



Episode 1,280: Trump, the Democrats, the Midterms, and the Future

Guest: Dan McCarthy

WOODS: Nice column in *The New York Times*, I don't know how you keep getting away with it, but you have that sophisticated air about you and that allows you to get away with saying outrageous things. I don't know, that's my theory, anyway. So you're trying to assess the significance of the midterms here, and I realize that I'm kind of a day late on this, but just the way and the schedule that I do for recording the podcast, there was no way for me to get anything out any sooner. And then I saw your column, and I thought, all right, here we go. I'm going to rope McCarthy in to help me out in talking about this. Everybody's got a theory as to whether the midterms represented a repudiation of Trump, a triumph of Trump, a purple wave, a purple ripple. What is your overall assessment of what it means?

MCCARTHY: Well, I think the whole metaphor of a wave is inappropriate and what we have here is instead a tide. The difference between a wave and a tide, of course, is that a tide is a regular phenomenon. It comes in, and it goes out. And that's what we've seen with this midterm election, because each of the last four presidents, starting with Bill Clinton, then also with George W. Bush and Barack Obama and now Donald Trump, we've seen the president lose control of the House of Representatives. And except for Bush, it happened to all of them during their first term. So this is now a sort of repeating phenomenon in American politics. And I don't think it speaks really to the particular strength or weakness of the presidents themselves that you see this phenomena. Instead, it's the degree of the phenomena, it's the size of the change that I think is most significant. And Donald Trump lost fewer seats in the House this year than Bill Clinton had lost in 1994 or than Barack Obama lost in 2010. So that's a pretty impressive result, especially considering that Donald Trump is meant to be some sort of historically abnormal, completely incompetent, completely shocking and extreme kind of president. In fact, voters seem to be pretty comfortable with him.

WOODS: Are there any particular races, whether in the House or the Senate, that might be some kind of bellwether? Or even if that's too over the top, nevertheless, were interesting races that it made sense that we should want to keep an eye on them and interesting in how they turned out?

MCCARTHY: Yeah, there were a number of interesting races. I think one thing that can encourage Trump supporters and Republicans right now is how well the party did in Florida and also in Ohio. But in Florida, you had two very tight races for Senate and for governor, both of which the Republicans prevailed in. And of course, Florida is a key battleground for presidential elections, so that really gives Donald Trump I think something he can rely on come the next election. And similarly, doing well in Ohio also is something that Republicans

should never take for granted. But with that in their favor, they are feeling pretty comfortable.

I think the elections in Pennsylvania and Michigan, which were two states that Donald Trump one in 2016 and that are going to be battlegrounds again in 2020, those elections went in favor for the Democrats this November. But I don't think that really tells us very much about what the 2020 race is going to look like. In Pennsylvania, the Republicans didn't really have an A-list candidate going up against the Democrats for the Senate and governorship. Lou Barletta, who was the Republican running against Bob Casey for US Senate from Pennsylvania, was someone who had been a pretty solid Republican congressman, you know, had a background as a mayor as well. But he really ran a very poor campaign for senate, and he just didn't have the kind of energy that one would expect from someone who is running on a kind of Trumpian, "America first" platform. So it seems to me that there are very local explanations for some of the Republican failures this year, whereas it seems to me there's more of a cultural explanation for the success of the Republicans in Florida. I think that the state really is tilting in their direction. Having said that, Florida did just pass a constitutional amendment to reenfranchise felons, so that may be a factor in 2020, that you'll have a different electorate in Florida than you have right now.

WOODS: Right. Now, in Florida, we had a very close — well, a couple of close races. For governor, first of all, and then also for Senate. And Rick Scott apparently prevailed there, the Republican. The thing is that I've heard it said that Rick Scott winning in Florida in the US Senate, well, at the same time, you have a much clearer Trump ally in Dave Brat in Virginia, who lost in his House race, and does the addition of a Rick Scott make up for the loss of a known quantity like a Dave Brat?

MCCARTHY: Well, as far as Florida is concerned, I would say that the DeSantis race is perhaps the better analog to Donald Trump. So DeSantis was running for governor in Florida, and you know, he campaigned in a style that was a bit more like Donald Trump than what you would see from someone like Rick Scott. And the fact that DeSantis beat Gillum in the governor's race in Florida suggests that Trump has a good benchmark in terms of 2020. He can do at least as well as the DeSantis did and probably a lot better. And in fact, Trump came into Florida and campaigned very hard for DeSantis, so this really was a kind of proxy fight for 2020 and what we're going to see in the Sunshine State that year.

As far as Dave Brat goes, I have to say, I'd heard before the election, you know, in the weeks leading up to it from several sources that were very friendly to Dave Brat, but who said that Dave Brat made exactly the same mistake that his predecessor, Eric Cantor, had made several years ago. Eric Cantor was, you know, a kind of D.C.-focused, K Street Republican. He neglected his district, and he got voted out. Now, Dave Brat is not a K Street Republican. As you said, he's actually a pretty good ally for President Trump. He's a pretty good ally for the rather more serious kinds of libertarians in the House. But Dave Brat also, from what I heard, did not go home to his district enough. He didn't feel like he had sort of settled into his district enough. He was much more of a kind of, in some ways, a philosopher politician, or perhaps a critic would say a D.C. politician, but he just drifted away from his district. And as a result, he lost. It's a much more combative and competitive district than any politician can take for granted.

WOODS: You said something about demographics, and nobody is supposed to say that there are some groups that vote particular ways and other groups vote other ways, even though all

you have to do is look at the numbers. You know, it's like it's racist to point this out, even though everybody knows that's what happens. So in Florida, I was looking at some of the numbers about men versus women and Hispanics versus non-Hispanics, and Hispanics were much, much more likely to vote Democrat. And some people say, well, that's because they're scared off by the Republicans' anti-immigration rhetoric. But I don't think that's really true, because even very, very pro-immigration Republicans have struggled with Hispanic voters. So given how close these races were, maybe it's just a matter of time, as the numbers change, before you will be able to get what you want in Florida. You will be able to get that governor who wants to raise taxes, who wants to bring all the bad New England policies that have hurt those states and bring them down to Florida and implement them there. You may get your wish, eventually. So that's a factor.

MCCARTHY: Well, one of the things in particular that's influenced Florida is that you've had a wave of migration, internal American migration, in fact, coming from Puerto Rico, that as Puerto Rico, not just has suffered from hurricanes, but also has had a financial crisis that's been going on for years now, you've had waves of economic refugees, basically, coming from Puerto Rico, which is an American territory, to Florida. And that's not only changed the sort of ethnic demographics, but actually changes the class demographics, as well. That introduces a poorer, you know, sort of people who can be sort of attracted by Democratic messages.

I mean, the demographic question is something I think Republicans have to get their minds around, but it's also something the Democrats can't really just sort of lie back and think is going to always benefit them. You can look at a country as diverse as Brazil, for example, and what's just happened in the Brazilian election? Well, you've had actually a very right-wing candidate, Bolsonaro, get elected. You can look at a country like India, which is one of the most diverse countries on the planet, in terms of its sort of ethnic splits, in terms of its religious divisions, in terms of all sorts of things. And India, too, has a very sort of nationalist government. Multiculturalism isn't always going to play in the Democrats' favor, I think, and they're going to be surprised by that.

And you saw a little bit of this I think during the Kavanaugh hearings and the Kavanaugh sort of protests as he was about to be confirmed to the Supreme Court, that really you had a lot of white liberals who got very interested in this Kavanaugh brouhaha and who went out and protested, but even in Washington, D.C., which is a majority black city and a majority Democratic city by an even larger margin, you didn't see a lot of nonwhite Democrats come out and start protesting the Kavanaugh hearing.

So Republicans do have a problem. The demographics are something that should worry them. But I think Democrats also have a problem that they haven't really grappled with. And that if you can find a way, for example, to make economic nationalism appealing to nonwhites, you could have a really big realignment happen, kind of like how Donald Trump was able to go after industrial voters in the Midwest in 2016. These were voters that Republicans had written off since Ronald Reagan, but in fact, when they heard the right message, they turned very quickly.

WOODS: The other demographic issue to talk about is age. Now, one reason that Republicans have been able to get away with not really connecting as well with the young is that, no matter how many get-out-the-vote drives you have for the young, they just don't show up, at least not in the numbers that older folks do. So Republicans have been able to hold that off.

But it seems like quite a significant — I haven't seen the numbers, but just culturally, it seems like there's a huge gap there. But on the other hand, maybe it's the case that, as you get older, and you see that the world is slightly more complicated than, "I want something, so let's pass a lot of give it to me," that maybe the world doesn't work that way, maybe you're more likely to become a Republican, and then it kind of solves the problem. So now you become somebody who is older and therefore more likely to vote, and now you're more likely to be Republican. Maybe the problem solves itself. I don't know. What do you think, if anything, the Republicans need to do with regard to the youth?

MCCARTHY: Yeah, I wish I had a magic bullet for that. You know, a part of it is not just youth by itself, but it's the indoctrination and the way our educational system is currently working. In fact, you'll see that one of the clearest distinguishing marks now between Trump supporters and Trump opponents or between Republicans and Democrats tends to be education. If you look at people who only have a high school education, whether they're men or women, and even across different demographics sometimes, you'll find that they have a stronger tendency to vote for Republicans, and especially a stronger tendency to vote for someone like Donald Trump. By contrast, the more educated you are, supposedly, if you have a college degree, if you have an advanced degree, those things are indicators that you are more likely to vote Democratic and more likely to support basically what Donald Trump would call probably globalism.

So this is one of the major fault lines in our politics in the years to come here. It's unlikely that people are going to stop going to college. It's unlikely that the colleges are going to stop being ideologically left-wing centers of indoctrination as much as learning, so it's hard to see what will happen here. But I suspect reality tends to reassert itself. That's one of the things that the communists kind of learned to their chagrin, is that you can have these experiments against reality for some time, you can have a fake economy, you can have fake legitimacy in your elections and so forth. But ultimately, that falsehood, that sense of disconnection from reality comes crashing down. And I suspect what will happen is that, even though you will see some gains for the left from some of the miseducation, in the long run, the education that real life itself provides is going to reassert itself and change things back

WOODS: Well, Dan, as we're recording this, we're reading that Jeff Sessions submitted his resignation to Trump and there's now an interim figure holding that office and then they will appoint somebody else. What do you think it is exactly — and I suppose you probably don't need a crystal ball here. But what is Trump looking for in an attorney general? I don't understand, when it comes to Sessions, what he thought he was going to get with Sessions. I think Sessions pretty much did what I would have predicted Sessions would do. So what does Trump want here?

MCCARTHY: Well, I agree with you there. I think that Donald Trump is simply frustrated that a fabricated investigation of imaginary Russia connections based on opposition research — right, it was commissioned by the Democrats for the 2016 election and the way got this sort of mercenary ex-spy to come up with these very dubious stories about Trump connections to Russia, and, you know, things involving hookers, and hotels and Moscow and so forth. I think Donald Trump is just so angry about all of that, that he really wants his Justice Department to be able to make that whole thing go away. And unfortunately, I mean, just the way the system works, you can't snap your fingers and just vanish this stuff. And if you do act the way the Donald Trump would like an attorney general like Jeff Sessions to have acted, chances are it actually only makes the problem worse.

And in fact, I think it was a mistake for Donald Trump to fire Comey when he did. Comey, the head of the FBI, should have been fired right away, right from the beginning of the administration. But by firing him in what seemed to be a context involving the Russia investigation, Donald Trump kind of made it easy for his opponents to go out there and start an independent investigatory campaign with Robert Mueller. So I don't know that there's any attorney general who can live up to the expectations that Donald Trump might have for putting an end to this investigation. And in some ways, as bad as the investigation might be, as much of a nuisance and distraction as it might be, fighting against it so hard is actually going to make things kind of worse. So I think that this is an area where Donald Trump needs a bit more patience than he's so far been willing to exhibit.

WOODS: It seems like every presidential election cycle, we start getting into politics a little bit earlier and earlier each time. When in 2019 can we expect to see Democrats starting to announce their campaigns?

MCCARTHY: They'll start unofficially campaigning, as they have been already to some degree, to a much greater extent basically right now. And already you're seeing a little bit of Beto O'Rourke buzz coming out of his defeat in Texas. I think that is significant, by the way. O'Rourke, even though he was beaten by Ted Cruz, he actually came pretty close, and while I think he's not a very plausible candidate for 2020, I can see why the buzz has developed and why it seems like, if someone like him can do fairly well in Texas, then in other sort of states that are less Republican than Texas is, you would think that someone like O'Rourke might actually be a very sort of powerful contender. Now, for a variety reasons, I think O'Rourke is inexperienced, I think he's a little bit flaky, all those things are going to cut against him. And I think he'll also have trouble with the left wing of the Democratic Party. But certainly he is someone who's very ambitious, and he has a fan club that's going to be eager to promote it.

WOODS: There's a lot of chatter about who candidates will be, and it sounds like it's going to be like the last Republican go around, where you had 16 candidates or whatever it was, because there are so many who could potentially throw their hats into the ring. I did read an article recently where some former top people for Bernie Sanders are kind of looking around to other places, thinking that maybe it's time for him to bequeath his legacy to somebody and not himself do it. But it's quite possible that he could. There have been rumors about Hillary and then other people indignantly deny these. Joe Biden is more plausible, as is Michael Bloomberg, given some noise we've heard from him. And given how much money he has, he could stay in that election as long as he likes. Which ones of these names do you think — I mean, I know you mentioned O'Rourke, but what do you think of the ones who will have the staying power, and secondly, that would be the biggest threat to Trump?

MCCARTHY: Well, I think most of the people you've named are not very serious prospects this time. I think Hillary Clinton had her shot and she blew it. I don't see the Democrats deciding they want to lose with her again.

WOODS: Right, me either. That's why I just cannot get over all these articles where they're trying to pick up on a hint here and there in something she said. I just can't believe — I feel like there would be a revolt among some Democrats. I mean, of course they hate Trump, so they would probably vote for anybody, but still in the primary season, I feel like there'd be a revolt.

MCCARTHY: Oh, there absolutely would be. And, you know, if she were somehow to win the Democratic nomination, I don't think Democrats can reasonably expect her to be able to beat Donald Trump. I think it would be — it's just, I think, a very unlikely scenario. As is, you know, sort of the idea of resuscitating the political career of John Kerry, which a few people have suggested. That's also not going to happen. I think Michael Bloomberg is someone who always likes to talk about the idea of running for president. I don't think he could get the Democratic nomination. I don't think they would consider him left-wing enough. And if he ran as an Independent, he would actually siphon votes away from the Democratic candidate, and make it even more likely that Donald Trump would win. So if he runs, that may actually be a great benefit to Trump.

As far as which Democrats do have a pretty good shot of getting the nomination, I think there are really sort of two or three categories. In one category, you have people like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who are perceived as being economically left-wing, but who may not excite sort of the minority elements of the Democratic political coalition. They don't have the identity politics appeal that someone like Barack Obama had in 2008. Now, if you put together identity politics plus left-wing economics, I think you actually have a candidate that the Democrats would be very excited about and very eager to have. There's no one who combines those two worlds. So it seems to me that, you know, between Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, Sanders is probably the one with the more intense, sort of real support within the Democratic party. I think Warren is a candidate that is often talked up as someone who should be a plausible Democrat, but really isn't. I think that there are some Democrats, some people on the left who would look skeptically at her foreign policy, for example, who would even look skeptically at some of her economic policies. You know, she's a former Harvard professor. She lied about her ethnic background. I think she's just kind of a silly candidate.

WOODS: Yeah, in fact, can I just jump in here for a second? Because I think if the conventional wisdom about this really is true, that that whole question of her ancestry really did blow up in her face, the media tried to cover for her for the first 24 hours or so. You saw all these favorable headlines. And then all of a sudden, they realized, no, this boat is too leaky, even for us, so they really started to say, "Boy, this was a big mistake." The key thing — if I were a Democratic strategist, the key thing for me is that it showed that going toe to toe with Trump, she is just made to look like a fool. And if this were to go on, month after month after month, he makes her look like a fool, this is not going to end well.

MCCARTHY: That's exactly right. And if you think about this midterm election, you know, if the Democrats took the House, the Democrats can point to pretty good numbers in terms of the, you know, meaningless but symbolic popular vote for the Senate and for the House. And they can look at these things and say, okay, this means that we're going to be in pretty good shape for 2020. But the thing is, in a midterm election for Congress and for state-level offices, it's very easy to run against a president in the abstract, and that's one reason why I think we see a kind of tide instead of a wave of the House changing hands under each of the last four presidents. It's very easy to run against a president who's identified with a particular ideological viewpoint in the abstract. It gets a lot harder when you have to actually run against that person, concretely, and you have to field a candidate of your own with real human weaknesses and really ideological weaknesses, as well, in competition against the president that you were able to successfully campaign against in congressional elections.

So yeah, Elizabeth Warren is clearly not someone who's cut out for battle with Donald Trump. I think Bernie Sanders actually in a weird way might be. Sanders, like Ron Paul is sort of so

focused. He knows his own school of thought, he knows his own philosophy so strongly, and he's so dedicated to it that I think he would actually be able to have the thick skin necessary to take on Donald Trump. So I think Sanders, if he could somehow get the Democratic nomination — which I think is unlikely, because moderates and some of the identity politics people will be against him. But if he could actually get the nomination, I think he'd be a surprisingly formidable candidate in November.

Now, on the other side of the Democratic Party, you have people who seem like they ought to be sort of exciting for purposes of identity politics. You have Kamala Harris, for example, and you have Cory Booker from New Jersey. But both of them, I think, have liabilities when it comes to the economic left, because both of them are seen as being very pro-corporate, pro-business, sort of pro-Wall Street Democrats. And I also think that a guy from New Jersey, a woman from California, they might have some difficulty appealing to Michigan; they might have some difficulty appealing to the swing states that are going to matter in 2020. So it seems to me that wing of the party, just like the economically left-wing side of the party, has some intrinsic problems that are going to be very difficult to overcome in 2020.

WOODS: Let me ask you one more thing about Trump's temperament here, because that's something that's also been raised in some analyses of the midterms. Because they say the midterms are a referendum on Trump and his first two years, but you can't separate Trump and his accomplishments from and Trump's identity and who he is and his personality and his Twitter account and all that. And there are a lot of people out there who might be able to be talked into some of his policies on paper. If they were enacted by Mitt Romney or something, they would be more or less willing to go along with them. But some of these folks are professionals, and they feel like, in professional circles, they can't get away with saying, "I support Donald Trump," because people will say, "What are you, some kind of a — you have no manners?" They just feel like there's so much baggage because of his temperament, it does turn some people off. But at the same time, as soon as you start talking that way, you're reminded that that temperament brought him into the White House. And so I get that. I'm not saying he's got to shut down his Twitter account. I do think that that had a good deal to do with why he won. But if he wants to build on that, I don't know, I mean, does he tone it down a bit? He definitely rallies his base, but I don't know. What are your thoughts about that?

MCCARTHY: No, I don't think he'll tone it down. I did think after he won in 2016 that he might then have sort of changed the way he speaks and that he might have tried to unify the country a little bit. And then he would have been in a position to do so, because his Republican opponents had been crushed, and the Democrats would have been totally wrong-footed by Donald Trump who suddenly sounded conciliatory and suddenly sounded a bit more like a kind of Ronald Reagan optimist instead of a sort of almost Pat=Buchanan-style sort of populist with a pitchfork. And Trump didn't do that.

And I'm not entirely sure that Trump was incorrect with the stance he took. I think he was right to see — and, in fact, has proved to be even more correct over time — that there were sort of what we call the deep state, there were elements of kind of elite media opinion that were so fundamentally opposed to President Trump, that he had to be willing to sort of attack them head on, or else he just would have been steamrolled. But you're right. I mean, there's an advantage to him in being as combative as he is, but there's also a disadvantage, and it's impossible to separate sort of the good part of that from the bad part. And so there's sort of a judgment call to be made, both on the part of voters and on the part of the president himself. Where does the sort of balance of virtue lie? Does it lie in being combative,

even if that means that you're somewhat rude and that people are turned off by that? Or does it lie in being more civil, perhaps, but then also at the risk of not confronting really dedicated enemies the way that they really ought to be confronted?

WOODS: Do you think — I know this involves some prognostication here, but do you think the Democrats are going to move forward with anything like impeachment?

MCCARTHY: No, I don't. And, in fact, I think the Democrats are kind of facing some difficulties here. First of all, obviously impeachment would have very little chance of succeeding in convicting and removing President Trump because the Senate is in Republican hands. And even if the Democrats had somehow won the Senate by a very thin margin, remember, you have to have a supermajority in order to convict and remove the president. So, certainly, impeachment cannot succeed.

Now, the idea of trying to frame articles of impeachment and trying to start some sort of quixotic campaign to impeach Trump, well, you saw a little bit of sort of desultory Republican efforts to impeach Obama. You saw a lot of talk about it during the Clinton years, and none of that amounted to much. So you might see some discussion. You might see some congressional committees toying with the idea of impeachment, but it's all going to be for show. There's not going to be any real effort.

Now, the Democrats I think even have a problem in terms of some of the congressional hearings they can hold to look into, for example, President Trump's tax returns or looking into various aspects of the administration, because I think the American people actually have a very limited patience for such sort of congressional tomfoolery. You saw that the whole Benghazi thing that Republicans whipped up against Hillary Clinton really didn't go very far. It was good for the Republican base, but nobody who voted against Hillary Clinton in 2016, it seems to me, did so simply because of the Benghazi hearings and things like that. It seems to me that if the Democrats hold incessant hearings into every minute business transaction or administrative sort of question that the Trump officials handle, that the American people could get very sick very quickly of Congress's behavior.

Finally, I should just note, remember, as controversial as Donald Trump might be — his popularity ratings may be in the low 40s — but you can always, always count on one institution having far lower public approval ratings than the president, and that's Congress. Congress routinely has barely double-digit or sometimes single-digit approval ratings from most Americans. So it seems to me, in a battle between a Democratic Congress and the President Trump, it's the Democrats in Congress who are going to be the unpopular ones.

WOODS: Dan, give us a quick — I always ask you to do this, but it couldn't hurt each time. Tell us something about *Modern Age* and how people can read it and anything interesting coming up there.

MCCARTHY: Well, I'm delighted to say that the Fall 2018 issue of *Modern Age* has just been published. It includes a long essay that I wrote on Samuel Huntington and the clash of civilizations, and it kind of looks at populism and nationalism and how those things relate to Huntington's thesis. So I think listeners of the podcast will find that very interesting, indeed. We have other great material in the issue, including Peter Hitchens writing about the British philosopher John Gray's new book on *Seven Types of Atheism*. And we just have a wealth of phenomenal material. You can subscribe to *Modern Age* by going to ISI.org, which is the

publisher of *Modern Age*. You can also look at *Modern Age* articles online and also find a way to subscribe at the URL ModernAgeJournal.com.

WOODS: All right, I'll link to that at TomWoods.com/1280, and I'll also link to your *New York Times* column. I just — I'm going to have to get used to saying things like that, Dan [laughing].

MCCARTHY: [laughing]

WOODS: It just seems foul in my mouth to say things like that, but I'll definitely link to it, because people should take a look at what you're writing, and I always find it interesting. And when you sent that column out to a select group of friends, as soon as I saw the subject line, I thought: we're getting down on the show. So I appreciate it.

MCCARTHY: Excellent. Well, I really appreciate that. And the link is helpful, too, I think. You know, I've never inquired about my traffic numbers whenever I write there, but I'm sure that the more traffic it gets, the more helpful that is for future endeavors.

WOODS: Right, so help Dan McCarthy by clicking on that link, okay, and then you can leave and go read some other publication. Thanks a lot, Dan. I appreciate it.

MCCARTHY: Thanks, Tom.