

How to Buy Votes (Like With Rent Control and Other Welfare Programs)

The following was written by James Bovard, a policy advisor at The Future of Freedom Foundation and author of Attention Deficit Democracy, The Bush Betrayal and Freedom in Chains along with six other books.

American democracy is capsizing as a result of the vast increase in the number of government dependents and government employees. This has created a voting bloc that overwhelms every other potential force. H.L. Mencken quipped in the 1930s that the New Deal divided America into **“those who work for a living and those who vote for a living”** – a division truer now than ever before.

In the era of the Founding Fathers, few things were more dreaded than “dependency” —

Not being one’s own man, not having a truly independent will because of reliance on someone or something else to survive. One of the glories of America was the possibility that common people could become self-reliant with hard work and discipline. Prof. John Philip Reid, the author of The Concept of Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution, summarized 18th-century political thinking: *“Property was independence; lack of property was servility, even servitude ... a man without independent wealth could easily be bought and bribed. A man of property had a will of his own.”*

This was part of the reason that many of the states initially required a property qualification for voters. Sir William Blackstone, whose work on the English constitution profoundly influenced Americans, observed that a property qualification for suffrage was necessary because if the property-less “had votes, they would be tempted to dispose of them under some undue influence or other.” Thomas Jefferson warned, “Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.”

But in modern times, dependency is the highest political good – at least for politicians. Since the 1930’s, politicians have striven to leave no vote unbought.

Government aid programs have been endlessly expanded, and the government has sought to maximize the number of people willing to accept handouts. Government aid has become redefined as a symbol of self-actualization.

Americans’ dependency on government is soaring. Federal social programs have continued expanding in recent decades despite bipartisan rhetoric about rolling back government spending. The Heritage Foundation created an Index of Dependency to measure the rising number of Americans reliant on government. The index gauges “the pace at which federal government services and programs have been growing in areas in which private or community-based services and programs exist or have existed to address the same or nearly the same needs.” The index is based on housing aid, health-care and welfare assistance, retirement income and subsidies for college and other post-secondary education. While private programs were judged by how much they actually helped

people, the “success” of government programs “is frequently measured by the growth of the aid program rather than its outcome.”

The index has a benchmark of 100 for 1980; by 2005 the index reading had risen to 212, signaling more than a doubling of overall dependency on the federal government over the prior quarter century. As a result of the expansion of government “aid” programs into one area after another, subservience rather than initiative is becoming the ticket to prosperity. Now, roughly half of all Americans are dependent on the government, either for handouts, pensions or paychecks.

Most voters no longer seem concerned about leashing government. Instead, many if not more are primarily concerned with directing the sludge of government benefits in their direction. Voters want to unleash politicians to give them more benefits. When government is viewed as fount of benefits, limits on government power will appear to be self-deprivation. The more people expect from government, the more biased they become against limiting government power. This was stark in the 1980s debates over a constitutional amendment to balance the federal budget. The most vehement opponents were organized groups representing senior citizens, government employees such as teachers, and others who rely on government checks to pay the bills.

The key question for many voters is: How much is the candidate offering for my vote? Elections routinely degenerate into “an advance auction sale of stolen goods,” in Mencken’s apt phrase. There is vastly more interest during election campaigns in Social Security handouts and policies than in Justice Department cover-ups and FBI abuses.

A Political Auction

Sums spent on government vote-buying usually dwarf all private campaign expenditures. Incumbents perennially use the machinery of state to bombard voters with government handouts, often on the flimsiest pretexts. President Clinton turned the Federal Emergency Management Agency into a permanent part of his reelection campaign.

FEMA now routinely blankets residents of swing states with lavish checks for dubious claims for damage from hurricanes and other bad weather. Florida was a key swing state in the 2004 elections and thanks to FEMA and four hurricanes and storms, Florida residents received more FEMA handouts than any state in history. The inspector general revealed in May 2005 that FEMA used a standard that would make a drunken sailor blush. If someone called in and claimed his bed was damaged by an EMA-recognized adverse weather incident, FEMA insisted on sending him a check to buy an entire new large bedroom suite.

FEMA did not require any evidence that a person actually sustained losses. Instead, anyone who called deserved a check. FEMA shoveled out \$31 million in the Miami/Dade County area in the months before the election to compensate people from damage from one storm whose winds never exceeded 45 miles per hour.

More than 4,000 people received more than \$8 million to rent temporary housing – even though they had not requested aid and often had suffered little or no home damage.

FEMA's handout standard is the mirror image of that used by the Internal Revenue Service, which has never set up toll-free numbers for people to call and nullify their tax obligations merely by asserting they have zero taxable income.

FEMA vote purchases are bargains compared with other ways incumbents purchase their job security. During his 2004 reelection campaign, Bush often bragged about having gotten Congress to enact a new prescription drug subsidy for the elderly – which is now estimated to cost more than \$2 trillion over the next 20 years. Clinton had campaigned for reelection in 1996 by hawking a similar benefit, but had not been able to deliver the goods through a Republican Congress.

Prior to Bush's Medicare expansion, the record for the most costly reelection campaign may have been held by Richard Nixon, who railroaded a 20 percent hike in Social Security benefits through Congress and then made sure that each senior citizen received a personal letter from him along with a new higher benefit check a few weeks before the 1972 election. Nixon also destroyed economic freedom in order to perpetuate his supposedly pro-free-enterprise administration. In August 1971, he imposed wage and price controls that were supposed to throttle inflationary pressures. At the same time, the Federal Reserve boosted the money supply with a flood of new dollars – creating the appearance of an economic boom while federal controls delayed the evidence of inflation. Nixon's policies helped cause international financing crises and the worst U.S. recession since World War II.

Democracy and Dependence

Politicians have divided America into two blocs of voters labeled “more deserving of other's paychecks” and “less deserving of their own paycheck.” Between 1986 and 1996, government transfer payments per capita rose at a rate six times faster than pretax compensation per private worker, according to economist Erich Heinemann. The income of the elderly rose nine times faster than the income for the average Americans from 1971 to the late 1990s largely because Social Security benefits have increased far faster than average wages.

Democracy has also been undermined by the continual growth in the number of government employees. There are more than 20 million government employees in the United States – more than the total number of Americans employed in manufacturing. Not only has the number of government employees multiplied in recent decades, but the rise of government unions further stacks the political odds against private citizens. Compensation expert Wendell Cox, publisher of the *Public Purpose*, a newsletter on government unions, estimated that pay for local and state government employees rose more than five times faster than private-sector pay from 1980 to 1998. Cox also found that federal employees receive roughly 50 percent more total compensation than do private employees performing similar jobs.

The sheer number of government employees and welfare recipients effectively transforms the purpose of government from maintaining order to confiscating as much as possible from vulnerable taxpayers. Elections nowadays, instead of a note on what government should do, are largely referenda on how much it should take. The more government dependents, the more likely that democracy will become a conspiracy against self-reliance. Not all government workers, or all retirees, or all handout recipients will vote for candidates championing big government. However, politicians' ability to frighten and mobilize much of this huge voter base is often sufficient to turn elections into routs. The danger of excessive dependency on democracy has been obvious for nearly 2,000 years. Plutarch observed of the dying days of the Roman Republic, "*The people were at that time extremely corrupted by the gifts of those who sought office, and most made a constant trade of selling their voices*".

Once a person becomes a government dependent, his moral standing to resist the expansion of government power is fatally compromised. Every increase in the number of government dependents means an increase in political power. Each increase (I) in the number of government dependents means another person who sees limits on government power as a threat to his own personal well-being.

Anything that increases dependency on government undermines liberty. "Self-government becomes a farce when the citizen looks to the government three times a day for his next meal, while the government curtsies to the citizen only once every couple of years after often meaningless elections. How can a citizen help steer the ship of state at the same time that he has his hand out for another government benefit?

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