

While Trump backers, critics differ on his cabinet picks, few surprised they're unorthodox

By [MARTIN WISCKOL](#)

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They are billionaires and generals.

Seven of the 23 named so far have no government experience. At least six oppose key policies of the agencies they've been nominated to run.

Welcome to the administration of incoming President Donald Trump – an administration shaping up to be as controversial, unpredictable and unorthodox as Trump's campaign.

"It's clear he gets a tremendous amount of delight from picking people other politicians wouldn't," said Dan Schnur, director of USC's Jesse M.

Unruh Institute of Politics. "He's very aggressively agitated against the political establishment. It shouldn't be surprising that his approach to his administration is so much different than usual."

As unlikely as some of the picks are – such as Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson, who's spent his entire career with the oil conglomerate, to be the nation's top diplomat – others are more conventional, Schnur said.

But even the "conventional" in the context of Trump's Cabinet might be outliers in other administrations.

"On one hand, it leads to creative thinking," said Jack Pitney, a political scientist at Claremont McKenna College. "On the other hand, it can lead to people like Tom Price, who has links to groups with ideas that are kooky."

Price, the nominee to head the Department of Health and Human Services, is among those Schnur listed as "conventional conservatives." Price, a congressman and a surgeon, is an ardent opponent of abortion rights and Obamacare, stances shared with Trump.

But Pitney, author of "The Politics of Autism," points out that Price is also a member of the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons. The group's journal has said that HIV does not cause AIDS, that there are links between autism and vaccinations, and that there are links between abortion and breast cancer – all stances that go against widely accepted medical science.

Trump's picks also have attracted attention for their homogeneity. Of 23 top-level choices, more than three-quarters are white men.

For those who win Senate confirmation – Tillerson is among those already raising questions not only among Democrats but also some Republicans – one question is how long they'll last in their jobs.

After all, this is the chief executive who made "You're fired" a catchphrase while host of "The Apprentice" and whose campaign saw unusually high turnover among top aides.

Administration picks could face similar scenarios, said Lori Cox Han, a professor at Chapman University who specializes in the U.S. government and the presidency.

"They're either going to reshape the model or they're going to fall flat and be replaced," Han said. "People may have less time than usual to succeed."

Drain the swamp?

Trump's populist campaign resounded among white middle-class and lower middle-class Americans who felt government was out of touch. On the campaign trail, Trump relentlessly attacked the political establishment, liberal elites and globalist business interests.

His nominees and appointees, meanwhile, are elites in their own right.

There are five multimillionaire magnates, including former Goldman Sachs partner Steven Mnuchin, and five billionaires. There are five members of Congress, three generals, a governor, a former governor and the former chairman of the Republican National Committee.

Hardcore Trump backers are thrilled.

"I want people in office who don't need to fill their coffers with bribes from lobbyists," said Deanne Tate of Orange, who runs the Veterans First nonprofit in Santa Ana. "Too many people go to Washington, D.C., become millionaires and let their staffers write regulations without ever having lived under these interpretations. And we the people suffer."

John Berry, a California coordinator for the Tea Party Patriots, also applauded Trump's picks.

"Yeah, they're at the top of their fields, but they are successful and they are patriots and statesmen," said the Redlands resident. "Government has a stale mindset. It's limited. In the private sector, it's a different way of thinking. It's based on creativity. These are heavyweight, smart people."

Berry is relieved to see a lack of Ivy Leaguers, who proliferated in President Barack Obama's administration.

"There's nothing wrong with the Ivy League, but in government they have a stale, condescending attitude," he said.

Of course, there are no shortage of critics.

"His Cabinet picks confirm what he campaigned on," said Dan Jacobson, chairman of the Democratic Foundation of Orange County. "It shows a penchant for strongman, corporate rule."

One of Jacobson's biggest concerns is harm to the environment from rolling back regulations. Environmental Protection Agency nominee Scott Pruitt is seen as an ally of the fossil fuel industry and, as Oklahoma attorney general, has fought regulations targeting climate change.

Other worries include the possibility of foreign governments having inordinate sway over administration policies, the deregulation of Wall Street and the deportation of immigrants whose only crime is being in the country illegally.

Jacobson has been worried about the use of government-sanctioned torture, given Trump's campaign statement that "torture works." But he was heartened to hear that defense secretary nominee James Mattis' words of opposition to torture were apparently well-received by Trump.

"The secretary of defense pick is probably one of the better picks," Jacobson said.

At the other end of the spectrum, for Jacobson, is the choice of former Texas Gov. Rick Perry to head the Department of Energy and Alabama Sen. Jeff Sessions for attorney general. Perry once called for the elimination of the Department of Energy, and Sessions once failed to get confirmed for a judgeship because of racist comments.

Fears and hopes

While he remains wary, Jacobson says he no longer is as devastated that Hillary Clinton lost as are many Democrats.

"I've accepted that Donald Trump will be our president," he said. "That acceptance came at the end of a grieving process. And that acceptance allows you to see things clearly. Fear of the destruction of the republic is alarmist and wrong."

Those opposed to Trump's proposals should focus on those that show signs of advancing and use available legislative, parliamentary, legal and activist means to fight them, Jacobson said.

“Fortunately, there are laws in place that can ensure the survival of the government services that we rely on,” he said. “There are 50 states and three branches of government. The president and his appointees have limited power.

“And then we’ll kick the con man out of office.”

Jacobson pointed out that congressional approval would be needed to impose tariffs and that a ban on Muslims entering the country would be unconstitutional. He opined that Trump and congressional Republicans would be unlikely to dismantle Obamacare in a way that would take away health insurance from the 20 million who didn’t have it before the law was passed.

While saying that Trump and his administration picks are “definitely uncharted territory,” Chapman’s Han shares Jacobson’s view that they are unlikely to justify the deepest fears of foes or hopes of backers.

“I’m skeptical how much deep change will take place,” Han said. “The president doesn’t have unlimited power. There are a lot of checks and balances in place.”

Entrenched bureaucracies and special interests slow efforts of sweeping reform, Han said. She pointed to Obamacare as an example of a complex plan that is unlikely to be undone quickly because of the extensive work needed to replace it.

Additionally, the Cabinet and White House staff members don’t all agree with one another – or with Trump. As examples, USC’s Schnur points to former GOP chief Reince Priebus, Trump’s chief of staff, and former Breitbart News executive Steve Bannon, Trump’s senior counselor.

“You probably couldn’t pick two people who have a more different view of how government should run,” Schnur said. “Trump has demonstrated a penchant in his business for setting up people with competing viewpoints – and then he watches them battle it out. If that’s what he’s doing here, he’s off to a good start.”

When it comes time for confirmation, Senate Republicans may signal just how cooperative they’ll be when it comes to controversial aspects of White House policy.

“We know what the Democrats in Congress are going to do,” Schnur said. “Watching what the Republicans do in the confirmation process will be much more telling.”

Peter Navarro, a

longtime professor at UC Irvine and noted advocate for tougher trade rules with China, will head the newly created White House National Trade Council.

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Contact the writer: mwisckol@scng.com