

It's not about the role of government

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

June 15, 2012

E. J. Dionne—probably my favorite big-daily columnist—[thinks](#) liberals need to make a direct, full-throated defense of government:

If progressives do not speak out plainly on behalf of government, they will be disadvantaged throughout the election-year debate. [Gov. Scott Walker's victory](#) in the Wisconsin recall election owed to many factors, including his overwhelming financial edge. But he was also helped by the continuing power of the conservative anti-government idea in our discourse. An energetic argument on one side will be defeated only by an energetic argument on the other.

Hmm. I share Dionne's frustration with the success of anti-government conservatism in recent years, as well as the positive view he goes on to present of government's singular role in stimulating the economy and creating jobs (the main policy focus of his column). But more generally, I'm not convinced that the answer is to match anti-government attacks with equally fierce pro-government rebuttals. I consider myself a fairly mainstream liberal when it comes to economic issues. I think that enacting Rep. Paul Ryan's slash-and-burn budget would be a huge step backward in the struggle for a just, fair society. And I'm no fan of Bill Clinton-style neoliberalism, of weakening the social safety net and sticking it to unions (and staying good and hawkish on defense, but I digress) in the name of saving liberalism from itself.

Still, I don't think economic liberalism means, first and foremost, being pro-government—and I don't think this idea is a political winner, either.

It certainly has been a winner for conservatives. For years now, old-school free market enthusiasts, Tea Partiers and even social conservatives have been rhetorically pivoting to the role of government at every possible opportunity (and at some that seem *impossible*). And yes, Democrats have stumbled and stammered in countering this. But I'm not willing to accept the debate on conservatives' terms, because it's hard to win hearts and minds in this country by simply taking the "pro" side in a role-of-government debate. More importantly, I'm philosophically opposed

to these terms—because in the kind of liberalism I can get on board with, the role of government is a secondary question. The main point is promoting dignity and fairness, by whatever means available.

In other words, I'm not interested in debating whether the public vs. private sector is better suited to tackle a large problem that shows no signs of going away. When we start running out of low-income families to assist with housing or food or job training, let's have a robust debate about whether the feds and the states should handle this or whether they should leave it to the churches and private charities. Until then, there's enough work to go around.

It's both/and. When conservatives insist that they too believe in taking care of the neediest among us, but their objection is to *how* liberals want to do it, I think this is a better—i.e., both more strategic and more truthful—response than simply defending the government safety net on the merits. It's about whatever it takes to get the job done, because getting the job done is the real point.

So if you're a small-government type and you're Catholic, let's talk about subsidiarity (but the real kind, not [Rep. Ryan's variation](#)). If you're evangelical, let's talk about what the Bible has to say about inequality and injustice and human need—in political contexts far removed from our modern sense of the public/private divide. Whoever you are, let's talk about what specific things work and what ones don't. In such conversations, I will be glad to acknowledge that liberals are sometimes too broadly dismissive of ideas (the Bush faith-based initiative, even the charitable giving deduction) that fail some liberal litmus test or another but also address real human need.

But if all you want to talk about is small government as a first principle, I'm not that interested in taking you on. With suffering all around us, it's the wrong conversation to be having.