

My Politics

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Abstract

America stands at the crossroads. The recent 2012 presidential election has made it clear that the population is deeply divided. One problem with the present political system is that few people seem to take the time to formulate their political views with any amount of deliberation. Many, if not most, people have adopted their political parties and views from their parents, without delving deeply into the issues that define these views.

In this brief essay, I would like to put forth the thinking that has informed my personal political philosophy. First, as background, I will outline the divide that exists in America today. Then, I will indicate the reasons for coming down on one side of the divide.

I. Background

To understand the nature of the political divide in the United States, one needs information about the divide. The key point of contention dividing people today is the view of the functions of government. The difference of opinion manifests itself along more than one dimension.

(1) Central versus state governments

At the very beginning of the formation of the nation, a key dividing issue was whether the country should have a strong central government or a weak central government with the main functions of government located at the state level. This division existed even among the Founders. For example, President Thomas Jefferson advocated that states should conduct most government functions, with the central (Federal) government playing a supporting role. He was a central figure at the beginning of the republic, being the principle author of the Declaration of Independence, ambassador to France (the key ally helping obtain independence from Great Britain), the second vice-president and third president of the country. Other, equally august figures advocated a strong central government that played the leading role in the governance of the country. This side was represented by Alexander Hamilton (first secretary of the treasury), John Adams (second president) and

indeed George Washington (Commander of Revolutionary forces and first president under the Constitution).

The country began with a weak, or one might say nonexistent, central government. The first national constitution was called the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union, but it created not a country, but rather a confederation of states. The central organ under this document was a congress, but one that had few powers of its own. It relied on unanimous votes to operate.

The Articles of Confederation (as it is usually known) fulfilled one principle function: to legitimize the Independence movement against Great Britain. Without it, independence would have been seen as nothing more than a rebellion, and few European powers would have supported it. The support of other European countries (especially the support of France) was crucial to the success of the Revolution.

Despite their importance for legitimizing the Revolutionary movement, the Articles were nonetheless adopted only in 1781, four years after being completed and only two years before the end of the Revolutionary War. The length of time needed to ratify the Articles speaks to the difficulty of the philosophy they embody for governance.

The deficiencies of the position soon became manifest. For example, the central government had no power to levy taxes, but rather had to rely on each state making voluntary payments. Many states failed to meet this obligation, and the central government had no recourse. Another issue was that changing laws at the national level required all 13 states to ratify any changes. Such unanimous ratifications were difficult to bring about. In 1787, a conference was called to amend the Articles and state representatives gathered in Philadelphia. However, beginning with George Washington, who held no government position at the time, the delegates soon moved to discard the Articles all together and write an entirely new constitution, which resulted in the present Constitution.

The present Constitution was finished and came into force after ratification by the requisite nine states on September 13, 1788. Note that the Constitution did not require unanimous consent to come into force, although, eventually, all thirteen states did ratify it. Still, arguments remained concerning how strong that central government should be. Under the Constitution, the states retained certain rights that the central government could not overrule. Gradually, the Federal (central) government claimed more and more power, and

the Federal government clashed more and more with the states. The clash finally came to a head over the issue of slavery, resulting in the Civil War (1861-1865).

This division of opinions as to the balance between the central government and state governments has lasted to the present day. Recently, during hurricane Sandy, the issue flared again. One candidate for president had expressed the opinion early in the campaign that responsibility for disaster relief, currently residing with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, should devolve back to the states since they allegedly handle disaster relief more efficiently. Others, however, noted that since the hurricane affected an area covering more than one state, disaster relief was better handled at the national level.

(2) Small versus large government

A second dimension to the divide over government functioning is the one of small versus large government. Some say, “that government is best which governs least.”¹ This idea is that government’s role is to provide for the common defense and operate police forces. “It should not play the role of distributing wealth or dictating the private decisions of its citizens.”² This view found clear expression in the works of the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, especially his book, *The Road to Serfdom*. This book has enjoyed resurgent popularity recently even though it was published in 1944 (March in England and September in the United States).

The contrasting view is that government has a responsibility to help its citizens. Economic Nobel laureate Paul Krugman presents this position in his numerous writings. Government is to provide a safety net for its citizens. Life in the modern industrial society can be precarious. Accidents, unrest in foreign countries, currency fluctuations, unforeseen illnesses and a host of other factors make life unsure. Government should function to counterbalance these vicissitudes.

(3) Government versus private sector

A third dimension in the divide is connected with the previous one. The split is not, “the state government vs. the federal government,” and not, “small government vs. large

¹This quote is usually attributed to Thomas Jefferson, but it was from the magazine, *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in 1837, although it does reflect opinions of Jefferson and others.

² (<http://www.policymic.com/articles/2271/that-government-is-best-which-governs-least>, accessed November 17, 2012)

government,” but rather “government vs. the private sector.” In this view, private companies are much more efficient in accomplishing almost anything. An extension of this view is the view that great capitalists play the driving role pushing forward the nation’s economic well-being. People such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and others are responsible for making the economy successful. Furthermore, imposing restrictions on these builders will punish success and retard economic prosperity. Therefore, as much as possible, taxes on such people must be reduced so that they are free to create the jobs that employ the general populace.

An opposing view posits success as being due to not only private efforts and hard work, but also due to the concerted efforts of a society as a whole. Success depends on a strong infrastructure that cannot be delivered by private enterprise. Advocates point out that the post-World War II economic success of the United States relied on the interstate system of roads built in the 1950s by the federal government. One must have roads to deliver products to the market. Success in the 19th century rested on the extensive network of waterways for transportation built by the government.

Furthermore, this opposing view argues not only that entrepreneurs require strong support from the government, but also private enterprise is not efficient in all segments of the economy. For example, private enterprise has proven quite inefficient at delivering health care. If one is purchasing products for everyday use, one option is not to buy. If a price is too high, one can always forgo the purchase. However, if one has a heart attack, the option to forgo a hospital stay does not exist. Furthermore, administration costs for private health plans are much more expensive than care provided by a government. Many insurance companies spend much money on actually keeping sick people out of their insurance plans. People with pre-existing conditions find it impossible to find insurance. In insisting on keeping health care out of government hands, the American people have built the most expensive health-care delivery system in the world. For example, health care costs twice as much as in the US as in Canada.³

³ See for example <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2012/10/health-costs-how-the-us-compares-with-other-countries.html>. Accessed 12/15/2012.

(4) Government versus non-government intervention

A fourth dimension dividing the country is one in which normally government-shy advocates often support government intervention in society. This area concerns social issues such as the separation of church and state or legal restrictions on drug usage.

A recurring clash exists between those who want to recognize a place for religion in the government. This place might be a city government displaying the nativity scene (of the birth of Christ) during the Christmas season, or a public school incorporating a period of prayer in each day's schedule. Most Americans, however, hold the view that religion and government should not mix.

Related to the clash over religion is a clash over abortion. Whereas one can see a religious reason for limiting or indeed outlawing abortion, one can also see the issue anchored in purely moral considerations.

A third clash exists between those who wish to legalize drug use. In the last few years, some states have passed laws permitting the use of marijuana for medical use because some people with terminal cancer find marijuana to be the only way to alleviate their pain. California, among other states, has allowed such usage for several years. The 2012 election saw two states asking the voters to permit the recreational usage of marijuana. That is, the government should treat the drug the same as alcohol or cigarettes, freely available but restricted to adults.

To summarize, since the founding of the republic, citizens of the United States have been divided along four dimensions according to different opinions about the functions of the government. The first dimension divides people into those who claim that the state government should be the locus of government and those who claim that the federal government should be the locus. The second dimension divides people into small and large government people. The third dimension marks those who think government should do as little as possible, leaving most functions of society to private enterprise. The fourth divides those who would see the government maintain certain moral standards in the country and those who would have the government keep out of the private lives of citizens.

Coming down on one side

Now that I have delineated the dimensions of some of the main divisions in the American polity, I would like to present a logical case for taking one side in each dimension.

(1) Central versus state governments

Along the state-federal dimension, I would say that certain functions of government work better at the state and others at the federal level.

This argument originally arose because at the beginning of the country, the states, which were colonies under British rule, were much more separate than they are today. They had always operated as separate entities and often felt more connection with Great Britain than with other colonies. Certain states saw a danger in uniting to form a stronger government. The southern states required assurances that their right to slaves would not be abolished by a strong central government, and smaller states needed assurances that they would not be at a disadvantage compared with larger states. The right to slavery has since been dealt with in the Civil War. The structure of the upper house of the legislature, in which each state gets two representatives regardless of population, provides protection to the smaller states.

Today the issue revolves around some states wanting to institute policies that they cannot pass on the national level. The country is still quite diverse, with different regions of the country having different characteristics. In the recent election, though President Obama won the election, he did rather poorly in the American South. These are the states that especially push “states rights,” the view that states have the right to have policies differing from the national government. Similarly, some states wish to loosen drug restrictions. The citizens of two states voted in the recent election to decriminalize the use of marijuana for recreational use.

Certainly, some areas of government policy such as education are better handled on the state level. However, the federal government needs to assert itself at times. The civil movement, which allowed the greater civil participation of people of color (African-Americans and Hispanics), would have suffered greatly without federal intervention. The Supreme Court case, *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeca, Kansas*, required schools to accept children of all colors without discrimination. At the time of this decision some states attempted to ignore the court’s finding. In particular, the state of Arkansas attempted to bar a group of African-American students from enrolling in a public high school. President Eisenhower had to order out the US army to enforce court-ordered desegregation. Without the intercession of the Federal government, the state would have significantly curtailed the rights of citizenship of some of its residents.

So, some advocates of states rights have a hidden agenda. Others will advocate for states rights but have no trouble taking federal funds for accomplishing their purposes. In the recent election, candidate Romney advocated states rights, but when he was head organizer of the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, the Olympics were successful in part because of an infusion of \$1.5 billion (\$1,500,000,000) from Congress.⁴

(2) Small versus large government

The small-big dimension reflects differing ideas about the function of the government. Letting government grow large will ultimately restrict the freedoms that citizens enjoy, according to anti-government advocates. However, if one takes a closer look, one sees that even those advocating small government could not govern successfully without government.

First, measuring the size of the government presents some problems in operationalization. Some measure size as the percent of government spending to gross national product (GDP), whereas others measure size as the amount of taxes collected⁵ as a percent of GDP. Both of these measures, however, leave out what economists call tax preferences. These preferences include such things as tax deductions or tax credits. Indeed a recent book⁶ details the myriad of tax preferences that people use to reduce their tax bills.

Let's take a closer look at small-government advocates. These days the small-government advocate who first comes to mind is President Ronald Reagan. But note: A respected historian of presidents in his book about Reagan concludes, "Tax cuts [made under Reagan] did not shrink government deficits or increase private investment. And Reagan did not reduce the size of government"⁷ For details we can turn to a CNN article entitled, "Taxes: What people forget about Reagan," which compares the 40-year average of tax revenue (% of GNP) to the average under Reagan. The 40-year average is 18.1% of GDP whereas the Reagan-era average was 18.2%.⁸

⁴ <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/07/mitt-romney-expensive-olympics-federal-funding> accessed November 25, 2012.

⁵ Donald Marron and Eric Toder. (2012). How big is the federal government? Tax Policy Center.

⁶ Brian Miller and Mike Lapham. (2012). *The Self-Made Myth: And the Truth about How Government Helps Individuals and Businesses Succeed*.

⁷ Sean Wilentz. (2009). *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*. Harper (New York).

⁸ Ibid.

We can cite an equally clear example from an era that predated Reagan's. Historian Steven Conn⁹ illustrates the chasm in the philosophy and reality of Senator Barry Goldwater. The senator from the state of Arizona is credited with being a forefather of the anti-government rhetoric practiced by the Tea Party movement of the last few years. Goldwater claimed, "Individual initiative made the desert bloom." However, Arizona, being a desert, has required dozens of federally-funded irrigation projects to become amenable to humans.

One problem for those advocating a smaller government is how to bring it about, especially in the current economic downturn. The government provides a safety net that people cannot get elsewhere. Indeed, some who have opposed safety-net spending are finding themselves in need of such aid. Ki Gulbranson, a private citizen, used to support politicians promising to cut spending. Since the economic crisis beginning 2008, he has had to rely on a yearly government subsidy of several thousand dollars. Called the earned-income tax credit, it provides money to the working poor. He has also arranged for his school-age children to receive a free breakfast and lunch at the federal government expense.¹⁰

It is clear to me that citizens cannot do without the help of the federal government. Conn¹¹ has recently produced a book showing all the ways that government makes society better.

(3) Government versus the private sector

One can evaluate the third dimension by looking at a few concrete examples, in which private enterprise was able or unable to substitute for government. Space limits me to relating only two examples.

⁹ Steven Conn. (2012). Central Government: 13 Reasons Why Big Government Matters. Huffington Post (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-conn/central-government-book_b_1777321.html) accessed 12/2/2012.

¹⁰ Binyamin Appelbaum and Robert Gebeloff (2012). Even critics of safety net increasingly depend on it. *New York Magazine* accessed at http://www.newyorker.com/talk/financial/2012/10/08/121008ta_talk_surowiecki, 12/10/2012.

¹¹ Steven Conn. (2012). *To promote the general welfare: The case for big government*. Oxford University Press, USA.

The first example concerns the most important resource for living—water¹². The western part of the United States is a land of little rain. Clouds that cross the Pacific hit the west coast and lose some water, but lose most of their water hitting the Sierra Nevada/Cascade Mountain Ranges. In fact, they lose all their water. The west side of the mountain range may get 150 inches (381 cm) of precipitation a year, whereas the eastern side may get no more than four (10.16 cm).¹³ Therefore, there must be some way to distribute this water throughout the region if people are going to live there. The distribution is done through an extensive system of dams and aqueducts. California alone has around 1251 major reservoirs.¹⁴ The largest river in the western United States, the Colorado, which flows from the center of the Rocky Mountains into the Gulf of Baja California, provides water as well as electric power for more than 40 million people in seven US and two Mexican states. Without the system of dams, reservoirs and aqueducts, much of the southwest US would have to be abandoned.

Cadillac Desert details how private enterprises tried and failed to deliver water to the area. In the end, the money for the water system was a part of the New Deal stimulus under President Roosevelt. In the present day, when we honor independent farmers, we should not forget that the government played a key role in their success.

The second example concerns the military. To carry out their mission, soldiers need a large network of support. People must coordinate the transportation of troops to battles. People must cook and feed the soldiers. Until recently, soldiers themselves carried out these roles. However, private contractors have taken over many of these functions. The reasoning is that “the private sector is the primary source of creativity, innovation, and efficiency in our society, and is more likely than government organizations to provide cost-effective support to the Nation’s military forces¹⁵”.

Television news reporter Rachel Maddow writes about the privatization of support services in the military. It began in earnest when the US military went into the Balkans to

¹² Marc Reisner. (1993). *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*. Penguin Books, Inc. (Kindle)

¹³ *Ibid.*, location 145.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, location 268.

¹⁵ Rachel Maddow. (2012). *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power*. Crown. location 161.

keep the peace between the warring Bosnians, Croats and Serbians. One company, Brown & Root Services, provided such services as building barracks, feeding, laundering clothes and bedding, delivering the mail, and even seeing to recreational needs of the troops. Maddow illustrates their efficiency by noting that they shipped plywood from the US, thus turning a \$14 product into a \$86 product.

One can conclude from these cases that the private sector is in no way necessarily better than the government. Therefore, for any given government function one needs to study thoroughly how to fulfill that function. Can the government deliver the service more cheaply itself or can a company (or companies) from the private sector do it more cheaply?

(4) Government versus non-government intervention

The final dimension is difficult. For the previous three dimensions, if one knows which side a person takes on one dimension, then one can predict which side that person will take on other dimensions. However, this dimension is slightly different. Some who side with the federal government and large government and look skeptically on the private sector for traditional government functions might nevertheless see a government role for intervening on social issues. For example, Vice-president Biden, the current occupant of the office, takes a basically anti-abortion position since he is a Catholic. However, on the other dimensions, he sees a greater role for government. In contrast, people who call themselves Libertarians see a restricted role for government even in this realm. Indeed, Senator Barry Goldwater, otherwise identified with small government, carried that philosophy into the area of morals. He advocated a liberal position on abortion, and at one time introduced legislation to legalize marijuana¹⁶.

My own view sees the government functioning to smooth out the vicissitudes of life and providing services that the private sector either cannot or is inefficient at. However, in the case of religion, the federal (or state or city) cannot protect the rights of all citizens if it is favoring one religion or religions. Europe has seen most of its wars fought because of religious differences. The problem with government intervening on abortion is that the issue is extremely complex. The advance of science has only made a complex subject even more complex. As for drugs, the government has an interest in seeing certain drugs controlled,

¹⁶ Steve Erickson. (2012). I was a teenage conservative.

<http://prospect.org/article/i-was-teenage-conservative>. accessed 12/8/2012.

such as hallucinogens since these drugs can cause people to harm others. However, science has yet to show that marijuana causes harm to anyone but the one taking it. Similar to cigarettes or alcohol, the government does have an interest in preventing minors from using the drug.

III. Conclusion

In this brief essay, I have laid out what I hope are cogent reasons for taking one side in the debates that divided Americans today. I have delineated four dimensions along which Americans are divided: Central vs. state government, small vs. large government, government vs. the private sector, and intervention in social issues vs. non-intervention. All of these dimensions are complex and one can take a host of positions on each. However, good governance of the country demands that citizens take the time to establish a cogent view on each dimension.

