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Summary

While some argue that too many choices reduce consumer happiness, it is no justification for using government to restrict what we buy, or where we buy it.

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“To speak in terms of government’s ‘throwing an ever-greater menu of options at the American people’ is to beg the question: Should government have the power to constrict peaceful activities in the first place?”

I’ll Take Free Choice

by Sheldon Richman

Intellectuals who disdain the common man’s freedom never run out of rationalizations for government control. In a recent New York Times op-ed touting his book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, psychology professor Barry Schwartz criticized political reforms aimed at expanding choice. He argued, “For many people, increased choice can lead to a decrease in satisfaction. Too many options can result in paralysis, not liberation.”

He offered empirical evidence that a large range of choice makes people less happy, not more. For example, he cites research showing that “as the number of flavors of jam or varieties of chocolate available to shoppers is increased, the likelihood that they will leave the store without buying either jam or chocolate goes up.” Schwartz comments: “In cases like these, increased choice often enables people to improve their lives by some objective measure - quality of jam, rate of return on investment, suitability of a job to one’s ultimate career objectives, and so on. But it also makes people feel worse.”

Which leads Schwartz to the question, “Do we care about objective results or subjective results when we’re out to improve the general well-being? I think that once people’s standard of living is above subsistence levels, it is usually the subjective quality of the experience that really matters. And increased choice does not seem to improve the subjective quality of experience.”

So, Schwartz says, government really does us no favors when it gives us more choices in retirement plans, schools and medical care. We can’t handle it.

There is much to be said against this thesis. First, if choice makes us unhappy, why do so many of us stop patronizing mom-and-pop stores and rush to Wal-Mart the moment we get the chance? The opponents of freedom really must get their stories straight. They decry the little retail shops’ being driven out of business when the “big box” stores open nearby. But here’s Schwartz telling us lots of choices make us unhappy. Which is it, guys?

Moreover, regular people understand that we each have ways to manage a bewildering number of choices. Consumer Reports magazine is one method. A recommendation from a friend is another.

But there's a more fundamental objection to Schwartz's argument. The amount of choice we have should be none of the government's business. Government doesn't give us choices. It either interferes with free choice or it stays out of the way. To speak in terms of government's "throwing an ever-greater menu of options at the American people," is to beg the question: Should government have the power to constrict peaceful activities in the first place? Government can expand our choices only if it has previously limited them by physical force.

Choice in the marketplace grows out of individual freedom. I want shoes. Many people are free to sell me shoes. That presents me with choices, requiring me to pay attention and to discriminate. What's the alternative? Government control aimed at limiting choice. Where's the evidence that that makes people happy?

Schwartz is a professor. If someone were to suggest that too many books, journals and magazines crowd the shelves, that all this choice makes people unhappy, and that government could serve us better by restricting the number of choices, Schwartz and his ilk would scream like banshees.

So let's make a deal. The government will interfere with neither the freedom of choice that Schwartz likes nor the kind he cares little for, such as choice in consumer products, retirement plans, medical care and schools.

Schwartz may believe that "there may be a point when choice tyrannizes people more than it liberates them." But I'll take metaphorical tyranny over the real McCoy any day.

Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation in Fairfax, Va., author of Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State, and editor of The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty magazine.

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Please contact:

Kurt T. Weber
Vice President
Cascade Policy Institute
813 SW Alder Street, Suite 450
Portland, Oregon 97205

Phone: (503) 242-0900
Fax: (503) 242-3822

www.cascadepolicy.org
kurt@cascadepolicy.org