

NATIONAL POLITICS | By Amy Walter, May 9, 2017

## Americans Say They Want More Government. What Does That Mean?



Much was made of recent polling showing a spike in the percentage of Americans who say they want a more active or bigger government. An April NBC/Wall Street Journal poll found that 57 percent of Americans wanted to see “government do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people” — up seven points from 2015. In the April Pew Poll, 48 percent said they were supportive of “bigger government with more services” — up seven points from 2016.

Is this a sign that Americans are more comfortable with the big-government populism promoted in the 2016 campaign? President Trump, of course, campaigned on spending \$1 trillion on infrastructure projects, building a big, beautiful border wall, and protecting pricey entitlements like Medicare and Social Security. Democrats like Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren promote “free college” and single payer health care.

Yet, if you dig into the numbers you find that the election didn’t shake up traditional views of the role of government as much as it reinforced existing ones.

First, take a look at the NBC/Wall Street Journal poll. Back in 2015, those who said they wanted government to “do more” looked pretty much like the Democratic coalition: women, younger voters, women with a college degree, liberals and non-whites. Those who thought government was “doing too much” looked like the traditional GOP coalition: men, whites, whites with a college degree or better, and those 50 years old and over.

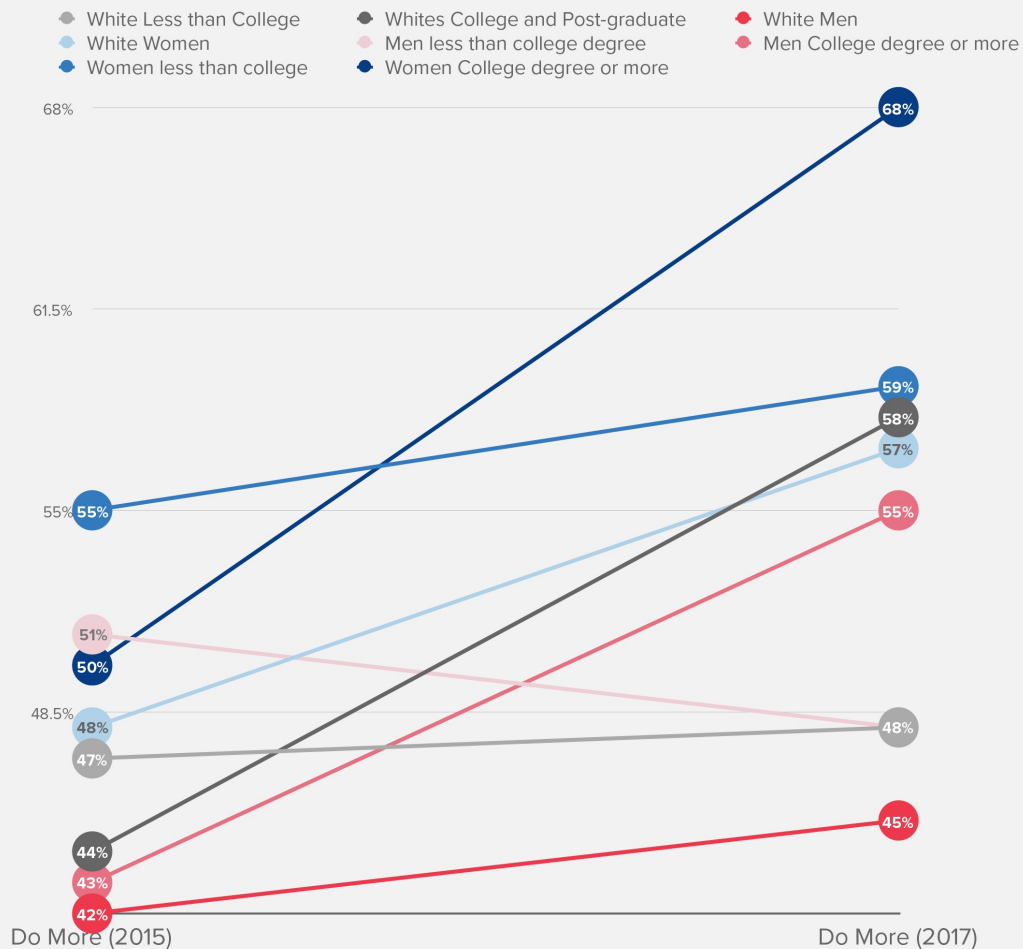
Two years later, the views of these voters remain pretty much intact. Those who we would describe as a member of the “Trump coalition”—white men who have less than a college degree—are the least supportive of a more active government. Meanwhile, those most supportive of active government are representative of the type of voters who backed Hillary Clinton in 2016: women, non-white voters and those with a college degree or more. In fact the biggest jump in support for bigger government came from white college educated voters. In 2015, just 44 percent of white voters with a college degree or higher wanted government to do more. In 2018, it was 58 percent—a 14 point jump.

In other words, despite Trump’s populist talk, the voters who supported him aren’t any more interested in a muscular government than they were in 2015.

## NBC/Wall Street Journal Poll April 17-20, 2017

**Question:** I'm going to read you two statements about the role of government, and I'd like to know which one comes closer to your point of view. (ROTATE STATEMENTS.)

Statement A: Government should do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people, Statement B: Government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals.

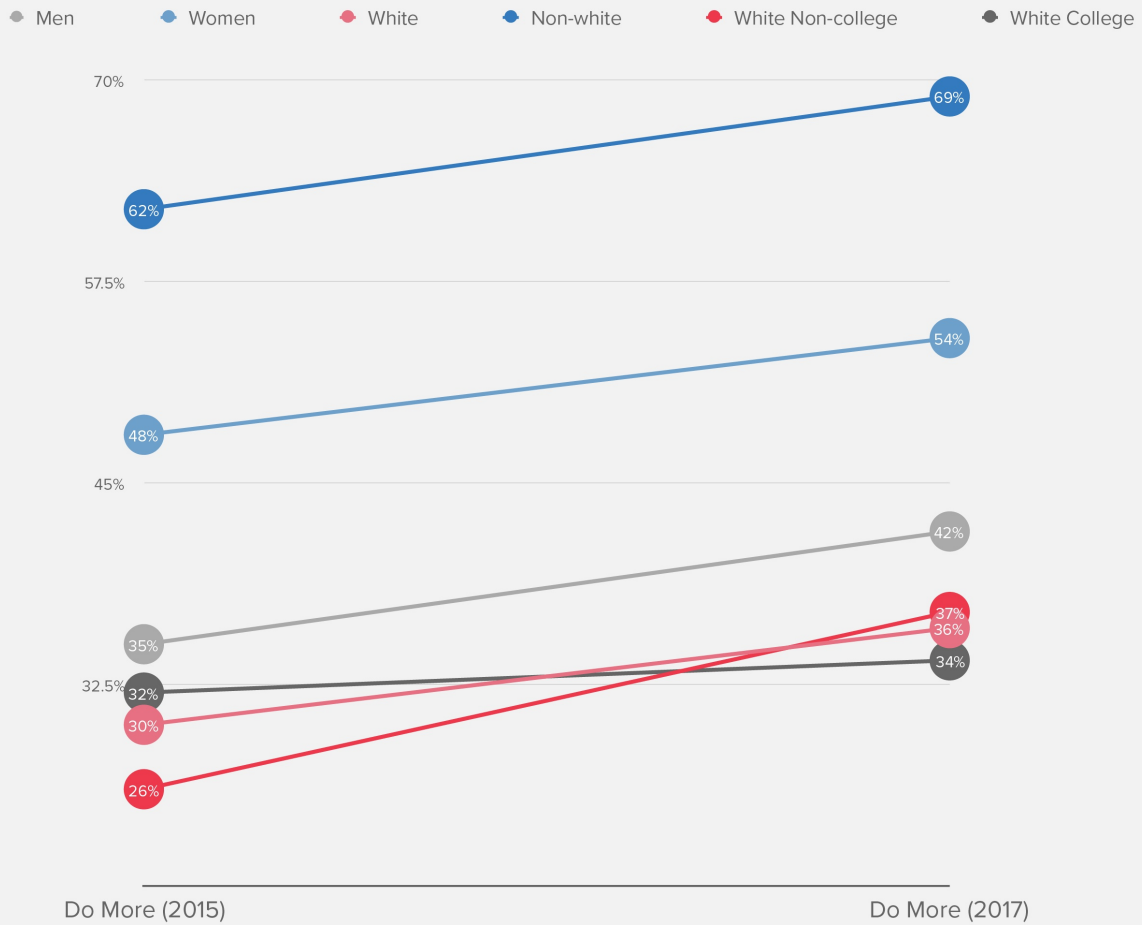


In fact, just 27 percent of voters who told NBC/Wall Street Journal that they supported Trump in 2016, were in favor of government “doing more.” Meanwhile, 84 percent of Clinton voters wanted to see government do more.

The Pew poll tells a similar story. Those most supportive of “bigger government and more services” are women, non-white voters, and younger voters. Those most supportive of “smaller government and fewer services” were men, whites, and older voters. There was a slight increase in support for “bigger government” across the board, though Pew did not find the big discrepancy between white college and non-college voters that NBC did. Just 37 percent of white non-college voters support bigger government, about the same percentage (34 percent) of those with a college degree. Moreover, support from white non college voters jumped 11 points from 2016 to 2017 compared to just four points among college white voters. It is important to note, of course, the difference in the wording and framing of the question. The NBC poll asked the question as government “solving problems and meeting the needs of people,” while the Pew poll framed it as “bigger government” doing more stuff.

Pew Research Center, April 5-11, 2017

**Question:** If you had to choose, would you rather have a smaller government providing fewer services, or a bigger government providing more services?



Understanding who wants more - or less- from government is critical to understanding how these voters are going to respond to campaign promises and policy prescriptions. Democrats need to appreciate the reticence many white, working class voters have for calls for more robust government services, support and meddling. Many of these voters feel displaced by the current political, economic and cultural environment in the country. But, that doesn't mean they think that more government intervention is the answer. Meanwhile, Republicans need to appreciate that white, college educated Americans - those suburban voters who have long been supportive of their "smaller government" agenda - are more comfortable with government than they think. Trump's travel ban and the latest rollback of Obamacare, for example, can alienate these voters as much as Democrats push for higher taxes.