Robert Booth Fowler’s *Enduring Liberalism: American Political Thought since the 1960s* is a journey back in time to a period that feels at once immediately familiar and incredibly distant from 2020. Originally published in 1999, *Enduring Liberalism* examines the competing ideas of prominent and not-so-prominent US political thinkers of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. It is a reminder of who qualified as a “public intellectual” in those decades—a far less diverse lot in terms of race and gender than our current roster—and what social and political issues commanded their attention. (The “African-American family” and “civil society” received a lot of ink; the criminal justice system not so much.) *Enduring Liberalism* makes a simple, two-part argument. First, that American political thought since the 1960s has repeatedly challenged, criticized, and attempted to redirect American liberalism, defined here in the philosophical sense as the norms undergirding representative government, a market-based economy, and individual freedom and personal autonomy (within reasonable limits). Second, that Americans who are not public intellectuals are pretty happy with liberal norms and institutions; despite everything we might hear from the intellectuals, liberalism has an enduring appeal.

In making this argument, Fowler engages with a long-standing argument in American intellectual history about the relative degree of conflict or consensus in the United States’ past. So-called consensus scholars of the mid-twentieth century, such as Richard Hofstadter and Louis Hartz, argued that American political thought took place in a relatively narrow band of ideas and practices, including a commitment to representative democracy and a capitalist free market. Progressives and conservatives, abolitionists and slaveholders, union members and employers all fought bitterly at times, but they still managed to share a respect for certain ground rules of American political and social life. Scholars since the 1960s have rejected this narrative, for example
by uncovering the histories of radicals and other political outliers or by paying more attention to the distinctive perspectives of women, Blacks, Native Americans, and other groups that were disenfranchised during much of the country’s “liberal” past (and remain underrepresented and underempowered today). Meanwhile, new generations of scholars and public intellectuals have found liberalism wanting in various ways: its self-centered nature undermines efforts to build community, and its responsiveness to short-term human desires and political influence makes it impossible to tackle long-term challenges requiring private and public self-denial, especially regarding the global environment.

Whether those profound disagreements and intellectual conflicts ultimately matter beyond the world of academia and small journals devoted to public ideas is another matter. Fowler synthesizes political theory with public opinion research to suggest that as much as some Americans might yearn for more authentic community or want to take on global warming, they do not want the institutional or intellectual revolution sometimes presumed necessary to make it happen. (Needless to say, the average American is even less likely to believe they inhabit the world of the mid-1990s postmodernist theorist, in which language creates its own quasireality.) So, perhaps, the most relevant political thought that Fowler catalogues comes from thinkers who are willing to simultaneously criticize and accommodate themselves to American liberal traditions. Or, as Fowler puts it, to solve America’s problems “we have to understand the public’s widely shared liberal values that lie below the sometime raucous policy disputes” (251).

Is this still the case today? I am writing this in September 2020, at a moment when liberal institutions are under significant stress in the United States. Just this month, the current occupant of the White House has repeatedly declined to promise that he would allow a peaceful transfer of power should he lose November’s presidential election. A few days earlier, the Atlantic reported that the president’s reelection campaign had spoken to state representatives in certain swing states about possibly rejecting the outcome of the vote and announcing a slate of electors based on their own partisan preferences. Donald Trump seems to know little and care less about what had previously been considered basic norms of liberal, representative government. More surprisingly, neither his willful ignorance nor his expressions of admiration for foreign strongmen appear to be a liability among many of his supporters. Rather, Trump seem to have tapped into a significant well of illiberal, proto-authoritarian public opinion in the United States. The
FBI recently warned that armed groups of white supremacists may constitute the primary terrorism threat in America today.

To be sure, there have also been spasms of left-wing illiberalism, as well. The extent of it is sometimes oversold. (Protesting a speech by a political figure you deem to be morally abhorrent is well within the liberal tradition of free expression.) But some thinkers and activists involved with, say, the “antifa” (short for antifascist) left believe that liberal norms and institutions are incapable of meeting the challenge of an authoritarian right and that right-wing groups need to be confronted, with physical force if necessary, in the streets. And now, as before, public intellectuals assail liberalism for its weakness and internal contradictions. One of the most discussed books by any American political theorist in recent years was written by the right-leaning theorist Patrick Deneen and titled *Why Liberalism Failed*. Note that the title purports to be a statement of present-day fact, not an intellectual question or matter of future concern.

This is in part because the institutions of American government have, in fact, screwed up repeatedly in the two decades since *Enduring Liberalism* was originally published. The contested presidential election of 2000, the terrorist attacks of September 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that followed them, the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession, the political rise of Trump, the failure to contain a deadly pandemic—all of these events have shaken the confidence that many Americans might have had in their government and its institutions, from its ability to obtain a mutually acceptable vote-count to its ability to protect the financial security and public health of its citizens. Meanwhile, the decline of mediating institutions and the rise of interactive social media have created new spaces for conspiracy theories to flourish, public pessimism to be reinforced, and mob mentalities to be unleashed. These too threaten liberal institutions and the norms that make them possible.

At the same time, evidence suggests that tens of thousands of Americans have already voted in this fall’s general election, with many more to come before and on November 3; nearly all of them presumably expect that their ballot will be counted and used to determine who will control the White House and Congress. At least at the moment, the polls suggest that Americans prefer the candidate who promises a restoration of liberal norms instead of the president who has been shredding them. It is far from clear that Trump could find a way to cling to power despite losing the popular vote in the crucial swing states, even if he were willing to try; nor is it clear that the armed, right-wing
groups that look forward to a second civil war are remotely capable of instigating one. Fowler obviously understood how a public philosophy could at once strain under the weight of its internal contradictions and still retain the faith of the vast majority. The eventual reader of this preface will have a better idea than its author whether American liberalism reached the limits of its endurance in the fall of 2020 or found, in this difficult time, a second wind.

Jefferson Decker
New Brunswick, NJ
September 2020