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How Much Government Is Enough?

An interview with John Samples

Jeremy Lott from the August-September 2010 issue

John Samples, the director of the Cato Institute's Center for Representative Government, is an adjunct professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University. This year he published *The Struggle to Limit Government* (Cato), a historical survey of the occasional successes and many failures of reformers who tried to slow or reverse the growth of the American state. Jeremy Lott, an editor at the Capital Research Center, spoke with Samples in April about America's ongoing love-hate relationship with government.

Q: How much government do Americans want?

A: During the run-up to the Reagan election in 1980, polling was done on a lot of issues about taxes and spending. The general rule was that people had in fact had enough on the tax front. Taxes had been going up for a decade or more, and they had been going up across the board.

On the other hand, you found support in the polls for a lot of the spending programs. There was a sense that some of the programs should be cut, and some were cut. But generally speaking, Americans aren't put to a choice between spending and not spending.

So the answer is that the electorate has been on both sides of the issue—most of the time.

Q: Tell me about the congressional class of 1994.

A: I see some parallels between now and then in the sense that the Tea Party groups are bringing new people into the political system, people who had not been involved in politics. There's a lot of evidence that the 1994 class was really politically inexperienced. Perhaps because of that, they were somewhat idealistic and a bit naive about how the system worked and how much could actually be done. On the other hand, that was their endearing quality. They still believed in the country and in the politics of redeeming the country toward its ideals.

They certainly proved to be difficult for Newt Gingrich to control. It was difficult for them to make compromises. They believed that they had come there to change things, to cut back on government and get the country off the path it was on. That made it harder to

practice the arts of politics and leadership.

Q: You identify George W. Bush as “the most radical American leader since Lyndon Johnson.”

A: Bush’s domestic policy drew on Christianity in ways that were unexpected.

Some people think compassionate conservatism is just a bumper sticker thing, but I think he actually meant it. Bush ran against the Republicans of 1994, and he ran against Reagan, really. Of course, he couldn’t actually say that, but he did.

Q: We’ve just seen Obama’s health care bill pass, against the opinions of the American people. How did that happen?

A: If you are willing to take any kind of losses, there are a lot of things a president and a determined leadership can do. The Republican majority from 1998 onward was very careful and worried about preserving its majority. The Democrats are not necessarily worried about preserving their majority.

Q: One of the themes that you bring out is the idea of competing secular faiths in American politics. Tell me a little bit about that.

A: I’ve come to see the United States as a struggle between these two ideas, classical liberalism and progressivism. Classical liberalism was present in the founding and still remains present today. Progressivism is over a century old now.

Will the United States become predominantly one or the other? Right now it looks a little grim for individualism. On the other hand, in 1970 it looked like classical liberalism had been completely routed. That proved not to be true. I think the cultural foundations of individualism and limited government in America are a lot stronger than you might think.