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Lexington's notebook

The end of big government liberalism

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MATT YGLESIAS argues that, with the passage of Obamacare, the era of "big government liberalism" is over (http://yglesias.thinkprogress.org/archives/2010/03/the-end-of-big-government-liberalism.php):

> For the past 65-70 years—and especially for the past 30 years since the end of the civil rights argument—American politics has been dominated by controversy over the size and scope of the welfare state. Today, that argument is largely over with liberals having largely won.

He goes on:

> [P]rogressive efforts to expand the size of the welfare state are basically done. There are big items still on the progressive agenda. But they don't really involve substantial new expenditures. Instead, you're looking at carbon pricing, financial regulatory reform, and immigration reform as the medium-term agenda. Most broadly, questions about how to boost growth, how to deliver public services effectively, and about the appropriate balance of social investment between children and the elderly will take center stage.

I'd like to think this was true. But I don't see how it can be. I agree that the enactment of almost-universal health coverage checks off a huge item on the progressive "to do" list. But it doesn't change the most basic force in democratic politics: that voters like to vote themselves goodies at someone else's expense.

Once non-poor, non-elderly Americans get a taste of direct government subsidies for health insurance, they will ask for more. They will not always get it, because taxpayers vote, too, and the bond market doesn't care whether your back hurts. But often, they will get it. And the battle will go on.

To illustrate this point, here's a chart showing what has happened to federal health spending since 1970 (http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/2010/03/23/federal-health-spending/).