

FINAL WORD ⇨ BY A. BARTON HINKLE

Give 'Em What They Don't Want

Some years ago, an acquaintance of mine was asked by her sister if she would like ice in her drink. She said no. “You don’t want ice in your drink?” the sister asked again, for clarity’s sake. “No.” “Are you *sure*?” “I’m sure. I don’t want any ice.” “Yes, you do,” the sister retorted, filling the cup with ice.

This vignette encapsulates the relationship between Americans and government. Consistently, the public says it would like government to do less. Time and again, government responds by slashing budgets, furloughing employees, and closing down marginal and obsolete programs.

Ha! Of course, the government does no such thing. It just keeps growing bigger and doing more. Earlier this year, Gallup released a survey showing that Americans rank government as the No. 1 problem in the country, beating inflation, race relations, crime, and other pressing matters. Both Republicans and Democrats put government at the top of the problem list.

Granted, those results leave room for interpretation. Perhaps Americans consider government the biggest problem because it is *not doing enough* to tackle all the nation’s other problems, such as crime and immigration (for Republicans) and poverty and racism (for Democrats). Maybe Americans want government to do less of what other people like and more of what *they* like. And, of course, one of the top things many Americans want government to *not* do is mess with Social Security and Medicare.

But still. Consider what Gallup noted two years ago:

Americans have shifted back to favoring a more hands-off approach for government in addressing the nation’s problems after

a rare endorsement of a more active role last year.... Last year marked only the second time in Gallup’s 29-year trend that at least half of Americans endorsed an active role for the government.... The other pro-government response came in the weeks after the 9/11 terror attacks amid heightened concern about terrorism and a surge in trust in government.

Likewise:

Americans’ preference for a limited government role is also evident when they are asked to consider the trade-offs between taxes and government services. Given a choice, half of Americans say they prefer fewer government services and lower taxes, while 19% want higher taxes and more services.... In the five times Gallup has asked this question since 1993, the preference for lower taxes and fewer services has consistently prevailed.

In other words, absent a global pandemic or a terrorist attack of colossal proportions, most Americans would like government to back off.

And yet, figures from the St. Louis Fed show that federal outlays consumed 24.6 percent of U.S. gross domestic product last

year, up from 21.2 percent in 1992. Because GDP also has grown, that means government is taking a bigger slice of a bigger pie. And that is just the federal government. Figures from the St. Louis Fed also show that state and local government annualized spending rose from \$936 billion in the fourth quarter of 1992 to \$3.684 trillion in the fourth quarter of 2022. Even after adjusting for inflation, that’s nearly double.

But fiscal outlays are only one metric of government’s size. It can expand in many non-monetary ways as well. Consider the draconian and sometimes absurd response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer now concedes that her banning the sale of seeds and gardening supplies might have been a trifle over the top. Or that government agencies are monitoring social media, expanding the use of facial recognition, and testing the limits of domestic surveillance. Consider the 50 abortion restrictions that either were passed or took effect in 2022 after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Or the proliferation of efforts to restrict drag shows in certain states. Consider the Florida legislative proposal earlier this year to require bloggers who write about the governor to register with the state. Or the Mississippi legislation, signed into law by Gov. Tate Reeves, requiring electric vehicles to be sold only through franchise dealerships. Or the Illinois legislation, signed into law by Gov. J.B. Pritzker, that will require employers to provide paid time off for any reason, starting next year—regardless of business size. Or—well, there are simply too many examples to list.

Little surprise, then, that Americans place less trust in government these days. Gallup’s latest “confidence in institutions” poll shows that only 26 percent of Americans have a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the presidency, down from 52 percent in 1973. Congress fares even worse: the share of Americans who have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the nation’s lawmakers has plunged from 42 percent to 7 percent.

That’s a heck of a big drop to swallow. Would you like some ice with that? **R**

