Why so many people who need the government hate it

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Suzanne Mettler

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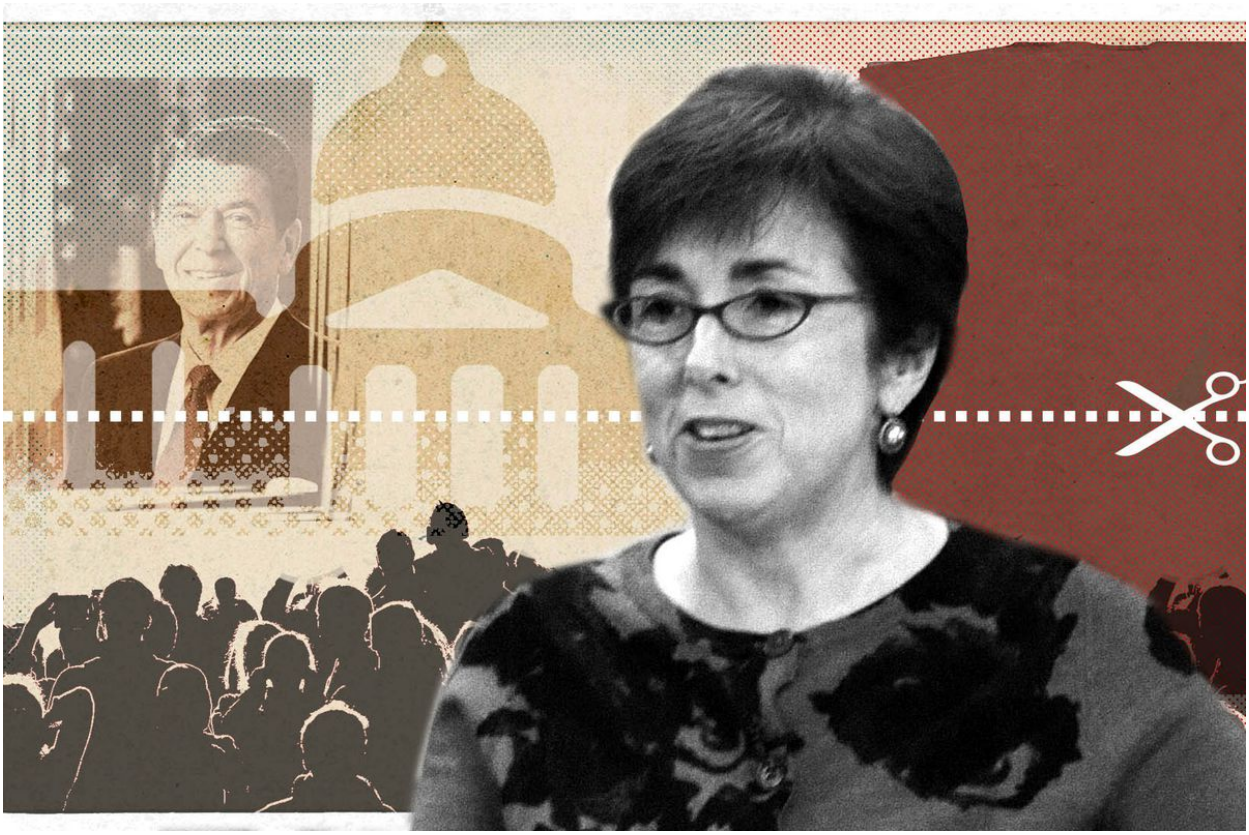

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“Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”

President Ronald Reagan uttered those words in his 1981 inaugural address to the country. He was referring specifically to the government’s role in helping bring the US out of an economic crisis. But since then, it’s become a kind of blanket truism in Republican circles. The government is a perennial boogeyman, and the main policy objective on the right has been to reduce the role of government in public life.

But there’s a problem: Many who accept this dogma are the very people who need the government the most. Research shows, for instance, that Republican states are disproportionately dependent on federal aid. Yet many Republican voters appear blissfully unaware of this contradiction.

In her new book *The Government-Citizen Disconnect*, Cornell political scientist Suzanne Mettler investigates this paradox. She looks at historical government data as well as surveys of Americans’ experiences with 21 federal social policies, including food stamps, Social Security, Medicaid, and the home mortgage interest deduction.

And what she found was fascinating:It turns out that people’s attitudes toward welfare are a strong predictor of how they’ll vote. But even more interesting, the types of federal benefits people get — and whether they’re “visible” like food stamps and Medicaid or “invisible” like

tax breaks — influence how they perceive their own personal dependency on social welfare programs.

I called Mettler to talk to her about her findings and why she thinks the government-citizen connect is a genuine threat to American democracy. A lightly edited transcript of our conversation follows.

Sean Illing

Your book focuses on a contradiction at the center of our politics: the disconnect between citizens and the government they rely on. How did this paradox evolve? How did people become so alienated from their government?

Suzanne Mettler

We're in this weird situation in which people have to come to rely on government more and more, and at the same time government has required less and less of people. Now, you'd expect this to mean that people's attitudes toward government have become favorable, but the opposite is true. And this is the paradox I'm grappling with in the book.

It turns out that how much a person actually benefits from government services matters very little in terms of shaping their attitude toward government. And that's true even when controlling for all sorts of other factors.

Sean Illing

But there was one factor in particular that did make a big difference in terms of predicting someone's view of government, right?

Suzanne Mettler

Right, and that was people's attitudes about welfare. About 44 percent of Americans have unfavorable views of welfare. And the people who have very unfavorable views about welfare have strong attitudes about government that are shaped by this view. They believe that welfare is unfair, or that undeserving people are receiving it, and that deserving people like themselves are not getting anything.

There's a lot of resentment out there from people who have this deeply negative perception of welfare, and this perception determines their view of government more than anything else. They're blind to their own relationship to government, and so they assume welfare is something "other" people get.

'"If individual citizens withdraw from public life, the only people in society who have power are those with lots of economic power"'

Sean Illing

I have to address the giant elephant in the room. When we're talking about welfare and people's perceptions of it, we're talking about race. And what you often find is that people don't necessarily object to welfare; they object to welfare going to the out-group, to the "others." Is this consistent with your findings?

Suzanne Mettler

Yes. Race is significant, and many other scholars have discovered this as well. Across the board, whites had more unfavorable views of welfare than people of color, in large part because they considered welfare something that people of color primarily benefit from.

I also found that income matters a lot, too. Every group throughout the middle class had very unfavorable views toward welfare. Even African Americans, if they were middle-class, were more resentful of welfare than African Americans who were low-income or high-income.

So we've got these parallel patterns going on at once. There's the racial bias, as you mentioned, and then there are the views of middle-income people. The past several decades have been particularly rough for the middle class. Productivity is very high, people are working more hours than ever, and incomes are stagnant. Many of these people feel like they're trapped between the poor, who receive lots of benefits, and the rich, who don't need any help.

Sean Illing

Can you give me a sense of how public attitudes toward the government have evolved over the last three or four decades? And how does this break down on the left and the right?

Suzanne Mettler

If you go back to the middle of the 20th century, there are all kinds of survey questions that have been asked in the same way over time, like from the 1940s or so onward. It used to be that majorities of Americans, like over 60 or 70 percent in the 1950s and 1960s, had very positive responses to questions about trust in government.

But then it begins to deteriorate with the Vietnam War and Watergate and you see a downward slide. There was a slight uptick during the 1980s and a little bit of up and down movement in the 1990s. After 9/11, the country briefly comes together, but basically it's a downward trendline on all of these indicators.

Today, about one in five Americans holds a positive view toward government. About one in five believes that public officials are responsive to people like them, and this more or less holds across party lines. I think there are different reasons why people on either end of the political spectrum don't like government, but there's a lot of antipathy to government across the board.

"“We have to find a way to recapture that sense of the government as an instrument of good in our lives, and we have to stop thinking of it as the enemy”"

Sean Illing

In the book, you cite Mitt Romney's famous “47 percent” comment from 2013, in which he claimed that 47 percent of the population are dependent upon the government and will vote for the Democratic candidate no matter what. But data shows that it's the so-called “red

states" that contribute the least to the federal coffers and rely the most on federal services — and of course, nearly all of those states voted for Romney. What the hell is going on here?

Suzanne Mettler

Yeah, this is quite frustrating. I spent a lot of time looking at the state of Kentucky to try to make sense of this. Kentucky is a very poor state. And when you look at congressional districts there, you find a bunch of them where the average person gets more than 30 or 40 or 50 percent of their income from federal social benefits.

Yet those same districts are electing very conservative members of Congress who promise to introduce work requirements for food stamps and repeal the Affordable Care Act and so forth. It's really puzzling.

I think there are a couple of things that might explain this. One is that I found that people who benefit from more visible social programs, like food stamps, are much less likely to vote.

This is not a big surprise. We've know for some time that people who are higher-income and have more socioeconomic status tend to vote more. They tend to be mobilized more by groups and public officials and they participate more, and they tend to be less cognizant of the ways in which they benefit from social services.

Sean Illing

We should explain this participation gap a little more. So we know that people who are aware and appreciative of government's role in their lives through social benefits are least likely to participate in politics, and those who use social benefits but show no cognizance of government's role in providing them are much more likely to vote. What accounts for this?

Suzanne Mettler

The people who participate the most in politics, usually people with more education and more resources, rely on plenty of social benefits from government, but these benefits are often hidden in the tax code or are disguised in other ways. So they don't think of government as having done much for them personally.

But the people who are most aware that government has helped them tend to be people who've used more visible policies like food stamps or subsidized housing or Medicaid. The reasons for this are fairly straightforward.

People with more resources have more time and are part of social networks that encourage them to participate, and they're asked to participate by public officials and organizations. We just don't see these sorts of incentives for low-income people.

Sean Illing

A big part of this story is the relentless efforts of organizations and political activists like the Koch brothers, who spend a lot of money convincing people that government is their enemy. The people they're targeting have almost nothing in common with the special

interests manipulating them, but the propaganda is effective.

Suzanne Mettler

As a political scientist, I would have thought that people's personal experiences might interfere with that. If the government helped you afford college or health care or prevented your grandmother from falling into poverty when she was a citizen, you would think that would overcome the messages people are getting from the special interests.

But I've found that those personal experiences don't matter much, unless somebody is connecting the dots, unless someone is pointing out these connections.

Sean Illing

Well, that's precisely my point: There are countless forces, many of which operate behind the scenes, that are invested in obscuring these connections, in making sure that people don't connect the dots.

Suzanne Mettler

You're absolutely right about that. There is a lot of obscuring, and there's also a lot of distraction. People are encouraged to focus on all kinds of side issues or culture war issues or anything that draws their attention away from these fundamental connections.

Sean Illing

I often feel like we're locked in a brutal self-fulfilling cycle here. What we've seen time and again in states like, say, Louisiana and Kansas, is that Republican administrations have deliberately undermined social policies like Obamacare and then pointed to the subsequent dysfunction as proof of the government's inherent badness.

Suzanne Mettler

Right, and there's another story there to be told, and that is that the government has actually helped people out in lots of ways and is doing so every day through all of these social benefits. But this story is not told, and so we end up in this place with many Americans are philosophical conservatives but utilitarian liberals.

Sean Illing

Can you explain what you mean by that?

Suzanne Mettler

When people are asked broad questions about how big government should be, or if they approve of larger taxes, they reflexively sound pretty conservative. But when they're asked more concrete questions about funding for Social Security or unemployment insurance, they sound pretty liberal.

So when you really drill down, you find that people like these benefits, but when the game of politics is played in a way that draws people's attention to abstractions, conservatives win. And when liberals can manage to draw attention to specifics, they win.

"“If we become more and more anti-government, we’re against ourselves. We’re against our own collective capacity to do anything.”"

Sean Illing

Do you think this is mostly about information? If we could take all these people who are confused about what government actually does to and for them and sit them down in front of a screen and educate them about the reality, do you believe that would change anything?

Suzanne Mettler

I think information can help, but I think we shouldn’t exaggerate how much it helps. New information only helps those who are actually open to it, and the truth is that many people aren’t. We’re in this very partisan environment where it matters to people who is conveying a message, and there isn’t a lot of trust.

I’ve come to the conclusion that relationships are more important. And I think organizations need to be making these things much more clear to people in their everyday lives. I also think that, as a citizenry, we need to rethink how we talk about our lives and the role that government has had in it.

Sean Illing

I see the government-citizen disconnect as an existential threat to our liberal democracy, because it’s destroying the very basis of citizenship and making it near impossible to respond to rising income inequality. Is that how you see it?

Suzanne Mettler

I agree that this government-citizen disconnect makes it really difficult for government to do anything constructive about economic inequality, but it’s not just that. It actually undermines government’s capacity to do much of anything.

Government is what we have in common, our shared capacity to do something to overcome what political scientists call “collective action problems”— that is, inherent disincentives to work together for the common good. These are problems that cannot be solved by your church, your family, businesses, or other organizations. They require government action.

In the United States, we have this history and this aspiration for government to be democratic. It’s about all of us and what we can do together. So if we become more and more anti-government, we’re against ourselves. We’re against our own collective capacity to do anything.

So it really doesn’t matter what it is. It could be economic inequality, it could be climate change, it could be restoring the infrastructure. We can’t solve any of these problems without government. And if individual citizens withdraw from public life, the only people in society who have power are those with lots of economic power. That’s why I find this profoundly troubling.

Sean Illing

So where does that leave us? How do we bridge the gap between citizens and government?

Suzanne Mettler

We have to change the narrative. We have to think about the role that government has had in our own lives. We have to talk to friends and family members about what role government has played in their lives, and help them see the connections.

I have my students do interviews with a family member, preferably the eldest member of their family who has grown up in the United States, and ask them about government's role in their life through public policies. They come back having learned all sorts of things they didn't know about how a public policy like the GI Bill enabled that person to be the first in their family to go to college, and how that changed the fate of the family forever.

So we have to find a way to recapture that sense of the government as an instrument of good in our lives, and we have to stop thinking of it as the enemy. Otherwise, we cannot make reforms and move forward as a democracy.