Election Day is almost here and every U.S. citizen must reflect on the similarities and differences between each presidential candidate before casting a vote. This requires more than a quick scan of party platforms. Instead, a deeper focus on the philosophy behind Democratic and Republican party rhetoric will help the average citizen make a more informed decision on Nov. 6. While many believe philosophy has little impact outside of academics, the campaign trail has shown the importance of really knowing the core philosophical values that guide each candidate and will ultimately determine America’s fate for the next four years.

**Similarities**

Lost in the heat of partisan politics is the truth that most of us share the same values as a people. In fact, both parties share core philosophical views traceable to the European and American thinkers of the Enlightenment Period (about 1600-1800) such as Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The English philosopher John Locke is probably the philosopher who most influenced American politics in his case for the right to life, liberty and property. In addition to these cherished ideals, Locke also believed legitimate government relies on the consent of the citizenry through majority rule. Interestingly, Democrats and Republicans are united in the once radical view that government exists for the good of the people.

**Differences**

*Self-Interest vs. the Common Good*

Many of their differences, however, stem from deciding what role the government should play in serving this good. Republicans tend to take a more conservative approach and accept the philosophy of Adam Smith, the author of *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith’s view, commonly known as laissez-faire capitalism, encourages individuals to act on the basis of self-interest in a free and competitive market that best serves the good of all. Furthermore, Republican views on the role of government are best attributed to the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau: “that government is best which governs least.” Rather than have the state direct the market, Smith spoke of the market’s “invisible hand” as a metaphor to describe the self-regulating behavior of the marketplace.
While Democrats also embrace capitalism, the philosophy of the current Democratic Party was shaped by the Great Depression and the New Deal. From their standpoint, this economic disaster was caused by allowing the invisible hand of the market to act with little restraint or regulation. As such, Democrats tend to favor having the state play a prominent role in regulating the economy. This allows the state to serve the good of the people by checking the excesses of self-interest in favor of the common good. Republicans contend checking of excesses can harm the public good by choking the economy. Thus, Republicans generally favor less state influence over the economy.

The Democrats, as exemplified in the New Deal, generally take the view that the state has a positive, active and significant role to play in securing the good of the people. Specifically, the Democratic Party believes the state should be altruistic in its support of programs like federal student aid, welfare and healthcare.

While the Republican Party also holds to the idea of the state having an active role in the public good and in caring for citizens during times of need, they generally embrace the idea that the role of the state should be more limited and it is preferable for people to rely on personal success than private charity.

A very strong version of this view is put forth by the Tea Party. Interestingly, they explicitly acknowledge the influence of philosopher Ayn Rand. In her collection of essays titled The Virtue of Selfishness, she argued that we are morally obligated to achieve happiness. As she saw it, ethics based on altruism (the moral view that we should act for the benefit of others) would prevent people from achieving happiness. This is because altruists would be wasting their resources on other people rather than using them to achieve their own happiness. Her solution was that people should embrace what philosophers call ethical egoism—the moral view that a people should exclusively act in their own self-interest. While this might sound harsh, the justification is that this creates a better society in which people can succeed by their own efforts without being dragged down by supporting others and without being trapped in dependence.

Thus, some of the key philosophical distinctions between the Democrats and the Republicans involve their views of what role the state should play in securing the general good. The Democrats advocate a more extensive role for the state in securing this good while the Republicans claim the general good is better served by a more limited state. This disagreement is often dramatically exaggerated in political rhetoric, which makes it all the more important to remember that far more unites us as Americans than divides us as Democrats or Republicans (or Independents).

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