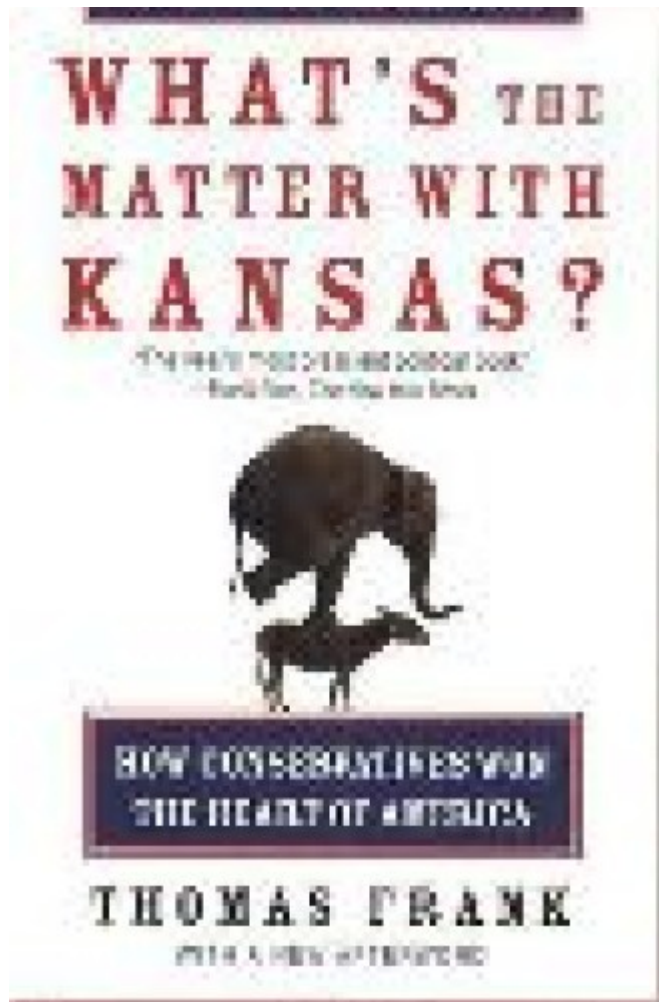


Fear factor

By [Raymond De Vries](#) in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

In Review



What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America

Thomas Frank
Henry Holt

Writing months before the 2004 presidential election, Thomas Frank predicted that many members of the working and middle classes would vote on issues of culture, not economics. Being correct on this point won't bring satisfaction to Frank, who begins and ends *What's the Matter with Kansas?* by puzzling over conservatives' ability to generate cultural anger and to use that anger to persuade the victims of economic change to vote against their economic interests. Frank sees this new style of conservatism as the "Great Backlash," a movement that mobilizes voters by arousing public outrage over everything from school busing to unchristian art to the teaching of evolution.

Frank's home state is his case in point; he uses his recollections of growing up in Kansas, interviews with key players, and archival research to look for clues that might explain the demise of moderate Republicanism and the rise of the new conservatism. The choice of Kansas is apt. He shows the transmogrification of populism from the abolitionist movement to the radical left farmers' movements of the early 1900s to the contemporary conservatism of those who disdain the "latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving liberal elites."

Frank notes that although today's Kansas populists proudly trace their roots to the free-soilers of the 1850s, they have more in common with the pro-slavery "border ruffians" who temporarily displaced the abolitionists in 1855. In a kind of precursor to contemporary talk radio, the border ruffians accused the abolitionists of being effete, East Coast, college-educated liberals intent on destroying the good old, simple way of life of grassroots Kansans.

Frank claims that the new conservatives—"the Con Men"—have cornered the market on this same aw-shucks, down-home demagoguery and are using it to advance the interests not of the folks who vote for them, but of the true American elite: the capitalist class whose only value is money. "The leaders of the backlash may talk Christ, but they walk corporate. Values may 'matter most' to voters, but they always take a back seat to the needs of money once the elections are won."

That the Con Men never succeed in changing culture does not matter to these voters; in fact, this continued failure fuels alienation, ensuring that once-reliable Democrats will continue to vote against their own economic interests. In Frank's words: "The trick never ages, the illusion never wears off": *vote* to stop abortion, *receive* a rollback in capital gains taxes; *vote* for a constitutional amendment

banning gay marriage, *receive* Social Security privatization.

People on the right are no fans of Frank—George Will accuses him of “fevered” and “delusional” thinking—but in these postinaugural days at least some members of the president’s base seem to be catching on to the political sleights of hand he describes. On January 25, the *New York Times* published the contents of a letter sent to Karl Rove by a who’s who of conservative Christianity, including James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, Paul Weyrich, the Family Research Council and the Southern Baptist Convention. Frustrated by the president’s comments to the *Washington Post* that “nothing will happen” on the constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, and knowing how much the campaign to privatize Social Security means to him, they ask Rove whether the president is “prepared to spend significant political capital on privatization but reluctant to devote the same energy to preserving traditional marriage.” “If so,” they warn, “it would create outrage with countless voters who stood with him a few weeks ago.”

As if reading from Frank’s book, the writers remind Rove that many of the president’s supporters are drawn from the working and middle classes, constituencies that had long been loyal to the Democrats because of programs like Social Security, but had crossed over to the Republican Party because of its conservative stand on cultural issues: “When the administration adopts a defeatist attitude on an issue that is at the top of our agenda, it becomes impossible for us to unite our movement on an issue such as Social Security privatization where there are already deep misgivings.”

If there is a weakness in Frank’s book, it is that he fails to explain why voters are susceptible to this strategy. For a few weeks in November the story was all about the 22 percent of voters who listed “moral values” as the deciding factor in their choice for president. Three months later other explanations of the outcome emerged. In his analysis of how Bush “really won,” Mark Danner (*New York Review of Books*, January 13) rejects the notion that “values” drove voters to the right and to Bush. Instead, he credits the Bush campaign’s uncanny ability to create and exploit people’s fear of terrorism and their desire for security.

Values? Fear? To understand the current state of the electorate we need to recall Max Weber’s critique of the notion that economic interests are the sole engine of societal power. According to Weber, power is not just about money; status and prestige play an equally important role in politics. In his classic work *Symbolic*

Crusade, Joseph Gusfield uses Weber's idea to explain an earlier expression of conservative populism, the temperance movement. Gusfield sees that movement as an example of "status politics": its goal was not to put an end to drinking, but to assert the preeminence of the Protestant way of life in the face of the rapid transformation of society by waves of (wine-swilling) immigrants from Catholic Europe. In much the same way, Bush supporters in 2004 voted to protect their way of life from the threats of the 21st century: terrorists, yes, but also gays, evolutionists, and those who believe abortion should be legal. Today's conservatives are voting primarily to protect not their means of making a living but the meaning of their lives.

Given the president's public commitment to the hope of the gospel, it is odd to hear him so often preaching fear and using that fear to pit people against each other. Those who seek a society in which justice and love prevail need to understand how public outrage is stirred up, manipulated and used to serve the ends of power. Frank's highly readable (and highly partisan) exploration of that process provides a starting point for that understanding.