

OPINION**CENTRIST OR RADICAL, THE DEMOCRATIC NOMINEE MUST PLEDGE TO REBOOT WASHINGTON—OR LEAVE FIELD OPEN TO TRUMP | OPINION**

(L-R) DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES ANDREW YANG, FORMER SOUTH BEND, INDIANA MAYOR PETE BUTTIGIEG, SEN. ELIZABETH WARREN (D-MASS.), FORMER VICE PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN, SEN. BERNIE SANDERS (I-VT.), SEN. AMY KLOBUCHAR (D-MINN.), AND TOM STEYER PARTICIPATE IN THE DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY DEBATE IN THE SULLIVAN ARENA AT ST. ANSELM COLLEGE ON FEBRUARY 7, 2020 IN MANCHESTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE. JOE RAEDLE/GETTY

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To challenge Donald Trump, Democratic candidates are debating leftist and moderate versions of progressive agendas. But what's needed most, polls suggest, is a candidate who addresses the main source of voter anger—Washington itself.

Almost two-thirds of voters support "very major reform" of Washington, according to a 2018 Pew survey, almost double as many from twenty years ago. In a recent Gallup survey asking for "the most important problem facing the country," the number one problem by far, polling at 28 percent, was government. Healthcare was second, at 6 percent.

Much of the voter attraction to Trump, and Obama before him, was that each was an outsider who promised to clean up Washington ("Drain the swamp") ("Change we can believe in"). The 2020 Democratic debates so far have included not one question on fixing broken government.

Nor is a spring cleaning of Washington bureaucracy inconsistent with expanding healthcare coverage and climate change initiatives. It may be the only way to achieve them. These programs will cost trillions. Where does the money come from? Soak the rich? Voters may be skeptical. Trump's rejoinder is easy: Do voters want to risk a recession?

A vision to reboot Washington—not just new officials, but a simpler framework replacing the jungle of red tape—would bring resources to achieve reform goals, while also relieving the suffocating bureaucracy that drives Americans to distraction. For example:

- Bureaucracy is ruinously expensive. Lengthy environmental review and permitting doubles the effective cost of new infrastructure—and harms the environment by prolonging polluting bottlenecks. Many states have more school administrators and non-instructors than teachers, in large part to manage the red tape. Over 30 percent of healthcare dollars go to administration. That's about \$1 trillion, or \$1 million per physician. Standardizing health plans to reduce fee-for-service paperwork, and replacing thick rulebooks with more flexible oversight, would free up billions.
- Obsolete and duplicative programs consume much of the discretionary budget. Any spring cleaning exercise would readily find resources needed for climate change activists to introduce carbon taxes as part of a package that reduces the overall tax burden.
- Bureaucratic micromanagement causes voter backlash. Other developed countries don't compel teachers and doctors to spend hours filling out forms, make small businesses go to multiple agencies for a simple permit, levy fines for paperwork foot faults, threaten parents who allow their children walk to school alone, or let any disgruntled employee bog an employer down in years of litigation.

Why is it that new leaders get elected, but old problems don't get fixed? Bureaucracy has supplanted Democracy. All the accumulated legal requirements—150 million words—stifle leadership as well as cause massive waste and frustration. Washington is like a company that tries to run itself by every idea than anyone ever had.

Republicans, too, are missing the opportunity. They talk about less government, but bureaucracy gets ever denser and the deficit ever larger. Demands for de-regulation don't happen because Americans don't want to breathe dirty air or give up Medicare. Trump's policies are good for business, but do not address daily voter frustrations with overbearing bureaucracy.

The bold idea, available to both parties, is system overhaul: Streamline government so it can achieve its goals, not abandon its goals. Conventional wisdom is the opposite—to take pruning shears into the jungle and clean up a specific area. But history shows that meaningful reforms happen in a surge, not incrementally—think the 1960s, the 1930s, and the Progressive era. Political scientists call it "punctuated equilibrium." Pressures build until, all at once, the system breaks and new ideas rush in.

Pent-up frustration by Americans at government will cause the dam to burst, perhaps soon. But what will the change be? De-regulation, whatever the effects on the environment? Socialism, whatever the effects on prosperity? Most Americans might prefer a party that has a credible vision to achieve needed reforms while also getting Big Brother off our backs in daily choices.

Governing shouldn't be this hard. The richest country on earth can afford to be environmental stewards, provide healthcare to all, and help workers whose incomes have stagnated. The land of the free can also honor individual initiative by ending bureaucratic micromanagement at all levels of society.

Rebooting Washington will also have losers, of course. Unnecessary subsidies will be phased out. Many interest groups in Washington feed off the red tape. Candidates will have to choose between traditional alliances and a new governing vision that marshals the resources and attracts voter support to achieve new reforms.

Climate change activists, in my view, are the key to realignment. Their concern is urgent. Stalemate does them no good. But they are unlikely to succeed when the solution bites into pocketbooks and is perceived by many as "more government." Cleaning out encrusted bureaucracy is the key to unlocking this door. Americans know Washington is broken. The winner at the polls will likely be the party with a coherent vision to fix it.

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