



# Obama suffers from narrow view of what's 'public'

By [Timothy P. Carney](#)

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President Obama, when pressed this week, revealed his view of civil society and the state. It could be summarized thus: Government brings us together and free association tears us apart.

Arthur Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute (where I am a visiting fellow), joined Obama on stage at a poverty summit last week. Obama gave opening remarks about finding common ground between the Left and Right on repairing communities, alleviating poverty and improving mobility. Brooks later spoke, mentioning that "free enterprise and free trade" helped lift 2 billion people out of poverty in recent years.

A slightly peeved president responded with an interesting — and tellingly mistaken — discourse on how free enterprise tears apart the bonds of community.

First, Obama asserted that those "who are doing better and better" economically, thanks to market forces, "are withdrawing from sort of the commons." How so? "Kids start going to private schools," the president said, and then "an anti-government ideology then disinvests from those common goods," such as public schools and public parks.

So many misconceptions are tangled up with this explanation that it's difficult to untangle them all.

First, on what basis does President Obama assert that private school attendance leads to "an anti-government ideology?" About half of all students in private school attend Catholic or Jewish schools. These are hardly hotbeds of Gadsden-flag-waving anarcho-capitalism. Nor are the the other private schools — among them the tony, upper-crust academies that strive for Ivy League placements from kindergarten onward — turning out disciples of Ayn Rand or Ludwig Von Mises.

After President Obama's comments, I looked up the famous alumni of the most expensive public school in America, the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. The two politicians to graduate from Lawrenceville in recent decades were Democratic congressman Patrick Murphy of Florida and liberal Republican Lowell Weicker, the man who created Connecticut's income tax. Obama fundraiser and former Disney CEO Michael Eisner is probably the school's most famous alumnus. (For a bit of balance, former AEI President Christopher DeMuth is an alum.)

But Obama also erred by implying private schools are all as economically stratified as Lawrenceville, or Sidwell Friends, where his daughters study (also not quite a feeder school to the Cato Institute).

About 40 percent of all U.S. private school students attend Catholic schools. Obama should cross the district line and come to Montgomery County to see how Catholic schools compare to public schools as far as blending incomes and races. He could visit St. Andrew Apostle School in Silver Spring, where my children, being white, are in the racial minority. At the beginning of Mass earlier this month, our pastor had to use 15 different languages — including Amharic—to welcome parents and grandparents of children receiving their First Communion.

Any child of any religion can attend St. Andrew's — this is why we have children of cops and children of lobbyists — and for those in need the Archdiocese provides financial aid. In contrast, only the wealthy can afford to live within the boundary lines of the better public schools in the area — Seven Locks Elementary School and North Chevy Chase Elementary.

The question of schools is just one example of Obama's flawed thinking on public and private. He stated his general rule at the poverty summit. Speaking of "certain investments we are willing to make as a society, as a whole" Obama said, "our government and our budgets have to reflect our willingness to make those investments."

It's not "public" or "the commons," according to Obama, if it's not created by the government and funded by tax dollars. This is a common view on the Left, where you often hear the phrase, "Government is the word we give to the things we choose to do together."

This is a mistaken view of government — it omits that government is at bottom coercion, and even in a democracy its actions are often the "choice" of only a handful of powerful people. More importantly, this is a mistaken view of the things we choose to do together.

A parish, a little league, a soccer club, a corner pub, a family, a charity — these are all things we choose to do together. They all build community by bringing together people of different races, incomes and career fields. They interact with government, sure — they may use of municipal baseball diamonds, they certainly depend on public roads and sometimes police protection — but these activities are not government.

If President Obama and other liberals would broaden their understanding of "public," they would be better equipped to seek out solutions for disintegrating community ties.