



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on September 13, 2012

Depending on Dependency

The theme that most seemed to rouse the enthusiasm of delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte was that we are all responsible for one another — and that Republicans don't want to help the poor, the sick and the helpless.

All of us should be on guard against beliefs that flatter ourselves. At the very least, we should check such beliefs against facts.

Yet the notion that people who prefer economic decisions to be made by individuals in the market are not as compassionate as people who prefer those decisions to be made collectively by politicians is seldom even thought of as a belief that should be checked against facts.

Nor is this notion confined to Democrats in America today. Belief in the superior compassion of the political left is a worldwide phenomenon that goes back at least as far as the 18th century. But in all that time, and in all those places, there has been little, if any, effort on the left to check this crucial assumption against facts.

When an empirical study of the actual behavior of American conservatives and liberals was published in 2006, it turned out that conservatives donated a larger amount of money, and a higher percentage of their incomes (which were slightly lower than liberal incomes) to philanthropic activities.

Conservatives also donated more of their time to philanthropic activities and donated far more blood than liberals. What is most remarkable about this study is not just its results. What is even more remarkable is how long it took before anyone even bothered to ask the questions. It was just assumed, for centuries, that the left was more compassionate.

Ronald Reagan donated a higher percentage of his income to charitable activities than did either Franklin D. Roosevelt or Ted Kennedy. Being willing to donate the taxpayers' money is not the same as being willing to put your own money where your mouth is.

Milton Friedman pointed out that the heyday of free market capitalism in the 19th century was a period of an unprecedented rise in philanthropic activity. Going even further back in time, in the 18th century Adam Smith, the patron saint of free market economics, was discovered from records examined after his death to have privately made large charitable donations, far beyond what might have been expected from someone of his income level.

Helping those who have been struck by unforeseeable misfortunes is fundamentally different from making dependency a way of life.

Although the big word on the left is "compassion," the big agenda on the left is dependency. The more people who are dependent on government handouts, the more votes the left can depend on for an ever-expanding welfare state.





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Optimistic Republicans who say that widespread unemployment and record numbers of people on food stamps hurt President Obama's reelection chances are overlooking the fact that people who are dependent on government are more likely to vote for politicians who are giving them handouts.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt understood that, back during the Great Depression of the 1930s. He was reelected in a landslide after his first term, during which unemployment was in double digits every single month, and in some months was over 20 percent.

The time is long overdue for optimistic Republicans to understand what FDR understood long ago, and what Barack Obama clearly understands today. Dependency pays off in votes — unless somebody alerts the taxpayers who get stuck with the bill.

The Obama administration is shamelessly advertising in the media — whether on billboards or on television — for people to get on food stamps. Welfare state bureaucrats have been sent into supermarkets to tell shoppers that food stamps are available.

The intelligentsia have for decades been promoting the idea that there should be no stigma to accepting government handouts. Living off the taxpayers is portrayed as a “right” or — more ponderously — as part of a “social contract.”

You may not recall signing any such contract, but it sounds poetic and high-toned. Moreover, it wins votes among the gullible, and that is the bottom line for welfare state politicians.

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