

Do Republicans believe in small government?

Scott Petersen
Seijoh University

The United States has basically only two political parties. Various other parties exist—such as the Peace and Freedom Party, the Green Party, the American Independent Party and the Libertarian Party—but none of these parties has ever had a chance at prevailing at the polls and winning an election. Indeed, third parties often draw voters from one of the main parties, allowing the other main party to win the election. This is what happened in 1912, when the third-party candidacy of former Republican president Theodore Roosevelt drew votes from the Republican candidate and gave the election to the Democrat, Woodrow Wilson.

One of the main philosophical differences between the two main parties rests on differences in the view of the size of the federal government. Democrats supposedly advocate big government and the Republicans supposedly advocate small government. President Ronald Reagan brought the issue to the fore in his First Inaugural Address when he asserted that “... government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem”¹.

This view becomes reflected in media description of the two parties. However, is this difference in views truly representative of the two parties? I would like to explore this issue.

Definition

When undertaking the examination of any controversial issue, the most important preliminary task is to define the terms. What does big or small government mean?

One strain of the definition concerns the functions of government.

What does “big government” mean? “Big government” is a government that is bloated, spends far too much money and is overly intrusive in the lives of its citizens.

When people advocate for a leaner or smaller government, they are advocating for less government bloat, less money spent on government salaries and general government

¹ http://www.reaganfoundation.org/pdf/Inaugural_Address_012081.pdf. Accessed November 27, 2015.

expenditures, and less intrusion into the lives of individuals and private businesses.²

Problems with this definition abound. What does *bloated* mean? What does *spends too much* mean? What does *overly intrusive* mean?

Here is another definition:

Big government is a term generally used in a pejorative manner by factions on the political right or by those who believe in individual freedoms to describe a government that is too intrusive in too many areas of individual citizens' lives. This could include criticisms of governments that try to exercise too much control over business, but also includes criticisms of governments that aim to provide too much welfare, or are too prescriptive on preventative health issues, for example by trying to influence behaviour on smoking or eating. Typically, when people use the term big government, they are also describing a government that is physically large and expensive to run.³

The most salient piece of new information is that the term is used pejoratively.

How did a record of Reagan's presidency compare to this advocacy of small government? Joan Claybrook, president of Public Citizen, a public policy and advocacy organization, summarized the record in an article in the *New York Times*.⁴ She noted that at the end of his first term, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office projected that Reagan would increase the national debt from the then current \$1.6 trillion to \$3.1 trillion by the end of his second term in January 1989. In the realm of welfare, she noted that "[s]ubsidies to taxpayers, tax loopholes and Pentagon (military) waste [had] never been larger." In addition to the financial big government policies, he also intruded onto the lives of citizens. She continues that he "endorsed lie detector, wiretapping, blacklisting and censoring." One check on government intrusion into the lives of citizens is the

² <http://www.davemanuel.com/investor-dictionary/big-government/>. Accessed November 27, 2015.

³ <http://lexicon.ft.com/Term?term=big-government>. Accessed November 27, 2015.

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/11/01/opinion/reagan-ballooned-big-government.html>. Accessed November 27, 2015.

Freedom of Information Act, which forces the government to release information it has collected. Claybrook remarks that President Reagan “erected procedural and economic barriers to keep citizens from challenging Government [sic] decisions ...” Despite the wide use of policies that the above definitions characterize as big government, Claybrook concluded her article by pointing out that Reagan continued to cite his belief that “Government is too big and it spends too much money.”

Framing the debate

Linguist George Lakoff has proposed using what social science researchers term “frames” to analyze political debate.⁵ What is framing?

In the social sciences, framing comprises a set of concepts and theoretical perspectives on how individuals, groups, and societies organize, perceive, and communicate about reality. Framing involves social construction of a social phenomenon - by mass media sources, political or social movements, political leaders, or other actors and organizations. It is an inevitable process of selective influence over the individual's perception of the meanings attributed to words or phrases.

People use framing to make sense of their environment. For example, if people discuss the behavior of a teacher, the discussion will be influenced by how one frames the term *teacher*. The frame will differ from culture to culture, not only among different countries but also within different cultures of the same country. The frame will differ between, for example, America and Japan, but within each country between the wealthy and not so wealthy. What is appropriate behavior in one frame may be inappropriate in another. An example might be corporal punishment. Some people define the frame *teacher* to include the characteristic of disciplinarian. These people might insist that teachers need to be able to punish students physically. Other people define the frame of *teacher* as nurturer. They would look askance at teachers who use physical punishment.

An example from political discourse could make framing easier to understand. Diane Gurman⁶ uses Lakoff's framing approach to illuminate the

⁵ George Lakoff, *The ALL NEW Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. 2014.

⁶ Why Lakoff still matters: Framing the debate on copyright law and digital publishing, Diane Gurman. *First Monday*, Volume 14, Number 6 - 1 June 2009

debate concerning copyright law in the United States.

The debate revolves around the length of copyright protection afforded under the law. In the United States, the Constitution provides the legal foundation for granting copyright (as well as patent) protection in Article 1, Section 8, which explicitly enumerates the powers of Congress. Clause 8 reads, "Congress shall have power ... [t]o promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries;" (capitalization in the original).

This clause seems to frame copyright as being for the purpose of promoting science and useful arts, in other words, for the benefit of society. However, in giving concrete form to this clause, the 1998 Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act (CTEA) extends the length of the copyright to the life of the author plus 70 years. Republican Sonny Bono, who as a rock singer directly stood to benefit from the law, and other supporters of this extension, had framed the clause not as being for the benefit of society, but as being a matter of private property. The copyright holder should have the absolute right to control their works. Therefore, the extension and other restrictions placed on copyrighted material seemed natural.

One result of this change delayed the time when a work would enter the public domain and thus be available to everyone not only without charge but also for use in new works. Because they are in the public domain any person may use the novels of Dickens, Shakespeare, Austen among others to create new works of art. For example, Seth Grahame-Smith has given the world *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*.⁷

Those who frame copyright as public benefit consider that copyright as private property can be taken to extremes. Schools and such venues cannot show movies without obtaining written permission and paying a fee.⁸

This conflict between public and private property has recently become important in the realm of scholarly publishing⁹. The linguistics journal *Lingua* publishes scholarly works; that is, works for which the authors receive no compensation. Indeed, they must sign over their copyright to the journal. The editors, scholars who work for little money, recently quit *en masse* to begin the open source journal *Glossa*. This is the case for a wide range of scholarly journals. The expenditures for acquiring content are minimal, but the publishers of the journals charge premium prices. For example, the yearly charge for *Lingua* is

<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2354/2210>. Accessed November 27, 2015.

⁷ Seth Grahame-Smith. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. Quirk Books, 2009.

⁸ <http://groupshowings.swankmp.com/copyright>. Accessed November 29, 2015.

⁹ See for example <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=22516>.

¥40,300 for 16 issues.

Framing offers a way of describing and examining the suppositions people use when formulating their opinions. Let us now turn to concrete examples of how Republicans frame their policies as small government even if those policies exhibit characteristics of big government.

Examples

Newspapers cover a wealth of examples to illustrate the point that Republicans have no trouble with big government. I will limit myself to the following issues: sports and military expenditures. In addition, I will discuss health-care policies.

Sports

The first example comes from professional sports. A central guiding principle behind small government is competition. According to the thinking behind small government, competition will obviate the need for government intervention in the economy. If someone charges too much for a service or product, then someone else will enter the same market with products or services that are cheaper. This principle keeps the prices of consumer goods low. In the budget cutting that Republicans advocate, they have never suggested changing the number of subsidies that professional sports enjoy.

However, the first striking characteristic of professional sports in the U.S. is that the teams and players are exempt from anti-trust law. The leagues control completely not only who may field a team, but they have rules that spread players around so that one team cannot buy all the best players. Because of these departures from market principles, some players can and do receive huge salaries. By keeping the number of teams small, the teams can charge what they will for admission to their games. In England, in contrast, anybody with enough money and players can field a rugby or other sports team.

Let us take the National Football League (NFL) as an example. The Taxpayers Protection Alliance (TPA), a non-profit, non-partisan organization that tracks the effects of government on the economy, has looked at the NFL¹⁰. It finds that this league receives a number of subsidies, or what the report terms “crass corporate welfare” pg. 1. These teams receive direct subsidies for the construction of their stadiums. Between 1995 and today, these subsidies have amounted to \$7 billion. The recipients of this government largesse argue that the money improves these cities financially. The Tax Association has looked at this issue by comparing

¹⁰ Taxpayers Protection Alliance, *Sacking Taxpayers: How NFL Stadium Subsidies Waste Money and Fall Short on Their Promises of Economic Development*. Washington D.C. 2015.

the poverty rates and medium income in the counties where the subsidized stadiums are located. Their analysis concludes “that median income decreased and poverty rose substantially in counties with publicly funded NFL stadiums” (p. 1).

David Cay Johnston in his book *Free Lunch* reports similar data about baseball¹¹. Johnston claims that most teams only make a profit because of their government subsidies and special considerations. What makes his reporting especially interesting is that he reports a case study of George W. Bush, the former U.S. president who claimed to be a strong supporter of free markets. Before becoming governor of Texas, he led a group of investors who bought the Texas Rangers baseball team. The former owner wanted to sale the team because in Johnston’s words, he considered the team an expensive hobby due to it continuously losing money. Bush gathered investors by telling them the team could succeed if they only had a new stadium. In setting about to build a new stadium, Bush convinced the taxpayers of Arlington (the location of the stadium) to increase their sales tax by a half a cent. The investors wanted not only the 17 acres of land for the stadium (around 68,800 sq. meters), but also 200 acres (a little over 809,000 sq meters) for an entertainment zone of hotel and restaurants. Instead of using the free market to acquire the land, the investors convinced the city to use the government’s power of eminent domain to seize the land from unwilling sellers. Interestingly, the investors that Bush lined up were wealthy enough that they could have raised all the money on their own without recourse to big government.

The Texas example is not the only case of taxpayers subsidizing the sports-loving wealthy. Johnston also chronicles the case of how the New York Yankees obtained land for their new stadium in a similar fashion. Again, the owner of the Yankees is a very wealthy man and could have financed the construction of a new stadium on his own.

The Republicans have framed this issue as being good economically. However, as the Tax Association has clearly shown, the facts belie this framing. Unfortunately, no amount of counter evidence will cause Republicans to adjust the frame. Indeed the resistance to change is one characteristic of the concept of frames. Interestingly enough, even if their assertion were correct, it still involves big government policies.

Military Expenditures

The U.S. government spends fully one-half of its discretionary budgets on the military.

Discretionary Spending refers to spending set

¹¹ David Cay Johnston, *Free Lunch*. Chapter 7. Portfolio, 2007.

by annual appropriation levels made by decision of Congress.

This spending is optional, and in contrast to entitlement programs for which funding is mandatory.¹²

The National Priorities Project reports that the 2015 federal budget contains \$1.11 trillion of discretionary spending. Military spending accounts for \$598.5 billion or 54% of this total. In comparison, Educational spending amounts to only \$70 million or 6%.¹³

We can compare the spending not only to what the U.S. spends on other items in the budget, but also we can compare it to what other nations spend. For every dollar that China, which is the second-highest spender, spends on defense, the U.S. spends \$3.60. Military spending in the U.S. roughly equals the total of the next nine high spenders: India, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China.¹⁴

Presently, the U.S. is engaged in campaigns for the 2016 presidential election. Republicans, who claim to want to shrink government spending, should be proposing to do just that vis-à-vis military spending. Do the campaigns positions of the candidates bear out this rhetoric?

The candidates are rather divided on this issue. Although most of candidates want to raise military spending, some of the candidates moderate their views if the additional spending would contribute to the budget deficit, which Republicans already consider too high. Some, such as Marco Rubio, want to restore the cuts in the defense budget as a result of across the board cuts in 2011. Rand Paul, who is the odd man out in that he is rather isolationist, would like to continue the cuts. Other candidates lie somewhere between these views. The front-runner in most polls, Donald Trump, asserts that on the one hand we need a stronger military but on the other hand we cannot be the world's police force; we cannot bankrupt ourselves.

Most of the candidates propose a bigger military budget, ignoring the fact that the U.S. already spends more than the next nine highest-spenders combined. This ability to advocate small government but actually implement big government has existed from the beginning of the republic. Thomas Jefferson, who is imputed to have said that that government is best which governs least, had

¹² U. C. Mandal. (1 January 2007). *Dictionary Of Public Administration*. Sarup & Sons. p. 140. ISBN 978-81-7625-784-8. Retrieved December 4, 2015.

¹³ <https://www.nationalpriorities.org/campaigns/military-spending-untied-states/>. Accessed December 4, 2015.

¹⁴ <https://www.nationalpriorities.org/campaigns/us-military-spending-vs-world/>. Accessed December 4, 2015.

no trouble upon becoming president in 1801 in asking Congress for money to fight the Barbary pirates in Africa. In one of America's first foreign wars, Jefferson felt it necessary to fight against the Barbary pirates who were terrorizing trading ships that came near their coast. They attacked and extracted tribute from traders. However, if one is a small government advocate one should tell traders who wished to avoid these pirates, that they should stay away from the area and if they could not do so, they should provide their own defense. Not only did the U.S. provide defense for trading ships, but it also paid ransom for 300 crew members when their ship was scuttled. The ransom, cost of naval patrol vessels and future tribute the United States ultimately agreed to pay amounted to a fair sum.¹⁵

Health Care

Health Care policy plays a slightly different role in size of government argument. The law in question is the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), sometimes known as Obamacare, signed into law in 2010. One big government aspect of this act concerns the Mandate. This provision of the law requires citizens to buy health insurance, either through their workplace or on insurance markets. Failing to do so results in having to pay a special tax. Republicans object to this as big government. However, when President Clinton proposed a health care revolution in 1993, Republicans objected and put forth an alternative plan that also contained a mandate provision. The state of Massachusetts subsequently passed a health care law that included a mandate provision and the Republican governor, Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate for president in 2012, signed the bill into law. Initially he vetoed the mandate provision, but signed it when the state legislature overrode his veto.¹⁶

Again, the difference in opinion about the government requiring health insurance springs from differing framing of government. The Republican frame says that market mechanisms for implementing public policies are always superior to government implementing the same policies because government-implemented policies will always result in higher costs. The ACA only went into effect in 2014, so it is too early to estimate the success of the program from the financial side. Indeed, the results are mixed. Some reports claim it is an unmitigated success.¹⁷ But other reports detail problems in how to read the

¹⁵ Williard Sterne Randall. *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*. Henry Holt and Company, New York. pg. 563.

¹⁶ Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Wikipedia:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patient_Protection_and_Affordable_Care_Act.
Accessed December 5, 2015.

¹⁷ Jason Easley. Fact Bomb Obliterates Republicans: Obamacare Helps 137 Million Americans Save Money. <http://www.politicususa.com/2015/05/14/fact-bomb-obliterates-republicans-obamacare-helps-137-million-americans-save->

numbers.¹⁸ The ACA has definitely insured more people. In his documentary movie, *Sicko*,¹⁹ Michael Moore, clearly illustrated the deficiencies of the pre-ACA health care system. Many people did not have any insurance and would go to a hospital only if they faced an emergency. Furthermore, pre-existing conditions, such as asthma or high blood pressure, would preclude them from purchasing any health insurance at all. The ACA forces insurance companies to offer coverage even for pre-existing conditions. Having to pay for the added costs of these two new additions to health care required the abovementioned mandate.

One might see the arguments around the ACA as a perfect example of big versus small government. The Republican opposition to the act springs from the way they frame the issue. They frame the issue as one of the responsibility of the individual. Citizens should be responsible to take care of their own health. Supporters of the ACA frame the issue as one of the responsibility of society. Society has a responsibility to insure the health of all citizens because people have different financial abilities to care for their health. In addition, people have differing levels of health problems that are not the result of their own misjudgments. Is providing healthcare the responsibility of government?

However, we should also keep in mind one purported advantage of non-government administration of social services. If the government does it, it will cost more. Using market mechanisms will hold down costs. However, looking at the cost of the pre-ACA system seems to argue against this philosophy. The United States spends more than twice as much as any other nation for healthcare, but this cost results in no better overall health than in other nations. In a comparative study of healthcare in advanced nations, the U.S. placed last.²⁰ Healthcare is most expensive, but fails to bring corresponding outcomes. Not only this, but cost of the U.S. healthcare system negatively impacts U.S. companies. The General Motors automobile company spends more on healthcare than on steel, and the coffee chain Starbucks spends more on healthcare than on coffee beans.²¹

Conclusions

Political parties put forth policy platforms that purport to detail the

money.html. Accessed December 5, 2015.

¹⁸ Roger Morse. Does Obamacare Save or Cost Money? <http://cagw.org/media/wastewatcher/does-obamacare-save-or-cost-money>. Accessed December 5, 2015.

¹⁹ Michael Moore, *Sicko*, Dog-eat-dog films, 2007.

²⁰ Karen Davis et. al. *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall*. The Commonwealth Fund, 2014.

²¹ Davis Munro. U.S. Healthcare Ranked Dead Last Compared To 10 Other Countries. *Forbes Magazine*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/danmunro/2014/06/16/u-s-healthcare-ranked-dead-last-compared-to-10-other-countries/>. Accessed December 5, 2015.

party's philosophy. The Republican Party in the United States in this fashion advocates small government. However, their actions depart from this philosophy. We have seen that the hero of the Republican Party, President Ronald Reagan, clearly advocated one thing but implemented another. I have shown that one should not take a party's platform at face value. The discrepancy is clearest in the realm of defense spending. Republicans advocate small government but vote to increase defense spending despite the U.S. being the largest defense spender by far. On the other hand, they have fought to keep the government out of healthcare even though it can be argued that this prohibition causes healthcare to be the most expensive system among all advanced countries without bringing corresponding superior outcomes.

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