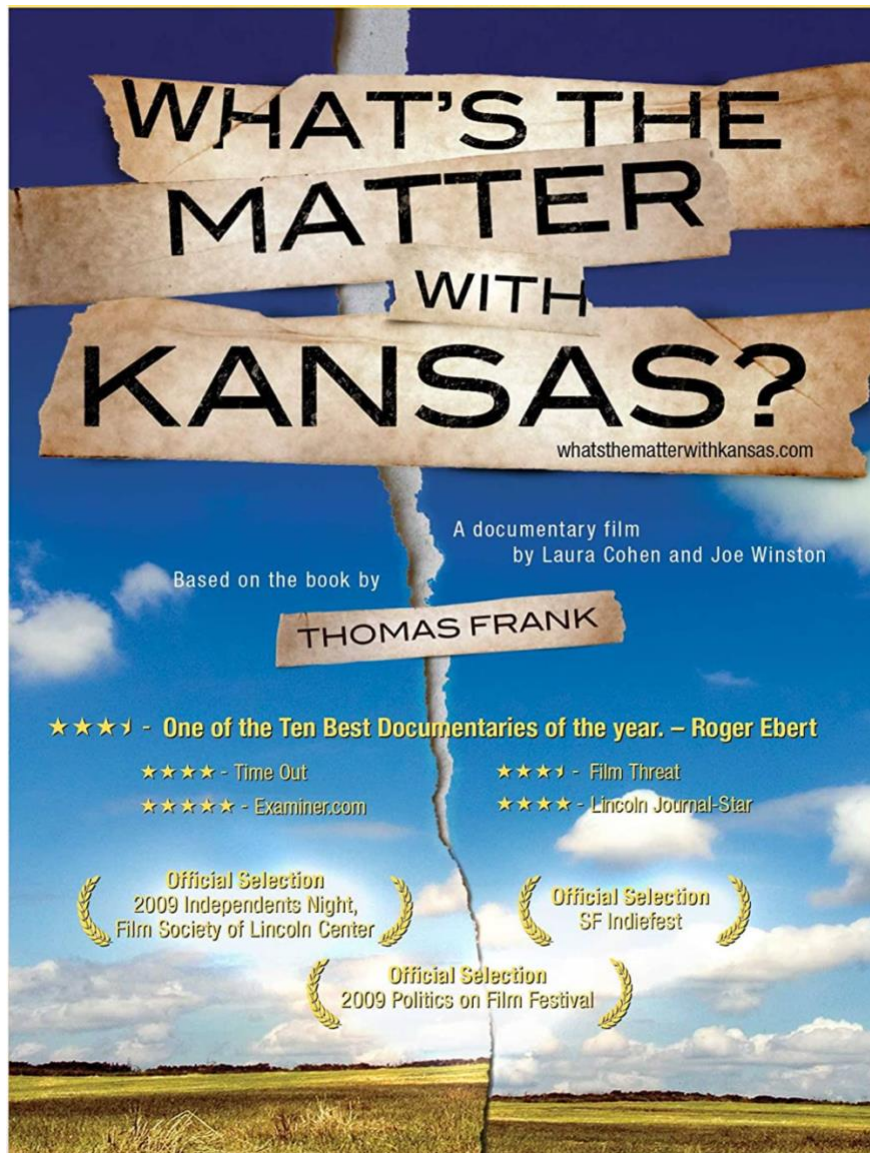


## Supplemental Notes to Lecture 7: Nonvoters in the US

### I. “What’s The Matter With Kansas?”



As discussed in Lecture 7, the second “fact” about nonvoting in the US is that a disproportionately high number of low-income voters do not cast ballots. According to a 2019 Pew Research Report, for instance, individuals earning less than 30K accounted for 56 percent of nonvoters in 2018, even though they made up only 25 percent of the voting population.

As for those low income voters who *do* go to the polls, their preferences have often come as a surprise to many pundits, which is what happened [in the November 2020 elections, when many low-income voters in the impoverished Rio Grande Valley in south Texas confounded journalists and Democratic party officials by voting Republican.](#)

But that was not an anomaly, in the sense that such tendencies among low-income voters have manifested themselves throughout the country for decades, to the dismay of incredulous writers like Thomas Frank, whose work on populism we cited earlier in the semester.

Confronted by the fact that in the 2000 election, Republican George Bush won 75 percent of the vote in the poorest county in the US, which lies in central Nebraska, Frank wrote the following in *What's The Matter With Kansas* (a book that has been adapted into a 2011 documentary film):

This puzzled me when I first read about it, as it puzzles many of the people I know. For us, it is the Democrats that are the party of workers, of the poor, of the weak and the victimized. Figuring this out, we think, is basic, it's part of the ABC's of adulthood. [So] how could so many people get it so wrong? [This question] is, in many ways, the preeminent question of our times. People getting their fundamental interests wrong is what American political life is all about.

Analysts like Frank who are at a loss to explain voter behavior in this context would benefit from reexamining our two-party system, a task that we will take up in two weeks.

For now, I want to emphasize that missing from analyses like Frank's is an acknowledgement of the extent to which the lesson Americans allegedly internalize before reaching voting age, namely, that the Democratic Party of FDR clearly and boldly stands with the working poor, has largely become, *especially since the early nineteen nineties*, a political fiction.

So, if presented with electoral choices in which the two major parties often do not offer starkly different economic programs, why shouldn't many Americans vote for the party that at least claims to represent their cultural values?

This dynamic may partly explain why places like Loup County, Nebraska have gone Republican by decisive margins over the last several decades.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It may also explain why, in an op-ed published on October 15, 2019 in the *New York Times*, economist Dambisa Moyo cautioned readers against thinking that compulsory voting in the United States would be a boon to Democrats: "If the United States had mandatory voting, there likely would be a greater turnout among lower-income groups and minorities, which could lead to a change in the types of politicians elected. One might think this would favor Democratic candidates, but that's not necessarily the case." And why not? Instead of looking at why such voters might find Democratic candidates unappealing, Moyo cites the example of Australia, whose compulsory voting laws have led, most recently, to the 2019 electoral victory of Scott Morrison, an evangelical Christian and leader of the center-right Liberal Party and National Party coalition, which defeated the center-left Labor Party. (Within the context of Australian politics, "Liberal" does not refer to the type of "liberal" discussed in American political culture.)



laboratories of democracy, as no less than 19 of them have passed automatic voter registration laws, with Oregon having led the way in 2015.

On the other hand, state legislators in Alaska and Georgia have introduced bills this year to *eliminate* automatic voter registration, which brings us back to a point raised in Lecture 7—that an increasing number of political battles over voting regulations are now taking place in state legislatures, in Congress, and in the courts.

For example, consider the so-called For The People Act, which passed in the House earlier this year but died in the Senate over the summer. Denounced by its opponents as a draconian and unnecessary bill that, if enacted, would infringe upon states' rights, the law would have made voting registration nearly automatic throughout the country, required states to allow a minimum of two weeks of early voting, and granted to all eligible voters the right to cast a ballot by mail for any reason, which is referred to as no excuse absentee voting.

### **III. Who Should Vote?**

One thing the For The People Act does not do is grant voting rights to non-citizens, *something that until 1926 was common in this country*, though it has long since become politically untenable. And yet, this summer, the Vermont legislature endorsed voter-approved changes to two city charters, so that [noncitizens in those cities may now vote in local elections](#).

Those Vermont cities (Montpelier and Winooski) are not alone. In San Francisco and nine cities in Maryland, noncitizens are allowed to vote in local and school board elections, and proposals to adopt similar voting laws are currently under consideration in New York City and Illinois.

What sort of case has been made for allowing noncitizens to vote? Essentially, proponents of such measures have drawn upon one of the oldest political slogans in American history: no taxation without representation. By once again allowing noncitizens to vote in this country, argues Illinois State Senator Celina Villanueva, permanent lawful residents (often referred to as green-card holders), who must pay income taxes, will receive political representation. (It takes a *minimum* of five years for a permanent lawful resident to gain citizenship.)

As you might expect, many are opposed to extending the franchise to noncitizens. Indeed, over the past three years, ballot initiatives that explicitly prevent noncitizens from voting passed in four states. “The idea that we would give legal voting rights to people who have not shown the loyalty to choose the United States over another country is stunning,” said John Loudon, director of the interest group, Citizen Voters, which opposes giving voting rights to noncitizens.

*Here is a question you may want to take up in your Analytical Essay: are noncitizens allowed to vote in other representative democracies? If so, what impact has it had on their elections? What arguments were made for and against the enfranchisement of noncitizens?*

### **IV. “There is No Excuse Not To Vote”**

The voiceover narrator in the 1988 Members Only and League of Women Voters PSA declares: “200 years ago, the constitution of the US suggested a very simple way to keep fools like these out of our government. There is no excuse not to vote.”

In other words, the blame for low voter turnout *rests entirely* with individuals who, out of complacency and/or ignorance, stay home on election day. The PSA implies that nonvoters should think hard about what it would be like to live under a dictatorship, where no one *can* vote in a free and fair election. Indeed, it goes further, suggesting that a failure to vote will somehow weaken our representative democracy to such a degree that “fools” like the ones depicted in the PSA could take advantage of widespread apathy and seize power. The use of “fools” in this context is unfortunate. Characterizing Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini as such demeans the victims of those tyrannical regimes. Moreover, the “very simple way” to keep someone like Hitler out of government overlooks the fact that Hitler came to power through parliamentary elections held in 1932, in which his NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers’ Party) won far more votes than any other party.

Thirty-one years removed from the airing of that PSA, we may think that the Members Only warning is crude and exploitative; nevertheless, we should also consider the state of contemporary political campaigns, in which the specter of fascistic and communist leaders looms large in different ways. A vote for Trump is a vote for fascism; the very existence of our democracy is at stake, the Clinton campaign declared in 2016. A vote for Biden is a vote for socialism; the very existence of law and order is at stake, the Trump campaign declared in 2020.

**Quiz Question 5: Why is Thomas Frank puzzled by the 2000 election results in Loup County, Nebraska?**

**Quiz Question 6: What changes to voting regulations were mandated by the 1993 Motor Voter Bill?**

**Quiz Question 7: In the 2020 presidential election, would lawful permanent residents (or green card holders) be included among the Voting Age Population (VAP) or the Voting Eligible Population (VEP)? Briefly explain.**

