

Government is the jobs solution so why don't progressives just say so?

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Photo by Fritz Blakey

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Why don't Democrats just say it? They really believe in active government and think it does good and valuable things. One of those valuable things is that government creates jobs — yes, really — and also the conditions under which more jobs can be created.

You probably read that and thought: But don't Democrats and liberals say this all the time? Actually, the answer is no. It's Republicans and conservatives who usually say that Democrats and liberals believe in government. Progressive politicians often respond by apologizing for their view of government, or qualifying it, or shifting as fast as the speed of light from mumbled support for government to robust affirmations of their faith in the private sector.

This is beginning to change, but not fast enough. And the events of recent weeks suggest that if progressives do not speak out plainly on behalf of government, they will be disadvantaged throughout the election-year debate. Gov. Scott Walker's victory in the Wisconsin recall election owed to many factors, including his overwhelming financial edge. But he was also helped by the continuing power of the conservative anti-government idea in

our discourse. An energetic argument on one side will be defeated only by an energetic argument on the other.

The case for government's role in our country's growth and financial success goes back to the very beginning. One of the reasons I wrote my book *Our Divided Political Heart* was to show that, from Alexander Hamilton and Henry Clay forward, farsighted American leaders understood that action by the federal government was essential to ensuring the country's prosperity, developing our economy, promoting the arts and sciences, and building large projects: the roads and canals, and later, under Abraham Lincoln, the institutions of higher learning, that bound a growing nation together.

Both Clay and Lincoln battled those who used states' rights slogans to crimp federal authority and who tried to use the Constitution to handcuff anyone who would use the federal government creatively. Both read the Constitution's commerce clause as Franklin Roosevelt and progressives who followed him did, as permitting federal action to serve the common good. A belief in government's constructive capacities is not some recent ultra-liberal invention.

Decades of anti-government rhetoric have made liberals wary of claiming their legacy as supporters of the state's positive role. That's why they have had so much trouble making the case for President Obama's stimulus program passed by Congress in 2009. It ought to be perfectly obvious: When the private sector is no longer investing, the economy will spin downward unless the government takes on the task of investing. And such investments — in transportation and clean energy, refurbished schools and the education of the next generation — can prime future growth.

Yet the drumbeat of propaganda against government has made it impossible for the plain truth about the stimulus to break through. It was thus salutary that Douglas Elmendorf, the widely respected director of the Congressional Budget Office, told a congressional hearing last week that 80 percent of economic experts surveyed by the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business agreed that the stimulus got the unemployment rate lower at the end of 2010 than it would have been otherwise. Only four percent disagreed. The stimulus, CBO concluded, added as many as 3.3 million jobs during the second quarter of 2010, and it may have kept us from lapsing back into recession.

So when conservatives say, as they regularly do, that "government doesn't create jobs," the riposte should be quick and emphatic: "Yes it has, and yes, it does!"

Indeed, our unemployment rate is higher today than it should be because conservatives blocked additional federal spending to prevent layoffs by state and local governments — and because progressives, including Obama, took too long to propose more federal help. Obama's jobs program would be a step in the right direction, and he's right to tout it now. But he should have pushed for a bigger stimulus from the beginning. The anti-government disposition has so much power that Democrats and moderate Republicans allowed themselves to be intimidated into keeping it too small.

Let's turn Ronald Reagan's declaration on its head: Opposition to government isn't the solution. Opposition to government was and remains the problem. It is past time that we affirm government's ability to heal the economy, and its responsibility for doing so.