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What Purple America Wants From Trump

Swing voters would hold Washington to account but also protect programs they see as essential.



The president-elect in Des Moines, Iowa, during his victory tour, Dec. 8. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By **PAUL C. LIGHT**

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The 2016 election has usually been described as a contest between red and blue America, but that isn't the whole picture. My analysis of survey data collected by nonpartisan organizations suggests that this year's voters can be broken down into not two main groups, but three.

First there are the angry "dismantlers," who favor smaller government and support major political reform, such as term limits, constitutional limits on campaign spending, and a lifetime ban on lobbying by former members of Congress. These are the voters who helped Donald Trump win the Electoral College. Dismantlers have grown to a near-majority, the tracking surveys show. They are now 43% of Americans, up from only 17% in 1997.

Then there are the "reinventors." They favor bigger government and say that Washington is basically sound, though they may support limited reform such as reducing paperwork burdens on businesses. These voters helped Hillary Clinton win the popular vote, but their numbers have plunged in the past two decades. Reinventors are now only 20% of Americans, down from 43% in 1997.

Finally, there are "priority setters," who favor both bigger government *and* major political reform. They want more of virtually everything Washington delivers, but they also believe most elected officials put their own interests ahead of the country. This group has grown to 25% of Americans, up from 16% in 2001.

None of these groups represents a majority of the electorate. Instead, the priority setters act as a swing vote. Although they lean Democratic, they are able to find common ground with both dismantlers and reinventors. To a large extent, these priority setters will determine whether President Trump is re-elected in 2020.

So what do priority setters want? Here are six things that they believe would help to drain the swamp at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.

- *They want major campaign-finance reforms.* These voters worry about the amount of money in politics and say that the high cost of presidential campaigns discourages good

candidates from running. They support limits on election spending, and they believe that effective laws—or even a constitutional amendment—could be written to fix the system.

- *They support serious ethics reforms.* Priority setters believe that big interests pretty much run the country. They doubt that elected officials care much about what ordinary citizens say, and they describe their leaders as lazy, selfish, dishonest and not particularly patriotic. These voters blame both parties for gridlock and the failure to solve important problems. They await action from Congress and Mr. Trump and will swing toward the party that delivers the most.

They will also be watching as Mr. Trump decides how—or whether—to untangle himself and his web of financial interests. If he seems to be profiting from the presidency, they may join with the dismantlers to punish him in four years.

- *They want to protect essential federal programs.* Priority setters believe that the federal government is almost always wasteful and inefficient. Yet they still want Washington to play a major role in strengthening the economy, protecting the environment, helping people get out of poverty, ensuring safe food and drugs, and guaranteeing access to health care. They generally say the government is doing a good job on these missions, and they want improvement, not cuts.

These voters are unlikely to support Mr. Trump's government-wide hiring freeze. They have seen many freezes, caps and ceilings come and go over the years with negligible effects and significant costs. They might ask whether Mr. Trump would ever use such a blunt instrument to manage his own business.

- *They favor a nuanced effort to flatten the Washington hierarchy.* In 1961, according to my analysis, John F. Kennedy oversaw 450 political and career executives who occupied 17 bureaucratic layers at the top of government. Mr. Trump will soon oversee more than 3,000 executives in 63 layers. This leads to a Washington hallmark: titles like chief of staff to the deputy assistant secretary. Such complexity distorts information as it travels up the chain of command, and then thwarts guidance on the way down.

- *They would support reform of hiring and personnel systems.* More than half of the priority setters say they would recommend a career in government to a son or daughter. But they might reconsider if they knew how long the hiring process takes, how many federal employees say performance has little impact on pay and promotions, and how few say creativity and innovation are encouraged. Mr. Trump should work with Congress to build a new personnel system to recruit the millennials who are eschewing federal employment even as the baby boomers retire.

- *They want to stop the cascade of government breakdowns.* Under the two most recent presidents, Washington has suffered dozens of serious failures: the missing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; the Space Shuttle Columbia accident; the sluggish response to Hurricane Katrina; the Deepwater Horizon oil spill; the healthcare.gov glitches; the Veterans Affairs hospital scandal; last summer's TSA bottlenecks; the lack of early warning to residents in Flint, Mich., about lead in their water. If vision without execution equals daydreaming, Congress and the president have been doing too much of it. Yes, federal employees perform miracles every day, but they often do so against the political and administrative odds.

This agenda shows how far the priority setters have moved, and they show little inclination to go back. To the contrary, four more years of polarization and gridlock might be precisely what they need to pull more dismantlers and reinventors to their side. Priority setters have created an alternative vision of government reform, and as Mr. Trump begins his administration, he would be wise to keep them in mind.

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