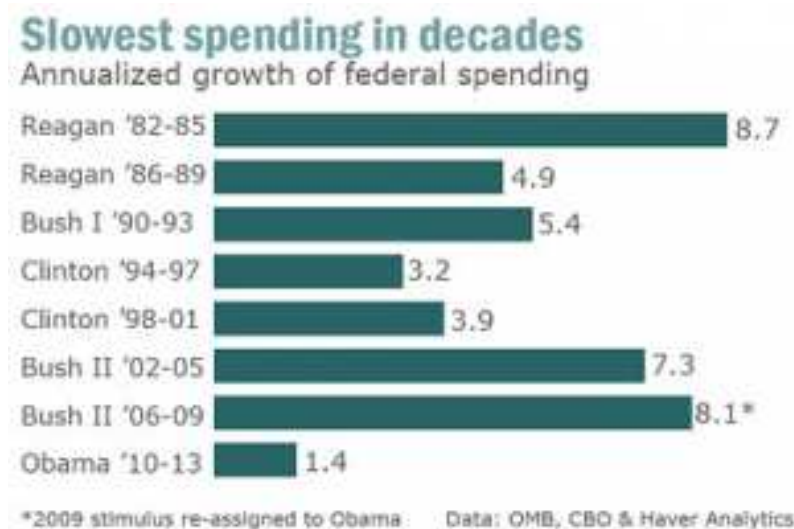


# Better Government, or Just Cheaper Government?

By [Tom Sgouros](#) on June 1, 2012



One of the great things about sophistry is that in any argument there is always enough dust around to throw in people's eyes. Whatever the argument, the dirt at your feet is always at hand.

One of the great things about intellectual honesty is that you don't take positions without multiple sources of support. It helps you see through the dust, too.

A week ago I wrote about how spending under Obama has [not been nearly as profligate as is widely thought](#). Marc Comtois, one of the dedicated soldiers of the right who daily lays waste to armies of straw men over at Anchor Rising, thinks he's found a nut, and complains that an article I used in support of that essay had been amply refuted. (You can find his links in the comments over there.)

What he doesn't get is that those refutations are just dust. One can go into the weeds of the refutations to show that they are just as tendentious as the original article they critique, but why bother? Even if you pretend the article I cited was all wet, there is ample other support for the assertion that if you really care about

responsible spending, you shouldn't vote for people who promise cheaper government.

So, for example, if you don't like Mr. Nutting and [marketwatch.com](http://marketwatch.com), how about the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities? Here's what [they say](#):

*"By themselves, in fact, the Bush tax cuts and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will account for almost half of the \$20 trillion in debt that, under current policies, the nation will owe by 2019. The stimulus law and financial rescues will account for less than 10 percent of the debt at that time. "*

Oh, wait. You say CBPP is a partisan organization. Well then how about the Cato Institute? Its director, the late Bill Niskanen had a reputation for unyielding libertarianism, and also a reputation for intellectual honesty, part of what has made Cato a source of actually useful data over the years. He wrote an article some years ago pointing out that the "Starve the Beast" strategy of cutting taxes to force spending cuts did not work. In short, Republicans made deficits bigger and Democrats made them smaller. ([Original article](#), [recent follow-up](#).) I wrote [a follow-up to Niskanen's original article](#) pointing out that the situation was even worse than he wrote (page 2 at the link).

In other words, pretty much any way you turn, evidence says that if you care about responsible spending, vote for the people who don't focus on spending. Vote for the people who are talking about what government should do — they're the ones who care enough about the enterprise to do it responsibly. And yes, any given article or set of numbers can be showered with dust, obscuring its meaning. But dust is for brushing aside.

Now, all that said, what do I think about this? In basic economics classes, we're taught that the Great Depression was ended by demand-side spending — the spending necessary to fight a World War was of the scale necessary to bring our nation out of the economic funk of the 1930s. I believe that 50 years from now, students in basic economics classes will ask impertinent questions of their professors when they wonder why, with that example to go by, the world acted in precisely the opposite way when faced with the challenges of the Bush depression. The fact is that the last three years have seen ample confirmation of the theory behind Keynesian stimulus, but it's all been in the wrong direction. We're doing the opposite of stimulus, so we get the opposite of prosperity.

Which is all to say that I'm not defending the Obama austerity. I'm simply stating the fact that if you want responsible spending, the record — stretching over

decades — says that voting for people who simply promise to make government cheaper is the wrong way to get it.