

The Minimal State Versus the Welfare State

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Welfare Dependence and the Political Case for a Minimal State

In New York in 1994, one out of 11 residents was living on welfare. The Governor of New York once argued that the result of these welfare policies was that they punished initiative, encouraged dependency, and destroyed the spirit. He then introduced a number of reforms that promoted the value of work and the individual's responsibility. The debate between the minimal state that classic and modern libertarianism hold and the welfare state as espoused by liberals has been debated for more than a century. This study analyses the differences between the two forms of the state and suggests which one is preferable according to society and the individual's needs.

Liberty is a core principle in the movements and [political philosophies](#) that are held by libertarians. It is a political philosophy that seeks to maximize autonomy and political freedom, and it revolves around notions of voluntary association, freedom of choice, and individual judgment. Libertarians are not in favor of state power and authority and seek to minimize it, often seen calling for the dissolution or restriction of institutions that are socially coercive. Liberalism, on the other hand, emphasizes the freedom and rights of the individual, which the government is there to guarantee. The government, in liberalism, guarantees individual freedom, whereas, in a libertarian government, the involvement of the government itself is as little as possible (Johnson). Therefore, the fundamental difference lies in the kind of authority the government should have over an individual in American political discourse.

The basic differences in approach often lead to a different outlook toward a wide range of issues. Within the debate, there is disagreement over the welfare state and how far it should extend its powers. Improvement in technology, shifting economic or social factors, and demographic trends can lead to demands for change. In a welfare state, people may be living healthier or longer lives, but the high number of pensioners may lead to fewer working people to sustain those extra healthcare services or pensions that the state needs to provide. Liberals see the government's role in promoting good and social justice. Therefore, their vision is for the government to tax high-income and wealthy citizens to finance programs for social justice and regulate personal behavior and business as much as is minimally necessary for social justice.

Conservative and Liberal Views of Government

Responsibility

Conservatives and liberals both agree that the role of the government is to provide moral leadership, make the world better, and protect people from each other and themselves, though they disagree on the nature of what is moral or good. Libertarians see goodness as voluntary and morality as something personal. They do not agree to legislate anything that controls human nature, except what may involve harming others. They believe in a limited government but not chaos. For them, the role of the government is to enhance and preserve liberty, and to achieve that purpose; they must defend citizens against external enemies. They must try, arrest, or punish people who endanger or harm others and provide judgment when there is a conflict in liberties.

The only morally justifiable government Libertarians see is the minimal government. Proponents such as Nozick claim that persons are moral agents, they are rational and hold free will, and they have the capacity to guide and regulate their lives according to their own conceptions of life and choices. In contrast, a welfare state responds to social problems where the well-being and health of the people are to be undertaken by the government, especially for those who have greater social or financial needs (Patterson). Here, the principles of equitable distribution of wealth, equal opportunity, and public responsibilities come into play. Conversely, the minimal state is often called the night watchman state, where the state is there to protect against theft, violence, and fraud, and enforce business or commercial contracts.

The welfare state is more expansive in nature, where basic necessities of life are to be guaranteed by the government through a cooperative arrangement that seeks everyone's mutual advantage. So, those who are not able to achieve the benefits may look to the government (Patterson). For them, justice is the first virtue, and conceptions of justice govern the interrelationships and functions of a society's fundamental institutions. These institutions make decisions such as the assignment of duties and rights and the distribution of authority and wealth. They do not demand an equal income or power, but compensating benefits for the less advantaged.

Taxation, Bureaucracy, and the Limitations of the Welfare State

However, the social welfare state does have limitations. In particular, the tax burdens are high in order to meet the citizens' expectations for welfare. They are bureaucratic in nature, and it is expensive to run such a state to meet its demands, but proponents argue that the socio-economic gap between the rich and the poor is reduced as a result. It is also not good for businesses because the prices can be regulated and not depend on supply and demand forces. Libertarians differ in this aspect as well and see liberty itself as the primary concern in justice. Equality or a just distribution of property is irrelevant as long as the means are legitimate. They criticize welfare governments for prioritizing equality before liberty. This is defended by arguing that this is only done in order to

provide a reasonable common advantage, as long as the individual's basic rights are not involved.

In my view, though the notions of liberty may seem important, a welfare state is the one that is most justifiable because it serves as a device for protecting the vulnerable and the needy against exploitation by those who assume control over large resources. The welfare state protects the interests of those who are not in a position to protect themselves. Egalitarian or communitarian ideas may lead people beyond the welfare state as justified and conceived, but that does not invalidate the argument of those who see the benefit in maintaining only minimal protections necessary for society's vulnerable members.

Works Cited

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