



When Red States Get Blue

What's the matter with Connecticut?

By [Patrick J. Deneen](#)

In *What's the Matter With Kansas?* Thomas Frank sought to explain why blue-collar voters abandoned their longtime home in the Democratic Party of Franklin Roosevelt for the Republican Party of Ronald Reagan. Frank complained that they had been deceived into voting their class resentments rather than their economic interests. Relying on “wedge” social issues such as abortion, welfare, and guns, Republicans persuaded heartland voters that the Democratic Party was run by liberals who detested family values and regarded the people who held them as backward. Voters in the poorest parts of America thus came to support a GOP whose words evoked traditional morality but whose policies mainly benefited Wall Street.

Whatever the virtues of Frank's explanation, there can be no doubt that this shift has occurred. But an equally dramatic change has come to the Blue States of the Northeast, once Republican bastions turned solidly Democratic. Highly educated and affluent voters whose parents or grandparents were stalwarts of the GOP now seemingly vote against their own economic interests by favoring Democratic candidates.

Connecticut—nicknamed the “land of steady habits” in recognition of its erstwhile traditionalism—is, per capita, the richest state in the nation. The bedroom of the country's financier class, it is home to some of our wealthiest towns and most prestigious blue-blood educational institutions, including Yale, Choate, and Loomis Chaffee.

Between 1860 and 1988, Connecticut voted for Republicans in 22 out of 29 presidential elections, with the seven exceptions occurring mostly during the Depression and the Civil Rights era. But since 1992, Connecticut has consistently voted for Democratic presidential candidates. Ideology appears to have surpassed economic interest among these voters, who now embrace the prospect of higher taxes and more government regulation of the financial activities by which so many Nutmegers collect enviable bonuses.

If Thomas Frank could argue that Kansans are caught in the throes of false consciousness thanks to Republican electoral machinations, wouldn't it stand to reason that Connecticut barons should be pulling those strings? Frank's analysis would seemingly require that

Connecticut vote Republican. Since the opposite is true, a more plausible argument is needed to explain what's the matter with Kansas—and Connecticut as well.

The best guide on this subject remains the work of historian Christopher Lasch, especially his exploration of the rise of the meritocracy in the title essay of his posthumous book, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. There Lasch excoriated the new meritocratic class, a group that had achieved success through the upward-mobility of education and career and that increasingly came to be defined by rootlessness, cosmopolitanism, a thin sense of obligation, and diminishing reservoirs of patriotism. The meritocracy had all but replaced the old aristocracy of the sort embodied by a Connecticut man like Prescott Bush, on the one hand substituting talent for privilege, but on the other hand replacing older forms of *noblesse oblige* with self-congratulation. Lasch argued that this new class “retained many of the vices of aristocracy without its virtues,” lacking the sense of “reciprocal obligation” that had been a feature of the old order.

Toward the end of the 20th century, this class of “meritocrats” began to concentrate. This was a key finding of a series of books published in the early 2000s by Richard Florida. If the old aristocracy was dispersed throughout the country—residing in the nicer parts in any given city or town—the new meritocracy, called by Florida the “Creative Class,” fled smaller towns and settled in a relative few attractive urban settings. These cities, according to Florida, cater to the Creative Class with liberal lifestyle offerings such as a “teeming blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros, where it is hard to draw the line between participant and observer, or between creativity and its creators.”

Florida celebrates the accomplishments of this class, and more, the dispositions that draw them together and define the sorts of places where they gather. In particular, he notes three “T’s” that characterize “Creative Cities”: talent, toleration, and technology. Members of the Creative Class are drawn to such locations as “BosWash,” Silicon Valley, Seattle, and Austin for the high density of other members of the Creative Class; for their toleration of lifestyle choices including (and perhaps especially) sexual openness; and their highly developed technological infrastructures, as well as industries that create or employ cutting-edge technologies. Needless to say, these concentrated centers of meritocrats are drawn to progressive political programs, often providing key electoral and financial support for liberal candidates in Blue States.

Not until 2009, with the publication of Bill Bishop’s *The Big Sort*, did data become available that more adequately reveals what's the matter with Connecticut. What Bishop found, in combining data used by Richard Florida with the kind of data that had been employed by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*, was that a key difference between “Creative Class” cities and the rest of the country was a remarkable gap in what Putnam called “social capital.” While Creative Class locations are successful in generating financial and creative capital, they are comparatively poorer in social capital. Bishop discovered that people living in non-Creative Class settings enjoyed “the comfort of strong families, bustling civic groups, near universal political participation, and abundant

volunteering.” Creative Class cities, by contrast, “had fewer volunteers, lower church attendance, and weaker family connections.” Among other attractions for the Creative Class were “anonymity, the opportunity for self-invention, and the economic benefits of loose ties.”

Far from being subject to false consciousness by supporting liberal political candidates, members of the meritocratic class are acting in a rational and deliberate fashion. Because of the sorting that has taken place, locales with large Creative Class concentrations are far less likely to engage in activities that would call upon deep reservoirs of social capital. Inclined toward individualism and a devotion to personal expression and development, and committed especially to success in their careers, members of the meritocracy rely not on each other for assistance and support, but rather expect the government to fill in the abandoned civic sphere. Thus their decision to support liberal politicians is a classic case of recognizing opportunity costs: rather than generating their own social capital, which would detract from their careers and their lifestyle experimentation, they are willing to use relatively ample economic resources to get someone else to do the job.

This also assuages guilt. The old aristocracy lived among people who could not hope to attain similar status and felt some obligation to provide for their assistance. American history is rife with examples of socialites advancing causes such as poor relief, better education, even efforts to squelch alcoholism through the Temperance movement. In many cases, it was wives of the wealthy who took on such social causes, free to move in the civil sphere and not yet obligated—or “liberated”—to pursue careers. But as the new meritocracy has congregated together and intermarried, it has left behind the losers of the talent sweepstakes, dividing the nation not only into Red and Blue but perceived winners and losers. The question becomes, whose responsibility is it to help the losers?

Members of the meritocracy are well aware of whom they have left behind, and rather than assuming the personal obligation of old to those less fortunate, they elect instead to pay an impersonal middleman—government—to deal with the aftereffects of what Wendell Berry has called the “strip-mining” of talent from every town and hamlet in the world. At the same time, they demand that everyone else pay up as well—what would have been personal forms of responsibility have instead been spread to the entire population, including those they purport to succor. As Christopher Lasch wrote, “obligation, like everything else, has been depersonalized; exercised through the agency of the state, the burden of supporting it falls not on the professional and managerial class but, disproportionately, on the lower-middle and working class.”

If the denizens of Connecticut are acting reasonably in supporting liberal politicians, so are Kansans in opposing them. They inchoately recognize that expanding government is a desideratum of the Creative Class, not of those left behind. Theirs is a new kind of class resentment, ironically one in which the “revolutionary” class supports conservative policy and the “aristocracy” advances a global liberalism. Further, they vaguely perceive that their own taxes end up enabling the bad habits of the meritocrat class. And even as citizens of Red States enjoy substantial federal largesse, they are at least surrounded by enough residual social capital to recognize that there is a better way. Theirs is a deep

resentment born not of status envy but of a disgust that arises from allowing the irresponsible to buy off their bad consciences.

In other words, Connecticut and Kansas really are voting their interests, economic and otherwise. But Kansas needs to quit giving Connecticut a free pass: rather than framing the fight over issues in the “culture wars”—as important as those may be—Kansas needs to stop allowing Connecticut to pay a middleman to assuage its guilt. The best way is to connect explicitly the massive inequalities fostered by the new meritocratic arrangements that Connecticut enjoys with the bleeding-heart claims of its own purported liberalism and thereby—like the prophets of old—call them to account.

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