



THE VOLCKER ALLIANCE
Working for Effective Government



Eight Takeaways from The Rebuilder's Dilemma

CHARTING THE IMPACT
OF GOVERNMENT REFORM ON
THE 2020 ELECTION

Paul C. Light

EIGHT TAKEAWAYS FROM THE REBUILDER'S DILEMMA

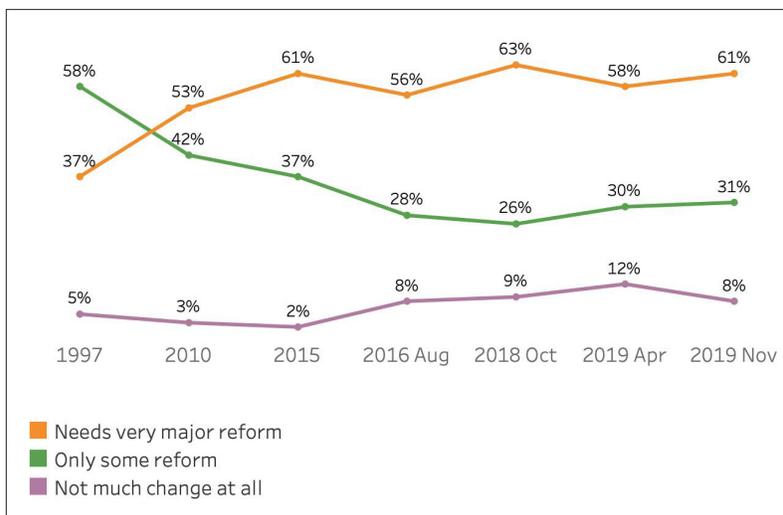
Charting the Impact of Government Reform on the 2020 Election

MY NEW REPORT FOR THE VOLCKER ALLIANCE, *The Rebuilder's Dilemma*, provides fresh data on what Americans want from government. It is based on a November 2019 survey by SSRS and includes a recommended bipartisan agenda to address the demand for reform. The survey strongly suggests that the 2020 Democratic field is spending too much time promising a bigger federal government that provides more services and not enough time on the need for major reform in how the federal government delivers on the promises it makes.

This analysis provides a clear warning to the 2020 Democratic candidates: Absent a promise to improve federal performance, Democratic voters could face a choice between (1) a Republican president who rarely misses an opportunity to criticize the federal government and promote a smaller government that delivers fewer services, and (2) a Democratic candidate who rarely misses a chance to embrace a bigger government that delivers more services but who has little to say about making government work.¹ Unless Democrats offer a credible government reform agenda to match their inventory of new programs, the rebuilders—those who support a bigger government that provides more services and very major reform—may conclude that President Donald Trump is the safer choice. This is the rebuilder's dilemma in 2020.

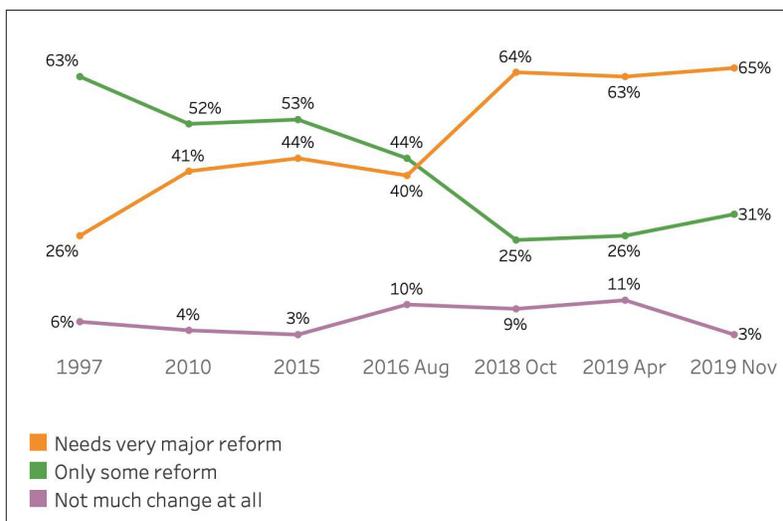
This warning emerges from eight takeaways presented in this report:

I. THE PUBLIC DEMAND FOR VERY MAJOR GOVERNMENT REFORM IS NEAR A TWENTY-YEAR HIGH. As shown in Figure 1, the number of Americans who believe the federal government needs very major reform rose from 37 percent in 1997 to 61 percent in November 2019. This increase reflects a mix of public concerns about waste and inefficiency in government, the role of special interests in running government, mediocre ratings of government performance, and reactions to highly visible government breakdowns such as the opioid crisis and mistreatment of children at US border detention centers.

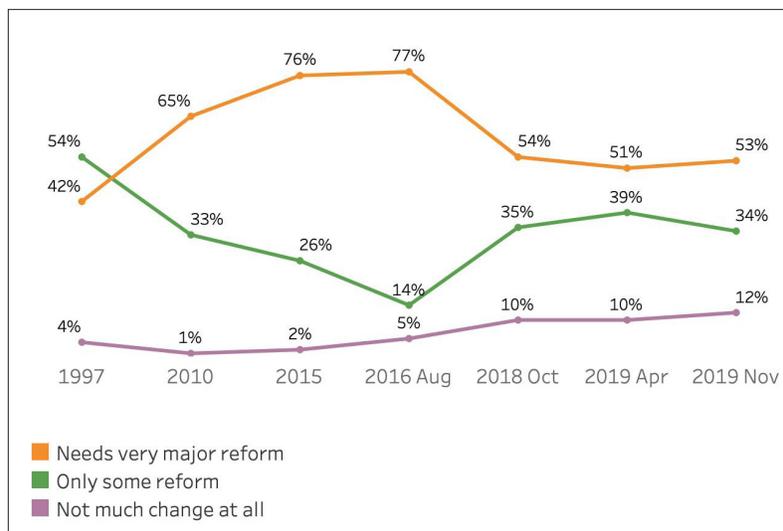
FIGURE 1: The demand for reform, 1997–2019 (all survey respondents)


SOURCES Surveys and data collection by the Pew Research Center, by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and by SSRS; analysis and interpretation by Paul C. Light.

2. PARTY IDENTIFIERS ARE LESS LIKELY TO FAVOR VERY MAJOR REFORM WHEN THEIR PARTY IS IN POWER. Though this statement holds overall, Figures 2 and 3 show that Republicans expressed a greater demand for reform three years into Trump’s first term than Democrats did at the same point in President Barack Obama’s first term. Trump’s own attacks on government may explain the higher Republican demand for reform.

FIGURE 2: The demand for reform, 1997–2019 (Democratic respondents only)


SOURCES Surveys and data collection by the Pew Research Center, by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and by SSRS; analysis and interpretation by Paul C. Light.

FIGURE 3: The demand for reform, 1997–2019 (Republican respondents only)


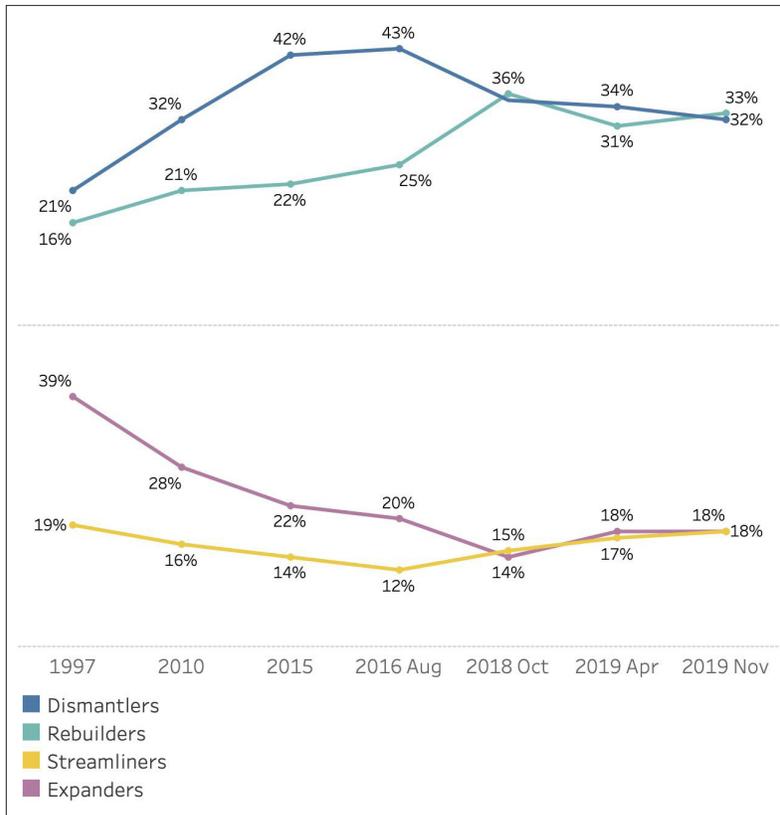
SOURCES Surveys and data collection by the Pew Research Center, by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and by SSRS; analysis and interpretation by Paul C. Light.

3. AMERICANS DIVIDE INTO FOUR GROUPS BASED ON THEIR DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT REFORM AND SUPPORT FOR BIGGER OR SMALLER GOVERNMENT:

- **Dismantlers**, who support both a smaller government that provides fewer services and very major reform, and lean Republican.
- **Rebuilders**, who support both a bigger government that provides more services and very major reform, and lean Democratic.
- **Streamliners**, who support a smaller government, think the federal government is basically sound, and lean Republican.
- **Expanders**, who support a bigger government, think the federal government is basically sound, and lean Democratic.

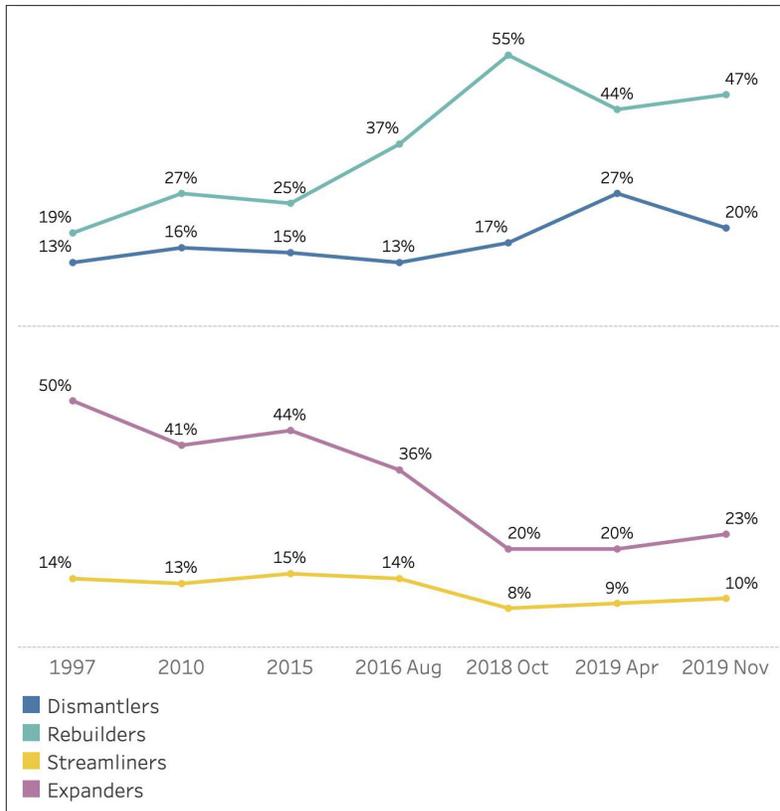
4. THE 2020 ELECTION IS HEADED TOWARD A SHOWDOWN BETWEEN REPUBLICAN DISMANTLERS AND DEMOCRATIC REBUILDERS. Figures 4, 5, and 6 show the movement of reform positions over time. In the latest survey, dismantlers and rebuilders were divided by only 1 percentage point among all respondents, 33 percent to 32 percent, with expanders and streamliners far behind at 18 percent each.

FIGURE 4: Changing reform positions, 1997–2019 (all survey respondents)



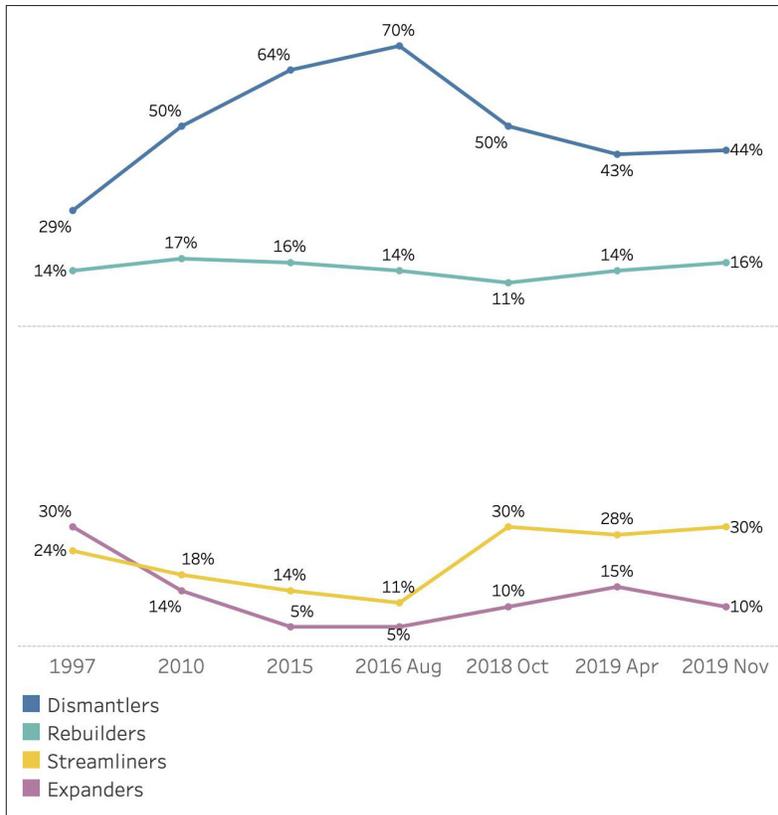
SOURCES Surveys and data collection by the Pew Research Center, by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and by SSRS; analysis and interpretation by Paul C. Light.

FIGURE 5: Changing reform positions, 1997–2019 (Democratic respondents only)



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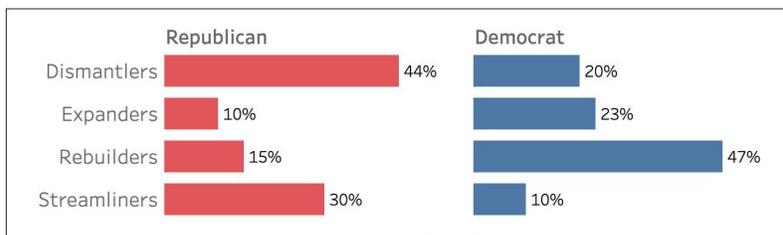
FIGURE 6: Changing reform positions, 1997–2019 (Republican respondents only)



SOURCES Surveys and data collection by the Pew Research Center, by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and by SSRS; analysis and interpretation by Paul C. Light.

5. TRUMP'S REELECTION DEPENDS ON REPUBLICAN DISMANTLERS, WHILE THE 2020 DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE WILL DEPEND ON DEMOCRATIC REBUILDERS. As Figure 7 indicates, dismantlers made up 44 percent of Republicans in November 2019, while streamliners trailed at 30 percent. In turn, expanders represented just a 23 percent share of Democrats, and rebuilders more than double that, at 47 percent. Trump's next campaign is clearly focusing on dismantlers, while the Democratic field started the primary season with a long list of promises designed to activate expanders.

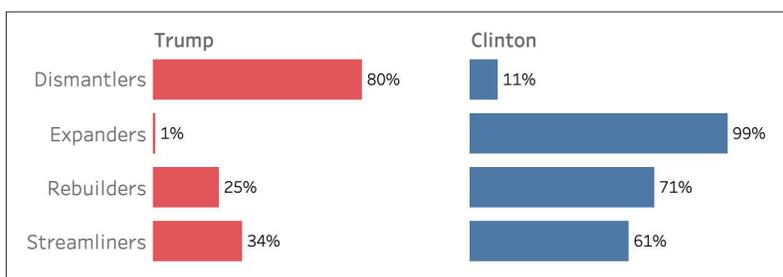
FIGURE 7: Reform groups within each party, November 2019
(all survey respondents)



SOURCES Surveys and data collection by the Pew Research Center, by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and by SSRS; analysis and interpretation by Paul C. Light.

6. REBUILDERS AND DISMANTLERS WILL DETERMINE THE 2020 ELECTION. As Figures 8, 9, and 10 show, Trump won the largest share of his 2016 support from dismantlers, both among the public as a whole and within the Republican Party. In turn, Hillary Clinton’s largest support came from expanders, both among the public overall and within the Democratic Party. Asked in August 2016 whom they intended to vote for in the general election, 93 percent of Republican dismantlers said Trump, while 100 percent of Democratic expanders and 96 percent of Democratic rebuilders said Clinton.

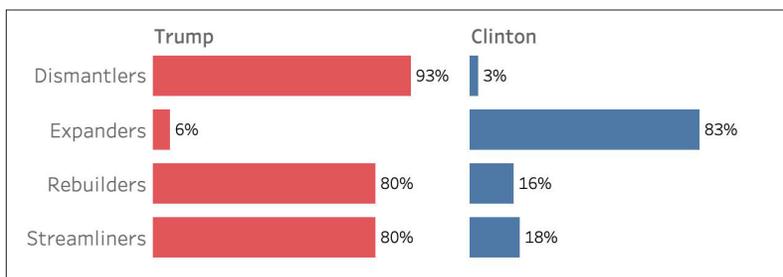
FIGURE 8: Vote intentions by reform position, 2016 (all survey respondents*)



*Figure excludes respondents who answered “other” or “don’t know.”

SOURCES Surveys and data collection by the Pew Research Center, by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and by SSRS; analysis and interpretation by Paul C. Light.

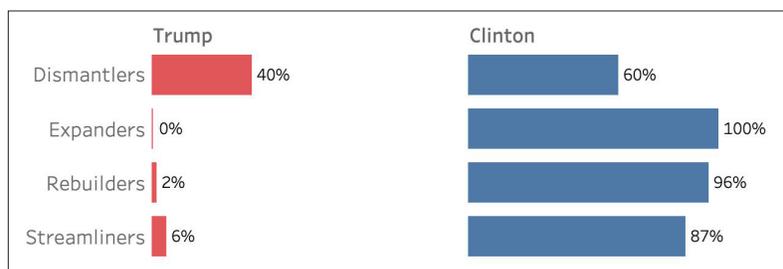
FIGURE 9: Vote intentions by reform position, 2016 (Republican respondents only*)



*Figure excludes respondents who answered “other” or “don’t know.”

SOURCES Surveys and data collection by the Pew Research Center, by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and by SSRS; analysis and interpretation by Paul C. Light.

FIGURE 10: Vote intentions by reform position, 2016
(Democratic respondents only*)



*Figure excludes respondents who answered “other” or “don’t know.”

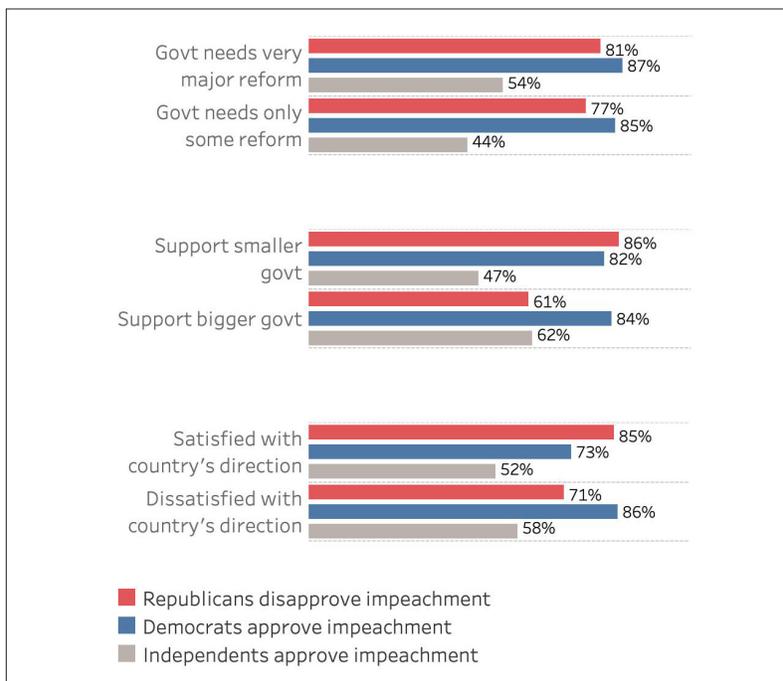
SOURCES Surveys and data collection by the Pew Research Center, by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and by SSRS; Analysis and interpretation by Paul C. Light.

7. THE GREATEST THREAT TO TRUMP’S REELECTION COULD COME FROM REPUBLICAN STREAMLINERS, WHO MIGHT LEAN TOWARD A MODERATE DEMOCRAT; THE GREATEST THREAT TO THE EVENTUAL DEMOCRATIC NOMINEE COULD COME FROM THE PARTY’S DISMANTLERS, WHO MIGHT LEAN AWAY FROM A LIBERAL DEMOCRAT. The number of Republican streamliners almost tripled between 2016 and November 2019, from 11 percent to 30 percent; the number of Democratic dismantlers rose from 13 percent in 1997 to 27 percent in April 2019 before dropping back to 20 percent in November. Republican streamliners are increasingly isolated within their party, partly because of their more moderate positions on government performance. They are less likely than Republican dismantlers to describe themselves as very conservative, express anger and frustration with the federal government, and view the federal government as almost always wasteful and inefficient. As such, they may be more open to a moderate Democrat who promises to repair government.

8. THE OUTCOME OF TRUMP’S IMPEACHMENT AND TRIAL IS UNLIKELY TO AFFECT THE DEMAND FOR REFORM. Asked about the impeachment inquiry only days before the House hearings began in mid-November, 57 percent of respondents approved of the inquiry, 39 percent disapproved, and 5 percent did not answer the question. Party loyalties clearly influenced these opinions, with 86 percent of Democrats approving of the inquiry, 79 percent of Republicans disapproving, and 69 percent of independents approving.²

As Figure 11 shows, Democrats will continue to favor very major reform until Republicans lose the White House, while Republicans will continue to see a somewhat less urgent need for reform until a Democrat wins the White House.

FIGURE II: Attitudes on Reform and Impeachment, November 2019
(all survey respondents)



SOURCES Surveys and data collection by the Pew Research Center, by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and by SSRS; analysis and interpretation by Paul C. Light.

ENDNOTES

1. Party identifiers include respondents who said they usually think of themselves as a Democrat or Republican or lean more toward the Democratic or Republican Party.
2. The question was worded: “Do you approve or disapprove of the House of Representatives’ decision to conduct an impeachment inquiry into Donald Trump?”

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