

Forbes[®]

Does the Left Favor A More Activist Government?

By: Timothy B. Lee – October 10th, 2012

“Why do intellectuals support government solutions?” My friend Julian Sanchez asks that question in a new essay for the Cato Institute’s *Libertarianism.org*. Intellectuals, he says, seem “disproportionately attracted to ‘progressive’ political views and government-centric means of remedying social ills.” He suggests this is because “if the best solutions to social problems are generally governmental or political, then in a democratic society, doing the work of a wordsmith intellectual is a way of making an essential contribution to addressing those problems.” And, therefore, scribblers like him and me are more important in a society with a large, activist state than one where the state is small.

I rarely find myself disagreeing with Julian, but I’m going to disagree with him here—on two different fronts. First, it’s not obvious that the work of intellectuals is more important when social problems are tackled by the state rather than civil society. And second, I don’t think the political left is uniquely prone to advocating “government-centric means of remedying social ills.”

We can think of public-sector problem solving as a game that’s played in two rounds. In round one of the “political game,” candidates compete for votes. In round two, the winners of the previous round (say, members of Congress) get a pot of taxpayer money to allocate among a variety of competing causes.

The “market game” is similar. In the first round, entrepreneurs compete for dollars. In the second round, the winners of the previous round (wealthy businessmen and their heirs) have a pot of money that they distribute among potential causes.

As far as I can see, wordsmithing plays an important role in both rounds of both games. In the first round of the political game, wordsmiths are needed to script TV ads, write candidate speeches, write op-eds, and the like. Journalists covering political races also play an important role. But intellectuals play an analogous role in the first round of the market game. Wordsmiths are needed to write ad copy, compose jingles, write speeches for executives to give at trade shows, and so forth. Journalists review new products and cover firms’ rise and fall.

Intellectuals also play an important—and similar—role in the second round of both games. Both members of Congress and private philanthropists need to identify causes worthy of their support. They do this by reading news stories, academic studies, and other wordsmithed documents. Both are affected by the “climate of opinion” that

intellectuals help to shape. For example, the film “Waiting for Superman” likely persuaded some elected officials to pursue a “reformist” education agenda. It also likely persuaded some rich people to spend their own money supporting those same causes. In a libertarian society, there might be fewer think tank writers, but there would be more people writing grant proposals to private foundations. There might be fewer reporters covering corruption in the public sector, but there would be more people investigating waste and fraud by private-sector charities.

Accordingly, I’m skeptical of the premise that the political left is uniquely prone to advocate a more activist government. It’s true by definition that non-libertarians on the political left advocate a more activist state than libertarians do. But most conservatives advocate vigorous government action to combat immigration, terrorism, drug abuse, pornography, abortions, gay adoptions, and so forth.

It’s true that more conservatives than liberals employ the language of limited government in defending their preferred policy agendas. But their embrace of libertarian rhetoric seems opportunistic. When it comes to causes conservatives really care about, they have little hesitation in advocating government action. And while the government programs conservatives favor are often “smaller” in terms of dollars spent, this is offset by their greater intrusiveness. The Drug Enforcement Agency is a much larger threat to freedom, per dollar spent, than the Social Security Administration.

A more parsimonious explanation for liberals’ advocacy for government action on issues they care about is that almost everyone advocates using the government to solve the problems that are of greatest concern to them. Principled libertarians are a small minority of intellectuals simply because they’re a small minority of the public at large. If anything, I suspect libertarians are over-represented among the intelligentsia relative to the general public. See, for example, the economics profession.