Journal of Right-Wing Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2023)
https://jrws.berkeley.edu

ESSAY

Trumpism's Paleoconservative Roots and Dealignment

Jeffrey Bloodworth

Department of History, Gannon University

The 2016 and 2020 presidential elections did more than simply usher Donald Trump into and out of the presidency. The election results signaled political dealignment. Long in the making, 2016 catalyzed, and the 2018/2022 midterms and 2020 election confirmed, startling alterations in the two major party's electoral coalitions. Under Trump's leadership, an amalgam of right-wing populist style and paleoconservative policy triumphed as the GOP's brand. Likewise, Hillary Clinton's and Joe Biden's campaigns signaled the enduring weaknesses of the McGovern-cum-Obama coalition. The age of Reagan might be done, but dealignment means neither party can coalesce an enduring majority.

In dealignment, wide swaths of the electorate divorce themselves from previous partisan affiliations and remain "unaffiliated." Indeed, Gallup polls reveal that the percentage of Americans identifying themselves as political independents, 43 percent, has reached an all-time high.[1] In an environment of dealignment, no party can establish an enduring majority, which prompts political gridlock that only further alienates an already disaffected electorate. The road to dealignment began in the GOP's and Democrat's intraparty squabbles and shifting coalitions. Donald Trump's surprising success in the 2016 GOP primaries signaled the return of the Eisenhower-Taft feud within conservatism. In 1952, Dwight Eisenhower defeated Robert Taft for the Republican nomination. In so doing, moderates defeated the Old Right and defined the GOP through the mid-1970s. Thereafter, the New Right defeated the moderates and defined Reagan-era conservativism until Trump. But this brand of Reagan conservatism antagonized a significant element of the Old Right and its intellectual progeny, the self-dubbed paleoconservatives. Starting in the mid-1980s, paleoconservatives revolted and pushed for a return to "first principles." Shoved to the margins in the 1990s, paleocon

1 Jeffrey Jones, "Democratic, Republican Identification Near Historical Lows," *Gallup*, January 11, 2016, https://news.gallup.com/poll/188096/democratic-republican-identification-near-historical-lows.aspx; "Party Affiliation," *Gallup*, accessed July 26, 2022, https://news.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx.

issues—noninterventionism, immigration, and free trade—were made relevant again in the 2000s by the Iraq War, the Great Recession, and shifting demographics.

Out of dumb luck, political brilliance, or, more likely, a combination of both, Donald Trump sensed the paleoconservative revival. In his 2016 campaign, he took up their banner on foreign policy, immigration, and trade. Upsetting decades of conservative orthodoxy, the turnabout produced significant churn in the GOP coalition. Cementing the Republicans as the party of big business, working-class whites, religious conservatives, and libertarians, the ex-president has pushed college-educated women, well-to-do suburbanites, and well-educated millennials to the Democrats. When Trump is on the ballot, working-class whites vote GOP and educated suburbanites flock to Democrats. Both factions have broken from their traditional partisan loyalties without attaching themselves to a new coalition. The topsy-turvey results of recent elections demonstrate the roiling nature of dealignment.

Unlike the Republicans, the Democratic Party's coalition has been evolving in plain view. Spawned by the party's civil war of the 1960s, the so-called McGovern coalition emerged in the early 1970s. Consisting of women, young voters, racial minorities, the poor, a smattering of economically populist white workers, and white middle-class liberals, the coalition was supposed to create an enduring liberal majority. In a forty-year stretch, from 1972 to 2004, this coalition, however, failed to muster 50 percent for a Democratic presidential candidate. Even worse, four times, in 1972, 1980, 1984, and 1992, the Democratic standard-bearer failed to garner even 45 percent of the vote. By 2008, demographic change, the Iraq catastrophe, and an economic cataclysm enabled an unusually gifted candidate, Barack Obama, to win 53 percent of the vote. Dubbed the Obama coalition, the mature, erstwhile McGovern coalition, observers surmised, would dominate American politics for years to come. But the 2010 and 2014 midterms along with the performance of the Clinton and Biden campaigns in 2016 and 2020 revealed the McGovern-cum-Obama coalition's fault lines and structural weaknesses.

Paleoconservativism

Donald Trump is not sui generis. Though the ex-president's bombast and comb-over pompadour are singular, his current policies, if not his politics, have definite roots. The ex-president's personal beliefs are unknowable. The ultimate political opportunist, the one-time Democrat seems to have few fixed political principles. But the set of conservative policies and bromides he rode to the GOP nomination and presidency possess a clear paleoconservative lineage.

Contemporary paleoconservativism is a direct descendant of the traditionalist Old Right with a "countercultural" twist.[2] Antimodern at their core, Old Right

2 Joseph Scotchie, *Revolt from the Heartland: The Struggle for an Authentic American Conservatism* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 14; Chris Woltermann, "What is Paleo-Conservatism?," *Telos* 97 (1993): 13.

traditionalists looked to a feudal past for cultural inspiration and revival. To them, free societies depended upon a virtuous citizenry that could only be maintained by an "organic" social order governed by "institutional authority" with a ballast of "historical continuity."[3] Since the 1930s, traditionalists have warned against the corrupting forces of the New Deal state, cosmopolitanism, and corporate economies. Nearly a century hence, paleocons see these heresies as so institutionalized that they seek a radical break with the present.[4] Instead of "conserving" the present, paleocon thought leaders seek to destroy it and return to an idealized past.

A twice-divorced casino kingpin is America's most unlikely paleocon. Ideologically, the former president is a blank slate. But Trump's fetish for brawny mass industry, contempt for cosmopolitan ideals, and search-and-destroy mentality result in paleo-friendly immigration, trade, and foreign policies. Beyond policy, Mar-a-Lago is no Bedford Falls, but Trump's constellation of grudges and prejudices fits the paleoconservative tear-it-all-down temper.

The former president and paleoconservative thinkers seek to eradicate the institutions and norms of the present. The roots of Trump's personal nihilism are either unknowable or best left to psychologists. But in smashing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), abandoning the Paris Climate Accord and the Iranian nuclear deal, and spawning an insurrection, we see a "creative-destructive" trend. The paleoconservatives are transparent about their creative-destructive goals. Sam Francis, a godfather of the movement, declared their aim is to demolish the "major foundations, the media, the schools, the universities, big business, and most of the system of organized culture."[5] Upon these ashes, they seek to rebuild a very different world. In this ideological framework, the ex-president's actions make logical sense.

The Old Right and Eisenhower's Middle Way

Birthed by reaction against the Progressive Movement, the Old Right was cemented by opposition to Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. In America's "French Revolution," from which all later apostasies flowed, the Old Right saw Progressivism, and especially the New Deal, as a betrayal of the liberal traditions of Western civilization.[6] The Old Right viewed FDR's and Harry Truman's wartime and postwar policies as heresy. Noninterventionists throughout the 1930s, conservatives backed the

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3 Scotchie, *Revolt from the Heartland*, 19–20; Jean-Francois Drolet and Michael C. Williams, "America First: Paleo-Conservatism and the Ideological Struggle for the American Right," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25, no. 1 (2019): 5.

4 Scotchie, *Revolt from the Heartland*, 14.

5 Drolet and Williams, "America First," 7.

6 Gordon Lloyd and David Davenport, *The New Deal & Modern American Conservatism: A Defining Rivalry* (Palo Alto, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2014), 2–3, 11.

war effort following Pearl Harbor, but many Old Rightists saw the postwar treaties, collective security arrangements, and free trade pacts as abominations. The war, however, changed some conservatives who split with their Old Right brethren on foreign policy. Symbolized by Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg, the war transformed many noninterventionists into internationalists. The Old Right, symbolized by Mr. Republican, Robert Taft, maintained a prewar, noninterventionist worldview. Unfortunately for Taft, the political tides were moving against him.

Seen as cranks, reactionaries, and elitists, the Old Right was adrift and politically immaterial throughout the Roosevelt and early post–World War II era.[7] During the early postwar era, conservatism's "traditionalist wing" slowly coalesced.[8] In the meantime, it was Dwight Eisenhower who rescued the GOP from the Old Right and total irrelevance. During his presidency, he pushed the Old Right to the party's margins.[9] A champion of balanced budgets, Ike nevertheless proffered a restrained form of federal activism that built infrastructure and provided tangible economic benefits to "the little fellow."[10] His "middle way" between the Old Right and New/Fair Deal liberals meant the GOP endorsed an internationalist foreign policy and a safety net achieved within strategic and fiscal discipline.[11]

The Old Right's eclipse was a temporary byproduct of Eisenhower's unprecedented personal popularity. In ten consecutive Gallup polls, from 1951 to 1960, Americans named Ike their most "admired man." Across the globe, he earned the same honor from 1951 to 1955.[12] Through his enormous appeal, he attempted to cast the GOP in the middle-way image. But middle-way Republicanism never went beyond the White House. Despite his personal popularity, Republicans lost sixty-eight House and seventeen Senate seats during his presidency. Never close to Vice President Richard Nixon, Eisenhower failed to groom a successor, or a cadre of middle-way up-and-comers.[13]

Once Eisenhower left office, conservatives battled moderate Republicans for control over the GOP. Despite Goldwater's landslide defeat in 1964, conservatives slowly gained power. To be sure, Richard Nixon largely governed as a moderate Republican. But Watergate and the Jimmy Carter presidency boosted conservatives into ascendance

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7 Michael Bowen, *The Roots of Modern Conservatism: Dewey, Taft, and the Battle for Soul of the Republican Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 7.

8 George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 36.

9 William Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 259.

10 Hitchcock, 259.

11 Bowen, *Roots of Modern Conservatism*, 199.

12 Hitchcock, *Age of Eisenhower*, 244

13 Bowen, *Roots of Modern Conservatism*, 198–201.

within the GOP. By the mid-1970s, conservative versus liberal defined American politics. Despite Ike's and Nixon's best efforts, the Republican Party was fated to become the organizational vehicle for anti–New Deal conservatism.

The New Right, Neoconservatism, and a Conservative Majority

The Old Right's eclipse allowed for the postwar conservativism movement's birth. During the 1980s, Ronald Reagan enabled this new breed of conservative activists to control the GOP and conservatism to become the nation's majority creed. But the conservative movement always contained schisms. The three-legged intellectual stool upon which it stood was symbolized by a trio of urtexts. Friederick Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* (1944), Whittaker Chambers's *Witness* (1952), and Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953) represented the libertarian, anticommunist, and traditionalist wings of the movement.[14]

The specter of Soviet advance and internal subversion caused conservatives to embrace the interventionist bugaboos of the Cold War. Wary of modernity's large-scale capitalism, traditionalists had looked to an agrarian past in which economies were local and the world less urbane. But the libertarian's argument that free markets promoted traditionalist virtue brought the latter's proponents into an accord on big business and free trade.[15] Under the aegis of William F. Buckley and the *National Review,* the separate strands were welded into a "broad conservative movement that would uphold the principles of minimal government and the worth of the individual while recognizing the moral order and the authority of God and truth."[16] Before Reagan and the 1980s, a united conservative movement nevertheless encountered the New Deal order, in which they were a distinct minority. In 1964, their chosen candidate, Barry Goldwater, was steamrolled by Lyndon Johnson.[17] Vietnam and domestic unrest, however, punctured the New Deal coalition and gave conservatives an opportunity.[18]

The mid-1970s were the turning point for conservatives. Civil rights, Vietnam, and controversial social issues had spawned a backlash that gave conservatives the electoral heft to seize the GOP and White House. Led by activists Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie, and others, they used social issues like homosexuality, school prayer, the Equal Rights Amendment, and (especially) abortion to recruit millions into the so-called New

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14 Susanna Klingenstein, "It's Splendid When the Town Whore Gets Religion and Joins the Church: The Rise of Jewish Neoconservatives as Observed by Paleoconservatives in the 1980s," *Shofar* 21, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 90.

15 Julian Zelizer, "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism," *Reviews in American History* 38, no. 2 (June 2010): 368.

16 Donald Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the Republican Right Rose to Prominence in Modern America*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 22–23.

17 Critchlow, 68.

18 Critchlow, 103.

Right.[19] The resulting political battles, or culture wars, convinced millions of evangelicals and Catholics, in the words of David Farber, that "they were conservatives."[20]

Like the New Right, neoconservatism was also born during the 1970s. Antagonized by the Democratic Party's leftward shift on culture and the welfare state, and its allegedly dovish foreign policy, a faction of once liberal intellectuals formed the neoconservative movement. They battled the New Left who had moved the Democratic Party away from the blue-collar working class and toward issues of concern to women, minorities, and college-educated voters.[21] After losing this political brawl, many moved right as neoconservatives and eventually joined the GOP.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan brought traditionalists, libertarians, anticommunists, the New Right, and neoconservatives into an enduring coalition.[22] A master communicator, Reagan infused sunny optimism into the Old Right's antistatism and the New Right's culture wars. He catalyzed an electoral realignment, killed the New Deal order, and transformed the GOP into the majority party. But it was during the Reagan presidency that paleoconservatives slowly became aware of their alienation from the newfangled conservativism.

The Neoconservative-Paleoconservative War

Alienated from postwar America's cultural and economic life, traditionalists recoil from market capitalism and mass democracy. Seeking a return to an agrarian society in which an "aristocracy rule[d] over a traditional culture," they seek an elite-led, hierarchical, even neo-feudal world.[23] For mainstream conservatives, culture wars could move the political needle, build New Right majorities, and sometimes bring policy change. But to traditionalists, culture wars transcended transactional politics. To traditionalists, culture wars amounted to an existential battle for civilizational survival. As one faction of the conservative minority during the New Deal order, traditionalists' deviance from mainstream conservative norms loomed small. Once conservatives seized power, these contrasts were sharpened and eventually metastasized.

Reagan's election gave traditionalists an uncustomary dose of optimism. They looked to it as their long-awaited opportunity to finally wield power. Reality dashed these expectations, generated the paleoconservative rift, and spawned Trumpism's contemporary roots. In sum, paleoconservatism emerged from the traditionalists who

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19 Thomas Fleming and Paul Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement* (Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 79–82.

20 David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 156; Fleming and Gottfried, *Conservative Movement*, 84.

21 Critchlow, *Conservative Ascendancy*, 113–16.

22 Critchlow, 184.

23 Klingenstein, "It's Splendid," 90.

blamed neoconservatives for Reagan's apostasies. The Old Right provided Reagan an antistatist, anti-immigrant, and anticommunist philosophy. The New Right's foot soldiers helped boost him to office. But it was the neoconservatives who gave Reagan, and by extension the conservative movement, intellectual panache. Daniel Bell, Midge Decter, James Q. Wilson, Seymour Lipset, Nathan Glazer, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, and Ben Wattenberg, among others, employed data and empirical arguments to move old conservative shibboleths toward mainstream acceptance.[24]

As the neoconservative star rose, traditionalists quickly learned their place was not in mainstream conservatism. Eager for the spoils of Reagan's 1980 victory, they pushed for one of their own to head the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). In early 1981, their choice, M. E. Bradford, was seemingly on a glide path to head the institution.[25] Using their media savvy and influential journals, neocons scuttled Bradford's nomination by using his scathing critiques of Abraham Lincoln, opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and support for George Wallace's presidential campaigns against him.[26] Facing conflicts over the budget and foreign policy, Reagan smartly avoided a bruising fight over a relatively measly federal post. Given an opening, the neocons pushed for one of their own, William Bennett, to fill the post. Neocons would perform this act repeatedly in the Reagan era.

Locked out of prominent White House positions, traditionalists watched helplessly as neocons inserted themselves into the decision-making loop and made their worldview synonymous with Reaganism. Zealous antagonism toward the USSR was their primary point of agreement. Due to political exigencies, Reagan and neocons found additional areas of convergence on social welfare spending. A pragmatic ideologue, Reagan encountered an entrenched bias for the welfare state in the mass media and electorate. In addition to Democratic control of the House, GOP Senate moderates feared cuts to social welfare spending could cause political pain. Rather than slashing the welfare state, the president changed the national discourse vis-à-vis "big government." Voters agreed with Reagan's view that big government loomed as a nefarious threat. Nevertheless, they objected to cuts to big-ticket social welfare programs and grew to accept the dissonance of rhetorical small-government conservatism and real-life federal spending. Neoconservatives within and outside the administration urged Reagan to accept voter restraints on his vision. Conceding to the political reality that Americans had become "ideologically conservative but operationally liberal," Reagan inveighed

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24 Fleming and Gottfried, *Conservative Movement*, 64–65.

25 Carla Hall, "The Amazing Endowment Scramble," *Washington Post*, December 13, 1981, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1981/12/13/the-amazing-endowment-scramble/b16738d2-5d6b-4260-aeda-a7e435c455e9/.

26 Klingenstein, "It's Splendid," 88.

against liberal programs even as he signed legislation funding them.[27] Politically potent but intellectually inconsistent, this element became the central domestic achievement of the Reagan Revolution.[28] Traditionalists blamed the neocons for this treacherous subversion.

The combination of political realities and neoconservative political acumen meant a restrained welfare state was the de facto definition of Reagan's domestic conservativism.[29] Rhetorically, Reagan castigated the welfare state. But substantively, Reaganism meant, in the words of Bill Kristol, a "promise to get trim government and lower taxes," not a repeal of the New Deal or prosecution of culture wars.[30] With regards to the traditionalists' cherished culture wars, Reagan, as he did with social welfare spending, offered rhetorical support but largely avoided political battles over school prayer and abortion.[31] In addition to the welfare state and culture wars were immigration and foreign policy. The neoconservative embrace of mass immigration and an interventionist, democracy-promoting foreign policy fundamentally jibed with Reagan's ebullient sense of the American mission.[32]

To traditionalists, a conservative White House should have meant a smaller welfare state, vigorously prosecuted culture wars, and a restrained foreign policy. Instead, Reagan offered rhetoric on culture and statism and an interventionist foreign policy modeled after Truman more than Taft. Feeling betrayed and blaming the neocons for the turnabout, Clyde Wilson, a key traditionalists thinker, inveighed, "Our estate has been taken over by an imposter, just as we were about to inherit."[33] Newcomers to the political right, neocons, in the traditionalist's eyes, were ignorant of conservatism's timeless theological and philosophical traditions. Terming them "modernists" who affirmed humanity's ability to shape and improve their world, traditionalists charged neocons with conservative heresy. To one paleocon thinker, George Panichas, the theology of conservatism was being "sacrificed to the new god and the new morality of modernity."[34] Traditionalists came to see that a conservative majority had come at the cost of the conservative soul.

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27 Elizabeth Popp and Thomas J. Rudolph, "A Tale of Two Ideologies: Explaining Public Support for Economic Interventions," *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 3 (July 2011): 810.

28 Scotchie, *Revolt from the Heartland*, 43.

29 Fleming and Gottfried, *Conservative Movement*, 64–67.

30 Fleming and Gottfried, 67.

31 Scotchie, *Revolt from the Heartland*, 43.

32 Klingenstein, "It's Splendid," 87.

33 Klingenstein, 92; Scotchie, *Revolt from the Heartland*, 43.

34 Hans Vorlander, "Liberalism," in *A Companion to 20th-Century America*, ed. Stephen Whitfield (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 475.

Paleoconservativism Is Born

Thomas Fleming and Paul Gottfried are credited with coining the term *paleoconservative* in the mid-1980s.[35] Venting their ire at neocons, they launched a concerted attack to reclaim the conservative mainstream. One of their initial public broadsides occurred at the Philadelphia Society's 1986 conference. Chaired by the almost–NEH head, M. E. Bradford, and structured around the "neoconservative" theme, the conference was little more than a paleocon quinceañera. University of Michigan historian Stephen Tonsor, a leading paleoconservative thinker, best expressed the conference's stance on their rival. He said of the leftists-cum-conservative thought leaders: "It is splendid when the town whore gets religion and joins the church. Now and then she made a good choir director but when she begins to tell the minister what he ought to say in his Sunday sermons, matters have been carried too far."[36] Neoconservatives might be part of the Reagan coalition, but for paleocons, these newly minted conservatives remained junior coalition partners. And with that an intellectual war within the right was launched.

In conjunction with the Philadelphia Society conference was *The Intercollegiate Review's* 1986 spring issue. Dedicated to the "State of Conservatism," this issue from the flagship publication of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (the nation's oldest conservative student organization) termed neocons "interlopers" who were unconcerned with big ideas, "first principles," and "permanent things."[37] To traditionalists, a "policy intellectual" was little more than a political hack. Traditionalist icon Russell Kirk best expressed the movement's regard for policy intellectuals by styling "politics . . . the preoccupation of the quarter educated."[38] Two years hence, Kirk expressed his views in more barbed words. Speaking at the Heritage Foundation on the issue of the "Old Right and Neoconservativism," Kirk decried the "horde of dissenters . . . of Jewish stock," who lacked a deep conservative appreciation for the "human condition" and "civilization."[39] For those who merely sensed antisemitism in this body of thought, Tonsor left no doubt. He proclaimed conservatism's "worldview was Roman or Anglo-Catholic" in its core.[40] Apparently, neither Judaism nor Jews had a place or role in the canon of Western conservatism.

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35 Drolet and Williams, "America First," 3. As I note below, decades later, during the Obama presidency, Paul Gottfried coinvented the term "alt-right" with Richard Spencer.

36 John Judis, "Conservative Wars," *The New Republic,* August 11 and 18, 1986, 16.

37 David Hoeveler, "Conservative Intellectuals and the Reagan Ascendancy," *The History Teacher* 23, no. 3 (May 1990): 307.

38 Hoeveler, 307.

39 Klingenstein, "It's Splendid," 93.

40 Judis, "Conservative Wars," 16.

In journals and on television, neoconservatives returned the ideological fire. The brouhaha resulted in a public feud that played itself out on the streets of Manhattan. In early May 1989, a leading neocon thinker, Father Richard John Neuhaus, and his five-member staff arrived to work only to find they had been summarily fired and tossed from their New York offices. For several years, the Rockford Institute, a paleoconservative think tank, had sponsored Neuhaus's Center for Religion and Society. Neoconservative in their orientation, Neuhaus and the center clashed with the institute and its flagship journal, *Chronicles,* over the publication's "tilt toward a white European tradition."[41] In the *Chronicles* March 1989 lead editorial, the editor had termed third world immigration a threat to America's "European character." Unsettled by blood-and-soil nationalism, Neuhaus attempted to negotiate an "amicable separation" of the two entities. In the midst of talks, the Rockford Institute's board abruptly ordered the New York offices closed and its inhabitants and contents dumped into the streets.[42] The paleocon-neocon war was no longer a private affair relegated to the pages of little-read right-wing periodicals. Mainstream newspapers sniffed the juicy story and reported it.

The New Republic and *New York Times* might have covered an intellectual spat that landed Neuhaus officeless, but they avoided deeper dives into its seamier elements. Soaked in antisemitism, the paleoconservative charge against the neocons was ugly but ignored during the late 1980s. Mainstream observers probably deemed writings and speeches for obscure conferences and journals by mysterious thinkers scarcely worthy of more attention. Moreover, paleocons were dismissed as a "dying breed" and therefore disregarded by mainstream observers.[43] But paleoconservatives would not go gently into the good night. Their strident barks and sharp ideological yawps forced mainstream conservatives to act.

National Review's Joseph Sobran and media pundit Patrick Buchanan spawned a media storm that prompted paleoconservatism's banishment from mainstream conservatism. Throughout the 1980s, Sobran's *National Review* and syndicated newspaper columns had veritably dripped with antisemitic and racist venom. The paleoconservative writer termed the *New York Times* "Holocaust Update," questioned American-Jewish loyalties, and excused the history of Christian antisemitism by writing, "If Christians were sometimes hostile to Jews, that worked two ways."[44] He followed up his praise of the ferociously racist and antisemitic magazine *Instauration* by pronouncing America a "minority-ridden country" in which whites lived in constant fear of blacks.[45] The resulting controversy caused Buckley and *National Review* editors

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41 Richard Bernstein, "Magazine Dispute Reflects Rift on U.S. Right," *New York Times*, May 16, 1989.

42 Bernstein.

43 Klingenstein, "It's Splendid," 96.

44 Judis, "Conservative Wars," 16.

45 Joseph Sobran, "The Undisclosed Truth: Racism and Reality," *Victoria (TX) Advocate*, May 19, 1986, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=U41dAAAAIBAJ&sjid=a1wNAAAAIBAJ&pg=3349%

to ban Sobran from writing about Israel and to officially dissociate themselves from his "obstinate tendentiousness."[46]

Not to be outdone, Buchanan joined the fray.[47] In his syndicated columns and from his perch on *CNN* and *PBS*, he issued a slew of antisemitic statements. In a March 1990 article, Buchanan defended a Ukrainian-American citizen accused of working at the Treblinka death camp, Ivan Demjanjuk, by employing a classic Holocaust denial canard: exaggerated death tolls.[48] One year later, he sneered about the first Gulf War: "There are only two groups that are beating the drums for war in the Middle East, the Israeli Defense Ministry and its amen corner in the United States."[49] On another program he termed Congress "Israeli-occupied territory." And in yet another venue he ignored easily identifiable prowar gentile figures, preferring to castigate four Jewish men as the secret cabal pushing for war.[50]

Sobran and Buchanan's resulting media storm finally forced the towering figure of postwar conservative thought, William Buckley, to choose a side. In 1990, he convened a "What Now?" summit to chart a post–Cold War trajectory for conservativism; conspicuously absent from the gathering were any paleoconservatives. Realizing Buckley's snub, Paul Weyrich cracked, "I suspect these people weren't there because they have made a career out of attacking too many people who were there."[51] One year later, Buckley took an even bigger step. In a remarkable forty-two-page *National Review* essay, "In Search of Anti-Semitism," he pronounced Buchanan, Sobran, and other conservative figures unfit for the post–Cold War right.[52] Soon after, Buckley ejected Sobran from the *National Review*'s editorial board. Read out of the conservative movement by Buckley, paleocons, along with communists, were seemingly relegated to the dustbin of history.

Buckley and his neoconservative allies had tried to purge the paleocons from mainstream conservatism. Unfortunately for them, the nagging issues of trade, immigration, and foreign interventionism remained salient with many conservative voters. Sensing this, Buchanan announced a quixotic primary challenge to President

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46 Judis, "Conservative Wars," 18.

47 Buchanan dubbed Sobran "perhaps the finest journalist of our generation." See "Joseph Sobran," *Crisis*, February 16, 2022, https://www.crisismagazine.com/author/jsobran.

48 Patrick Buchanan, "'Ivan the Terrible'—More Doubts," *New York Post*, March 17, 1990, https://phdn.org/archives/holocaust-history.org/~jamie/buchanan/column.shtml.

49 Klingenstein, "It's Splendid," 97.

50 Klingenstein, 97. The figures he accused were A. M. Rosenthal, Richard Perle, Charles Krauthammer, and Henry Kissinger.

51 Scotchie, *Revolt from the Heartland*, 49.

52 Klingenstein, "It's Splendid," 98.

George H. W. Bush. Fresh from the 1991 Gulf War, Bush temporarily enjoyed 90 percent approval ratings. But a lingering recession, 7 percent unemployment, and a reversal on his "no new taxes" pledge rendered the incumbent vulnerable on his right flank. Bush also encountered larger structural problems. Quite simply, he lacked Reagan's conservative bona fides and charisma and was left to pay the bill for a decade's worth of paleoconservative alienation.

Buchanan's standard stump speech castigating foreign alliances, free trade, and immigration touched a nerve on the right. Of Bush's post–Cold War foreign policy, Buchanan remarked, "We must not trade in our sovereignty for a cushioned seat at the head table of anyone's new world order."[53] Ruing trade deals and foreign aid, he promised that "[o]ur resolve is to put America First, to make America First again, and to keep America First."[54] When it came to immigration, he sounded a paleo theme, declaring that "our Western heritage is going to be handed down to future generations, not dumped onto some landfill called multiculturalism."[55]

Foreshadowing Trump's dalliances with white nationalists, Buchanan played coy with David Duke. The former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard turned Louisiana state representative had also jumped into the presidential race. Refusing to alienate Duke's supporters in the primaries, Buchanan referred to him as "that gentlemen" throughout his campaigns in the South. When asked his opinion on the former Klansman's agenda, Buchanan said, "What his [Duke's] views are, I really don't care. I have my own views and I argue from my own vantage point."[56] When it came to race, however, Duke and Buchanan sang from similar hymnals. A self-described spokesman for "Euro-Americans," Buchanan warned that liberal immigration policies were pushing America toward becoming a "third world nation."[57] As a result, many on the far right expressed support for the "two Dukes." The race-baiting rag *Instauration* proclaimed Buchanan "a clean Duke."[58]

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53 Jeff Greenfield, "Trump is Pat Buchanan with Better Timing," *Politico*, September/October 2016, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/09/donald-trump-pat-buchanan-republican-america-first-nativist-214221.

54 "Pat Buchanan for President 1992 Campaign Brochure," 4President, accessed February 16, 2022, http://www.4president.org/brochures/1992/patbuchanan1992brochure.htm.

55 Greenfield, "Trump is Pat Buchanan."

56 E. J. Dionne, "Is Buchanan Courting Bias?," *Washington Post*, February 29, 1992, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/02/29/is-buchanan-courting-bias/4753a57f-183b-4033-be38-4e2360e6aa00/; Peter Applebome, "The 1992 Campaign: Far Right; Duke's Followers to Lean Buchanan," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/us/the-1992-campaign-far-right-duke-s-followers-lean-to-buchanan.html.

57 Dionne, "Is Buchanan Courting Bias?"

58 Applebome, "1992 Campaign."

Facing an incumbent president and without a scintilla of electoral experience himself, Buchanan nevertheless demonstrated surprising strength. In New Hampshire, he embarrassed Bush by taking 37 percent of the GOP primary vote.[59] The combination of recession and deindustrialization made the Granite State particularly fertile territory. When the campaign shifted to the economically robust Sunbelt, Buchanan maintained startling vigor. Taking one-third of the vote in Florida and Georgia, he captured a quarter of GOP ballots in Bush's home state of Texas. From California and Michigan to Connecticut and Colorado, he consistently took one-quarter to one-third of the Republican vote.[60] Revealing Bush's weakness and conservative schisms, Buchanan helped inspire Ross Perot's spirited third-party bid, a campaign that featured one paleoconservative bromide: opposition to NAFTA. In 1996, Buchanan ran another energetic race for the GOP nomination. In so doing, he demonstrated that paleoconservatives remained a vital, if minority, voice in the conservative ranks.

For paleoconservatives, George W. Bush's 2000 campaign and presidency marked a nadir. Running as a "compassionate conservative," Bush attempted a Clintonian triangulation on big government. Promising a muted welfare state might have played well with "soccer moms," but it remained anathema to paleocons. The post-9/11 Bush Doctrine offended them even more. Democracy promotion as an antidote to terrorism augured global interventionism on a scale that transcended Cold War levels. In many ways, Bush's domestic and foreign policies reflected the continued power of the neoconservatives within mainstream conservatism. Symbolized by Bill Kristol's *The Weekly Standard*, neocons and their intellectual progeny had effectively replaced Buckleyites and *The National Review* as the source of intellectual power on the right.

Adding insult to injury, Karl Rove, Bush's primary political adviser, devised an electoral strategy supporting mass immigration. Looking to William McKinley's 1896 election for inspiration, Rove sought the inclusion of Hispanic voters into the GOP coalition to create an enduring majority coalition. For paleoconservatives this was betrayal of the first order. To them, America represented an extension of Western civilization and was by definition a European creation. As such, Bush's policy of large-scale, non-Western immigration represented an existential threat. In a very real sense, immigration was to paleocons what anticommunism represented to the Buckleyites. It is the central organizing thesis of the creed.[61]

Looking to a neo-feudal future, paleocons seek to replicate the conditions in which the "Judeo-Christian tradition flourished."[62] To them, Christian belief is the anchor of morality. In an earlier era of weak governments and strong religious institutions,

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59 Greenfield, "Trump is Pat Buchanan."

60 Robin Toner, "Clinton Takes Florida Easily," *New York Times*, March 11, 1992.

61 Scotchie, *Revolt from the Heartland*, 63.

62 Woltermann, "What is Paleoconservatism?," 15.

the Christian virtue that eventually made democracy possible reigned. In their mind, homogeneous societies led by a natural aristocracy schooled in the Western canon inculcated the societal virtue in which "custom and comity," not government, provided order. Mass immigration was an invitation to instability and big government authoritarianism.[63] In addition to blaming the neocons for immigration apostasy, paleoconservatives also castigate libertarians for so greedily coveting cheap immigrant labor that they endorsed the policy.[64]

The return to an idealized "organic" past free from the necessity of big government is the first principle from which all paleoconservative policies flow. Opposed to the spiritually demeaning nature of crass materialism, paleoconservatives broke with libertarians and their support for uninhibited free market capitalism. To paleocons, free trade is not only an expression of neoliberalism run amok but it spawns disorder through deindustrialization and the rampant exchange of ideas and people. Finally, they ardently oppose a global foreign policy that seeks to export democracy and the American model. To them, American democracy is not replicable. It was made possible only by the "concrete particularity of American values, institutions, and ethnic-racial composition."[65] Democratic crusades demonstrate an ignorance of this reality.

Without intervening events, Bush and Rove might have very well built an enduring Republican majority. Indeed, in 2006, Bush proposed comprehensive immigration reform legislation. Intending to give illegal immigrants a path to citizenship and woo Hispanic voters, the president invoked Reagan's legacy and celebration of the immigration experience as central to the American ideal.[66] The Iraq War and Hurricane Katrina undermined Bush's political standing and a divided Republican Party killed the legislation. In 2008, the financial crash and Great Recession gave paleoconservatives the political opening they had long sought.

In the midst of the financial collapse, Bush's support for the $700 billion Troubled Assets Relief Program made many conservatives apoplectic. With approval ratings that bottomed out at 25 percent, Bush and establishment GOP foreign and domestic policies were in disrepute across the political right.[67] Indeed, the Tea Party aimed its venom at both Obama and "big government" conservatives. Adding to this was a changed media landscape. During the 1980s, neoconservative journals and Reagan's popularity kept paleocon dissent in check. The rise of talk radio in the 1990s, the internet in the early

63 Woltermann, 19.

64 Scotchie, *Revolt from the Heartland*, 73–74.

65 Drolet and Williams, "America First," 9.

66 "Bush's Speech on Immigration," *New York Times*, May 15, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/15/washington/15text-bush.html.

67 "Presidential Approval Ratings George W. Bush," *Gallup,* February 16, 2022, https://news.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx.

2000s, and social media during the Obama era created a fractured media environment that enabled new paleocon voices to emerge.

In 2002, a trio of paleocons—Buchanan, Taki Theodoracopulos, and Scott McConnell—launched *The American Conservative*. A response to Bush's "Freedom Agenda" and looming Iraq War, the magazine nevertheless had bigger aims than criticizing GOP foreign policy.[68] In addition to criticizing foreign adventurism, the magazine pushed a dogma of "self-containment" that opposed liberal immigration policies and globalized free trade. Taking direct aim at neoconservatives, whom Buchanan termed "right-wing impersonators," they sought to return conservatism to its paleo roots.[69]

In conjunction with additional opportunities to communicate ideas were the issues. In the 1990s, Pat Buchanan's warnings about global interventionism, immigration, and free trade garnered a quarter of primary votes in targeted states. By 2016, those topics had matured and gained greater saliency. The Iraq War and the seemingly endless nature of Bush's War on Terror had softened American support for an interventionist foreign policy. Though 42 percent of 2016 Republicans identified foreign policy as the nation's primary concern, the nature of their internationalism had evolved.[70] The paleocon indictment of global governance and the postwar liberal internationalist framework had gained traction. When 72 percent of 2016 Republicans expressed support for the use of "overwhelming force," they were implicitly rejecting limited wars, collective security treaties, and multilateral commitments of past decades.[71] In this way, "overwhelming force" entailed "get in, and get out," not democracy promotion and nation building. Trump's full-throated denunciations of the GOP establishment's foreign policy captured the mood of these grassroots conservatives. Rejecting global governance and hazy international commitments, Trump's "America-first" foreign policy was a return to the Old Right of the 1930s.

Trump's stance on illegal immigration was similarly an echo of Old Right roots and paleocon orthodoxy. The neoconservatives' heft and Reagan's embrace of the immigrant experience had muted conservative criticism of immigration policy. But circumstances had changed. By 2016, the number of illegal immigrants and foreign born in America made Buchanan's 1992 canard into a substantive policy concern. When Reagan's 1986

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68 Murray Polner, "Buchanan's Take-Off," *Columbia Journalism Review* 41, no. 5 (January–February 2003): 9.

69 T. A. Frank, "Welcome to the Golden Age of Conservative Magazines," *The Washington Post*, January 25, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/style/wp/2018/01/25/feature/why-conservative-magazines-are-more-important-than-ever/?noredirect=on.

70 Carroll Doherty and Samantha Smith, "5 Facts about Republicans and National Security," *Pew Research Center*, December 15, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/15/5-facts-about-republicans-and-national-security.

71 Doherty and Smith.

Immigration Reform and Control Act offered illegal immigrants a path to citizenship, only 6 percent of Americans were foreign born and four million illegal immigrants resided in the United State.[72] Thirty years later, the number of illegal immigrants had tripled to twelve million and the percentage of foreign-born Americans had skyrocketed to almost 14 percent of the total population.[73] In this context, historic conservative skepticism toward mass immigration returned to the mainstream. With Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, and Ted Cruz largely supporting immigration, Trump's condemnations gave him sole ownership of an ascendant issue.

Free trade was the final piece of the Trump-paleocon policy troika. In raw numbers, manufacturing jobs had peaked at nineteen million in 1979. But starting in the late 1970s, Rust Belt industry began shuttering plants at rates that pushed unemployment into double digits and the entire industrial Midwest into a sustained "regional depression."[74] By the 1990s vigorous economic growth temporarily revived American industry. But this was a short-lived revival. From 1999 to 2016, the nation lost 22 percent of its factories while the number of manufacturing jobs collapsed, falling from 17.2 to 11.5 million.[75]

Punctuating manufacturing's demise was the retail sector's ascent and replacement of industry as the nation's second largest sector of employment.[76] A sector rife with part-time work and low pay, retail's rise was part and parcel of a decades-long trend of stagnating wages for blue-collar workers. Adding to these economic doldrums were the economic and psychic shock waves emanating from the 2008 crash. This economic tsunami hit the white working class especially hard. The most gruesome and notable consequence of this was the spike in "deaths of despair." In a world of increasing life expectancy, America's white working class was the lone demographic across the globe to see a reverse. Dying early from suicide, drug addiction, alcohol abuse, and spiritual despair, members of the white working class were ripe for a demagogue.[77]

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72 "A Reagan Legacy: Amnesty for Illegal Immigrants," *All Things Considered*, NPR, July 4, 2010, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128303672; Abby Budiman, Christine Tamir, Lauren Mora, and Luis Noe-Bustamente, "Facts on U.S. Immigrants, 2018," *Pew Research Center*, August 20, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2019/06/03/facts-on-u-s-immigrants.

73 "Immigration Trends and the Immigration Debate," Bipartisan Policy Center (blog), August 14, 2017, https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/immigration-trends-and-the-immigration-debate/.

74 Steven Weisman, "Reagan's Campaign Advisers Say He Would Face Tough Race in '84," *New York Times*, September 18, 1983; Derek Thompson, "A World Without Work," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/07/world-without-work/395294/; Vaclav Smil, *Made in the USA: The Rise and Retreat of American Manufacturing* (Boston: MIT Press, 2013), 110.

75 Heather Long, "U.S. Has Lost 5 Million Manufacturing Jobs Since 2000," *CNN*, March 29, 2016, https://money.cnn.com/2016/03/29/news/economy/us-manufacturing-jobs/.

76 Smil, *Made in the USA*, 133.

77 David Berreby, "Deaths of Despair: Why Are So Many Americans without College Degrees Dy-

With downscale white voters an increasingly important piece of the GOP base, it is little wonder that free trade, long a Republican shibboleth, became in 2016 a hotly contested issue. Yet again, Trump, alone among all the major GOP hopefuls, occupied the protectionist lane.

From interventionism and free trade to immigration, Donald Trump had the paleoconservative lanes to himself. Riffing on Buchanan, Trump's 2016 thesis amounted to a j'accuse against bipartisan elites for betraying working-class Americans on this trio of issues. In a marked deviation from the Old Right, however, Trump promised to protect welfare state basics—at least for deserving "real Americans." Not coincidentally, a cadre of paleoconservative thinkers had already formulated an "ideological fusion" with the traditional left on the welfare state issues. According to them, the "us against them" bipartisan betrayal strategy depended upon creating group identity around common economic grievances. The Old Right's antipathy to the welfare state was supplanted by political realities. To achieve their primary political aims, paleoconservatives needed to coalesce culturally and economically populist working-class whites into their movement.[78]

In the primaries, Trump's geographic areas of strength neatly mirrored Buchanan's from 1992. Both demonstrated strength in the early and Super Tuesday primaries in the Northeast (New Hampshire and Massachusetts) and in the South (Georgia and South Carolina). Unlike Trump, Buchanan had only competed in selected contests. In this light, Buchanan's earning 22 percent of the primary vote against an incumbent president is that much more impressive. Competing everywhere, Trump earned approximately one-third of the votes in the early primary, Super Tuesday, and early March contests.[79] Political novices who possessed media savvy and espoused paleocon issues, Buchanan and Trump shared much.

Relying on paleoconservative themes and facing a divided field, Trump's early pluralities gave him the momentum to take the nomination. Winning pluralities until the April ACELA primaries,[80] he demonstrated consistent appeal to a significant minority of GOP voters. It was only after he established a significant lead that he won

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ing Prematurely?," *CQ Researcher*, January 27, 2023, https://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre2023012700.

78 Drolet and Williams, "America First," 19.

79 "2016 Presidential Republican Primary Election Results," Atlas of US Presidential Elections, David Leip (personal website), accessed April 15, 2022, https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?f=0&year=2016&elect=2; "Primary Season Concludes Without Much Drama," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1996*, 52nd ed., https://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/document.php?id=cqal96-841-24597-1091706#H2_3.

80 ACELA is the name for the Amtrack passenger train that serves the northeast corridor, which connects a series of cities stretching from Boston to Washington, DC. The ACELA Primary refers to the common primary date on which voters in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, Rhode Island, and Connecticut cast presidential primary ballots.

primary majorities. In the general election, Trump's 46.1 percent of the popular vote did exceed projections. Nate Silver, for instance, pegged Trump's vote at 44.9 percent. This was a small distinction with a huge difference. Clinton won the overall vote by three million ballots, but low Democratic turnout boosted Trump within striking distance of a political inside straight. Drawing just the right cards, he exceeded his national vote average by approximately two percentage points in Michigan (47.6 percent), Pennsylvania (48.8 percent), and Wisconsin (47.9 percent). In so doing, he eked out narrow wins in each and took the White House via the Electoral College.[81]

Paleocons, the Obama Coalition, and Dealignment

Trump cannily used paleoconservative bromides to win the nomination and presidency. But his candidacy led to further political dealignment, not a realignment. Indeed, the former president won due to his opponent's weakness not his strengths. This reality bodes poorly for his nascent GOP coalition. First, Clinton garnered 4.4 million fewer votes, or 3.5 percent fewer overall votes, than Barack Obama in 2012.[82] Most of these 4.4 million voters did not switch to Trump. The majority of these voters simply stayed home. Unfortunately for Clinton the most noticeable decline was in the African American vote. In Michigan, a state Clinton lost by 100,000 votes, 75,000 mostly black Detroiters stayed home. In Wisconsin, Trump replicated Mitt Romney's 2012 vote total. Unfortunately for Clinton, 230,000 fewer Badger State voters turned out. Trump got the Romney voters. Clinton could not woo enough Obama voters to vote. She lost Wisconsin by 30,000 ballots.[83]

Declines in voter turnout do not wholly explain Clinton's loss. A second rationale for Clinton's failure was working-class whites who voted for Trump. Nationally, 9 percent of 2012 Obama voters cast ballots for Trump. The overwhelmingly majority of these voters were working-class whites.[84] According to one analyst, almost one in four of Obama's 2012 white working-class supporters defected in 2016. They supported Mr. Trump or a third-party candidate.[85] Pennsylvania, a relatively competitive state

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81 Nate Silver, "The Real Story of 2016," *FiveThirtyEight,* January 19, 2017, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-real-story-of-2016/.

82 Philip Bump, "4.4 Million 2012 Obama Voters Stayed Home in 2016—More than One-Third of Them Black," *Washington Post*, March 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/03/12/4-4-million-2012-obama-voters-stayed-home-in-2016-more-than-a-third-of-them-black/.

83 Silver, "The Real Story of 2016"; Malia Jones, "How and Where Trump Won Wisconsin in 2016," *UW Applied Population Lab*, November 21, 2016, https://apl.wisc.edu/shared/tad/how-and-where-trump.

84 Bump, "4.4 Million."

85 Nate Cohn, "A 2016 Review: Turnout Wasn't the Driver for Clinton's Defeat," *New York Times*, March 28, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/28/upshot/a-2016-review-turnout-wasnt-the-driver-of-clintons-defeat.html.

that Democrats had held since 1988, was ground zero for this phenomenon. Clinton's 44,000 vote deficit there was powered by a weakness with the state's downscale white voters. In Pennsylvania, working-class white support for Trump and, to a lesser degree, depressed black turnout in Philadelphia spelled the difference.[86] Trump squeaked out an improbable victory by the thinnest of margins, a feat that was not likely to be repeated, as revealed by 2020.

Adding to the statistical improbability is the history that aided Trump. Since Andrew Jackson, no two-term Democratic president has passed the White House on to a Democratic successor. The diverse nature of the Democratic Party lends itself to factionalism. Saddled with this history, decades of political baggage, and a paucity of charisma, Clinton still took 48.2 percent of the vote because Trump was so personally noxious and his policies only appeal to a plurality of conservatives. Democrats should take heart: a weak candidate, saddled with a divided coalition and history, nevertheless won the overall vote count by three million votes.

Added to this is the divided and contentious nature of the paleoconservative world. Unused to wielding power, paleoconservative thought leaders fumble when trying to increase their ranks. During the Obama era, Paul Gottfried, a leading paleoconservative academic, coined the term "alt-right" as an exercise in growing his movement's ranks. Joining with the provocateur Richard Spencer, Gottfried promoted the alt-right as an alternative, hipper moniker for paleoconservatives and expand their ranks. Alas, this alliance was short-lived. Spencer's explicit embrace of white nationalism, eugenics, and an avowedly "racialist" ideology spurred a schism that splintered many paleocons from the alt-right.[87] The revolving door of staffers and advisors in the Trump White House was more than a reflection of the president's metronome of moods and quirks. Paleoconservatism is not a philosophy fitted for broad coalitions.

Weak with college-educated women, educated suburbanites, and millennials, Trump's Republican Party performed poorly in elections throughout his tenure. A series of competitive special elections in GOP territory sent shivers down Republican elites' spines. Following these was the 2018 midterm shellacking. On top of losses in the Congress, Republican control of governorships went from 33-16 to 26-24, and of

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86 Stephen Herzenberg, "Reflections on the Election and the White Working Class . . . and Some Links Worth Reading," *Keystone Research Center*, November 16, 2016, https://krc-pbpc.org/research_publication/reflections-on-the-election-and-the-white-working-class-and-some-links-worth-reading/; Laura Hughes, "Some Pennsylvania Democrats Regret Not Voting in 2016," *Washington Post*, August 24, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/some-pennsylvania-democrats-regret-not-voting-in-2016-they-say-theyll-be-sure-to-cast-a-ballot-in-2020/2019/08/23/e2d4f4c0-a1b0-11e9-b732-41a79c2551bf_story.html.

87 Seth Bartee, "Paul Gottfried and Paleoconservatism," in *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chap. 7; Matthew Sheffield, "A History of Hate: How the Alt-Right Became Racist," *Salon*, December 8, 2016, https://www.salon.com/2016/12/08/how-the-alt-right-became-racist-a-short-history-of-hate-part-1/.

state legislature chambers from 57-42 to 52-47—in other words, from a clear advantage to a near draw.[88] Trump's historically low approval ratings did not augur well for his reelection and a GOP majority in the Senate. Prognosticators pointed to a potential Electoral College repeat as the president's best hope. Electoral College or no, candidates who lose the majority vote are never in a position of political strength. Those down-ballot are surely aware of this stark reality. Indeed, if Democratic advantages with millennials, women, and minorities hold, the GOP might be destined for minority status.

The 2020 election demonstrated why Democrats should have kept the champagne in the cellar. Obama's 2008 and 2012 victories reveal the McGovern coalition's maturation. In 2012, Obama lost the white vote by the very same percentage, 20 points, that Walter Mondale did in 1984.[89] In 1984, however, white voters comprised nearly 90 percent of active voters. Twenty-eight years later, whites encompassed around 72 percent of those who voted. The result is that Mondale's 1984 landslide loss, 58.8 percent to 40.6 percent, became Obama's narrow popular win, 51.1 percent to 47.2 percent. The percentage of nonwhites and the young is a growing piece of the electorate. The ratio of older white voters is declining. Nevertheless, the 2016 election reveals the centrality of Democrats' winning a respectable percentage of the white working class. The linchpin of the New Deal coalition, working-class whites have been the central weakness of the McGovern coalition since its inception. Candidates who were Southern, Protestant, and white, Clinton and Carter, were able to win enough of the demographic for victory. Outside of Southern whites, Obama also performed well with this group. But Hillary Clinton's weakness with them along with soft black turnout proved the difference.

The 2020 electoral results offered even worse news for the Democrats. Despite their victory in the presidential contest, the party lost twelve House seats and only took control of the Senate because Trump was more interested in insurrection than winning two Georgia Senate seats. Deep dives into the data demonstrate white, black, *and* brown working-class voters shifting to the Republicans.[90] The 2022 midterms offered more of the same. To be sure, Democrats were delighted by the Red Wave's disintegration. But the GOP's disastrous midterm was dictated by extreme candidates not Biden's popularity. Where Republicans nominated extremists (Arizona, Michigan, and Pennsylvania), they lost. When the GOP nominated "moderate" Trumpists, Ron

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88 Aaron Blake, "3 Election Years Under Trump, 3 Decisive GOP Losses," *Washington Post,* November 6, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/11/06/election-years-under-trump-decisive-gop-losses/.

89 Chris Cillizza and Jon Cohen, "President Obama and the White Vote, No Problem," *Washington Post*, November 8, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2012/11/08/president-obama-and-the-white-vote-no-problem/.

90 Ezra Klein, "David Shor Is Telling Democrats What They Don't Want to Hear," *New York Times*, October 8, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/08/opinion/democrats-david-shor-education-polarization.html.

DeSantis and Brian Kemp, they won easily. Democrats possess a hammerlock over the popular vote for the presidency. But Trump's paleoconservative turn has given the GOP a decided advantage in the Electoral College and near parity in Congress. The shifting nature of the Republican and Democratic coalitions means neither party can coalesce an enduring majority.

The Reagan coalition crumbled over Iraq, the Great Recession, nativism, and the uneven benefits of a postindustrial, globalized economy. This enabled Trump to ride a paleoconservative wave to the nomination. The president's lawless behavior, loutish personal conduct, and refusal to take COVID-19 seriously are largely responsible for his 2020 defeat and the Republican Party's lackluster 2022 midterms. Untethered from the former president's personal foibles, many paleoconservative policies very well might enjoy significant popularity with the Republican rank and file and the larger electorate. But uncompromising opposition to immigration and the nativist rhetoric that accompanies it will doom conservatives with educated urbanites.

Meanwhile, the McGovern/Obama coalition is not destined to become a majority party with the consistent presidential landslides and enduring congressional margins that force the opposition to reconfigure. Reliance upon poor, minority, and youth voters makes consistent victory difficult. These demographic groups are simply not consistent voters. Democratic struggles for turnout in local, state, midterm, and special elections will continue. A weak majority party at the presidential level and an obstinate and inflexible congressional opposition will only create more gridlock, partisan divisions, and a toxic political environment.