

Conservatives and “Limited Government”

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My friend Will Wilkinson has [announced](#) that he and his boss Brink Lindsey are leaving the Cato Institute. Because Brink and Will were the standard-bearers for [libertarianism](#) at Cato, their departure has prompted [discussion](#) of whether their departure constitutes a “purge” of left-leaning scholars at the Institute. I’m not in a position to comment on those rumors, but their departure has inspired a number of writers to declare the failure of the libertarian project. Probably the most thoughtful take from the conservatives is [this piece](#) by Joseph Lawler:

Ron Paul, of course, is one of the very few libertarian officeholders with any national cachet at all. And the Tea Party is the most dynamic anti-big government political movement in modern American politics. For better or for worse, Ron Paul and the Tea Parties represent the best things going for the libertarian movement of which Cato is a key institution. That Lindsey is not able to find common cause with best successes of libertarianism in the national arena suggests that Cato is probably wise to want to distance its brand from Lindsey’s libertarianism, if that is in fact what it is doing.

Is the Tea Party “the most dynamic anti-big government political movement in modern American politics?” I think it’s helpful here to unpack the concept of “anti-big government,” because the right uses it in a peculiar and rather perverse fashion.

In the conservative (and [fusionist](#)) worldview, government activities are evaluated using a simplistic “size of government” metric that treats every dollar of government spending as equally bad, regardless of how it’s used. This has some unfortunate results. It means that cutting children’s health care spending is just as good as cutting a dollar from subsidies for wealthy corporations. And since wealthy corporations typically have lobbyists and poor children don’t, the way this works out in practice is that conservative politicians [staunchly oppose](#) the former while letting the latter slide.

Worse, mainstream conservatives give programs involving the military and law enforcement a free pass. Conservatives vociferously (and [correctly](#)) [oppose](#) giving the FCC expanded power over the Internet, but they actively supported the NSA’s [much more comprehensive and intrusive](#) scheme of domestic surveillance.

Conservatives [support](#) a massive expansion of government power at our southern border to restrict the freedom of Mexican migrants. They seem unconcerned by the fact that we have [more people in government-run prisons](#) than any other nation on Earth.

This distinction makes no sense. When American soldiers [gun down Iraqi civilians](#) and blow up a van that comes to rescue the survivors, *that's a government program*. When a SWAT team conducts a [military-style raid](#) on the home of an innocent Maryland mayor and kills his dogs, that's a government program too. Obviously, law enforcement and national defense are important functions of government, but these highly coercive government programs should be the subject of *more* public scrutiny, not less.

Personally I'm not interested in "limited government" as an end in itself, but as a means to greater individual liberty. I'm opposed to government programs that waste taxpayer dollars because higher taxes restrict my freedom. But I'm much more opposed to government programs that use taxpayer dollars to restrict freedom directly. I'm not interested in joining a "limited government" movement that considers the two equivalent. And I'm *definitely* not interested in being part of a movement that gives torture and preemptive war a free pass under the heading of "national defense" while it focuses instead on fighting the tyranny of SCHIP and unemployment insurance.

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