



5 trends that tell us who – and what – Donald Trump will prioritize in his administration

Piecing Together the Trump Team

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Even in the best of circumstances presidential transitions are chaotic, but much more so with the Trump transition, which has been characterized by multiple staff turnovers on the transition team, residual discord among factions within the Republican Party following Trump's controversial campaign and the emergence of a series of competing power centers, both formal and informal.

While President Donald Trump moved quickly to name an accomplished set of cabinet secretaries, news reports suggest he is far behind schedule in naming the cadre of deputy, under- and assistant secretaries who manage the day-to-day governance. Although it has frequently proven perilous to predict Trump's actions, studying the social and professional networks surrounding the Trump team reveals several trends that will likely shape the people, and ultimately the policies, that come to define this administration.

Early loyalty matters. After a tumultuous and divisive campaign, Trump seems to remember those who were with him early. Former Alabama Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions, one of Trump's first congressional backers, was rewarded with the appointment he appears to have sought most – attorney general. Controversial Gen. Michael Flynn was named to the highest position in national security that does not require Senate confirmation. Sessions' chief of staff Rick Dearborn, who joined the Trump campaign shortly after his boss endorsed, is now a deputy White House chief of staff. And 31-year-old Stephen Miller, whose prior experience consists entirely of writing speeches for Trump and conservative members of Congress (including Sessions), is now a senior policy adviser with responsibility for the White House's entire

domestic policy apparatus. (Miller was intimately involved in several of the most controversial executive actions from the first week of the Trump administration.)

Meanwhile, those who spoke out against Trump during the campaign have been largely shunned. None of the signatories of the major #NeverTrump letter from Republican foreign policy leaders has been named to the transition team, and news reports suggest that Secretary of Defense James Mattis is facing significant resistance from the White House in trying to name establishment Republicans to senior Pentagon posts.

Mercer and Thiel, the quiet voices. All presidents have rewarded top financial backers with plum positions, and Trump is no exception. Top donors have been named to cabinet or sub-cabinet level positions at the Departments of Treasury, Commerce, Labor, Education, the Small Business Administration and the White House. But the more interesting question is what top financiers are doing behind the scenes, particularly the Mercer family and Peter Thiel.

Much has been written about hedge fund manager Robert Mercer and his daughter Rebekah, Trump donors who have strong personal and financial ties to Steve Bannon, Kellyanne Conway, the Heritage Foundation, Citizens United, Breitbart and Cambridge Analytica, the data firm credited with building Trump's innovative approach in toss-up states that he ultimately won. Rebekah Mercer ended up on the executive committee, overseeing the transition, where she would have had significant inputs on personnel.

Silicon Valley titan Peter Thiel was also named to the transition's executive committee, and he was seated next to Trump at a November meeting with the top executives from America's top technology companies. At first blush, Thiel's fierce libertarianism appears at odds with Trump's populism. But if you follow his investments, particularly in Trump family ventures, things become a little clearer. Thiel's venture capital firm, Founders Fund, led two groups of investors in raising \$175 million for Oscar, a health insurance firm led by Josh Kushner, the brother of Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. A venture capital firm led by one of Thiel's former business partners provided \$80 million in early funding. Founders Fund also made substantial investments in Cadre, another Josh Kushner-backed venture.

It is perhaps not surprising then that Jim O'Neill, managing director of Thiel-founded Mithril Capital (a firm that also employs "Hillbilly Elegy" author J.D. Vance), has been reported as a candidate to lead the Food and Drug Administration, or that Elon Musk, a longtime Thiel associate, has Trump's ear. Thiel associates were also named to transition teams for Commerce, Treasury and Defense (where Thiel-founded Palantir Technologies has been praised by users but has clashed with the Pentagon procurement bureaucracy), and one of his executives has been named the top strategist at the White House's National Security Council. Thiel has investments in several heavily regulated industries, such as nuclear energy, space, health care and the sharing economy, and Thiel associates could well end up in government positions related to these industries.

Heritage reigns supreme. In any Republican transition, we would expect to see policy wonks from the three leading conservative think tanks – Heritage, American Enterprise Institute and Cato – taking positions in government. But throughout the campaign, top AEI and Cato experts

criticized Trump's plans, and only the tea party-aligned Heritage remained consistently supportive or silent.

Heritage founder Ed Feulner joined the transition team before the election, survived the purge of Chris Christie loyalists and got his people into a staggering 20-plus positions on the transition team. Although nobody comes close to Heritage, smaller research groups, like the Competitive Enterprise Institute and Institute for Energy Research, have outsized presence on the Trump team. And conservative-leaning law firm Jones Day has staffed the core of the Trump legal team, starting with White House Counsel Don McGahn, but also providing at least 11 other lawyers for senior roles at the White House, Departments of Justice, Agriculture, and Commerce and the transition team.

Vice President Mike Pence's influence will likely be strongest in health and energy. Trump's decision to appoint Georgia Republican Rep. Tom Price to secretary of Health and Human Services came as no surprise to most analysts. But that same day, Trump also named longtime Pence ally Seema Verma to lead the HHS agency responsible for Medicare, Medicaid and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Verma has limited Washington experience and no history of deep collaboration with Price, but she will now be his top deputy in determining how HHS shapes and implements whatever system replaces the Affordable Care Act.

Pence staffers are already filling key political roles at the White House, but he also has several close staffers from Indiana with extensive experience in energy, particularly utility regulation. Keep an eye out for some of them to fill energy positions in the Trump administration.

Bob Dole is alive and well. Many political analysts were surprised to see reports that Dole helped to arrange a call between Trump and the president of Taiwan that contradicted decades of U.S. policy toward China. They shouldn't have been. Bob Dole's network is pervasive in Trumpland. Former Dole staffers have been involved in the transitions for the Departments of Defense, Agriculture and Health and Human Services, as well as broader efforts to shape the administration's early policies. U.S. Trade Representative nominee Robert Lighthizer and CIA Director Mike Pompeo both have ties to Dole, and Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao sits on the board of the veterans foundation created by Dole's wife.

With 4,000-plus political appointments, the Trump team will likely be filling key positions well into the summer and beyond. While the first three weeks of the Trump presidency has provided many signals on where he intends to take policy during his first 100 days, the people who fill these key posts may well define his governing legacy.