



2008 Elections Won't Result In Better Gov't

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Most Americans have become reconciled to life with a federal government that has more money and exercises more power in more ways over the lives of more people than any secular institution the world has ever known.

And many — if not most — have also come to believe that the ubergovernment in Washington is not only benign but is also benevolent, devoted strictly to making everyone both better and better off.

This counterfactual view of government is partly because in America we have so many elections. The "people's voice" is constantly being heard, almost year-round every year, in media-saturated rituals that reinforce the idea that government is the collective "us" acting for our common good.

Elections legitimize government when they are for real, but under no circumstances do they make government smart and efficient or even minimally competent.

The mere fact that the president and the members of Congress achieve their offices by election — instead of by force or inheritance — does not mean that what the government does is actually good for us. Our best interests may not even be its first priority.

And new elections, with a new president and new members of Congress taking office, do not mean that the government will change its character or that its performance will improve.

It is unlikely that the '08 elections will change the fact that on average the 15 Cabinet-level departments of government fall 43% short of achieving the results they are supposed to produce.

In fiscal 2006, for example, they spent \$1,568 billion to do a \$902 billion job. Sadly, the Department of Veterans Affairs was the worst, falling 66% short on results. Next worse was Interior, with a performance shortfall of 59%. Education, HUD and Homeland Security all missed the mark by more than 50%.

The independent agencies failed just as badly as the big Cabinet departments. EPA missed by 67%, EEOC by 60% and both the Civil Rights Commission and the FCC seem not to have demonstrated any results in the most recent performance rating study carried out by the Office of Management and Budget.

Among the highest-ranking was the Social Security Administration, which doesn't have much to do but write checks — but even it fell short on performance by 29%.

When the scorekeepers at OMB looked at the details of specific government-spending programs, the results (or more correctly the lack thereof) were even more appalling.

The Commerce Department had eight programs (27%) that failed the "mission accomplished" test by more than 60%. Between one-third and one-half of the spending programs of Treasury, Justice, Labor and Agriculture flunked by that same wide margin.

In addition to not making the government efficient, the '08 elections are also unlikely to stop the federal government from doing bad things.

It will still tell businesses whom to hire and not to fire and what wages to pay; pilfer from Social Security and other trust funds and spend the money on political pork; discriminate on the basis of race and sex; say who can and cannot attend which schools; tell schools what to teach and how to teach it; restrict religious speech, mostly by Christians; suppress political speech by candidates who challenge incumbent officeholders; inflate the cost of medical care, insert bureaucrats between patients and their doctors; dupe the elderly with unsustainable promises; ignore the entitlement crisis that will bankrupt the economy; and fail to protect the nation's borders.

Elections have never stopped the federal government from deliberately choosing to impose taxes in ways guaranteed to do the most economic harm per dollar of revenue collected; from saddling the public with an unnecessary paperwork burden that amounts to a hidden additional annual tax of at least \$250 billion; or from burdening businesses with complex regulations that impair economic growth by at least \$750 billion per year.

Ironically, when it comes to money and the economy, most of the government's greatest abuses are because of elections. The 10-pound tax code consists mostly of complex special indulgences granted by Congress in exchange for votes. The same is true of the warehouse full of federal regulations on every subject imaginable.

In addition, vast amounts of government spending — perhaps as much as 25% — seem primarily to serve the re-election needs of incumbent members of Congress.

It will take an extraordinary president and an extraordinary election to reclaim America from the bipartisan political combine of a few elected officials and lots of bureaucrats, lawyers and lobbyists in Washington.

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