

A signal of distaste for dynasties bodes ill for Bush, Clinton

By Dan Balz, *Washington Post*

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AURORA, Colo. — It's been a good few weeks for Jeb Bush, who has been setting the pace among prospective 2016 presidential candidates — at least in the view of some in the elite world of political donors, strategists and commentators. But even before the news that Mitt Romney is thinking about a third campaign, a dissenting view on Bush was registered here Thursday night.

A dozen Denver-area residents spent two hours dissecting the state of the country and its politics. The 12 participants — Democrats, Republicans and independents — are weary of political dynasties. They were dismissive, sometimes harshly, in their assessments of Bush, the former Florida governor. They were also chilly toward former secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton.

When the name of Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) was introduced into the conversation, however, many of those around the table, regardless of party affiliation, responded positively. To this group, who spoke in stark terms throughout the evening about the economic challenges of working Americans, Warren has struck a chord.

The two-hour session, moderated by Democratic pollster Peter Hart for the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, turned upside down much of the conversation about the coming presidential campaign, where Bush and Clinton occupy so much space.

It is important to emphasize that this was simply one group of 12 people. They are not necessarily a representative cross section of the entire population, any more than a dozen donors or a dozen strategists would be. But as with all recruited focus groups, the collective impressions and individual observations provide a valuable counterpoint to the conversation that is taking place among political insiders.

The participants in Aurora have barely begun to engage with their 2016 choices; most are not even close to the starting line. But they are underwhelmed by the prospect of a race pitting another Bush against another Clinton. When Charlie Loan, an IT program manager and Republican-leaning independent, said half-seriously that he would be happy if Congress would pass a law banning anyone named Bush or Clinton from running, half the people in the room agreed.

Reactions to Bush were viscerally negative. When the participants were asked for short impressions of him, the responses included the following: “Joke.” “No, thank you.” “Clown.” “Don't need him.” “Greedy.” “Again?” One said, “intriguing” and another said, “interesting.” That's as close as anyone came to outright enthusiasm for Bush.

Hart asked the group which individual from a long list of current politicians they would least like to have as a next-door neighbor. Eight named Bush. “I'm tired of it,” said Brandon Graham, an IT systems engineer and Democratic-leaning independent. Jenny Howard, who works in accounting and voted for Romney in 2012, said, “He's running off the Bush name and thinks that means something.”

Clinton fared slightly better. Instant impressions included the following: “Don’t like.” “Strong.” “Spitfire.” “Untrustworthy.” “More of the same.” “Politician, but gets things done.” The reactions echoed what has been found in polls and in other focus groups, which is that Clinton has stature but remains a polarizing figure.

Most of the prospective presidential candidates were only vague figures to these Coloradans. When names such as Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) or Gov. Scott Walker (R-Wis.) or Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) or Mike Huckabee, the former Republican governor of Arkansas, were raised, many indicated they didn’t know enough to have even a superficial impression.

Of those in the Republican field, Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) drew positive comments, not necessarily because the members of the group know that much about him, but because they find him new and intriguing. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (R) was better known but not admired.

Warren proved the exception to all this. Quick impressions voiced about her were highly positive: “Passionate.” “Smart.” “Sincere.” “Knowledgeable.” “Intelligent.” “Capable.” One person said, “questionable.” That was as close to a negative reaction as she got in that round.

There were other signs that Warren, who has said repeatedly that she is not running for president in 2016, had caught the eyes and ears of people in the room. She was the popular choice as a next-door neighbor, seen as genuine and personable. Even one of the most conservative members of the group said this.

Several said that if they could pick from a long list of national politicians, they would prefer to have the chance to have a long conversation with Warren, describing her as both articulate and down to earth. “She’s a strong woman, and I’d like to sit down and pick her brain,” said Susan Brink, an independent who backed President Obama.

Howard, an independent who voted Republican in both 2012 and 2014, was among those who offered an admiring view of Warren. “If she ran, I think she could be the next president,” she said.

What’s behind all this? The rest of the discussion on Thursday helped to explain why the participants feel the way they do, from the lack of enthusiasm for Clinton to the obvious disaffection with Bush to the comments about Warren.

These voters distrust elected officials and are disgusted by what they regard as the privileged lives they lead. To them, Bush and Clinton represent a political class that is seen as living lives apart from those they represent, people who are seen as out for themselves rather than for ordinary people.

“They want your vote, but I feel like once they have that, the American citizens end up being voiceless,” said Karstyn Butler, a homemaker and caterer who voted for Obama.

Just as significant was the feeling that the economic recovery has not touched most people. Rick Lamutt, a cable company technician who said he leans Republican and voted for Romney, said he sees the problem every day.

“I’m in 10, 12, 15 homes a day, every day,” he said. “People are hurting. . . It’s just crazy to see what people are doing just to pay their bills.” He scoffed at talk of a rising economy with plentiful jobs available. “If you want to make \$9 an hour, you can get a job,” he said. “But if you want to make a wage that can support your family, good luck.”

Howard offered her situation as evidence. She said her husband has been out of work for more than a year. Meanwhile, she carries a hefty student-loan debt, with monthly payments that she said are nearly twice what she spends for housing.

Those realities are shaping the qualities these voters say they are looking for in the next president. Andrew Regan, a beekeeper and Democratic voter, said the next president should be “someone who understands what everyone in America is going through — someone that we can relate to, someone who we understand and someone who understands us.”

After the group had departed into the freezing drizzle outside, Hart stayed behind to sum up what he had taken away from the conversation. The group had started predictably, he said, and then turned quite unpredictable. He found several things to be notable.

“One is [that] the political classes told us it’s going to be Bush against Clinton. But these people are hundreds of miles away from that choice,” he said. “Essentially what they’re telling us is, ‘I don’t trust these people. They’re part of an establishment that I don’t like.’ ”

That was one turning point, he said. The other was Warren. “Elizabeth Warren, from every part on the compass, had a level of support,” he said. “She’s not invisible. She’s not unknown. She’s not undefined.” And, he added, she has reached them on the issue that so many spoke about, which was their own economic concerns.

“You couldn’t leave this without feeling how hard-pressed these people are and how they’re looking for someone who will be a voice for their cause,” he said. “And Elizabeth Warren has broken through.”

That, he added, was wholly unexpected when the focus group was organized.

The Warren Commission

By John Dickerson, *Slate*

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/01/elizabeth_warren_does_well_in_peter_hart_focus_group_voters_not_excited.html

When 12 voters gathered in Aurora, Colorado, for a political focus group on Thursday night, it wasn't surprising to hear them compete to see who could bash politicians more. "If we got rid of every member of Congress and elected new people tomorrow who had no experience, I don't think we could do any worse," said Charlie Loan, who voted for Mitt Romney in 2012. When the group was asked to come up with phrases members of Congress should wear on wrist bracelets, they suggested "Don't trust me, I lie," "Looking out for me," and "Two Faced."

But one politician escaped the voters' ire: Elizabeth Warren. Six of the 12 said they would like to have Warren over to their house to talk, more than any other possible 2016 presidential contender they were asked about. They said she was "down to earth" and "knowledgeable." When asked a separate question about which politician they would like to have live next door, they picked Warren over every other contender as well. Jenny Howard, an accountant with student-loan debt who voted for Romney in 2012 and Sen. John McCain in 2008, also liked Warren: "If she ran, she could be the next president because she is personable and knowledgeable and has a good handle on what's going on in the country."

Peter Hart organized this Colorado focus group. Hart, a Democratic pollster for more than 40 years, helps conduct the Wall Street Journal/ NBC poll and has been holding these kinds of sessions for the past four presidential elections. The focus group was the first of a series of such two-hour interviews of swing voters that Hart will do leading up to the 2016 presidential election, for the Annenberg Public Policy Center to track how voter sentiment changes.

These people do not represent metaphysical certitude about the country's political opinion—it's only 12 people after all—and we are still far from the next election so much can change, but they offer glimpses of the current stirring in the public. Their desire for change, concerns about the economy (despite news that things are better), and interest in a candidate who cares about the middle class have appeared consistently in polls and other voter forums.

The affection for Warren among the group of five self-described independents, three Republicans, and four Democrats may not tell us anything about the Massachusetts senator herself. It's possible that she is a vehicle through which they are signaling their desire for change, for something authentic and maybe new. Charlie Loan, an IT manager, says he voted the straight conservative line most recent election but he'd listen to what Warren had to say. "The little I have seen and heard from her, she seems genuine—people from [Oklahoma] usually are. Since she was formerly devoted to the Republican Party, maybe she fits in the middle somewhere, which is where I would like to see most of them be. She is clearly well-educated and seems level-headed."

If Warren is a possible vessel for change, so too is Sen. Rand Paul, who several of the conservatives found intriguing. (Sen. Ted Cruz wasn't mentioned, even though he, like Paul and Warren, is also trying to position himself as an outsider on the inside.) Paul had a bit of the crossover appeal that Warren had. "He's a reasonable choice," said Andrew Regan, who described himself as a strong Democrat. "I would

consider him, but I don't know who the Democratic nominee is going to be." Regan was emblematic of the strong desire for something new. Despite his ideological affiliations, he was happy to see Republicans in control of Congress. "I'm happy to see that Republicans took Congress. Instead of a 'Do Nothing' congress we have a 'Do Something' Congress."

Once a Democratic nominee is chosen, it's almost certain that Regan, a self-employed beekeeper, will vote as he always has. That's what voters usually do. The same is true with conservatives who express an openness for Warren. But Warren's authenticity, anti-corporate message, and outsider status all reflect the desire for change that came across so clearly from most of the participants.

The 2016 contenders who didn't fare well are also two of its marquee names: Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush. Six of the 12 said they would back a law to bar all Bushes and Clintons from running. "He's running off the Bush name and thinks that's something," said Howard. In a free-association exercise, the words people used to describe Bush included: "joke," "no thank you," "clown," "interesting," "don't need him," "intriguing," "greedy," and "bad scene." (By contrast, Paul was described as "entertaining," "interesting," "very intriguing," "honest," and "freedom.") Mention of Hillary Clinton conjured "hopeful," "crazy," "strong," "spitfire," "don't like her," "untrustworthy," "more of the same," and "next candidate, please." Although the antipathy toward Bush and Clinton was often specific, it also could be read as a broad dislike of American politics today.

Not surprisingly, the economy was the issue everyone was most concerned about. Jobs numbers were solid again on Friday and the unemployment rate is at 5.6 percent (lower than Mitt Romney said it would be under his administration by the year 2017), but the good numbers didn't do anything to assuage the participants' worries. Though they said lower gas prices have helped, most were skeptical things were genuinely getting better.

"It's nice to have the extra money," said Susan Brink, a 56-year-old independent who voted for Barack Obama. "But I do kind of feel like they give us a little bit to make us happy, and then they take it away." Rick Lamutt, a right-leaning independent who works as "a cable guy," said that despite the good numbers, he sees the truth of the real economy in all the houses he visits where family members are moving in together and struggling to make do. "The simple fact is, regardless of what the numbers say, there's a lot of hurting people out there," he said. "You've seen on the news, 'Everything's fine, the economy's great, there's jobs everywhere!' Well, if you want to make \$9 an hour, you can go get a job, but if you want to make a wage that can support your family, good luck."

This pervasive feeling of economic insecurity drove what these voters are looking for in candidates, too. Kimberly Tyler, a 61-year-old veterinarian, wanted a candidate who understood the pinch of the middle-class lifestyle. "Most in politics have money and it's a money game for them and they don't relate to the middle class, and everyone in the middle class is hanging on by their fingernails."

There's a long road before the election and while these views give us some idea of the mood, it's important to keep in mind that even these voters are a long way off from drawing any real conclusions about specific candidates. Hart asked everyone to place themselves at a racetrack that showed how far along they were in their thinking about the next presidential contest. Most said they were in the parking lot. One woman said she was in her car taking allergy medicine—she said she was allergic to both horses

and politicians. When asked whom she'd like to see in the race, she replied, "Superman." But he hasn't even formed a leadership PAC yet.

Jeb and Hillary Have Some Work to Do, a Pollster Finds

By Trip Gabriel, *New York Times*

<http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/01/09/?entry=8242>

The political classes may be embracing the inevitability of a Bush-Clinton clash in 2016, but some voters are not sold.

A dozen who participated in a focus group in Denver on Thursday — an even mix of Democrats, Republicans and independents — expressed disdain for political dynasties and a desire for leaders who understood the economic pain of the middle class.

“Essentially what they’re telling us is, ‘I don’t trust these people — they’re part of an establishment I don’t like,’” said Peter D. Hart, a Democratic pollster who conducted the session, referring to Jeb Bush and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

A focus group is not a poll. Its participants don’t represent more than themselves. But campaigns love focus groups for their in-depth sampling of voters’ moods and raw glimpses of their views. Mr. Hart convened this one for the nonpartisan Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

Asked for a word or phrase to describe Mr. Bush, the responses included: “Joke”; “No thank you”; “Scion”; “Interesting”; “Don’t need him”; “Intriguing”; “Greedy”; and “Bad seed.”

Asked which potential candidate they would most like to spend an hour with, half the group named Senator Elizabeth Warren, Democrat of Massachusetts. “If she ran, she could be the next president,” said Jenny Howard, an accountant who said she had voted for Mitt Romney and Cory Gardner, the Republican elected senator from Colorado in November. “She is personable and knowledgeable.”

Asked who they thought would be the next president, regardless of their own preference, several said Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky. Andrew Regan, a beekeeper and the most liberal of the group, said, “I would consider him.”

Afterward, Mr. Hart said, “You can’t leave this without feeling how hard pressed these people are and how they’re looking for someone who will be a voice for their cause, and Elizabeth Warren has broken through.”

None of the four Democrats in the focus group “were ready to go to the ramparts for Hillary,” he said.

Similarly, Republicans and independents “knocked Bush around as hard as you could, and it was much more visceral and personal than it was, ‘Gee, I disagree with his stance on immigration’ or ‘I have a hard time on Common Core,’” Mr. Hart said.

His conclusion: Both the Bush and Clinton camps have their work cut out to bring voters o