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The Return of the Middle American Radical

An intellectual history of Trump supporters.

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In 1976, Donald Warren—a sociologist from Oakland University in Michigan who would die two decades later without ever attaining the rank of full professor—published a book called *The Radical Center: Middle Americans and the Politics of Alienation*. Few people have read or heard of it—I learned of it about 30 years ago from the late, very eccentric paleoconservative Samuel Francis—but it is, in my opinion, one of the three or four books that best explain American politics over the past half-century.

While conducting extensive surveys of white voters in 1971 and again in 1975, Warren identified a group who defied the usual partisan and ideological divisions. These voters were not college educated; their income fell somewhere in the middle or lower-middle range; and they primarily held skilled and semi-skilled blue-collar jobs or sales and clerical white-collar jobs. At the time, they made up about a quarter of the electorate. What distinguished them was their ideology: It was neither conventionally liberal nor conventionally conservative, but instead revolved around an intense conviction that the middle class was under siege from above and below.

Warren called these voters Middle American Radicals, or MARS. “MARS are distinct in the depth of their feeling that the middle class has been seriously neglected,” Warren wrote. They saw “government as favoring both the rich and the poor simultaneously.” Like many on the left, MARS were deeply suspicious of big business: Compared with the other groups he surveyed—lower-income whites, middle-income whites who went to college, and what Warren called “affluents”—MARS were the most likely to believe that corporations had “too much power,” “don’t pay attention,” and were “too big.” MARS also backed many liberal programs: By a large percentage, they favored government guaranteeing jobs to everyone; and they supported price controls, Medicare, some kind of national health insurance, federal aid to education, and Social Security.

 Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump greets supporters during a campaign rally at the American Airlines Center on September 14, 2015 in Dallas, Texas. More than 20,000 tickets had been distributed for the event. TOM PENNINGTON

On the other hand, they held very conservative positions on poverty and race. They were the least likely to agree that whites had any responsibility “to make up for wrongs done to blacks in the past,” they were the most critical of welfare agencies, they rejected racial busing, and they wanted to grant police a “heavier hand” to “control crime.” They were also the group most distrustful of the national government. And in a stand that wasn’t really liberal or conservative (and that appeared, at least on the surface, to be in tension with their dislike of the national government), MARS were more likely than any other group to favor strong leadership in Washington—to advocate for a situation “when one person is in charge.”

If these voters are beginning to sound familiar, they should: Warren’s MARS of the 1970s are the Donald Trump supporters of today. Since at least the late 1960s, these voters have periodically coalesced to become a force in presidential politics, just as they did this past summer. In 1968 and 1972, they were at the heart of George Wallace’s presidential campaigns; in 1992 and 1996, many of them backed H. Ross Perot or Pat Buchanan. Over the years, some of their issues have changed—illegal immigration has replaced explicitly racist appeals—and many of these voters now have junior-college degrees and are as likely to hold white-collar as blue-collar jobs. But the basic MARS worldview that Warren outlined has remained surprisingly intact from the 1970s through the present.

In explaining Trump’s ascent, most political analysts have ignored the role of this distinct ideology. Instead, they have tended to attribute his success to his personal style. In August, for instance, *The New York Times* concluded that Trump’s coalition was “constructed around personality, not substance.” Polling expert Nate Silver has insisted that Trump’s appeal, in contrast to that of Bernie Sanders, is not related to the policies he espouses. “Trump,” he writes, “is largely campaigning on the force of his personality.”

This explanation isn’t entirely wrong: Trump’s personality—his outspokenness, his disdain for political-correctness, his showmanship, his reputation as a billionaire deal-maker—has certainly contributed to his political success. Indeed, a forceful personality—a veritable man on a white horse—is what Donald Warren found MARS to be looking for.

But it would be a mistake to assume that Trump’s supporters are drawn to him simply because of his personality or because, like Ben Carson and Carly Fiorina, he is a political outsider. What has truly sustained Trump thus far is that he does, in fact, articulate a coherent set of ideological positions, even if those positions are not exactly conservative or liberal. The key to figuring out the Trump phenomenon—why it arose now and where it might be headed next—lies in understanding this worldview.

AMERICAN POPULISTS have long confounded the division between left and right. Left populists like William Jennings Bryan and Huey Long sought to champion “the people” against Wall Street or big business; right populists like Pitchfork Ben Tillman and Gerald L.K. Smith attacked wealthy elites but focused their ire equally—or more so—on minorities and immigrants. Yet all these populists had something in common: They saw themselves as defending the middle class against its enemies.

Perot was closer to the left-wing tradition of populism: He denounced the General Motors executives he had battled and the revolving-door lobbyists in Washington who represented foreign firms. Wallace and Buchanan leaned more to the right; but just as Perot wasn't really a liberal, they didn't easily fit as conservatives. Wallace fought integration, but he also complained that “the present tax laws were written to protect the Rockefellers, the Fords, the Carnegies, and the Mellons.” Buchanan defended “Middle America” against “atrocities” committed by an “invasion” from the south of “illegal aliens”; yet he also foresaw “a battle between the hired men of the Money Power who long ago abandoned as quaint but useless old ideas of nationhood—and populists, patriots, and nationalists who want no part of [Clinton administration Treasury Secretary] Robert Rubin's world.”

Trump is squarely within the Wallace-Buchanan tradition. Speaking on behalf of the “silent majority,” he blames undocumented immigrants for urban violence (“A lot of the gangs that you see in Baltimore and in St. Louis and in Ferguson and Chicago, you know they're illegal immigrants”) and for driving down wages and raising welfare costs. But he has also accused hedge-fund speculators of “getting away with murder” on their tax bills, while the middle class is being “decimated” by taxes; and he has chided insurance companies for getting rich off of the Affordable Care Act.

It isn't just populism that undergirds the MARS worldview, however; another key component is nationalism. Wallace saw himself as defending America against its enemies at the United Nations. He opposed most foreign aid. He presented himself as “a man who would lead America to new greatness” and would “stand up for America.” Perot and Buchanan, who ran for office after America's trade surplus had turned into a growing deficit, advocated nationalist economic positions that distinguished them from most Republican politicians and from “new Democrats” like Bill Clinton. Perot warned that the North American Free Trade Agreement was creating a “giant sucking sound” that would draw jobs away from the United States; Buchanan charged that NAFTA and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade were designed for the benefit of “the multinational corporations and the financial elite.”

Trump has gone even further on trade. He has promised to renegotiate or junk NAFTA and to slap a punitive tax on Chinese imports. In his announcement speech, he pledged to “bring back our jobs from China, from Mexico, from Japan, from so many places. I’ll bring back our jobs, and I’ll bring back our money. Right now, think of this: We owe China \$1.3 trillion. We owe Japan more than that. So they come in, they take our jobs, they take our money, and then they loan us back the money, and we pay them in interest, and then the dollar goes up so their deal’s even better.”

He also argued, in his 2011 book, for getting “tough on those who outsource jobs overseas and reward companies who stay loyal to America. If an American company outsources its work, they get hit with a 20 percent tax.” And he has promised to end corporate tax “inversions,” whereby a company moves its official headquarters to a tax haven in order to avoid U.S. taxes. Recently, I asked Buchanan whether he thought Trump’s populism and economic nationalism were in line with what he and Perot had advocated. “Trump is a billionaire, but he gets it,” Buchanan told me. “It’s a very populist appeal and it works.”

 Presidential candidate George C. Wallace (1919 - 1998) reaches out for the hands of his supporters at the Texas State convention of his American Party, Dallas, Texas, September 17, 1968. PHOTOQUEST

The final major element of the Wallace-Perot-Buchanan-Trump worldview has to do with leadership and government—and like other parts of their agenda, it’s complicated. All four, like many conservative politicians of the past 50 years, harshly criticized Washington. Wallace charged that the federal government “was run by pointy-headed bureaucrats who can’t park a bicycle straight.” Buchanan called for dismantling four Cabinet departments. Perot popularized the term “gridlock” in describing Washington politics. Echoing his predecessors, Trump has denounced the “total gridlock” inside the Beltway. “Our leaders are stupid, our politicians are stupid,” he said during the first debate, adding later that evening: “We have people in Washington who don’t know what they are doing.”

But in subtle and not so subtle ways, these four men have also endorsed a more powerful executive at the top. Wallace, who had thoroughly dominated Alabama’s politics, was seen by critics as a potential “dictator.” Buchanan, who had served Richard Nixon through Watergate, touted the legacy of his former boss. Perot called for plebiscites to determine key economic policies—which would have had the effect of establishing a direct relationship between the people and the president, thereby bypassing Congress. For his part, Trump envisages the president acting as the “deal-maker in chief.” In a 1982 essay, “Message from MARS,” Sam Francis, who would later advise Buchanan during his campaigns, called this outlook “Caesarism”; it is also reminiscent of Latin American populists like Juan Peron.

Indeed, none of these candidates necessarily opposed big government. Wallace was the candidate of right-wing racists, but he also wanted to increase Social Security benefits and make the tax system more progressive. Perot was obsessed with deficits and debt, but he wanted to balance the budget by raising taxes on the rich. He also favored a public-private partnership to ensure universal access to health care. Buchanan and Trump rejected calls to privatize or eliminate Social Security and Medicare. “We’ve got Social Security that’s going to be destroyed if somebody like me doesn’t bring money into the country,” Trump said in his announcement speech. “All these other people want to cut the hell out of it. I’m not going to cut it at all; I’m going to bring money in, and we’re going to save it.” Trump also promises to fix aging bridges and airports. “I want to rebuild our infrastructure,” he says.

In view of Trump’s stands on government and economics, his Republican critics have charged that he is not really a conservative. In *National Review*, Jonah Goldberg wrote that “no movement that embraces Trump can call itself conservative.” That’s probably true; and it was also true of Trump’s predecessors as MARS standard-bearers.

 This image can only be used with the John Judis story that originally ran in the 10/3/2015 issue of National Journal magazine. Reform Party Pres. candidate Ross Perot w. running mate Pat Choate (2R) surrounded by supporters w. PEROT FOR PRESIDENT posters in bkgrd. SHELLY KATZ/GETTY IMAGES

IN 1968, WALLACE, running on the American Independent Party ticket, won five Southern states and 46 electoral votes; in early October 1968, he was still getting as high as 20 percent of votes nationally. Running as a Democrat in 1972, he won primaries in six states, including blue-collar Michigan and Maryland—and was poised to hold the balance of power in the convention until he was shot and forced to stop campaigning in May.

In the spring of 1992, Perot announced he was running as an independent, and by early June, he was leading both President George H.W. Bush and Democratic challenger Bill Clinton in the polls with 38 percent. Under attack from investigative journalists and opposition researchers, Perot pulled out of the race in July, but then reentered on October 1. He eventually got 19 percent of the vote—the best showing for a third-party candidate since 1912.

Buchanan ran a protest campaign in the Republican primary in 1992 and got 38 percent of the vote against Bush in New Hampshire. In 1996, he ran a more serious campaign and shocked eventual nominee Bob Dole by taking the Louisiana and Alaska caucuses, and then the New Hampshire primary. This summer, Trump, of course, astounded political observers, including me, by outpolling his Republican rivals.

Who are the voters who fueled these campaigns? If you take account of changes over the years to the educational level and occupational profile of the American workforce, there is a straight line between the MARS who flocked to Wallace and those who have backed Perot, Buchanan, and Trump. In 1968, Wallace’s greatest

support was among white, male, middle-income, and lower-middle-income workers and small farmers who had not gone to college. In September 1968, at a time when over a fourth of American workers belonged to unions, an internal AFL-CIO survey found that Wallace was backed by a third of union voters. In 1972, Wallace also received strong support from blue-collar private-sector unions in states like Michigan.

In the 1992 election, Perot did best among middle-income voters and those with some college, as opposed to those with only a high school education or those with college degrees—that is, the very voters who were mostly likely to be feeling squeezed from both above and below. In the 1996 New Hampshire Republican primary, Buchanan did best among exactly the same voters.

Demographically, Trump seems to be attracting the 2015 equivalent of these voters. In national polls of Republicans, and polls of Iowa caucusgoers, Trump's support is significantly stronger among those who do not have college degrees and earn less than \$100,000. In a Quinnipiac national poll released on September 24, Trump does better among voters without college degrees; and most tellingly, voters without college degrees are much more inclined than voters with college degrees to think he “cares about the needs and problems of people like you.” By contrast, voters with college degrees are much more likely than those without college degrees to believe that the three other candidates named in the survey question—Jeb Bush, Carly Fiorina, and Ben Carson—empathize with them. (Most of those voters without degrees probably did attend *some* college. Major polls often don't record separately the small number of Republicans who haven't attended college at all.)

The essential worldview of these Middle American Radicals was captured in a 1993 post-election survey by Stanley Greenberg, which found that Perot's supporters were more likely than Clinton's or Bush's to believe that “it's the middle class, *not* the poor who really get a raw deal today” and that “people who work for a living and don't make a lot of noise never seem to get a break.” They agreed with Clinton voters that corporations don't “strike a fair balance between making profits and serving the public,” but they also agreed with Bush voters that “too many of the poor are trying to get something for nothing” and that “we have gone too far in pushing equal rights for different groups in this country.”

There has been no similar polling of Trump's supporters, so all one can rely on are crowd reactions and interviews. Recently, I attended two Trump rallies: one at a high school auditorium in Hampton Falls, New Hampshire, where the line to get in stretched all along the side of the building and into the parking lot, as if it were the first night of a box-office blockbuster; the other at the 20,000-seat American Airlines Center in Dallas. The Dallas rally too was packed; it was filled with raucous supporters wearing red Trump T-shirts and “Make America Great Again” caps. The crowd was overwhelmingly white and roughly equally male and female. Even though the rally was held at 6:00, right after work on a weekday, I counted exactly

two men in the audience who were wearing suits and ties—and one of them, whom I interviewed, had come to accompany his aging mother, a Trump backer, and was himself leaning toward Jeb Bush.

At both rallies, Trump's railing against illegal immigration got applause. But so did his attacks on Chinese currency manipulation and corporate executives who ship jobs overseas. Almost all of the approximately 30 people I interviewed at these events mentioned Trump's opposition to illegal immigration, his defiance of political-correctness, and the strong leadership they expected him to bring to the presidency. Yet almost everyone also cited his economic nationalist stands. "He is about getting jobs back. I have two kids that can't find jobs. The jobs are going to Mexico," one woman in New Hampshire told me. Said a young Trump supporter in Dallas, who was also a union member, "I don't like the idea of tax dollars being used to ship jobs out to Latin America or Eastern Europe." (The previous month, an official of a large international union had told me that if his union held a referendum on who to endorse for president, Trump would probably win.) Another young Trump supporter in Dallas chided me for asking questions that seemed designed to pigeonhole him politically. "You are making assumptions about left and right," he said. "The media puts us in one or the other. It's not a good way to define people."

At the Dallas rally, I was supposed to meet up with a tea-party activist whom I had interviewed for an article two years ago, but we never found each other. So I corresponded with him afterward about why he was backing Trump. Asked about Trump's economic nationalism, he wrote back: "I do not have any problems nor does my wife with any of Trump's nationalist positions. We are all for them. It is long past time that we get our fair share from the Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, and others." I also asked him about Trump's pledge to protect Social Security and Medicare. His reply? "I do not want Trump to mess with Social Security other than to put a proposal in front of Congress on how to fix it and Medicare for the long run."

There is, as it turns out, considerable overlap between the tea-party worldview and Middle American Radicalism. (Here, I would distinguish between local tea-party groups, which line up with the MARS outlook, and national business front organizations that took on the tea-party mantle, which do not.) In June 2014, for instance, tea-party activists in greater Richmond led the fight to depose House Majority Leader Eric Cantor. Tea-party candidate David Brat charged Cantor not only with supporting amnesty for illegal immigrants but with backing "the crooks up on Wall Street." Today, not surprisingly, Trump leads among self-identified tea-partiers. In an early September CNN/ORC poll, Trump was backed by 41 percent of respondents who said they supported the tea party—double that of the next choice.

 Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan speaks at a rally at the Tennessee State House in Nashville, Tennessee. Buchanan is campaigning across Tennessee, trying to win the state's primary 12 March. LUKE FRAZZA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

TO SEE WHERE all of this may be headed, it's helpful to consider why bursts of Middle American Radicalism occur at certain moments. Several conditions have, in the past, proved crucial. One is a widespread sense of national decline. That was certainly the case in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the United States was mired in Vietnam; in the early 1990s, when the United States faced a protracted economic slowdown; and again from 2008 to the present. When the sense of doom has lifted, as it did when the Clinton boom began in the spring of 1996, the MARS voting bloc has gradually weakened.

The second condition is pronounced distrust of the leadership in Washington. Wallace's MARS were angry about the federal intercession in race relations. In the early 1990s, many conservative voters felt betrayed that Bush had broken his promise not to raise taxes, while others were enraged by the administration's seeming indifference to the recession and the growing clout of foreign lobbyists in Washington. That sense of distrust completely lifted after September 11, 2001, when Americans saw the national government as their protector. But it has returned during the Obama years: Middle American Radicals saw Obama's recovery program and his health care plan as a sop to Wall Street and the poor—which the middle class would have to pay for.

Until this summer, Middle American Radicals lacked a leader—someone to play the catalyzing role that Wallace and Perot had played decades ago—and they were furious at the Republican congressional leadership, which they had helped bring into power in 2010 and again in 2014, for failing to reverse Obama's policies. (One Trump supporter at the Dallas rally described House Speaker John Boehner and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to me as “a bunch of traitors.”) Then along came Trump—the leader the MARS movement had been missing.

 Supporters of US Republican Presidential hopeful Donald Trump hold up a sign during a Tea Party rally against the international nuclear agreement with Iran outside the US Capitol in Washington, DC on September 9, 2015. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

But can he succeed where Wallace, Perot, and Buchanan fell short? Can a MARS candidate actually win the White House? One hesitates at this point to offer any predictions, but my suspicion is that Trump will fail like the others. There is, of course, his volatile persona, which seems likely to cause self-inflicted wounds (just as Perot's did in 1992). But the bigger limiting factor for Trump is that there are only a certain number of MARS in the country: They constitute maybe 20 percent of the overall electorate and 30 to 35 percent of Republicans. That was enough to allow Trump to lead a crowded GOP field. But as the field narrows, he will have difficulty maintaining his lead unless he can expand his appeal beyond the MARS. And it will be hard to do that without threatening his base of support.

It therefore seems unlikely that we will end up with a MARS president in 2016 or beyond—especially since their percentage of the electorate is continuing to shrink. Still, that doesn't mean MARS will necessarily fail to have a political impact. After

all, tea-party activists—a group Harvard sociologist Theda Skocpol estimated at 250,000 during Obama's first term—have had a decisive influence on the balance of power in the House of Representatives since 2010.

The size of the MARS role going forward will ultimately depend on whether Americans believe their nation is in decline and whether they think the politicians in Washington are capable of, or even interested in, reversing that decline. Ronald Reagan dispelled fears of decline and was thus able to absorb many former Wallace sympathizers within the GOP. Following Bill Clinton's repudiation by voters in November 1994, he moved to the political center and was able to limit (though by no means eliminate) the effect of middle-class radicalism. Both Reagan and Clinton benefited, however, from a growing economy and apparent successes overseas. Will the next administration enjoy the same good fortune? With the world economy still in the doldrums, an ongoing crisis in the Middle East, and a polarized and paralyzed Washington, I doubt it. What's most likely is that Middle American Radicalism will keep simmering, until it finds a new champion and boils over once again.