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2016

## Donald Trump, the Perfect Populist

Why the GOP front-runner has far broader appeal than his predecessors going back to George Wallace.

By MICHAEL LIND | March 09, 2016

**I**s Donald Trump the Perfect Populist, one with broader appeal to the right and the center than his predecessors in recent American political history—so much so it could put him in the White House? In Trump, many of the kind of white working-class voters once called Reagan Democrats have found a tribune who represents their views and values more consistently than conservative populists like the Dixiecrat George Wallace, the Old Right paleo-conservative Pat Buchanan or the “theo-conservative” Pat Robertson, all of whom faltered in their bids for the presidency.

Trump, in fact, has more appeal to the center than the conservative populists of the last half century. Before Trump’s rise in this year’s Republican primary elections, the best-known populist presidential candidates were Alabama Governor Wallace and tycoon Ross

Perot, along with Buchanan. Yet none of these past figures had broad enough appeal to hope to win the White House. Despite his folksy demeanor, Perot was more of a technocrat than a populist and did poorly in traditionally populist areas of the South and Midwest, where Trump is doing well. Wallace was an outspoken white supremacist, while Trump tends to speak in a kind of code, starting with his “birther” campaign against President Obama, and his criticism of illegal immigrants and proposed ban on Muslims may appeal to fringe white nationalists even if it has offended many if not most Latinos. Nor has Trump alienated large sections of the electorate by casting his lot with Old Right isolationism, as Buchanan did, or by adopting the religious right social agenda of Robertson.

Indeed, the best explanation of Trump’s surprising success is that the constituency he has mobilized has existed for decades but the right champion never came along. What conservative apparatchiks hate about Trump—his insufficient conservatism—may be his greatest strength in the general election. His populism cuts across party lines like few others before him. Like his fans, Trump is indifferent to the issues of sexual orientation that animate the declining religious right, even to the point of defending Planned Parenthood. Trump’s platform combines positions that are shared by many populists but are anathema to movement conservatives—a defense of Social Security, a guarantee of universal health care, economic nationalist trade policies. “We have expanded the Republican Party,” Trump claimed the night of his Super Tuesday victories.

He may well be right, though it’s not clear what that Republican Party will look like in the end.

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**While populism has a history in American politics** dating back to Andrew Jackson and William Jennings Bryan, the modern era of American populism began half a century ago. In 1968, Wallace, running as candidate of the American Independent Party, won 13.5 percent of the popular vote and carried five Southern states—Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas and Louisiana. By receiving 45 electoral votes plus an additional electoral vote from a dissenting elector, he came close to throwing the three-way race between him, Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey and Republican candidate Richard Nixon into the House of Representatives, which would have chosen the president if no candidate received an electoral vote majority.

The appeal of Wallace, best known for his defiance of federal civil rights laws in his 1963 inaugural address as governor of Alabama—“segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever”—was concentrated in the Deep South. But Wallace also appealed to

some working-class and middle-class whites outside of the South, by appealing to resentment of busing for school desegregation, cultural liberalism and the left's opposition to the Vietnam War and U.S. military. Like many populist politicians, Wallace mingled colorful expressions—he said the only four-letter words that hippies did not know were “soap” and “work”—with rhetorical violence: “If any demonstrator ever lies down in front of my car, it'll be the last car he'll ever lay down in front of.”

In 1972, Wallace was crippled by a bullet in an attempted assassination while he was campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination. In the late 1970s, Wallace asked for forgiveness for his earlier segregationist stance and he won some black votes in his successful third race for governor in 1983 (he died in 1998). While Wallace failed to win the White House, his version of conservative populism changed the country: It was his 1968 race, along with Barry Goldwater's strong showing in the South in 1964, that persuaded the Republican Party to adopt a “Southern strategy” that exploited the backlash by Southern whites against the civil rights revolution.

But its conservative components have always limited the appeal of conservative populism, as the political career of Pat Buchanan shows.

Buchanan, a former Nixon aide and conservative journalist, ran unsuccessfully for the Republican presidential nomination in 1992 and was awarded with a prime-time speech at the Republican National Convention that nominated George Herbert Walker Bush for a second term in the White House. Buchanan's speech focused almost entirely on the “religious war” and “culture war” to save America from feminism, legal abortion, gay rights, and “the raw sewage of pornography.”

In his 1996 campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, and in his 2000 campaign as the Reform Party nominee, Buchanan emphasized populist themes of economic nationalism and immigration restriction. But he was too much of a member of the Old Right that despised FDR and sought a return to the isolationism of Robert Taft and Charles Lindbergh to have much appeal to former New Deal Democrats. Buchanan's history of borderline anti-Semitic remarks led William F. Buckley Jr. to criticize him in “In Search of Anti-Semitism,” (1992) and some of his associates like Samuel Francis were overt white racial nationalists.

For Reagan Democrats and their children and grandchildren, World War II showed America at its best. But Buchanan concluded a long career of eccentric World War II revisionism in 2009 with “Churchill, Hitler, and “The Unnecessary War”: How Britain Lost

its Empire and the West Lost the World,” arguing that Hitler should have been appeased by Britain and the U.S.

Buchanan, in a recent interview, characterized Trump as his populist heir. “What Trump has today is conclusive evidence to prove that what some of us warned about in the 1990s has come to pass,” he said. But the evidence is that Trump doesn’t see it that way. Trump even competed briefly with Buchanan for the presidential nomination. The year was 2000, and Trump, encouraged by his friend Jesse Ventura, then governor of Minnesota, was considering a run for the presidential nomination of Perot’s Reform Party, on the grounds that the Republican Party of George W. Bush and Karl Rove had “moved too far toward the extreme far right.” Trump and Ventura hoped to rescue the Reform Party from the conservative allies of Buchanan, of whom Trump said: “He’s a Hitler lover; I guess he’s an anti-Semite. He doesn’t like the blacks, he doesn’t like the gays.” Trump floated the idea of Oprah Winfrey as his running mate. In his 2000 manifesto *The America We Deserve*, Trump proposed a platform that included universal employer-based health insurance, gays in the military and a one-time 14.5 percent tax on the rich that would reduce the federal deficit and help eliminate the shortfall in Social Security.

In his press release announcing his withdrawal from the race for the presidential nomination of the Reform Party, Trump wrote: “Now I understand that David Duke has decided to join the Reform Party to support the candidacy of Pat Buchanan. So the Reform Party now includes a Klansman—Mr. Duke, a Neo-Nazi—Mr. Buchanan, and a Communist—Ms. [Lenora] Fulani. This is not company I wish to keep.”

Compared to Trump, Buchanan was a flawed vehicle for the Jacksonian populism of the ex-Democratic white working class. So was another Pat, the Reverend Pat Robertson, television evangelist, founder of the Christian Coalition, and, like Buchanan, a failed candidate for the Republican presidential nomination. But while the mainstream conservative movement marginalized Buchanan, it embraced Robertson and other evangelical Protestant leaders like Jerry Falwell and James Dobson of Focus on the Family.

On social issues like abortion and gay rights, Buchanan shared the agenda of the religious right. But his advocacy of tariffs to protect American industry and immigration restriction threatened the mainstream right’s consensus in favor of free trade and increased legal immigration. And his neo-isolationism threatened the post-Cold War American right’s support of high military spending and an assertive global foreign policy.

Unlike Buchanan, Robertson and other religious right leaders did not deviate from the Republican Party line on trade, immigration, or tax cuts for the rich. Many of the rank-and-

file members of the religious right shared the traditional populist suspicion of bankers and big business. But in the 1990s there was a tacit understanding that religious right activists would focus on issues of sex and reproduction and school prayer, leaving economics to free-marketers. In foreign policy, the Christian Zionism of many Protestant evangelicals made them reliable allies of neoconservatives with close ties to Israel and supportive of the Iraq War and other U.S. interventions in the Middle East.

From the 1980s until this decade, the religious right was the toothless, domesticated “designated populist” wing of the Republican coalition, and mainstream conservative politicians took it for granted that as long as they said they opposed abortion and gay marriage, evangelical voters would support free-market conservative economics and interventionist neoconservative foreign policy.

But even before the unexpected success of Trump in the Republican primary race beginning in 2015, there were signs that this generation-old bargain was coming undone. Hostility to both illegal immigration and high levels of legal immigration, a position which free-market conservatives had fought to marginalize, has moved very quickly from heresy to orthodoxy in the GOP. The opposition of populist conservatives killed comprehensive immigration reform under George W. Bush in 2007 and also killed the Gang of Eight immigration reform effort led in part by Senator Marco Rubio in 2013. The defeat of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in the 2014 Republican primary for the 7th District of Virginia by an unknown conservative academic, David Brat, was attributed largely to Cantor’s support for the immigration reform effort.

There were other signs of populist discontent with establishment conservative orthodoxy, for those who paid attention. No project is dearer to the hearts of mainstream movement conservatives than the goal of privatizing Social Security, a hated symbol of the dependency-inducing “statism” of the allegedly tyrannical Franklin D. Roosevelt. But George W. Bush’s plan to partly privatize Social Security was so unpopular, even among Republican voters, that a Republican-controlled Congress did not even bother to vote on it in 2005. And a Republican-controlled Congress passed Medicare Part D in 2003—the biggest expansion of a universal middle-class entitlement between the creation of Medicare in 1965 and the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010. Blue collar Republican voters applauded, as libertarian think-tankers raged.

Conservative populists cannot be accused of inconsistency. Like New Deal Democrats before them, they tend to favor universal benefits for which the middle class is eligible like Social Security, Medicare and Medicare Part D, and to oppose welfare programs like Medicaid and the ACA which feature means tests that make the working class and middle

class ineligible. The true inconsistency is on the part of the mainstream conservative movement, which has yoked together left-inspired crusades for global democratic revolution abroad with minimal-state libertarianism at home.

It remains to be seen whether Trump can win the Republican nomination, much less the White House. But whatever becomes of his candidacy, it seems likely that his campaign will prove to be just one of many episodes in the gradual replacement of Buckley-Goldwater-Reagan conservatism by something more like European national populist movements, such as the National Front in France and the United Kingdom Independence Party in Britain. Unlike Goldwater, who spearheaded an already-existing alliance consisting of National Review, Modern Age, and Young Americans for Freedom, Trump has followers but no supportive structure of policy experts and journalists. But it seems likely that some Republican experts and editors, seeking to appeal to his voters in the future, will promote a Trump-like national populist synthesis of middle-class social insurance plus immigration restriction and foreign policy realpolitik, through conventional policy papers and op-eds rather than blustering speeches and tweets.

That's looking ahead. Glancing backward, it is unclear that there has ever been any significant number of voters who share the worldview of the policy elites in conservative think tanks and journals. In hindsight, the various right-wing movements—the fusionist conservatism of Buckley, Goldwater and Reagan, neoconservatism, libertarianism, the religious right—appear to have been so many barnacles hitching free rides on the whale of the Jacksonian populist electorate. The whale is awakening beneath them, and now the barnacles don't know what to do.