The wrong debate: It’s not about the size of government

by Steve Thorngate in the July 25, 2012 issue

The Park Street Church and the Massachusetts State House, Boston.

In a June column, *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. argued that liberals need to be more direct and explicit about championing the role of government. Political scientist Douglas Amy titled his new book *Government Is Good*. With House Republicans pushing yet another draconian budget while the economy stumbles on for want of stimulus, some on the left are feeling the need to mount a fierce defense of government activity.

I’m not convinced. I consider myself an economic liberal, and I favor a wide variety of government interventions—a stronger safety net, more aggressive efforts to jump-start the economy, firmer protections of worker rights. But I don’t think engaging in direct skirmishes over the role of government is the right move for liberals.

For one thing, it’s politically foolish to engage in a debate conducted on conservatives’ terms. More important, a positive role for government is not really the substantive point of liberalism—at least, not any form of liberalism I can get on board with.

For years now, conservatives of many stripes have been pivoting rhetorically to the role of government at every opportunity. Whether the conversation is about the

federal debt, our convoluted and unfair tax system or struggling low-income people, the answer always seems to be smaller government. In speeches, House budget chair Paul Ryan has even conflated the role of government with another classic debate, charity versus justice—implying, rather incredibly, that federal programs always amount to mere Band-Aids, whereas local, private efforts by definition promote deeper change.

Democrats have stumbled and stammered in countering these talking points, which makes it tempting to call for more spirited rebuttals. But taking the pro side in a debate on the role of government is a tough lot in this country. Skepticism toward government is embedded in our cultural DNA, and tax increases are reliably, often wildly, unpopular. To be sure, it's only the abstract concept of government spending that most people oppose—the actual big-ticket budget items tend to enjoy broad support. But pointing out the mix of ignorance and cognitive dissonance at play here is no path to American hearts and minds. Fair or unfair, government's defenders face a steep road.

It's not just politics, however, that makes me hesitate to summarize the liberal economic agenda as "government is good." My objection is philosophical as well, because I see the role of government as a secondary question. The main point is promoting dignity and fairness—by whatever means available. The fundamental issue isn't public versus private; it's about getting behind any and all approaches that effectively broaden opportunity and alleviate suffering. The means is never the end.

I grew up among conservative evangelicals, and I went to Wheaton College. The politics of most of the people I've known since before I was 22 are at least a couple clicks to the right of mine. Over the years I've gotten into political discussions with many of them, and inevitably they at some point say something like this: "I believe we should take care of the neediest among us. My objection is to *how* liberals want to do it—it's always government programs." How should I respond?

One childhood friend—a particularly outspoken conservative—does volunteer work on summer weekends. He goes into the city and picks up surplus produce donations from farmers' markets that are winding down for the day. He delivers these to charities that can make good use of this nutritious food in their work feeding the poor. My friend sees this kind of effort as categorically superior to the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (otherwise known as food stamps).

And here’s the thing: I don’t take the opposite view. I just think we’re asking different questions. His first principle seems to be that government should be smaller, while mine is that people shouldn’t be hungry.

I could remind my friend how small his volunteer effort is in the grand scheme of things. I could point out that only the federal government offers anything like the scale to tackle a problem like hunger in a fair and systematic way. I could try to estimate just what absurd number of new food pantries and meals programs it would take to compensate for the $133.5 billion the House voted to cut from SNAP—or, for that matter, for the $4.5 billion in cuts recently passed by the Democratic-run Senate. I could even pivot to fiscal policy and insist that in a weak economy, Congress can do heaps of good precisely by spending more money—and that research identifies food stamps as a singularly effective form of economic stimulus.

Each of these points is true and important, and each emphasizes the positive role of government. On the other hand, small, hands-on efforts like my friend’s can be very responsive to the particular needs of pantries and meal programs. By going to the market and talking to the vendors, he’s able to procure whatever fresh food happens to be headed for the compost pile that day—thus preventing waste and preserving the farmers’ bottom line. His personal contact with producers may even plant a seed that leads them to start gleaning programs for hungry people in their own communities. And local, community-based programs are the front line on hunger, meeting a need that exists right now—not whenever someone’s SNAP application process is complete.

In short, major, ongoing problems often have all-of-the-above solutions. Public and private efforts aren’t squared off in a zero-sum game; they don’t compete directly for dollars or person-hours earmarked to address human need. And there’s more than enough work to go around. When we start running out of low-income families to assist with food or housing or job training, then let’s have a robust debate about whether the feds and the states should handle these matters or whether they should be left to the churches and private charities. Until then, it’s all hands on deck.

Small-government advocates often celebrate the virtues of private-sector service providers: their efficiency, their accountability, their hands unstained by government lucre. But the people working in these charitable trenches tend not to share this view. Many of them support government programs, because every day they see

their own limits and the people they can't reach—or even have to turn away.

And a lot of them do have government funding. In theory, the public-private divide may seem crystal clear. In practice, a lot of work gets done by private organizations using public money. As long as this work is carried out efficiently and with accountability, this arrangement is right and meet—assuming your goal is getting the job done, not ideological purity vis-à-vis the role of government.

For this reason, I'm less dismissive of President George W. Bush's faith-based initiative than some liberals are. First Amendment concerns are certainly important, but for me the *first* question is whether these public-private partnerships meet human need that otherwise wouldn't be met. There are other policies as well that conservatives tend to favor—the tax deduction for charitable giving is one—that I can't object to as broadly as some do. The question, again, is what promotes human dignity and well-being. All other litmus tests are secondary.

These policy specifics are fruitful subjects to discuss with anyone who shares my first principle but not necessarily my politics. If my conversation partner is Catholic, we can focus on the concept of subsidiarity. If he or she is evangelical, we can talk about the Bible's passages on injustice and human need—and the complexities of applying biblical material on the role of government to our own political context. Whomever I'm talking to, it's important to acknowledge the considerable evidence that some programs—whether public or private—are far more effective than others.

But when conservatives just want to debate the role of government, I'm not that interested in taking them on. Once we've dug into these positions, they'll have to defend the health-insurance bureaucracy, and I'll have to defend the department of motor vehicles. With suffering all around us—and so many opportunities to alleviate it—that's the wrong conversation to have.