



Meet the New GOP Prototype for Enriching Local Elites While Enacting Christian Right Dogma

Kansas under Gov. Sam Brownback is in fiscal ruin, but the wealthy still stay wealthy.

By CJ Werleman
July 22, 2014

It is said that states are political laboratories for political ideologies. On that score, there are few states that better exemplify how the working class has been used as an unwitting pawn for the elites than Kansas. Today, Kansas is dealing with its worst fiscal crisis in living memory. How did it get here?

Geographically, Kansas sits smack in the middle of the continent, which is appropriate given that for much of its history, the state has literally been all over the map. It was the hotbed for left-wing and socialist populism in the late 19th century. Pragmatic centrism was the rigor du jour in the 1980s. In the 1990s, Christian fundamentalism became the political ideology of the state's most agitated citizens, especially after the high-profile ant-abortion protests of 1992.

In the midterm elections of 1994, the Christian Right took all three leadership positions in the state's legislature, and introduced what they called a "Contract with Kansas," which amounted to little more than a solemn pledge to execute more prisoners and save more fetuses. It was also the year Sam Brownback, the son of one of the wealthiest families in the state, was elected to the House of Representatives.

Brownback quickly promoted his Christian dominionist bona fides. His 15 years in Congress are remembered more for outlandish non-legislative starters like supporting persecuted Christians in third-world countries and opposing human cloning than for attaining wins for the people of Kansas. Nevertheless, the Christian Right swept Brownback into the governor's mansion in the Tea Party wave of 2010.

What's the Matter With Kansas? is the title of Thomas Frank's 2005 political bestseller, which demonstrates how conservatives won the heartland of America. Shortly after Brownback became governor, conservatives crowed that what's the matter with Kansas is what's right for America.

In 2012, Gov. Brownback implemented what has been proven an abject failure wherever it has been tried: trickle-down economics. He signed into law massive tax cuts for the state's wealthiest citizens, which eliminated income taxes for businesses, and cut the highest income tax rates by 25 percent. The working-class foot soldiers of the Christian Right were placated with a bill that declared "life begins at fertilization."

The conservative think tank Americans for Tax Reform hailed the Brownback tax cuts for the rich as "the story of the next decade," despite the fact that the same tax cuts enacted at the federal level by President Bush in 2002 led to the slowest job and economic growth since World War II. But facts are just liberal opinions in the far-right alternative universe. In fact, the Koch brother-funded Cato Institute gave Brownback's tax cuts an "A" in fiscal leadership.

Today, Kansas is in fiscal ruin. The Wall Street Journal reported that tax revenues fell by \$685 million in the first 11 months of the fiscal year, putting Kansas on track to blow through its \$700 million reserve fund by the middle of next year. With 40 percent of state revenue traditionally coming from those taxes and no specific plan to make up the shortfall, Moody's Investor Service recently downgraded the state's debt rating.

"Over the last three decades they have smashed the welfare state, reduced the tax burden on corporations and the wealthy, and generally facilitated the return to a nineteenth-century pattern of wealth distribution," writes Frank. "Thus the primary contradiction of the backlash [conservative movement]: it is a working-class movement that has done incalculable, historic harm to working-class people."

While the Brownback tax cuts have made the already wealthy even wealthier, it has failed to boost the state's economy, with Kansas' rate of job growth putting in the bottom 10 percentile in the nation. Moreover, Kansans are earning less than they were in 2012, and more businesses have failed than have started in the state.

Of course, that's the intention of the string pullers within the Koch brother-funded conservative movement: to enrich the wealthiest few, while simultaneously starving government of the funds it needs to invest in infrastructure and services for the working class and poor.

"Here, after all, is a rebellion against 'the establishment' that has wound up cutting the tax on inherited estates. Here is a movement whose response to the power structure is to make the rich even richer; whose answer to the inexorable degradation of working-class life is to lash out angrily at labor unions and liberal workplace-safety programs; whose solution to the rise of ignorance in America is to pull the rug out from under public education," writes Frank.

Education has been one of the biggest victims under Brownback, with a 3 percent cut to education spending. As for Brownback's Christian Right ballot box lever pullers, what have they received? Well, like always, they've been used as a tool to enrich the lives of the people they work for. They voted to stop abortion, but have instead received something that most likely doesn't benefit them—a rollback on capital gains taxes and a

cut to public services, including the blocking of the Medicaid expansion. They voted to have creationism taught in the classroom, but have instead received lower wages, more dangerous jobs, dirtier skies, and de-regulations that encourage monopolies and thus higher costs of living.

The game never changes. The victims are always the same: a working-class that votes against its own economic interests, in the name of a celebrated champion of the poor and working class: Jesus Christ.