The Functions of Government; or is President Obama, just President Bush on Steroids?

What are the major functions of government? The answer depends upon whoyou ask, and whether or not they have an incentive to be truthful in their answer. Furthermore, some people benefit from a lack of clarity in the answer to the aforementioned question and may seek to shift the enquirer to more “important” questions. The problem for them is that clearly delineating what a government is supposed to do, allows people to ask if government is actually getting their job done and doing so efficiently. A vagueness of purpose leads to the impossibility of accountability.

To answer the question as to the major functions of government, one may turn to competing ideologies. An [ideology is a systematic body of concepts especially about life or culture.](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ideology) Below is a short list of ideologies along with what they believe to be the major functions of government. To be sure, longer, [more detailed lists of ideologies](http://www.radicalmiddle.com/ideologies.htm) exist.

Anarchism: There is no legitimate function of government. All voluntary transactions and associations are allowed to take place or form, but there is no place for a coercive state. Protection of people and their property are left to themselves or their voluntary associations.

Libertarianism: The function of the government is to define and enforce property rights. This is done through government creation of law, a judicial system, and the provision of public safety from predators both domestic (the police to arrest criminals), and abroad (national defense – narrowly defined).

Conservatism: The functions of government include defining and enforcing property rights (law, courts, police, fire, and national defense – broadly defined), maintaining competition (anti-trust), providing public goods and services (schools, hospitals, roads, parks, and a postal service), correcting market externalities (limiting air and water pollutants), and stabilizing the economy.

Liberalism: The functions of government include defining, creating, and enforcing property rights (an evolving law, activist courts, police, fire, and national defense – broadly defined), maintaining competition (anti-trust), providing public goods and services (schools, hospitals, roads, parks, a postal service, and the arts), correcting market externalities (limiting air and water pollutants, protecting nature – broadly defined, and slowing climate change), stabilizing the economy, and redistributing income.

Progressivism: The functions of government include defining and enforcing people’s rights (both positive and negative rights alike through evolving law and activist courts, police, fire, and national defense – narrowly defined), providing public goods and services (schools, hospitals, roads, parks, a postal service, and the arts), correcting market externalities (limiting air and water pollutants, protecting nature – broadly defined, and slowing climate change), guiding economic production and consumption, stabilizing the economy, and redistributing income.

Socialism: The functions of government include defining and enforcing people’s rights (both positive and negative rights alike through evolving law and activist courts, police, fire, and national defense – narrowly defined), providing both public and private goods and services (schools, hospitals, roads, parks, a postal service, the arts, steel, lumber, energy, food, clothing, shelter, etc), correcting market externalities (limiting air and water pollutants, protecting nature – broadly defined, and slowing climate change), engaging in economic production, dictating consumption, stabilizing the economy, and redistributing income.

In the US, the median voter lies somewhere in the conservative/liberal spectrum. While the two main political parties vehemently attack each other, they agree on much more than they disagree on regarding the functions of government. TARP was a bipartisan law as were the Medicare prescription benefit and the No Child Left Behind Act. As a result, politicians from both parties sound remarkably alike. Once in awhile the Republican Party wonders toward the libertarian end (Barry Goldwater) or the Democratic Party wonders toward the progressive end (George McGovern), but usually to their electoral dismay.

All government action is redistributive in nature to some extent, so even libertarians willfully forcibly redistribute some income in order to provide for a national defense, the police, and the courts. Likewise, most socialists allow for the ownership of some private property. The communist attempts to completely abolish private property did not fare particularly well.

People can self-identify with any of the above ideologies and may not fit perfectly into a single ideology. For instance, conservative commentator George Will from time to time exhibits libertarian streaks such as calling for the [privatization of the US Post Office](http://www.jewishworldreview.com/cols/will112711.php3). Likewise Friedrich Von Hayek, patron economic saint of many libertarians, supported universal health care coverage.

This weekend, the [Wall Street Journal had a nice piece](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203716204577016092542307600.html) pointing out the slide in the US from liberalism to progressivism on the part of the Democratic Party. Rather than promote a government that provides public services to citizens, it has become a party that promotes unionized government employees. Government is for the government employees, not for the public. The article left me longing for Canadian style liberals to reclaim a party that has drifted into progressivism. As [Dan Henninger pointed out](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204323904577040430486060086.html) last week, the Democratic Party now sides with government unions even against private unions.

While the political class over-emphasizes the differences between US liberals and conservatives, the more interesting intellectual distinctions are between liberals and progressives on the one (left/visible) hand and between conservatives and libertarians on the other (right/invisible) hand. As an academic, I would much rather watch a debate between a libertarian and a progressive than between a conservative and a liberal. Few people would bother watching a debate between an anarchist and a socialist, unless it turned violent (which is often the case – most recently when in [Greece the anarchists fought the communists in the streets](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EOolbDDvvI)). There just are not many anarchists or socialists in the United States. Does President Obama have strong progressive tendencies? Yes. Is he a full blown socialist? I doubt it.

President Obama’s policies often look like super-sized versions of President Bush’s. President Obama up-sized Bush’s war spending, lowered taxes (via extension of the Bush tax cuts along with a reduction in the payroll tax) to levels below that of President Bush, created a stimulus package even larger than President Bush’s, upped President Bush’s bank bailout with a bailout of GM, reappointed bubble boy Ben Bernanke to run the Fed, upped President Bush’s expansion of government health coverage, and increased government debt even faster than had President Bush. President Bush created a tax reform commission and ignored their suggestions. President Obama created a deficit commission and ignored their suggestions.

On the other hand, President Bush gave lip service to privatizing a portion of Social Security, while President Obama nationalized student loans. Perhaps the biggest difference between the two most recent presidents is their Supreme Court appointments. All eyes will be on their appointments this summer as the Supreme Court rules on the constitutionality of Obamacare. Which ideology will reign on the court?

Once they rule, we may then learn whether or not having President Obama as president is really any different than having President Bush as president. In many ways President Obama and President Bush appear ideologically joined at the hip. President Obama is different largely because he is a super-sized version of President Bush. This, of course, means that President Obama really blames himself when he says that Bush’s policies are to blame for a sluggish economy – he just doesn’t know it.