

Bipartisan Big Government in Washington



Conservatives used to believe that the U.S. Constitution set up a government of strictly limited powers. It was supposed to protect us from foreign threats and deliver the mail, leaving other matters to the several states or to the private sector—individuals, families, churches, charities, and businesses.

That's what lots of voters assumed they were getting when they voted for George W. Bush. Bush campaigned across the country telling voters, "My opponent trusts government; I trust you."

But federal spending has increased by 23.7 percent since Bush took office. There are more non-defense-related federal employees than ever before. Education has been further federalized in the No Child Left Behind Act. Bush pulled out all the stops to get Congress to create the biggest new entitlement program—prescription drug coverage for Medicare—in 40 years. He's proposed an energy bill that Jerry Taylor describes as "a smorgasbord of handouts and subsidies for virtually every energy lobby in Washington."

And then of course there's John Ashcroft's USA PATRIOT Act and the unprecedented expansion of federal law enforcement and surveillance powers. The Bush administration is pushing secret subpoenas, secret searches, secret arrests, and secret trials. American citizens are being held without access to a lawyer, and without access to an impartial, civilian judge.

It's not just President Bush, of course. A Republican Congress passed all of these spending bills and the PATRIOT Act. The chairman of the Republican National Committee tells journalists that "fiscal responsibility" means increasing the federal budget "at a slower rate of growth" than the Democrats—though spending is rising faster under Bush than under Clinton. The Senate Republican Conference boasts that federal spending on education has increased eight times as fast under "Bush and the Republicans" as it did when Democrats controlled the federal government.

When Bush proposed a sequel to the PATRIOT Act this fall, a Capitol Hill Republican told the *New York Times*: "This is the president talking. We have to be as supportive as we can of the president." That's not the attitude James Madison expected members of Congress to have toward the president. Former Rep. Bob Barr says that Republicans voted for the McCain-Feingold campaign finance regulation bill because, they said, "The Supreme Court will never uphold this law." That's not the attitude Madison expected members of Congress to have toward the Supreme Court—or the Constitution. And of course, their cowardly strategy backfired with disastrous results.

And it's not just Republicans. Big government is indeed bipartisan in Washington these days. Bush spends 24 percent more than Clinton, and Democrats call him a miser. Some day maybe Repub-

licans will learn that they can't win that argument no matter how much they spend. Democrats are digging in their heels against reform of entitlement programs and demanding an even bigger prescription drug benefit. Democrats have just about given up on free trade, something that even Bill Clinton was pretty solid on.

Democratic presidential candidates rail against the war in Iraq, but they then call for sending U.S. troops to Liberia. All of the senators running for president, along with Dick Gephardt, voted to give the president a blank check to wage the war. And none of them voted against the \$87 billion in additional funding for operations in Iraq. They claim to defend civil liberties, but all of them voted for the PATRIOT Act—without actually reading it any more than the Republicans did.

Could it be that both the Democrats and the Republicans are just reflecting what the voters want? I don't think so.

When they're given a chance to vote, Americans don't like big government. Last November, 45 percent of the voters in the most liberal state in the Union, Ted Kennedy's Massachusetts, voted to abolish the state income tax. In January of this year, Oregon's liberal electorate voted 55-45 to reject a proposed tax increase, thereby instructing the legislature to cut spending. (And when the legislature defied the vote and raised taxes anyway, voters started circulating petitions to overturn the tax hike.) In September, Alabama voters rejected Gov. Bob Riley's \$1.2 billion tax hike by 2 to 1. California voters tossed out big-spending Gov. Gray Davis, and 62 percent of them voted for candidates who promised not to raise taxes to close the state's deficit.

No, the problem is that we have a permanent ruling class in Washington that feels largely impervious to elections. House members boast a 98 percent reelection rate. It used to be that the

voters in a congressional district chose a representative to Congress; now members of Congress choose voters for their district. Gerrymandering, campaign finance restrictions, and other election rules make it hard for outsiders to break through.

That's why we need term limits and a more open, dynamic campaign finance system. It's also why we need committed, principled leadership on behalf of limited government—ideally from Congress and the president, but failing that, from citizens groups, taxpayer groups, and think tanks. Right now, because we don't have any national leadership for limited government—there's no Barry Goldwater or Ronald Reagan in today's Republican Party—we need that kind of outside leadership more than ever. And that's what we're focusing on at Cato—books, newspaper columns, Capitol Hill briefings, television appearances, and more—to try to get across the message that America would benefit from less government . . . and that Americans want less government.

—David Boaz

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