

Power, Not Policy, Drives American Politics

Claiming to speak for “we the people,” the framers of the US Constitution offered it as a tool to “form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”

More than 230 years later, is the federal government doing a good job of delivering on those purposes? A poor job? Or is it, perhaps, up to some entirely different job? Let’s look behind Door Number Three:

According to the late political philosopher Anthony de Jasay, the modern state is a “redistributive drudge If its ends are such that they can be attained by devoting its subjects’ resources to its own purposes, its rational course is to maximize its discretionary power over these resources. In the ungrateful role of drudge, however, it uses all its power to stay in power, and has no discretionary power left over.”

How much discretionary power does the federal government exercise over your resources?

Well, in 2019, actors in the US economy, including you, will produce goods and provide services worth more than \$21 trillion. Also in 2019, the federal government will seize and spend more than \$4.4 trillion of that \$21 trillion.

Nearly one out of every five dollars’ worth of wealth produced in the US disappears down Washington, DC’s gullet. That’s a lot of discretionary power, and it doesn’t account for state or local government expenditures, or for exercises of discretionary power that reduce the amount of wealth created in the first place.

How much justice, tranquility, defense, general welfare, and liberty does that much discretionary power buy? How much SHOULD it buy?

Personally, I’d say we’re well past the point where giving more discretionary power to the state serves the ends touted in the preamble to the Constitution, and far into a situation where the primary activity of government in the United States is using its power to stay in power.

From any debate between candidates for public office, one may collect a veritable basket full of promises.

But listen closely to the promises and you’ll find that unless the candidate is a Libertarian, they’re always conditional: Give me more power, give me more money, and I’ll give you X.

Those promises are a pig in a poke: Elect that candidate and you may or may not get some measure of X, but that candidate will definitely get the power.

Even Republican candidates who promise tax cuts tout a “Laffer Curve” equation under which lower tax rates will supposedly produce more total revenue — and with it more discretionary power — for them.

Do you consider keeping politicians in power a project worthy of nearly one out of five of the dollars you earn?

If so, by all means keep voting for candidates who advocate an ever stronger and ever more expensive federal government. There are usually at least two such candidates on your ballot for any office — they’re called Republicans and Democrats.

If not, vote Libertarian. Or abandon politics altogether.