


Ideology and Support for Federalism in Theory—And in Practice

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Conservatives are more likely than liberals to support the concept of federalism. In this article, we look at this support in the context of particular issues. Using multiple national surveys, including an original module on the 2020 Congressional Election Study, we find that conservatives are more likely to prefer a devolution of power to state and local jurisdictions, even if doing so might make it harder to achieve conservative policy aims, whereas liberals are more instrumental, more likely to prioritize policy aims and to support whichever level of government seems most likely to achieve them. We then examine reasons why conservatives might display a stronger adherence to the federalist structure of the American government. We find that the idea of “states’ rights” continues to loom large for self-identified conservatives, as does a generalized level of trust toward political units described as small versus large.

What happens when ideological principles clash with pragmatic political interests? It happens all the time in the daily ebbs and flows of politics. Whether one believes that a minority should be able to filibuster legislation may derive from one’s attitudes about minority rights, but it also depends upon whether one’s party is in the minority or the majority. Should a president be able to issue a particular policy via an executive order? Ideologues may have different general views on the assertion of executive power, but the answer is also likely dependent upon whether one shares the president’s party and what one thinks of the policy. As the parties move in and out of power, individual attitudes about how power is exercised and where it should lie are inevitably put under pressure.

In this study, we examine how contemporary conservatives and liberals compare in how they think about federalism. As is well documented, political attitudes are not wholly informed by political philosophies (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), and it is easy to see that there are certain circumstances in which the big ideas about federal power might be short-circuited by shorter-term interests, where conservative enthusiasm for federalism might wane, while liberal support would wax, in order

to pursue other goals. Where conservative values and policies can be achieved by the federal government and thus be applied to all (e.g., a federal abortion ban), those values and policies could well trump the idealized notion that states or localities should be the locus of power. And when liberals can achieve their goals at the state or local level when Washington is controlled by conservative Republicans or even when liberal policies are stymied by the filibuster, that should logically lead to more support for the devolution of power to states and localities. Consider situations where states pass environmental regulations that are more stringent than federal regulations, assure access to abortion in wake of the *Dobbs* decision, or make it easier to vote.

In pursuing these questions, we make the argument, developed in the pages ahead, that, in fact, conservatives are more attached to the principle of federalism than liberals are to any principle of federal versus state power. Employing a variety of surveys in the public domain, and one of our own, we argue that the conservative attachment to the devolution of power is genuine, and that it often survives (albeit with some erosion) when policy preferences are at stake. For liberals, we assert, attitudes toward federalism are more instrumental, that they are more likely to be a by-product of their policy goals.

Underlying this argument are two theoretical foundations. First, the concept of power devolution is more neatly articulated in conservative thought than the concept of centralization of power in liberal ideology. Of course, the devolution of power was instrumental in allowing conservatives to dominate the politics of the South, and “states’ rights” did come to capture the resistance to civil rights throughout much of the twentieth century. But conservatism encompasses libertarian notions that government is intrinsically oppressive, and importantly, that the devolution of power to smaller units, units “closer” to the individual, is the ideal. As *New York Times* columnist [Ross Douthat \(2021\)](#) argues, conservatism stands for “local community and local knowledge, against expert certainty and bureaucratic centralization.” Moreover, dual sovereignty is one of the great breakthrough ideas enshrined in the American Constitution. As conservatism venerates and promotes principled fidelity to the founding document, federalism fits nicely into the constellation of ideas that constitute a conservative viewpoint. One need only look to the arguments behind originalism that have so defined conservative jurisprudence to tie together fidelity to the Constitution to a conservative preference for power devolution.

Liberalism does embrace a more favorable stance toward a stronger, more assertive government, and the devolution of governmental responsibility to the constituent units can erode the ability of the central government to accomplish things. Liberalism puts more emphasis on egalitarianism, a value that more often than not is enhanced by uniform laws and policies that apply to all. Moreover, robust federal government power may sit in the liberal constellation of principles

because of the success of the New Deal and the Great Society or because the notion of federalism, in [Martha Derthick's \(1987\)](#) turn of phrase, “suffered fatally from the burden of the South’s deviant social system” (p. 72). The devolution of power, however, does not necessarily equate to weak or aloof government. [Nathan \(2006\)](#) argues persuasively that federalism is “naturally progressive,” “pro-government,” and “a fuel and force for building up governmental activities.” It is a principle that legal scholars and politicians on the left have pragmatically “discovered” ([Sullivan 2006](#); [Young 2004](#)) as the stigma of Jim Crow states’ rights has dissolved.

The second theoretical foundation for our hypothesis comes from recent work in political science which suggests that the right and the left differ in fundamental ways that would lead the former to be less pragmatic and more ideologically consistent in their approach to policymaking. [Grossmann and Hopkins \(2016\)](#) argue that Republicans are generally more unified than Democrats, and more supportive of a party that is ideologically pure at the expense of shaping policy. Democrats, on the other hand, are comprised of diverse interest groups, are more tolerant of ideological diversity and are motivated by continual, modest policy progress. This leads to fundamentally different views of political purpose and a general misunderstanding of each other. They write, “Republicans claim that they are the party of principles, where the Democrats are the party of giveaways. Democrats view themselves as the party of productivity and problem solving, while criticizing Republicans as the party of extremism and obstruction” (p. 13). If this is the case, then we would expect that Republicans—and the conservatives who comprise the core of the party—to show more fidelity to their principles with less concern for modest policy gains than Democrats and their liberals, who tend to have a more incremental approach to politics and take their policy wins when and where they can get them.¹

We are not the first to make the argument that conservatives are more federalist than liberals in their orientation. [Rendleman and Rogowski \(2020\)](#) analyze a series of questions capturing various dimensions of federalism, aggregated into a scale. They find that ideology has a significant relationship with that scale. Notably, they do not find a relationship of partisanship to federalist attitude but do conclude that attitudes toward the balance of power between state and national governments “are rooted in more deeply-seated political values” that accompany ideology. [Wolak \(2016\)](#), too, finds that conservatives are more likely than liberals to support the devolution of power. In what she calls a “thermostatic model of responsiveness” (480), the relationship is especially pronounced when the size of the national government grows larger relative to state and local governments. As that happens, both conservatives and liberals respond, widening the ideological gap. [Konisky and Nolette \(2022\)](#) argue that this difference we see in the conservative and liberal orientation toward federalism may be less a function of the application of ideological principles. Instead, it may be more due to the fact that

Republicans control more state governments at the same time that conservative jurisprudence is restricting federal agency policymaking. In this view, conservatives may be more federalist than liberals, but it is a response to the structural advantages held by Republicans in our federalist system.

Recent literature also shows that as the U.S. has become more polarized, attitudes toward federalism have become more instrumental, with outcomes trumping principles when so much more—and not just policy, but politics—seems at stake (Jacobs 2017; Mason 2018). This was especially apparent through the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the implications of our federalist structure were confusing. As Jacobs (2021) writes, “Overwhelmingly, individuals made sense of the complicated, multigovernmental response by relying on their partisan allegiances.” In contrast, Dinan and Heckelman (2020), with a more historical view that includes the more recent polarized decades, find that Republicans and conservatives are more likely than Democrats and liberals to support federalism no matter which party controls the federal government. It is compelling evidence that Democrats and liberals are more instrumental, being much more likely to support devolution when Republicans control Washington.

In the pages to come, we contribute to this literature on ideology and federalist attitudes in the following ways. We first will show, again, that conservatives are more federalist in their orientation than liberals, noting that the difference is among the most dramatic in the whole panoply of ideas that differentiate those on the right and those on the left. We then test what we call the “genuineness hypothesis” and look at a variety of issues where policy and principle come into conflict to see how liberals and conservatives respond. There is, of course, alignment between policy preferences and attitudes about where that policy should be made, but we show that conservatives are more likely to stick with their principles more than liberals, even in a dramatic situation like the COVID pandemic, where the executive branch is controlled by a conservative administration. We also seek some explanations for the differential attachment to federalism, concluding that liberal attitudes toward federalism, but not conservative ones, are the byproduct of other attitudes toward the U.S. government. Finally, we probe what it is about federalism that resonates more with conservatives than liberals with a battery of statements about federalism. A couple of very simple ideas—one about states’ rights and the other a preference for small rather than large governmental units—differentiate those on the right from those on the left.

How Genuine Is the Commitment?

The foundation of this article is the finding that contemporary liberals and conservatives have markedly different attitudes toward federalism in its broadest

articulation. In a 2010 survey from the Pew Research Center, 39 percent of liberals and 73 percent of conservatives responded affirmatively to the prompt that “the federal government is interfering too much in state and local matters.”² That is certainly a large gap, but that particular Pew survey gives us a sense of just how large by allowing us to compare responses to that question with responses to twenty-three other questions tapping attitudes toward politics and governance. This panoply of questions, shown in [figure 1](#), covers everything from how much the government should regulate business to whether the government threatens personal rights and freedoms, and much else. What is notable is that the liberal–conservative difference that emerges on the federalism question is larger than all but one of the other twenty-three items. In an environment where liberals and conservatives seem so opposed in so many ways, the fact that one of the biggest differences between them is about governance and not policy is notable.

Is that substantial liberal–conservative difference intact in more recent surveys? We replicated the question in a module that appeared on the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES), a large web-based survey administered by YouGov. The gap between the two sets of ideologues is still very large, with 32 percent of liberals and 59 percent of conservatives responding affirmatively. For additional confirmation, we added a second question to the survey to capture yet another dimension of federalism, and again, find a very sizable difference. When asked whether “The federal government should run only those things that cannot be run at the local level,” 43 percent of liberals and 79 percent of conservatives agreed.³

Before we accept the same conclusion that conservatives are more supportive of federalism or policy devolution than liberals, we want to further probe the general finding, to see whether it holds in practice as well as in principle. It is worth noting that the commitment to the principle of devolution of power is easier in the absence of details. Of course, in some instances, when the federal government is run by Republicans and is implementing conservative policies, federalism may not be such a great thing for conservatives. Likewise, liberals should be more open to the concept of devolution when their state government is promulgating policies more to their liking.⁴ Such circumstances are the true test of the conservative attachment to the idea that power should lay more in state and local hands, or for that matter, a liberal attachment to a strong central government.

Pollsters only occasionally ask about federalism in the context of various issues and these questions allow us to test how solid the commitment to the principle of devolution is. Take, for instance, the question of abortion and where those decisions should be made. Should there be a blanket policy across the country or should states and localities be able to apply the morals and beliefs of the majority of their own citizens in determining access to abortion? We obviously are studying the question pre-*Dobbs*, with the starting point being that a modest majority of Americans overall are pro-choice ([Hartig 2021](#)), while in some states, pro-life

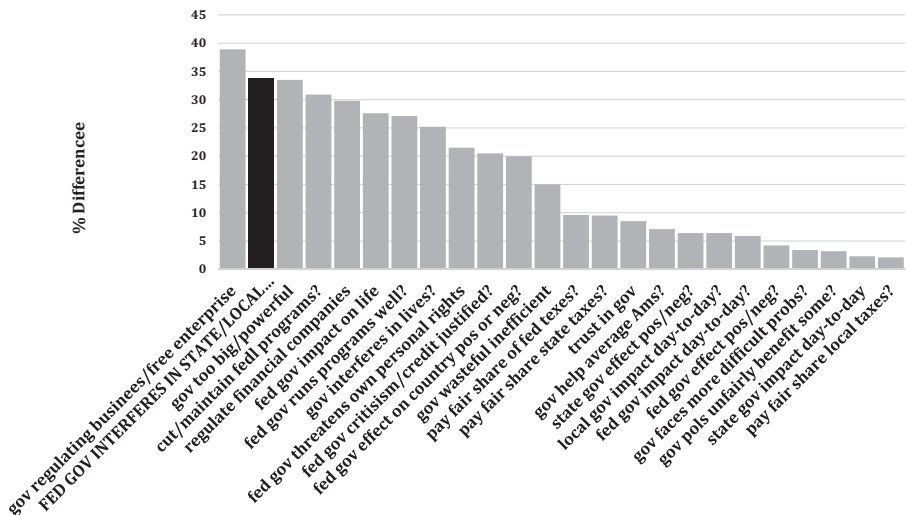


Figure 1 Out of twenty-four different questions about government, the Federalism Question evokes the second largest liberal–conservative difference.

All questions from [Pew Research Center Poll on Government Trust \(2010\)](#).

sentiment is dominant. Given that *Roe v. Wade*, in a broad sense, established a national policy that states, over decades, attempted to modify on the margins, it is not surprising that conservatives are much more likely than liberals to believe that abortion policy should be made at the state level (table 1). But there is an analytical opportunity here. What if we look at liberals who are pro-life or conservatives who are pro-choice? In these instances, an individual’s policy preference and their ideological principle would not lead to the same answer. What is striking is that pro-choice conservatives align perfectly with pro-life conservatives on this question.⁵ There are not large numbers of pro-choice conservatives—just seventy-two in the sample—but it is enough to give some sense that conservatives are genuinely federalists in their orientation on this issue. There are only twenty-seven pro-life liberals in the sample, but packaging liberals and moderates together, being pro-life instead of pro-choice does lead to instrumental support for state-based abortion policies, in remarkable contrast to conservatives.

Another issue—school prayer—also offers a simple test of whether ideologues are principled or pragmatic when it comes to federalism. Over recent decades, the General Social Survey (GSS) has regularly asked a question about support for a Supreme Court decision that prevents states or localities from requiring the reading of the Lord’s Prayer or the Bible in their public schools. Pooling responses

Table 1 Liberal and conservative attitudes toward federal–state/local balance on various policies

[Associated Press/NORC Center for Public Affairs Research \(2021\)](#): “Regardless of your opinion about abortion, which do you think should have a larger responsibility for making laws related to abortion: each state government or the federal government?”

	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
Each state government	29% (245)	46% (532)	62% (297)
Pro-choice	26% (218)	40% (322)	61% (72)
Pro-life	52% (27)	54% (208)	62% (224)

General Social Survey (2000–2018 pooled): “The United States Supreme Court has ruled that no state or local government may require the reading of the Lord’s Prayer or Bible verses in public schools. What are your views on this? Do you approve or disapprove [of the decision]?” (disapproval — shown in table — is the federalist position).

	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
All respondents	41% (3,693)	60% (5,175)	67% (4,771)
Attend weekly	59% (711)	74% (1,439)	73% (1,978)
Attend less frequently	41% (1,811)	59% (2,472)	63% (2,039)
Do not attend	31% (1,145)	46% (1,229)	59% (747)

Kaiser Health Tracking Poll (2015): “Which level of government should be primarily responsible for creating and implementing policies to reduce the number of people abusing prescription painkillers? The federal government, state government or local government?”

	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
State/local government	51% (1,068)	59% (1,486)	69% (1,578)

(continued)

Table 1 Continued

National Survey on Energy and Environment: “For the last 50 years, a federal law has given California the ability to set stricter standards for vehicle emissions than those set in Washington, DC. This has regularly resulted in California’s standard becoming the national one over time. Would you say you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the policy that allows California to set stricter standards for vehicles?” (2017).

	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
California should be allowed	72% (183)	68% (244)	55% (220)

“For the last 50 years, a federal law has given California the ability to set stricter standards for vehicle emissions than those set in Washington, DC. If the federal government were to lower the fuel efficiency requirement for automakers, California has stated that it will seek to maintain its existing vehicle emissions standards for new cars and trucks sold in the state. Do you think California should or should not be allowed to maintain this standard if the federal government lowers the national standard?” (2018).

	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
California should be allowed	83% (172)	75% (212)	58% (190)

from surveys in the 2000s gives us a very large number of cases to work with and provides us the opportunity to introduce an important control into the relationship of ideology and attitude.⁶ Conservatives are much more likely to disagree with the court’s decision⁷ and instead to support states and localities having the ability to require a statement of religiosity in their public schools. Almost two-thirds of conservatives believe this, but only 41 percent of liberals do.

However, this pattern could in fact be explained by the fact that conservatives are much more religious on the whole than liberals. Taking that simple fact into account could diminish the ideological difference on this question. Looking at the religious, measured by self-reported attendance at services, separately from the less religious and the nonreligious, does indeed show a conditional relationship. Among conservatives, the more religious are more supportive of state/local control over school prayer than the less religious. But even among nonreligious conservatives, a significant majority—59 percent—support devolution on the issue. It is liberals whose response to the issue swings much more by religiosity. For liberals, one’s position on the question of which level of government should control school prayer is heavily determined by their religiosity. While a substantial

majority of religious liberals believe that school prayer should be determined by state and local governments, a substantial majority of nonreligious liberals believe that this should be a national policy. This is some evidence that most conservatives are more genuinely dedicated to the concept of state and local control, and that liberals approach the question more instrumentally.

We also look at an issue where there is no obvious reason that either conservatives or liberals should favor state and local control other than the application of the federalism principle to the question. In 2015, a Kaiser Family Foundation survey asked respondents “Which level of government should be primarily responsible for creating and implementing policies to reduce the number of people abusing prescription painkillers? The federal government, state government or local government?” Here, again, we observe a substantial gap between liberals and conservatives, with roughly half of liberals believing that the responsibility rests with states and localities, but 69 percent of conservatives taking that position even though there is no apparent conservative policy advantage at the state and local level. It seems a pure test of the idea that conservatives naturally prefer the devolution of power, and the results align with those above.

Finally, we probe the genuineness hypothesis by identifying an issue where conservatives, by right of their policy preferences, should desire federal control over an issue, while liberals should support state and/or local control. The issue is environmental regulation, specifically the right of a state like California to adopt greenhouse gas standards and vehicle emission controls that are stricter than the federal levels. Conservatives are notably less sympathetic to environmental regulation, from any level of government, so this issue does allow us to test, for both liberals and conservatives, whether the ideological principle of policy devolution eclipses a policy preference.⁸

The National Survey on Energy and the Environment (NSEE) annually captures attitudes on these issues, and in several years, the survey specifically has included questions about whether a state should have the right to set stricter standards than the federal government. In the 2017 NSEE survey, the question is informed by the speculation—which turned out to be correct—that the Trump Administration would overturn California’s ability to set the higher standards. The 2018 survey captures the Administration’s assertion of national policy supremacy on this issue. These questions allow us to see what happens when preference collides with principle from yet another angle.⁹

Responses to both survey questions show quite similar results. Liberals are considerably more likely than conservatives to believe that California should have the ability to set its own policies on emissions. The gaps between liberals and conservatives range from 17 percentage points in 2017 to 25 percentage points in 2018. At first glance, these findings run counter to the expectation that conservatives are wed to the federalism principle more than their policy

preferences. Yet, in both cases, majorities of conservatives still give the pro-federalism response. In the 2018, survey, for instance, 58 percent of conservatives—and 52 percent of those conservatives who do not believe in climate change (not shown)—express a view that California law should prevail. For liberals, more than 80 percent believe that California rules should prevail over the federal government's rules on this issue, with preference for the policy overwhelming any sort of notion of a unified national standard. Now it is true that given California's size and market share, automakers are likely to build their vehicles to the state's standards instead of the national standard, but that would require an extension of thinking that is not likely in the context of a survey question.

By looking at how liberals and conservatives respond to the question of the devolution of power on these various issues, we conclude that conservatives have a more principled attachment to the idea that policies are best made by states and localities. Like [Dinan and Heckelman \(2020\)](#), we find that liberals do not seem as guided by the principle of federal control or national law. Instead, their responses to these questions are more situational; even though they tend to prefer more centralized policymaking, when their policy preferences are best served by the states, they are more likely to favor state control.

Covid and the Devolution of Responsibility

Another extraordinary opportunity to test the genuineness of the conservative commitment to federalism—as well as the commitment of liberals to a dominant national government—comes with the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The question of which level of government has primary responsibility for dealing with the pandemic was omnipresent through the early months of the crisis. If ever a situation set up a conflict for ideologues, this was it. Should the federal government led by President Trump take the lead, or should that responsibility belong to the states?

What makes this a somewhat different question than those explored in the previous section is that it was not just policy at stake, but government performance and accountability. While the pandemic, of course, did require governments to promulgate policies, the additional question we study here is which level of government is best equipped to provide access to services and needed resources in the context of a crisis. It offers yet another angle on how people think about federalism, this time about the *devolution of responsibility* as much as the devolution of power.

We placed a couple of questions on the 2020 CES to study attitudes toward the devolution of responsibility in the early months of the crisis (see [table 2](#)). We asked survey respondents which level of government—the federal government or “your state government”—*should be handling* the pandemic. Our goal here was to

Table 2 Responses to federalism in the context of the COVID pandemic

	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
Which level of government do you think should be handling the Coronavirus pandemic? Your state government or the federal government. (Percent federal government)	76	57	43
Which level of government do you trust more to handle the Coronavirus pandemic? Your state government or the federal government. (Percent federal government)	24	35	49
Number of respondents in survey (weighted)	331	257	336

Source: Cooperative Election Study (CES) (2020).

establish the natural predilection of conservatives and liberals when assigning responsibility for the pandemic. Much in line with what we have shown above, liberals are profoundly more likely than conservatives to say that the federal government should have that responsibility. While 76 percent of liberals take this position, only 43 percent of conservatives do so.

We also asked respondents which level of government they *trusted* to take the lead role in the pandemic. In other words, we asked not where pandemic responsibility should lie, but where that responsibility will most likely be met. Here, as above, it is liberals who are more situational than conservatives. Even with a conservative Republican president leading the executive branch, only 49 percent of conservatives trust the federal government to lead the effort. For liberals, with Donald Trump as president, only 24 percent of them trust the federal government to lead, despite the fact that they overwhelmingly think that the federal government should do so.

This is a different aspect of federalism, not a question of which level of government should determine policies so much as which level of government can be trusted to assume responsibility in a crisis. In this case, undoubtedly, liberals were responding to a conservative president and that dominated their federalist principles. What is notable is that conservatives do not offer a mirror image. Their federalist principles more faithfully guide their opinion on which level of government should lead through the pandemic.

Explanations

Interactions with Government

Could it be that liberals and conservatives have a different stance vis-à-vis policy devolution because they have different encounters with state and local

governments? Perhaps conservatives engage more with state and local governments and thus see those governments as more benign. Perhaps the liberal mistrust of states and localities also is rooted in experience. The question of how Americans engage with state and local governments, and how they view their encounters with state and local officials, is of course enmeshed with the question of race. Black Americans and liberals may not be as friendly toward the notion of state or local power given that public safety and legal officials—generally state and local officials—have generally treated Black citizens more oppressively than white citizens and have worked within systems of institutional racism. These “government encounters,” too, could shape Black and white liberal reactions to the questions of federalism.

The only problem with the government encounters hypothesis is that it fails to gain traction from the start for there is no apparent difference in how liberals and conservatives engage with the various levels of government. Surveys that allow us to test this idea come from the early 2000s, but there is little reason to believe that these findings should be different now than then. The differences between liberals and conservatives in their engagement with various levels of government are slender and inconsistent. For instance, when asked in a [Pew Internet and American Life Poll from 2009](#), “In general, which level of government would you say you deal with most often?” 54 percent of liberals say their local government and 20 percent say the federal government. For conservatives, those percentages are 50 percent and 14 percent. In that same survey, 42 percent of liberals and 41 percent of conservatives respond “just about always” or “most of the time” when asked about their trust of local government.

The largest difference to emerge in these comparisons is from a 2006 survey¹⁰ which asks, “From what level of government do you feel you get the most for your money?” and here, surprisingly, it is conservatives who are more likely to name the federal government as providing value, 35 percent to 26 percent (and modestly less likely to name local government as providing value, 37 percent to 44 percent). It would be a mistake to overinterpret this difference as these questions do not capture assessments of the quality of government interactions, but we do come away from these analyses with modest confidence that the liberal-conservative gap in federalist attitudes does not spring from differential levels of engagement with different levels of government. And while there is an ideological difference in trust in the federal government (discussed below), there is no difference in trust of local governments.

Other Explanations

What if the ideological differences we have observed have little to do with ideology? What if they are simply a function of other ways that liberals and

conservatives differ from each other? To further explore the distinctive thinking of conservatives—and liberals—we undertake a multivariate analysis. The idea here is to see if the liberal–conservative difference holds even after we control for various correlates of ideology.

In [table 3](#), we offer a series of multivariate regressions which build successively upon each other. Using data from the 2010 Pew Survey, we start with one general question on federalism as our dependent variable. The statement “The federal government is interfering too much in state and local matters.” evokes one of the largest differences between liberals and conservatives in the Pew survey ([figure 1](#)). Our analytical strategy is to compare liberals and conservatives on this question, not to each other, but to those people who are neither liberal nor conservative. This approach allows us to look at what makes liberals and conservatives distinct. We thus create two dummy variables—one for liberals and one for conservatives, with moderates and nonideologues—people who do not identify themselves as being at any point on the scale—serving as the base category.

We start by regressing the belief that the federal government interferes too much on the liberal and conservative dummy variables. We then layer on other variables in a series of analyses to test whether these controls explain the distinctive positions of liberals and conservatives. If these controls are explanatory, then the coefficients associated with the ideology variables in the original equation should move out of statistical significance. If the controls do not reduce the significance of the ideology variables, then there remains something that explains the distinctive attitudes of liberals and/or conservatives on the question of federalism.

The first regression shows, unsurprisingly, that being a liberal or a conservative, as opposed to a moderate, is powerfully important ([table 3](#)). In this equation, liberals are less likely and conservatives are more likely than those in the base category to believe that the federal government interferes too much in state and local affairs. The coefficients associated with the two dummies are large and statistically significant and provide the basis for comparison as we add controls into the equation.

The first set of controls we introduce into the equation are demographic—education, age, and race. Could the fact that ideologues are better educated than nonideologues help explain the distinctiveness of liberals and conservatives? Perhaps the fact that conservatives are more likely to be white and older, liberals to be Black and younger, is shaping the effect of ideology on federalist attitude. Indeed, two of the three demographic control variables (education and race) achieve statistical significance in the multivariate analysis displayed in the second column in [table 3](#). Older people are not statistically different from young people, a finding surprising to us given that the oldest respondents might associate forceful federal action with the New Deal and its role in delivering the country out of the Depression. The effect of education is strong and significant; the better educated

Table 3 Certain attitudinal differences help explain why conservatives are more attached to federalism than liberals logistic regression

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Liberal	−1.01 (0.12)**	−0.84 (0.12)**	−0.28 (0.16)
Conservative	0.51 (0.12)**	0.65 (0.12)**	0.48 (0.16)**
Age		0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Education		−0.17 (0.03)**	−0.13 (0.04)**
Black		−0.22 (0.09)*	0.39 (0.11)**
Rights/Freedoms			0.58 (0.05)**
Trust in Govt			0.38 (0.07)**
Effective			0.17 (0.06)**
Regulations			1.11 (0.05)**
Constant	0.62 (0.11)**	0.87 (0.15)**	−4.96 (0.29)**
N	1,576	1,546	1,458

Source: Pew Research Center Poll on Government Trust (2010).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Federalism (Dependent Variable): “The federal government is interfering too much in state and local matters. Do you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, completely disagree?” (recoded to 0 disagree and 1 agree).

Liberal: Liberals vs. Base Category (Moderates and Respondents who Don’t Place on Scale).

Conservative: Conservatives vs. Base Category (same).

Black: Black vs. non-Black, inclusive of Asians and non-Black Latinos. Base Category is non-Black. Rights/Freedoms: “Do you think the federal government threatens your own personal rights and freedoms, or not? [If yes] Is this a major threat or a minor threat?” (1 No threat; 2 Yes, minor threat; 3 Yes, major threat).

Trust in Govt: “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?”

Effective: “All in all, how good a job does the federal government do running its programs? An excellent job, a good job, only a fair job, or a poor job?”

Regulations: “The government has gone too far in regulating business and interfering with the free enterprise system. Do you completely disagree (1), mostly disagree, mostly agree, or completely agree (4)?”

being more likely to believe that the federal government is not interfering inappropriately in state and local matters. The effect of race is real with Black respondents more supportive than non-Black respondents of national government supremacy. Introducing these demographic controls into the equation does affect

the ideology coefficients: the impact of being liberal as opposed to moderate/nonideological decreases and the impact of being conservative as opposed to moderate/nonideological increases. In both cases, however, the change in these coefficients is quite modest, and notably, these coefficients retain statistical significance. All else the same—at least, demographically—liberals and conservatives hold distinctive views on federalism from those in the middle—and certainly from each other.

Building upon this model, we add four attitudinal variables capturing various views about the federal government to the equation. As [Hetherington and Nugent \(2001\)](#) argue in their study of attitudes toward devolution, “state government popularity is, in part, a function of the federal government’s unpopularity” (138). If this is so, then the conservative attachment to a federalist structure could simply be a function of not liking the national government or viewing its authority as a problem. Alternatively, if liberals like and trust the national government more, then perhaps they mind less when the federal-state balance leans more to the former. The four controls we add to the model capture different ways that people might react to and think about the federal government:

- Do you think the federal government threatens your own personal rights and freedoms, or not? [If yes] Is this a major threat or a minor threat?
- How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?
- All in all, how good a job does the federal government do running its programs? An excellent job, a good job, only a fair job, or a poor job?
- The government has gone too far in regulating business and interfering with the free enterprise system. Do you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree?

It makes sense that people who view the federal government to be personally threatening, untrustworthy, or ineffective would be loath to see the federal government involved in state and local matters. Likewise, believing that the federal government interferes too much with our economic system also could lead to a more generalized concern about federal intrusiveness. We view these relationships with interest. But we also look at them as explanations for the distinctive perspectives on federalism of liberals and conservatives. What happens to the ideology coefficients when we account for how conservatives and liberals view the federal government?

In the third model, the four attitudinal variables all operate as expected. The more one mistrusts the federal government, finds it threatening or ineffective, and objects to its interference with private enterprise, the more likely one is to respond favorably to the federalism question.¹¹ What is noteworthy is how these controls

affect the relationship of ideology to federalist attitude. The effect of the controls is not symmetrical. When the attitudinal controls are introduced into the equation, the difference between being liberal and being moderate/not ideological shrinks notably and to a point that is no longer statistically significant. For liberals, their preference for national over state governance is explained by how they feel about the federal government. However, these controls do not explain the distinctive conservative belief that the federal government should stay out of state and local governmental business. The coefficient associated with being conservative loses a little of its power, but it remains strongly significant even in this third model. Negative views of the federal government do not fully explain why conservatives differ from moderates/nonideologues in their attitudes toward federal-state balance, at least with this particular measure in this particular survey.

The multivariate exercise is meaningful, to be sure, but it still leaves us without an answer as to what might best explain why conservatives, in particular, hold distinctive views on federalism. To further investigate, we crafted a variety of statements about federal versus state/local control to see which of them evokes the largest differences between liberals and conservatives. In this, we are taking a similar tack as [Jacobs \(2017\)](#), who seeks to understand why individuals “think federally” and how ideas about government might differentiate liberals from conservatives. In our study, respondents are asked to agree or disagree with eight different statements, each one crafted with a potential explanation for the liberal–conservative difference in mind. We placed this exercise on the 2020 CES described above.

Three of the eight statements in [table 4](#) generate very little difference between liberals and conservatives, or moderates for that matter. One possible reason for the ideological difference is that conservatives are much more likely than liberals to live in rural places where state and local public officials are naturally more likely to be politically aligned. That may be true ([Beggs, Haines, and Hurlbert 1996](#)), but it does not translate into how liberals and conservatives perceive their local and state officials. There is no difference at all in liberal and conservative responses to the statement “My state and local officials are more likely than federal officials to make decisions that I will agree with.”

One of the most prominent arguments about the benefits of federalism is that it creates a “laboratory for democracy.” When Justice Louis Brandeis coined the phrase back in 1932 in his decision in *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, 285 U.S. 262 (1932), he wrote, “It is one of the happy incidents of the federalist system that a single courageous State may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.” Brandeis wrote this in the last paragraph of the decision, without a great deal of exposition, but the metaphor and this pro-federalism argument have long resonated. We were eager to see whether the “laboratory” argument resonates in

contemporary times, and whether it does so with some people more than others. The answer to the first question is a likely yes. A strong majority of people—over 60 percent—agree that “giving power to state and local governments provides opportunities to experiment with policies.” For our purposes, however, acceptance of the idea does not vary much across the ideological spectrum. Conservatives may be more enamored with federalism conceptually, but not because they are more likely than liberals to believe in the “democratic laboratory.”

Likewise, the statement “It’s best when decisions are made by officials who are most in touch with the people” does little to distinguish liberals from conservatives. In conceiving this statement, we hypothesized that perhaps conservatives might be more populist in their orientation to government or more accepting of what [Shaw and Reinhart \(2001\)](#) call “the old antifederalist argument that government close to the people is good government” (370). The fact is that an overwhelming percentage of all respondents—left, center, and right—want their representatives to be “close” to “the people,” however that is defined. Indeed, liberals are modestly *more* likely than conservatives to agree with the statement and moderates modestly less so. But the key to understanding the ideological difference in attitudes toward federalism clearly does not rest with a populist explanation.

Three other statements do modestly distinguish between liberals and conservatives, the differences ranging between 10 and 20 percentage points. For instance, conservatives are more likely than liberals to agree that “Throughout history, the federal government has been more likely than state and local governments to infringe on the rights of individuals,” while liberals are more likely than conservatives to agree that “Throughout history, state and local governments have been more likely than the federal government to infringe on the rights of minority groups” and “It’s important to have policies made by the national government so that all citizens are treated fairly and equally.” These differences are meaningful, and the findings suggest that some of the difference in how liberals and conservatives think about federalism has to do with how they think about whether and how the government respects the rights of individuals versus those of groups. This would be consistent with what [Grossmann and Hopkins \(2016\)](#) argue is a fundamental difference between the left and the right, with the former concerned with group interests and the latter concerned with individual liberties.

The biggest differences, however, emerge in responses to two other statements. The two statements offer the most basic of ideas, but they clearly capture fundamentally different orientations toward how power and responsibility should be divided between national and state governments. The term “states’ rights” has lingered for decades and over the course of the Jim Crow Era came to represent the defense of segregation. The point was not that segregation was somehow right—though, of course, that was a common belief among southern whites—but

Table 4 Some explanations for devolution divide ideologues more than others (percent agree/strongly agree)

	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives	Lib-Con Difference
“My state and local officials are more likely than federal officials to make decisions that I will agree with.”	47	47	44	−3
“It’s best when decisions are made by officials who are most in touch with the people.”	89	77	84	−5
“Giving power to state and local governments provides opportunities to experiment with policies.”	57	55	64	7
“Throughout history, the federal government has been more likely than state and local governments to infringe on the rights of individuals.”	31	31	43	12
“It’s important to have policies made by the national government so that all citizens are treated fairly and equally.”	76	69	64	−12
“Throughout history, state and local governments have more likely than the federal government to infringe on the rights of minority groups.”	59	45	42	−17
“States’ Rights’ is an important principle.”	52	72	87	35
“I trust smaller governments more than larger governments.”	34	47	73	39
Number of respondents in survey (weighted)	331	257	336	

Source: [Cooperative Election Study \(CES\) \(2020\)](#).

that southerners had a right to their own societal rules without interference from the federal government. The rhetorical strategy of southern politicians was to conflate federal interference in state affairs with authoritarianism or even communism. States’ rights are “the only guarantee we have that a kind of Kremlin will not be established in Washington,” as Strom Thurmond put it as he was campaigning for president as a Dixiecrat in 1948 ([New York Times 1948](#)).

Conspicuously, both liberals and conservatives respond to the term “states’ rights,” but they diverge a lot with conservatives much more likely to agree that this is an “important principle.” It is difficult to interpret this as anything but a profoundly different reaction to racial change and civil rights. Conservatives are much more likely than liberals to express racial resentment in the CES survey (and in almost every study) and taking this into account does explain some but not all

of the ideological difference we see on this item. On one CES question asking for a response to the statement, “Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors,” the differences between liberals and conservatives are stark (4 percent of the former and 67 percent of the latter agree). On another, “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class,” the differences are even broader with 84 percent of liberals and 14 percent of conservatives in agreement.

To see what difference racial attitudes make to the States’ Rights responses, we regress the States’ Rights question on two dummy variables capturing liberals and conservatives, as well as on some demographic controls (including a dummy variable capturing Black respondents). We then create a racial resentment scale from the two items above and add that variable to that equation.¹² As seen in [table 5](#), the coefficients associated with the two ideology dummies do shrink, but remain significant in the second equation, the conservative coefficient at 0.05 rather than 0.01 significance. The results suggest that the conservative attachment to and liberal concern about federalism are informed by the fact that “states’ rights” became code for resisting racial change, but do not explain the entire relationship.¹³

The other question that profoundly distinguishes between liberals and conservatives is one that captures a different orientation toward things big and small. Three-quarters of conservatives, and just short of one-third of liberals “trust smaller governments more than larger governments.” The question does not involve a sophisticated analysis on the part of the respondent, but simply captures a response to size and perhaps to the complexity and bureaucracy that accompany larger units of government as well as the diversity of their jurisdictions. Smaller governments, on the other hand, are more likely to preside over more homogenous populations and tend to be less complex organizations.

This is certainly consistent with various psychological studies that show that liberals and conservatives respond differently to complexity, bureaucracy, and diversity. [Carney et al. \(2008\)](#), for instance, discuss how liberals are far more likely than conservatives to tolerate messiness, and to be comfortable with difference. Believing that power should devolve into smaller units—states or even localities—is thus consistent with the psychological predispositions that many conservatives have. While it is true that a federalist system is, in some ways, “messier” with policies varying across the landscape, individuals tend only to live in one state and one locality, and conservatives clearly have more comfort with the smaller units. Liberals, on the other hand, are less likely to have a bad reaction to those things in the polity that require a stronger central government, or the various features of such a government.

Table 5 Racial attitudes explain some, not all, of the relationship between ideology and a favorable view of states’ rights logistic regression

	Model 1	Model 2
Liberal	−0.63 (0.09)**	−0.42 (0.10)**
Conservative	0.34 (0.08)**	0.22 (0.10)*
Age	−0.003 (0.002)	−0.003 (0.002)
Education	−0.04 (0.02)	−0.04 (0.02)
Black	0.27 (0.11)**	0.51 (0.12)**
Racial resentment		0.08 (0.02)**
Constant	9.48 (3.78)**	9.31 (.4.34)*
N	921	801

Source: Cooperative Election Study (CES) (2020).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

States’ Rights (Dependent Variable): “States’ rights is an important principle.” (1 disagree strongly to 5 agree strongly).

Liberal: Liberals vs. Base Category (Moderates and Respondents who Don’t Place on Scale).

Conservative: Conservatives vs. Base Category (same).

Black: Black vs. non-Black, inclusive of Asians and non-Black Latinos. Base Category is non-Black. Racial Resentment: “Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors”; and “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class.” Both variables are five-point items (agree strongly to disagree strongly). The first variable has been recoded so that disagreement is the resentful response and then aggregated with the second variable to form a nine-point scale.

Before concluding, we make one final observation. Kam and Mikos (2007) show experimentally that when subjects are primed to consider the value of devolution, they respond. In their study, which looked at attitudes toward a federal ban on physician-assisted suicide, subjects were significantly influenced by elite discourse on the issue. If it is Republican politicians much more than Democratic politicians who are expounding upon the virtues of federalism—and that does appear to be the case, at least since the Reagan years—then Kam and Mikos’ findings would help to explain the relatively consistent differences between liberals and conservatives that appear above. The question then goes back to why Republican and conservative politicians have absorbed the value of federalism more than Democrats and liberals, and that would require a different kind of study, though certainly one worth pursuing.

Conclusion

In this set of studies, we find that conservatives are more supportive of federalism than liberals. It is a finding that is in line with expectations set by how elites talk about federalism, and it is a finding well supported in the political science literature. Regarding the devolution of power, the question of which governmental-level policy decisions should be made where, the relationship, we argue, is not symmetrical. Liberals are more favorable to power invested in a strong central government, to be sure, but it is not necessarily a principle with them, and they are generally less consistent on the question when asked about it in the context of real-world situations. Liberals are more likely to take the position that the level of government that will best deliver their desired policy outcome should have the power to do so. Among conservatives, however, some attachment to the principle of federalism is evident even when the federal government is pursuing conservative policy or state governments are pursuing liberal policy, and even when the federal government is led by a conservative.

Why might conservatives be more attached to the principle of federalism or the devolution of power downward? We argue that some of the conservative partiality toward federalism comes from its incorporation into the foundation of ideas and beliefs that constitute the ideology. Because it was such an important founding principle, reverence for it among conservatives is not that surprising. But more likely than this, federalism is compatible with how conservatives (as opposed to liberals or others) think about power and responsibility. That conservatives prefer “small” to “big” government, we argue, is a function of how they respond to complexity, diversity, bureaucracy, and conformity, among other things. There is, too, a meaningful element of racial resistance in the conservative embrace of federalism and that makes conservative consistency less virtuous. Nonetheless, the conservative belief that power and responsibility should devolve to states does appear to be rooted in principle in a way that does not seem to be guiding liberals on important questions of federal versus state authority.

Notes

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1. Verlan Lewis (2019), in his expansive historical study of party, ideology, and power, argues differently, making the case that both liberals and conservatives (and the parties they constitute) have been flexibly instrumental in their beliefs about “power and who should or should not wield it” (xv). In this view, politics shapes ideas as much as ideas

shape politics. His study looks more at the branches of the federal government than the division of power between the central government and the states but could well apply to the latter.

2. Here, and throughout, we include results for moderates, as a comparison point. In our multivariate analysis, moderates become the base category. But we generally do not discuss these results given the aspirations of our project.
3. There are 331 liberals and 336 conservatives in the CES survey.
4. This is not an unusual circumstance. [Bowman and Krause \(2003\)](#), in their study of American policy devolution in the second half of the twentieth century, show that the amount of policy decentralization does not vary significantly across the time period. Politicians in both parties, they conclude, are instrumental in their use of federalism, pursuing their preferred policies with the power that they have, whether it be national or state and local. See also [Conlan and Dinan \(2007\)](#).
5. The AP/NORC poll question is, "Which comes closest to your opinion on abortion?" and has four response categories (legal in all or most cases; illegal in all or most cases). We consider the first two responses to be "pro-choice," the latter "pro-life."
6. The GSS school prayer question wording is completely consistent over this period of time.
7. While "disagreeing" with "disallowing" creates a double negative in the question, which is not ideal in survey research, there is little reason to believe that this construction should affect one set of respondents more than another.
8. It is worth noting that the conflict between policy and principle was not lost on the Republican administration or on the Democrats in California defending their standards. Said Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler about the issue, "We embrace federalism and the role of the states, but federalism does not mean that one state can dictate the standards for the nation." On the other side, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra highlighted Republican hypocrisy in his commentary on the situation: "Our message to those who claim to support states' rights is 'Don't trample on ours.' We cannot afford to backslide in our battle against climate change" (both quotes in [Davenport 2019](#)).
9. We should note that in general, even when Democrats have controlled the federal government, most citizens, including conservatives, recognize that federal supremacy on environmental issues does make some sense. After all, pollution, climate change, and environmental degradation do not recognize state boundaries. See [Jacobs \(2017\)](#), [Schneider, Jacoby, and Lewis \(2011\)](#) and [Konisky \(2011\)](#).
10. John F. Kennedy School of Government Social Capital Community Survey.
11. Some of the variables have been recoded so that the direction of the coefficients can be interpreted similarly.
12. To enhance the intuition of the results, we have recoded the States' Rights variable so that higher values equate to support for states' rights. The resentment scale is coded so that higher values represent higher levels of resentment.
13. The negative (and significant) coefficient associated with Blacks (versus non-Blacks) is a surprise in this equation, suggesting that perhaps "States' rights" no longer is associated with Jim Crow politics for this population.

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