

Both parties love big government, just different programs

By Steven Thomma, McClatchy Newspapers
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WASHINGTON — Strip away the political finger pointing over President Obama's proposed budget and the fight boils down to a clash of values. Both major parties are really for big government — just big in different places.

Republicans say they're outraged that Obama would "borrow and spend" his way to a new behemoth government. But they borrowed and spent their way through the '80s and the current decade. And they love big government — when it's at the Pentagon .

Democrats from Obama on down insist that they don't like big government, that they're just forced into a temporary spending spree by the recession. But Democrats love big government as well, when it's for social programs such as universal health care.

"The basic difference between Democrats and Republicans in recent decades is which aspect of government spending they prefer," said Steven Schier , a political scientist at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn. "With the Republicans, it's defense. With the Democrats, it's education, environment, health care etc. That's been the major difference between the two parties going back to Reagan."

The numbers tell the tale.

In his eight years, Republican Ronald Reagan increased government spending by 69 percent, led by a 92 percent increase in defense spending as he built up the military to confront the Soviet Union . (These numbers aren't adjusted for inflation.)

With the economy growing by the time he left office in 1989, the size of the government as a share of total economic production had shrunk slightly, from 22.2 percent to 21.2 percent.

Democrat Bill Clinton increased government spending by 32 percent from 1993 to 2001, brought down largely by the rapid slowdown in defense spending after the Cold War ended. Defense spending grew by just 4 percent during the Clinton years.

The combination of restrained growth in government and a booming economy meant that government's size as a percentage of the economy dropped from 21.4 percent to 18.5 percent in the Clinton years.

George W. Bush boosted government spending by 68 percent in his eight-year presidency, spearheaded by a 126 percent increase for defense as he waged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq . Bush's spending totals don't include the \$700 billion bank bailout added last fall to his final fiscal year, or the \$787 billion stimulus package added early this year.

By the time he left office, Bush's government had grown as a share of the economy from 18.5 percent to 22 percent.

While he relies on optimistic assumptions about the economy, Obama forecasts that he'll raise spending this year and next, then ratchet it back until it again represents 22 percent of the economy at the end of his first term.

In recent weeks, Republicans have unleashed a barrage of criticism against Obama as the bogeyman of big government.

"Who among us would ask our children for a loan so we could spend money we do not have on things we do not need? That is precisely what the Democrats in Congress just did. It's irresponsible," said Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal , delivering the Republican rebuttal to Obama's speech to Congress earlier this month.

"We simply cannot afford to mortgage our children and grandchildren's future to pay for this big government spending spree," said Rep. John Boehner , R- Ohio , the Republican leader in the House of Representatives . "The era of big government is back, and Democrats want you to pay for it."

Still, Republicans in Congress today support big government when it's for the Pentagon , such as spending for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan , or on weapons systems such as the F-22 Raptor fighter jet being developed by Lockheed Martin .

Rep. Phil Gingrey , R- Ga. , for example, argued recently for buying nearly 200 more of the F-22 Raptor jets, calling them critical to defend against China and Russia . "Moreover," he said, "over 100,000 jobs in our nation are directly or indirectly tied to this program."

Spending priorities for members of Congress often depend on their districts.

"Individual members of both parties are interested in expanding the budget in their areas," said Chris Edwards , the director of Tax Policy at the libertarian Cato Institute . "If you're from a farm state, you want to increase farm subsidies for your friends and neighbors. If you're from a big city like Chicago , you want to increase the school lunch program."

Obama, who's from Chicago and was ranked among the most liberal members of the Senate , has tried to assure Americans that he's against big government for its own sake. He's said he asked for a massive stimulus package for the economy because it was necessary, "not because I believe in bigger government — I don't."

Yet Obama's budget proposes huge new spending on social welfare programs such as universal health care that he wanted BEFORE the recession. And those programs would survive long after the recession ends.

Simply put, Obama and other Democrats want a big government that addresses their priorities, not the Republicans' agenda.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs summed it up this way: What the Republicans spent money on was "wasteful spending." What the Democrats want — education, energy conservation, health care — are "investments."