## Big Government vs. Small Government – Which Is Ideal for the U.S.?

The term "big government" stimulates plenty of images and emotions, and they're generally negative. Words like "bureaucratic," "inefficient," "intrusive," and even "corrupt" are often associated with the term. Economists charge that big government interferes with the mechanisms of free enterprise. Libertarians believe it seeks to control private or personal freedoms guaranteed by the "natural law" eloquently philosophized by John Locke and formalized in the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights. And politicians claim big government lacks checks and balances on its exercise of power, leading it to represent special interests to the detriment of its citizens.

Small government, on the other hand, is generally believed to lead to a more efficient and flexible system. "Getting government off our backs" or "getting government out of the way" are cries to return to the low-tax, no-regulation beliefs of the American Revolutionary period. The size of government envisioned by the country's founders sought to cast off tyranny and empower small businessmen and entrepreneurs.

Small government was best summarized by the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States Thomas Jefferson when he claimed, "That government is best which governs least, because its people discipline themselves." Meg Whitman, former CEO of eBay, current CEO of Hewlett-Packard, and one-time Republican candidate for Governor of California described it as "making a small number of rules and getting out of the way. Keeping taxes low. Creating an environment for small businesses to grow and thrive."

"Small government" is the mantra of patriots, conservatives, hippies, and progressives alike, but what do the terms "big government" and "small government" really mean?

## **Political Party Positions**

Republicans and conservatives have effectively captured the role as protectors and advocates of "small government," leaving Democrats and liberals to wrestle with the pejorative connotations of "big government." Mitt Romney, Republican presidential candidate in 2012, defined the best government as "small," effecting policies that "expand (its citizens) freedoms, broadens their opportunities, allow them to keep more of what they earn, afford them better education, let them choose their own healthcare, and turn loose the free enterprise system to create more jobs."

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's version of the role of government, detailed in the first presidential debate, included keeping America safe and creating "ladders

of opportunity and frameworks where the American people can succeed." The President went on to argue that "if all Americans are getting opportunity, we're all going to be better off. That doesn't restrict people's freedoms. That enhances it."

Despite the fact that 62% of Americans believe that "the Federal Government controls too much of our lives," according to a 2012 Pew Research Center report, in reality, "big" and "small" government are subjective terms, the definitions of which change according to each person who defines them.

The top four defense contractors in 2010 (Lockheed Martin Corp, Northrop Grumman Corp, Boeing, Raytheon) — collectively accounting for almost \$45 billion in government purchases — would hardly complain that our government is too large, nor would the communities affected by hurricanes Katrina or Sandy who sought and received considerable government aid. Most recognize that the interstate highway system, the Internet, and the amazing medical discoveries of the 20th century were possible only with the support and leadership of the Federal Government.

On the other hand, a businessman struggling against new regulations, or a smoker who's prohibited from lighting up in public and forced to pay exorbitant taxes to indulge his habit, or a property owner forced to cede a right-of-way to the prospective Keystone XL pipeline are all likely to believe that government is too large and threatens their freedoms. For every complaint about the excesses of government, there is an equal response wanting government to do more.

The preference of citizens for an activist or limited government depends upon several factors including political party, age, education, physical location, and the direct consequences of government action or inaction in their lives.

- Republicans Generally Prefer a Limited Government. Evidenced by their 2012 Party Platform, which declared the goals of the party to "return government to its proper role, making it smaller and smarter... keeping taxation, litigation, and regulation to a minimum," the Republican party has clearly adopted smaller government as its mantra. The Democratic platform, by contrast, advocated a more energized government that "stands up for the hopes, values, and interests of working people, and gives everyone willing to work hard the chance to make the most of their Godgiven potential."
- The Government Should Do More to Solve Problems. This is the attitude held by 59% of Americans aged 18 to 29, while a similar majority (58%) of those 65 and older people think the role of the government should shrink.

- Opinions Vary Among College Graduates According to Specific Social or Financial Issues. According to opinion polls, college graduates are more likely to favor government restrictions on guns and protected borders, and are more tolerant of different lifestyles and policies on legal immigration. Paradoxically, however, they generally prefer maintaining and strengthening the social safety net of entitlement programs, including Social Security and Medicare, while simultaneously limiting federal restrictions and regulations on business activities.
- Citizens Who Reside in Heavily Rural, Less Densely Populated States Favor Small
  Government. These citizens are generally conservative, less dependent upon visible
  government services, and more likely to believe that personal freedom, individual
  responsibility, and moral principles are under attack by intrusive government action.
- Self-Interest Is of Utmost Importance Regardless of Belief System. Despite one's
  beliefs, self-interest invariably trumps communal responsibility or obligation. Those
  who favor limited government may protest when businessmen peddle unsafe
  products or bankers engage in risky investments with depositors' funds. Those who
  advocate activist government may chafe under the restrictions of airline travel or
  what they consider exorbitant personal income taxes.

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