

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 14, 2012 at 11:01am

Government in our lives

by Pat Perriello

NCR Today

Michael Grunwald has done a piece in *Time* magazine (subscription required) that really focuses our attention on government and its role in our lives in this country in 2012.

Particularly during this election season, we have heard all sorts of claims and counterclaims as to the socialist nature of the Obama presidency, or how Americans love Medicare, which is a socialist program.

Grunwald does an excellent job of taking a look at our country today to see where government is involved in our lives. He goes through a day in his own life and illustrates how the hand of government is with us almost every step of the way. He thus enables us to take an honest look at government involvement apart from slogans and electioneering.

Let's consider some of the aspects of government involvement that Grunwald highlights. He talks about a lot of government subsidies for the water we drink and the food we eat. He speaks of subsidized child care and subsidized electricity. He talks about his subsidized home office and his subsidized kids. He explains how the mortgage interest deduction subsidizes his housing, and that even his property taxes are deductible.

Grunwald relates his article to the ongoing culture wars in the presidential election over the size of government, yet he notes our failure to see the whole picture. President Obama is accused of moving this country in a socialist direction, even though there is little evidence of that. Grunwald makes clear that for decades government policies have directly or indirectly affected the way we live our lives. Most of us don't think about how government is involved in our lives. Most of us tend to have no problem with government involvement if it has a positive affect on our lives.

How many of us want to give up our mortgage deduction or deductions for state and local taxes?

Honestly, I don't. But maybe I could be persuaded if there was a grand bargain that appeared to be fair and where sacrifices were being shared in an equitable manner.

A couple of things stand out for me. In general we seem to object to government when it helps the poor or needy, but are less concerned about subsidies for businesses or individuals like ourselves if it makes our lives more comfortable. Also, even if we want to reduce government involvement it would have to be done over the course of many years, because with government so entrenched in every aspect of our lives, a dramatic reversal may well result in catastrophic disruptions.

The fact that the United States is as successful and prosperous as it is suggests that, by and large, government involvement has been more positive than negative. With Grunwald's article we can look at government in the clear light of day, debate the realities and perhaps reach some consensus on what should be retained, what should be changed, and what is a reasonable way of reaching agreeable goals.

Perhaps once the election is over cooler heads will prevail, and we can sit down in a bipartisan way and find ways to improve the way government works for all Americans, without leaving the poor and needy behind.

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