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# Thurston Howell Romney

**By DAVID BROOKS**

In 1980, about 30 percent of Americans received some form of government benefits. Today, as Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute has pointed out, about 49 percent do.

In 1960, government transfers to individuals totaled \$24 billion. By 2010, that total was 100 times as large. Even after adjusting for inflation, entitlement transfers to individuals have grown by more than 700 percent over the last 50 years. This spending surge, Eberstadt notes, has increased faster under Republican administrations than Democratic ones.

There are sensible conclusions to be drawn from these facts. You could say that the entitlement state is growing at an unsustainable rate and will bankrupt the country. You could also say that America is spending way too much on health care for the elderly and way too little on young families and investments in the future.

But these are not the sensible arguments that Mitt Romney made at a fund-raiser earlier this year. Romney, who criticizes President Obama for dividing the nation, divided the nation into two groups: the makers and the moochers. Forty-seven percent of the country, he said, are people “who are dependent upon government, who believe they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to take care of them, who believe they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it.”

This comment suggests a few things. First, it suggests that he really doesn't know much about the country he inhabits. Who are these freeloaders? Is it the Iraq war veteran who goes to the V.A.? Is it the student getting a loan to go to college? Is it the retiree on Social Security or Medicare?

It suggests that Romney doesn't know much about the culture of America. Yes, the entitlement state has expanded, but America remains one of the hardest-

working nations on earth. Americans work longer hours than just about anyone else. Americans believe in work more than almost any other people. Ninety-two percent say that hard work is the key to success, according to a 2009 Pew Research Survey.

It says that Romney doesn't know much about the political culture. Americans haven't become childlike worshipers of big government. On the contrary, trust in government has declined. The number of people who think government spending promotes social mobility has fallen.

The people who receive the disproportionate share of government spending are not big-government lovers. They are Republicans. They are senior citizens. They are white men with high school degrees. As Bill Galston of the Brookings Institution has noted, the people who have benefited from the entitlements explosion are middle-class workers, more so than the dependent poor.

Romney's comments also reveal that he has lost any sense of the social compact. In 1987, during Ronald Reagan's second term, 62 percent of Republicans believed that the government has a responsibility to help those who can't help themselves. Now, according to the Pew Research Center, only 40 percent of Republicans believe that.

The Republican Party, and apparently Mitt Romney, too, has shifted over toward a much more hyperindividualistic and atomistic social view — from the Reaganesque language of common citizenship to the libertarian language of makers and takers. There's no way the country will trust the Republican Party to reform the welfare state if that party doesn't have a basic commitment to provide a safety net for those who suffer for no fault of their own.

The final thing the comment suggests is that Romney knows nothing about ambition and motivation. The formula he sketches is this: People who are forced to make it on their own have drive. People who receive benefits have dependency.

But, of course, no middle-class parent acts as if this is true. Middle-class parents don't deprive their children of benefits so they can learn to struggle on their own. They shower benefits on their children to give them more opportunities — so they can play travel sports, go on foreign trips and develop more skills.

People are motivated when they feel competent. They are motivated when they have more opportunities. Ambition is fired by possibility, not by deprivation, as a tour through the world's poorest regions makes clear.

Sure, there are some government programs that cultivate patterns of dependency in some people. I'd put federal disability payments and unemployment insurance in this category. But, as a description of America today, Romney's comment is a country-club fantasy. It's what self-satisfied millionaires say to each other. It reinforces every negative view people have about Romney.

Personally, I think he's a kind, decent man who says stupid things because he is pretending to be something he is not — some sort of cartoonish government-hater. But it scarcely matters. He's running a depressingly inept presidential campaign. Mr. Romney, your entitlement reform ideas are essential, but when will the incompetence stop?

*Frank Bruni is off today.*