snuffing out “freedom” on the health care bill, but have little compunction in, say, regulating peoples’ sex lives, pursuing warrantless wiretaps or advancing the [State Secrets Doctrine](#). They vehemently praise “the market” — unless of course anyone wants to force business to mark their assets to market, or maintain transparency in their off-balance sheet transactions, or end subsidies for private insurers (Medicare Advantage) or student loans. Conservatives believe in “the market” as long as it favors the dominant interests in society; when it doesn’t, they don’t.

Of course there are exceptions: at times, some libertarians will make noises about the national security state or same-sex marriage, but they are minor voices. When Will Wilkinson of the Cato Institute tried to work out a liberal-libertarian synthesis, he was fired for his troubles.

Back to climate regulation. Conservatives perceive — accurately — that at some level, climate regulation will tell powerful interests that things that they want to do they cannot do. They might also perceive — and this is certainly accurate — that the impacts of climate change will fall disproportionately on the least advantaged and least powerful people in society, both nationally and internationally. What's the problem?

Now, why the other 95% of us allow them to get away with it — that is indeed a problem. And there are lots of answers to it. But that's a different post.