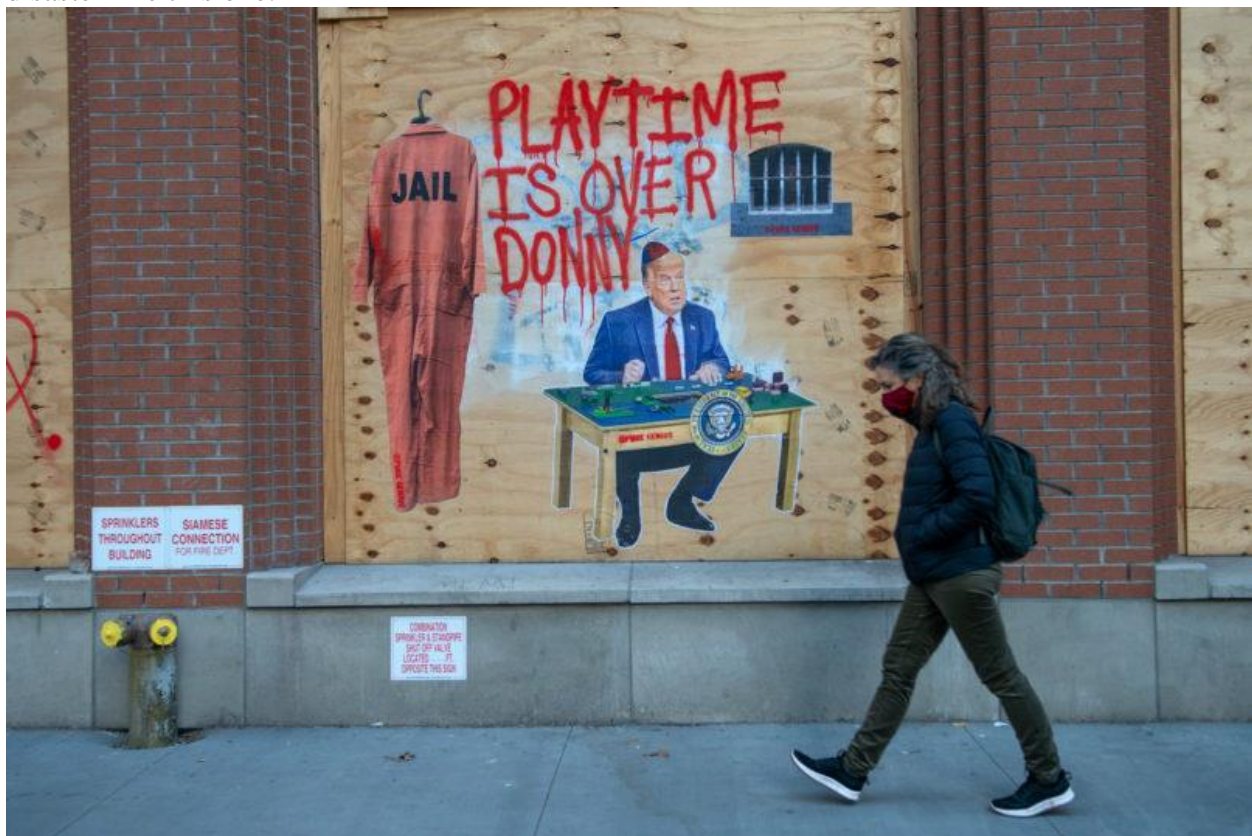


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It's Not Just Trump: COVID-19 Is The Test That Conservatism Was Built To Fail

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NEW YORK, NEW YORK - NOVEMBER 29: A person wearing a mask walks by street art that reads, "playtime is over Donny" by Pure Genius on November 29, 2020 in New York City.

(Photo by Alexi Rosenfeld/Getty Images)

By [Michael Linden](#) and [Sammi Aibinder](#)

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Nearly nine months into this COVID crisis, the virus appears to be raging completely out of control in the United States. Last week, we set new, dismal records for both hospitalizations and

new cases, and daily deaths from COVID have now reached levels we haven't suffered since the spring. Worse, there does not appear to be any plan in place to arrest the spread and bend the curve back downward, at least not from this outgoing administration. At the same time, the economic recovery from the spring's shock has demonstrably slowed, with unemployment claims ticking back up, job creation slowing, and small business closures accelerating. The scale and degree of the failure to handle this public health and economic crisis is breathtaking.

It would be easy — and not entirely wrong — to blame these failures on the particular personality in the White House right now. After all, President Trump, during the course of this crisis, has made some truly outrageous statements. And his posture towards the crisis, especially as the election neared, flew in the face of not only experts and local officials, but of common sense as well. And now that Trump has been defeated in the election, it would be equally easy, and comforting, to assume that with his personal irresponsibility gone, we will be finally rid of the main obstacle to an effective COVID response.

But focusing solely on the ousting of this particular president and his friends — and on their considerable failures as leaders — risks missing a deeper, more fundamental point: that though Donald Trump lost reelection, the ideology and belief system underpinning so many of the debacles of his presidency prevails, and was *always* doomed to fail the country in the face of a disaster like this one. A response to COVID-19 and the economic crisis it triggered guided by and grounded in a conservative worldview would *always* have failed us, regardless of who was in the White House. At base, conservative ideology itself was just as responsible for the failure to appropriately and effectively respond to this crisis as Trump's personal failings were. And that ideology will still be present — rife, in fact — in our government [long after Trump is gone](#).

Now, like any ideology, conservatism is not homogenous. It spans a spectrum of ideas that can roughly be grouped under a broad umbrella. But there are some important core tenets of the conservative movement that most, if not all, adherents share to some degree. First, conservatism posits that that government itself tends to cause more problems than it solves, and that free markets — unencumbered by government intervention — are always best positioned to allocate resources and improve society. Second, modern conservatism argues that the economy is primarily driven by capital and its owners, and as such, the interests of capital owners are paramount. And third, conservatives tend to see differences and disparities along racial and gender lines as either irrelevant, temporary, or — in the most pernicious form — deserved.

Certainly, conservatism means more than just these three ideas. But these three in particular, and their corollaries, are all critical tent poles for the modern conservative movement that permeate all levels of our government and economy. And as we lay out in detail below, these are arguments that fall flat generally and are especially ill-suited to the current COVID crisis.

“The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help.’”

Ronald Reagan's famous [quip](#) crystalized a classic tenet of conservative thinking: that government is always less efficient than the private sector, to the point that it often makes things

actively worse. This view has reverberated across the American political and policy landscape in the decades since, from the call for government so weak one could single-handedly [drown it in their bathtub](#) to major candidates [equating the social safety net with Big Brother](#).

Unfortunately, during a public health crisis like the one we currently face, there could hardly be a more counter-productive belief than thinking the government not only can't solve problems but is *itself* a problem.

Government intervention is necessary to combat a pandemic. Period. Only the government, acting in the general public interest, can ensure that there is sufficient testing of the virus all across towns, cities, and states; impose restrictions on large public gatherings and nonessential travel; and lead a coordinated contact tracing effort at the scale that the [CDC](#) has asserted necessary. Even vaccine development and dissemination are dependent on public investment and intervention. [In the words](#) of public health expert Atul Gawande, the U.S. doesn't have a technological problem — we have a delivery problem.

The rest of the world has made this crystal clear: the virus can be controlled. The nations successfully combating this disease have done so with *more* government, not less. Take [New Zealand](#), which issued its national lockdowns before the first coronavirus cases even hit its shores, and has now successfully flattened its curve [twice](#). Or [South Korea](#), where the government rapidly expanded and diversified its testing capacity and bore the costs of testing and treatment for all, citizens and non-citizens alike. In Italy, the government's emergency powers were extended through the fall so that new clusters of the virus caused by reopening can be tamped down as quickly and efficiently as possible. Indeed, though Italy also experienced a fall surge in COVID cases, the increase in new cases has already abated. The story is similar in countries like Belgium, where the fall surge peaked in late October, and new cases are now almost back down to summer levels, and in France, where new infections spiked to over 50,000 a day in early November, but have already been cut in half a few weeks later.

In the U.S., by contrast, the conservative belief that government is more often the problem than the solution made it practically inevitable that Republicans would render their own government ineffective. Instead of coordinating a national strategy to address the acute shortage of personal protective equipment and vital medical supplies across the country, this administration encouraged state leaders to essentially [compete with one another](#) to save their own people. When pressed by state leaders to help solve the PPE shortage, Senior White House advisor Jared Kushner [replied](#), "The free market will solve it." When asked about the federal government's role in assuring schools are able to resume in-person instruction safely, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos contended that was [not her department's job](#).

Instead of marshaling the resources of the wealthiest nation on the planet to ensure people could weather this crisis while preventing the virus from spreading in their communities, conservatives insisted on "reopening the economy" with the inane assurance that businesses will be destroyed by competition if they in fact ["have the disease."](#) This acceptance of "reopening" in numerous states led the private sector to orchestrate [profitable contact tracing and testing initiatives](#) for wealthy firms and individuals — but that doesn't solve the public health crisis. It just enables

executives to force their employees to choose between a roof overhead or food on the table and contracting a debilitating (if not fatal) disease.

In the same vein, conservative economic and social ideology puts its premium on the individual above all else — the world is defined by individuals acting in their own self-interest, in the market society alike. Communal welfare is borne not out of collective action, but out of each individual “pursuing his ambition or her desire, whatever, with excellence,” in the [words](#) of Rush Limbaugh. He goes on, “We resist the effort to group us. We resist the effort to make us feel that we’re all the same, that we’re no different than anybody else.”

The link between this philosophy and a “personal responsibility” ethos during a viral outbreak is not hard to find. It’s emerged in formal denunciations of the government’s role during this crisis, like conservative state legislators in Texas [declaring](#) it each “individual Texan’s responsibility” to keep themselves safe. It’s also what motivated anti-lockdown protestors in the spring to turn out all over the country and declare that [“social distancing = communism”](#) or that it would be preferable to [“sacrifice the weak”](#) rather than suffer a face mask.

All of this has laid bare what valorization of the market and individual “freedom” or “responsibility” can really do. As Ezra Klein recently [noted](#), conquering a public crisis at this scale is near impossible if your politics are founded on mistrust of the government and antagonizing social services. Nothing has illustrated this better than conservatives’ passing the buck to the “free market” — insisting that the only way for the American people to survive is to “reopen the economy,” when in fact it’s just that that gives the virus the reins.

This veneration of the “free market,” founded on the belief that only the market can accurately reflect the prices of goods and services in terms of their inherent societal costs and benefits, has been an overstated truism for decades. It is especially false during a global pandemic, though: the market can’t “price in” the health and economic costs of people contracting and spreading COVID at a bar or a restaurant. The social and economic benefits of wearing a mask and social distancing can’t be incorporated into “free market” interactions, especially because mask-wearing is largely for the [benefit of others](#) and about assuming communal risk.

What’s more, the supposed “efficiency” and superiority of the “free market” also depends on the imperative of a level playing field across the economy — whether between producers and consumers, employers and employees, or among competitors. This theory has been dubious ever since [Friedman first laid out his creed](#) a half-century ago, as corporate concentration has skyrocketed while wages and median household income have stagnated. In the context of today’s crisis, it rings especially false. Take the labor market as an example. The balance of power against workers across industries is at [the heart of COVID’s spread in the U.S.](#): without any say in labor conditions, without access to paid leave, millions of people have had to go to work sick and have incurred harsh retaliation for raising their health concerns to their employers.

Further, the idea of “essential workers” highlights a certain irony of this market-first approach, as employees from farms to grocery stores continue to earn poverty wages (even as lawn signs have popped up around the country thanking them for their hard work) and employers [cut their hours and salaries](#). By all rights, the “market” should have rewarded these “essential” workers with

soaring benefits and compensation. No such correction has happened; rather, they languish in the lowest bracket of earnings while the Bezos and Buffetts of the world enjoy [unprecedented expansions](#) of their personal fortunes.

It should really come as no surprise that when the cornerstone of your ideology defines government as ineffective, *your* government is predestined to fail. From a woefully inadequate federal pandemic response to political fights over common-sense relief measures, conservatives' rallying cry that less government is more reveals its own gross negligence. Governing through crisis calls for a commitment to public action and public good, not abdicating to the invisible hand.

“Private sector job creators are the heart of our economy.”

At the heart of the conservative view of the economy is a core belief in the primacy of capital, and the people who own it. Capital owners are the ones who “create jobs” for everyone else by investing and enabling the production and delivery of goods and services. The free flow and the low cost of capital results in higher productivity, higher wages, more jobs, and a more dynamic economy for everyone. To conservatives, the “supply side” is where all of the action happens. The [Heritage Foundation](#) put it succinctly: “Capital represents far more than cash locked away in a Scrooge McDuck vault. Instead, capital means factories, manufacturing, equipment, and intellectual property yielding output and creating wealth.”

The conservative Tax Foundation incorporates this central idea directly into the macroeconomic model it uses to evaluate economic policies. The model professes that cutting tax rates (on everything from corporations to estate and gift taxes) and spurring capital investment work hand in hand as the ultimate engine for economic growth, so much so that the revenue loss from cutting those taxes would be largely recovered by the boon generated across the economy. Putting such an enormous weight on the value of capital has bred skepticism among [mainstream economists](#) (not to mention that the Tax Foundation's own assertion of a “growing consensus” that taxes weaken the economy is [demonstrably false](#)). Nevertheless, this model and its assumptions were the lifeblood of what was arguably this administration's crowning legislative achievement. The bottom line is that in conservative economic ideology, if things are going well for capital, then things are going well, full stop.

This core belief manifests in a whole variety of ways, but there are at least three corollaries that are extremely relevant to the mishandling of the COVID crisis. First, the overemphasis on capital leads many conservatives to conflate the stock market with the economy as a whole, and to therefore miss more important economic signals. The stock market, of course, is a reflection — in theory — of the overall value and day-to-day concerns of the various publicly owned companies that are listed on the exchanges, not necessarily the underlying strengths or weaknesses of the economy in which those companies operate. And while there certainly must be some relationship between the performance of the stock market and the performance of the true economy, those connections are not self-evident.

To start with, it is certainly not the case that everyone benefits when the stock market does well, as is sometimes intimated by conservatives (on [Twitter](#) or [otherwise](#)). [The wealthiest 10 percent](#)

[of Americans](#) own 84 percent of stocks. [Half of American families](#) aren't invested in the stock market at all (including 401Ks and other retirement savings); that rate is even lower when we look at [communities of color](#) specifically, with only 36 percent of Black families and 37 percent of Hispanic families owning stock.

But even more to the point, increases in the stock market do not necessarily translate into broader measures of economic growth or wellbeing. [Over the last 40 years](#), for example, the S&P 500 has grown by 741 percent and chief executive compensation has grown 940 percent, but a typical worker's wages only went up 14 percent. Similarly, after the Great Recession it took only [four and a half years](#) for the stock market to surpass its pre-recession high point, while [recent data](#) shows that many middle and low-income families haven't recovered fully in the last 12 years ([especially](#) among Black and Hispanic households).

Despite all this, conservatives will often treat the performance of the stock market as an acceptable proxy for the entire economy, or worse, they will simply assert that the stock market is, effectively, the economy itself. This is not surprising, given the priority that conservatives give to the owners of capital. But it does lead them to either ignore or misdiagnose problems in the real economy.

In the early spring of 2020, when the pandemic was just beginning and the stock market was cratering, conservative lawmakers interpreted the dramatic fall in stock prices as a major economic crisis. That led them to support substantial federal economic aid. The CARES Act, a \$2.2 trillion fiscal stimulus package that provided direct cash assistance, expanded unemployment insurance, and forgivable loans to businesses, was passed unanimously in the Senate on March 25, in the House by voice vote on March 26 and signed into law by President Trump on March 27. In the days prior to this swift passage, the S&P 500 was [down 34 percent](#) from its previous mid-February high.

But, once the stock market started to recover, conservative support for further economic assistance largely dried up. By May, the S&P 500 had recovered [30 percent of its losses](#), and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) declared that additional measures were no longer [urgent](#), despite the fact that the unemployment rate was still [almost 15 percent](#) and the economy was still [over 20 million jobs](#) in the hole. Months passed, and the stock market continued to recover, while the broader economic recovery stalled. Emergency aid lapsed, job gains have slowed, hunger and precariousness has risen. But so long as the stock market continues to thrive, it is unlikely that conservatives will be moved to address these underlying problems.

Capital primacy not only leads conservatives to disregard real economic challenges, it also leaves them with very few tools to use when they do decide to act. Conservatives tend to rely on tax cuts — especially for the wealthy and corporations — as their primary economic policy lever, and disdain public investments, as well as more direct aid or targeted aid to anyone who is not a “job creator.”

It is well known that conservatives love tax cuts in good times or in bad; in war or in peace; during a surplus or during a deficit. As Newt Gingrich noted some [twenty years ago](#), cutting

taxes is “not only right in itself, but helpful as well, because it protects us from all sorts of temptations that the liberals love to place before us.” In [2006](#), after “more than four years of uninterrupted growth,” George W. Bush asserted in his state of the union that we needed *further* tax cuts. And at the outset of the global financial crisis in [2008](#), Mitt Romney insisted that the best thing you could do in a recession was lower taxes to [“build the economy.”](#)

A blind faith in tax cuts has led conservatives to throw their weight behind ineffective economic measures during COVID that are extremely unlikely to help anyone other than the wealthiest few, and to be suspicious of other, better measures. Tax cuts, especially those of the favored “supply-side” variety, are particularly ill-suited to this moment for several reasons. First, while COVID certainly has been a constraint on supply in some industries, reducing the cost of capital in those industries through a tax cut will do little to lift those constraints. More importantly, the most dangerous potential economic consequence of COVID is a massive decline in aggregate demand. Some industries — airline travel, food and beverage, entertainment — are already devastated by a drop in demand, but the widespread loss of jobs and market income in the early period of the crisis threatened to spill over into every industry as customers, had it not been for the relatively successful, but temporary, interventions in the CARES Act. None of those interventions — direct stimulus checks, boosted unemployment insurance, forgivable loans to small businesses — were tax cuts focused on wealthy people, and all have now lapsed, and conservatives seem unwilling to renew them.

Finally, and perhaps most dangerously, the pedestal on which conservative ideology places the interests of capital and the primacy of the “market” has sadly led them into a posture of skepticism and sometimes outright hostility to scientific expertise. The friction between conservatism and science in this country reaches back decades and stems, in large part, from the fact that scientific research and expertise has often run counter to perceived business interests. In the 1960s, for example, scientific expertise revealed the devastating health effects of smoking and the titans of the tobacco industry sought not to disprove their evidence, but to discredit it by railing against their overreach as [“big-government tyranny.”](#)

More recently, and most prominently, corporate interests have, of course, been battling the scientific consensus on climate change. And in fact, as Erik Conway and Naomi Oreskes [argue](#) persuasively, the challenge to capital from climate change was not only about the bottom line for fossil fuel industries: it is seen as fundamentally undermining “free market” economics. They write, “Climate scientists came under attack not just because their research threatened the oil industry (although it certainly did that), but also because they had exposed significant market failures. ... Accepting the need to correct market failures required one to concede the need to reform capitalism — in short, to concede the reality of market failure and limits. This became increasingly difficult for Republicans during the 1990s and 2000s.”

And so, while there isn’t anything necessarily inherent about conservatism that should require its adherents to disdain scientific expertise, that has been the consequence of decades of conflict between corporate and laissez-faire interests and the scientific community. As Jonathan Chait [wrote](#) in his evaluation of the Republican Party’s response to COVID, “Business owners [in the 1960s] quickly grasped that stopping the advance of big government meant blunting the cultural

and political authority of scientists.” And since conservatism defers to business owners, scientific expertise became permanently suspect.

This has had predictably disastrous consequences for the federal government’s ability to effectively respond to a public health crisis like coronavirus. The administration actively ignored counsel from [health](#), [intelligence](#) and [trade](#) officials alike on the aggressive actions that would be needed to contain outbreaks: from shutting down schools and workplaces to deploying massive amounts of funding toward testing, tracing and production of medical equipment. With the pandemic underway the CDC released detailed, stringent guidelines about [reopening](#) the country post-lockdown, only to have them gagged by the White House. And of course, it was a recent smaller-scale defiance of expertise that edified the government’s failure to contain infection: the Rose Garden reception that openly violated [DC’s local health guidelines](#) and was in turn widely deemed a super-spreader event.

It is tempting to ascribe these failures to the particular personality defects of Donald Trump himself. Certainly, it is hard to imagine any other president, even a different conservative one, suggesting that perhaps we could inject bleach into our veins in order to fight the virus. But the broader failure to follow the science and defer to experts is not solely, or even largely, about just one person. The fact is that it was easy and even comfortable for conservative lawmakers and leaders at all levels to dismiss, demean or ignore scientific advice because their ideology has primed them to be skeptical of such “expertise,” and to see it as fundamentally in conflict with “business.” Once conservatives began to see the crisis in terms of the false dichotomy of “fighting the virus” or “reopening the economy,” scientists, doctors and public health experts never stood a chance.

“We see human beings. We don’t see groups. We don’t see victims. We don’t see people we want to exploit.”

While COVID has wreaked havoc and pain all across the nation, in both its direct health effects and its indirect economic ones, it is impossible to ignore the grotesque truth that some people and communities have been hurt more than others. The divide runs, as it so often does in American history and in public policy, along racial lines. People of color — and Black people in particular — have borne the greatest costs. The racialized nature of COVID presents a unique challenge for conservatism, an ideology that either purports not to “see” race, or else, in an even more malignant form, actively thrives on racial disparities.

Compared to white patients, Black, Latino, Hispanic, and indigenous patients are [five times](#) more likely to be hospitalized when they contract coronavirus — and Black patients are twice as likely to die from the disease. Black and brown people suffer greater rates of pre-existing conditions that exacerbate COVID-19, such as [asthma, heart disease and diabetes](#), due to barriers to healthcare and environmental factors (like residential segregation in areas with high pollution). Black and brown people have also been [more likely to hold “essential” jobs](#): as a result, not only are they disproportionately losing their jobs and livelihoods in this economic crisis, but they are also being forced to choose between their jobs and their health at far greater rates than white workers.

Workers of color are often the first [fired and the last to be rehired](#). While the unemployment rate for white workers has dropped over seven points since April, the rate for Black workers has declined only four and a half percentage points (and is still in double digits). Parents have struggled to work and care for their children at the same time while schools have transitioned to remote learning, and [mothers](#) have largely carried the burden of that additional unpaid labor — while also [dropping out of the workforce](#) in unprecedented numbers. [Women of color](#) are more likely than white women to be single parents or significant breadwinners in their households, and are overrepresented in the frontline jobs that can't be done from home. In all of these ways, and many more, the twin crises of COVID have followed and exacerbated the existing racial fractures in our society.

Conservatism often makes claims to “colorblindness,” arguing that racial differences are either immaterial to policymaking, temporary, or sometimes even deserved. When it comes to policymaking, conservatives reject race-conscious approaches. They argue, as Chief Justice John Roberts did when he [struck down school desegregation policies](#), that “the best way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.” Rather than have government policies actively work against racial injustice or disparity, the key — as with nearly all other problems in conservatives’ minds — is getting government out of the way.

Conservatism posits that once left to the workings of the free market, racial discrimination will soon disappear. Economist Gary Becker, in his [seminal work](#) “The Economics of Discrimination,” argued that racial discrimination was irrational. Employers who refused to hire or otherwise undervalued workers on the basis of race would lose out to the more “rational” employers who didn’t. Over time, free and fair competition should eventually render such irrationality a thing of the past. Any difference in outcomes that remains must therefore be attributable to personal or communal failings, not the result of systemic discrimination or structural inequality. It is a “culture of poverty” that explains persistent racial wealth disparities, for example, and not the fact that Black families were systematically and deliberately excluded from the public policies that helped many white families build wealth. And disparities can always be overcome, according to conservatism, with a little elbow-grease and a tight grip on one’s bootstraps. As Kushner [recently](#) put it, above all else, Black people have to *want* to be successful.

Gary Becker’s famous work was written in 1957. More than 60 years later, of course, racial discrimination is far from a thing of the past. The reason, as Joelle Gamble [noted](#) in a recent essay, is that “the ‘free market’ does not inherently deliver equitable outcomes. Racism is rational when it upholds institutional arrangements that preserve white wealth and economic power.”

And though it may be unpleasant, we also must look squarely at the fact that a powerful strain of conservatism does not merely claim to be “colorblind,” and to waive away racial disparities, but rather takes those very disparities as evidence that there is something deserved about them, that people of color who suffer lower wages, higher unemployment, higher poverty, higher rates of incarceration, lower life expectancy, and worse overall health are undeserving of aid and investment. There is a reason why so many conservative politicians have, for the last half-century, relied on “dog-whistles” to signal their solidarity with a particular form of white identity

and to win elections based on the notion that “they” are taking something they haven’t earned. As Adam Serwer [argued](#) in *The Atlantic*, for conservatives, increasingly, “wielding power and influence depends on making white Americans feel threatened by the growing political influence of those who are different from them.”

An ideology that denies the reality of systemic racism was always going to have a difficult time effectively responding to a public health and economic crisis that so clearly proves the existence of such racism. Higher rates of infection and death among Black people could not be because of underlying issues of healthcare access, environmental pollution, or the racial patterns of employment and worker power. No. It must be because, as one Republican state legislator [suggested](#) in June, “They don’t wash their hands enough.”

And it is easy to understand how a movement that depends on coded racial appeals to white identity would be slow to move effectively to address a crisis that was disproportionately affecting people of color. This is the basis for conservatives’ erroneous arguments against expanded unemployment insurance for the tens of millions of Americans who lost their jobs this year: despite the [effectiveness](#) and [popularity](#) of the program, Republicans in Congress opted to double down on tired (and racist) tropes that UI recipients are just too lazy to return to work or are otherwise looking to game the system. It also helps explain how the conservative governor of Georgia could feel it was appropriate to pull back on public health restrictions even as [80 percent of COVID-related hospitalizations](#) in his state were Black people. Predictably, COVID infections began rising again in Georgia just weeks later.

Built to Fail

There is no doubt that as president, Donald Trump stamped his own personal brand of ineptitude on this crisis. There is nothing about conservatism that forced him to downplay the virus in the early stages. There is nothing about his ideology that compelled him to repeatedly and deliberately mislead the public. But it is also true that many of his failures were and are related in some way to the inherent weakness of conservatism to meet this moment.

True, most conservatives would not have suggested that sunlight could simply kill the virus. But plenty of conservatives have treated the scientific community with contempt, dismissing their advice and substituting their personal judgement for scientific expertise. True, Trump’s seeming disdain for the lives lost is shocking, but his callousness is different from other conservatives only in degree, not in kind. And true, his tweets bragging about the stock market even as the unemployment rate was at historic highs seemed especially out-of-touch, but while they weren’t so uncouth as to tweet about it, Senate Republicans blocked consideration of a new economic aid package for essentially the same reason.

COVID was the test that conservatism was built to fail. A public health crisis that demands a coordinated, powerful public response, leveraging all the power and reach of the federal government, meets an ideology that cannot accept a robust role for the public sector and believes the free market will solve all. An incredibly unequal economic crisis driven by a collapse in customers, in which the wealthy are mostly doing fine while everyday people teeter on the brink of generational ruin, meets an ideology that cares only for the prospects of those at the top and

sees tax cuts as the only useful economic answer. A fast moving, novel virus meets an ideology that disdains scientific expertise and treats empirical research as a threat to business interests. A disaster that exploits existing racial disparities meets an ideology that refuses to accept the reality of structural inequity.

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