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*A native Kansan goes home to figure out how the Republicans stole  
Middle America from the Democrats and ends up writing  
the must-read book of this political season.*

BY STEVE GREENLEE  
*Boston Globe*

It is the question that frustrates liberals most: Why do people who aren't wealthy vote Republican?

If the Democrats want to have any chance of reclaiming the White House or either house of Congress, a new book says, they must first understand why the people who once formed the backbone of their party — lower- and middle-class working folks in the heartland — have abandoned them.

Disenfranchised Middle Americans have flocked to the Republicans, who were once known as the party of the privileged but have gradually grown to identify more with farmers, NASCAR fans, veterans and plenty of other people who want government off their backs and some vague notion of integrity restored to power. Whether Republican leaders are serving their interests is up for debate, but what is clear is the economic policies of the Republicans skew in favor of the wealthy.

The idea that most people who vote Republican are voting against their own economic interests forms the core of Thomas Frank's revealing and startling book, "What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America."

What he's after is the why, and he goes back to the state where he grew up for answers.

It's a searing piece of work, yet Frank can't be accused of caricaturing Republican voters. He says upfront that to characterize conservatives as

gun-toting, Bible-thumping racists not only misses the point but is flat-out wrong.

Instead, he lays the blame essentially in two places: the Republican Party, which has exploited moral issues (abortion, indecency, gay marriage) to advance its policies of cutting taxes on the wealthy and deregulating business; and the Democratic Party, which has watered down its only selling point — its economic policies — and allowed Republicans to win over heartland voters on the moral issues.

"Old-fashioned values may count when conservatives appear on the stump, but once conservatives are in office, the only old-fashioned situations they care to revive is an economic regimen of low wages and lax regulations," he writes.

Frank calls the Republicans' ability to win over formerly Democratic voters "the Great Backlash," and his dissection of how it all happened makes this book one of the most important political writings in years.

Ultimately, he paints the backlash as a monumental exercise in anti-intellectualism: Republicans, he argues, have been able to illogically portray Democrats as arrogant, Starbucks-sipping Harvard grads who want government to intrude in the lives of ordinary citizens.

In doing so, he says, the Republicans are being disingenuous and hypocritical.

"Republicans today rail against obnoxious Ivy League stuffed shirts even when they themselves graduated from those same institutions," he writes.

"Republicans grumble about interfering professions when they are themselves lawyers or

doctors or MBAs. The Republicans today are the party of anti-intellectualism, or rough frontier contempt for sophisticated ideas and pantywaist book-learning."

Why the Democrats have not been able to successfully counter this campaign is a mystery, but Frank suggests the party has moved so much to the middle — compromised so much — that voters can't distinguish between the parties, except when it comes to issues of "values," and there the Republicans win every time.

Frank introduces the reader to a host of Kansans to illustrate his points, and though some of these portraits are useful in understanding the national picture, others force him off-track. (He spends too much time with an inconsequential religious fanatic who considers himself the real pope, and as a result, the chapter is apropos of nothing.)

But he soon returns to his point: that somehow Middle America gets outraged about disappearing jobs and wealth distribution and then elects the very people who will only make matters worse.

"The deafness of the conservative rank and file to the patent insincerity of their leaders is one of the true cultural marvels of the Great Backlash," he writes.

Forget Bill Clinton's autobiography. "What's the Matter With Kansas?" is the must-read of this election season.

Republican voters need to read it to better understand their party and their leaders. Democrats need to read it to better understand their opponents and their conundrum.

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KANSAS?



HOW CONSERVATIVES WON  
THE HEART OF AMERICA

THOMAS FRANK

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