

The return of big-government Republicans

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By Michael D. Tanner

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In the wake of the disastrous Bush presidency and the Republican defeats of 2006 and 2008, it was widely assumed that the GOP had repudiated the idea that big government could be harnessed for conservative ends. And, of course, in 2010, the Tea Party led a return to conservatism's traditional small-government roots, resulting in the biggest Republican landslide in 70 years. One would think that settled the matter.

Yet, just weeks out from the Iowa caucuses, both of the front-runners for the Republican nomination are strong advocates for a bigger, more activist government. Obviously, everything is relative. Neither Mitt Romney nor Newt Gingrich represents the sort of income-redistributing welfare state embodied by the Obama administration. But neither are they a threat to truly cut back the size, cost and intrusiveness of the federal government.

On most issues, in fact, Romney and Gingrich have nearly identical positions — and they are not positions that should warm the hearts of those advocating limited government. As is well known, both supported an individual mandate for health insurance, although Gingrich has now changed his mind and Romney says he only supports state-level mandates. Both also supported George W. Bush's Medicare prescription-drug benefit, and neither would back Paul Ryan's Medicare-reform plan, which Gingrich famously called "right-wing social engineering."

Both Gingrich and Romney have long supported more federal involvement and spending in education. Both backed No Child Left Behind. In fact, both endorsed the same strange idea of having the federal government buy a laptop computer for every child in America.

While both have eagerly embraced the Republican orthodoxy of cutting taxes, neither has indicated that he will do much to reduce government spending. Other than the usual conservative hit list — Planned Parenthood, NPR, legal services — it's hard to find anything that they are in favour of cutting. In fact, both are even opposed to cuts in farm price supports or ethanol subsidies. Gingrich was last seen suggesting that anyone who wanted to cut ethanol subsidies must hate farmers, while Romney believes food subsidies are a matter of national security, as if al-Qaeda is going to corner the wheat market.

And of course both favour increased defence spending and neoconservative interventionism overseas, while embracing government activism on social issues at home.

Barry Goldwater once described his political philosophy by saying, "I have little interest in streamlining government or making it more efficient, for I intend to reduce its size."

In contrast, both Romney and Gingrich see their role as one of streamlining government and making it more efficient. Romney is the quintessential better manager, a "turnaround specialist," someone who can make government run more like a business. And Gingrich's new ideas are nearly all about making government work better. For example, he doesn't oppose a national ID system (E-Verify); he wants it "run by MasterCard or Visa." He doesn't want to get government out of health care; he wants to use "Lean Six Sigma" business strategy to make it less wasteful.

Nowhere in their rhetoric is there a recognition that big government is bad because it makes us less free.

Perhaps the Gingrich-Romney ascendancy is a sign of the weakness of the rest of the field. Herman Cain now appears to know a lot more about sex than he does about foreign policy. Rick Perry looks worse with each successive debate. Jon Huntsman has been written off as a Republican In Name Only, despite being more economically conservative than either Gingrich or Romney, because of his heresies on global warming and (horrors!) his support for civil unions for gay couples. Ron Paul's foreign policy is not designed to appeal to Republican primary voters. Michele Bachmann is headed for Gary Johnson territory in the polls.

Or perhaps, after enduring the economic catastrophe of the Obama administration, voters are simply yearning for some competent management.

But for those with a yearning for a smaller, more limited, more constitutional government, this election becomes more dismal with each passing day.