WHY CITIES LOSE

THE DEEP ROOTS OF THE URBAN-RURAL POLITICAL DIVIDE

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To my parents

Geography and the Dilemma of the Left

THE STORY OF why cities lose in democracies with winner-take-all districts does not begin with the advent of sophisticated gerrymandering or the outbreak of contemporary culture wars. Rather, it begins with the birth of leftist mobilization in urban working-class neighborhoods during the era of rapid industrialization, known as the "second industrial revolution," which took place from around 1870 to the outbreak of World War I.

A good place to begin the American version of the story is at 8 p.m. on July 23, 1877, near the intersection of Seventh and Penn Streets in downtown Reading, Pennsylvania. According to historical accounts, many downtown residents were out enjoying the cool evening air, and a group of curious onlookers, including women and children, were examining a rail car that had been taken over earlier in the day by striking railroad workers.[1] A group of 350 state militiamen, marching on the tracks from the rail depot to the tap of a few drums, opened fire on the crowd without warning, killing several men including police officers. A mob broke into the Reading Armory and a local gun store. A bloody battle ensued, and ten Reading citizens, none of whom were rioters or strikers, were left dead. Reading descended into chaos. Railroad tracks and an important bridge were destroyed, and an uneasy calm was not restored until the arrival of federal troops.

The Reading Railroad strike was just one part of a national strike called by the Brotherhood of Railway Engineers and Firemen in response to massive pay cuts amidst a deep recession. Similar violent incidents were occurring around the United States throughout the summer of 1877. The strikes had started in Baltimore and spread to New York, but the strikes in Pennsylvania were among the largest and most violent, and from there, they quickly spread to many of the industrial towns of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri as well. Unrest occurred not only in Pennsylvania's large cities like Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, but also in smaller industrial outposts like Johnstown, Bethlehem, Harrisburg, and Hazelton. Unrest emerged in Toledo and Zanesville, Ohio; Terre Haute and Fort Wayne, Indiana; Effingham and Mattoon, Illinois; and Sedalia and St. Joseph, Missouri.

A thirteen-year-old boy named James Maurer was present among the crowd in downtown Reading that day, and later described "the hysterical sobs and shrieks of mothers and fathers, and the groans of the wounded and dying."[2] For Maurer, this "tragic act in the real drama of class struggle"[3] was a call to action. In the ensuing years, he joined up with a group of young radicals associated with the Knights of Labor and the Socialist Labor Party, and eventually, the Socialist Party of America. Maurer went on to serve as a Socialist representative in the Pennsylvania State Legislature from 1910 to 1918 and became the leader of the Reading Socialists—a group that dominated Reading politics for decades. The Reading Socialists worked with labor unions, published a newspaper, and owned a large building and even a park where they hosted picnics for workers. They elected several popular mayors and controlled the city council for much of the 1920s and 1930s, and routinely sent legislators to the capital of Harrisburg to fight for policies like workers' compensation and pensions. Twice, Maurer was the Socialist candidate for vice president of the United States.

Something very similar was happening in other countries that were experiencing rapid industrialization during the same time frame. As peasants were moving to cities to take jobs as wage laborers in Britain, Europe, and then Australasia and North America in the late nineteenth century, they were mobilized through cooperative efforts of labor unions and, soon thereafter, workers' parties. Strikes, labor unrest, and heavy-handed responses

by firms, armed gangs, and governments led labor leaders to form political parties and begin running for office in the late nineteenth century. The Belgian Labor Party was founded in 1885, the Swedish Social Democratic Party in 1889, and the Australian Labor Party in 1890; the British Labor Party started contesting seats a few years later. Each of these parties was formed in the midst of urban strikes, labor unrest, and anti-labor violence.

Though much has changed since the labor unrest and mobilization that took place from the late nineteenth century through the Great Depression, Europeans, North Americans, and Australians still inhabit the basic landscape of cities and party and electoral systems that took shape during that period. In the late nineteenth century, legislatures in Europe, North America, and Australasia were formed exclusively via winner-take-all districts. Not long after workers' parties started running for office, they realized they suffered from a basic problem: manufacturing and mining activity, and hence the voters most likely to respond to their appeals, were highly concentrated in urban legislative districts. This created a dilemma for workers' parties. If they maintained the purity of the socialist rhetoric favored by their radicalized urban supporters, they would not be able to form the alliances with voters in more centrist districts that were necessary to achieve electoral victory. However, to make those alliances was to invite challenges from insurgent radicals and communists. By focusing on the needs of the geographically concentrated working class, workers' parties were able to win decisive victories in industrial cities, but they found it difficult to transform votes into commensurate seats.

It is important to understand the rise of urban workers' parties and the dynamics of their geographic dilemma in the early twentieth century for three reasons. First, this era foreshadows the dilemma faced by the Democrats and other urban parties today. The occupational basis and ideological content of urban parties has changed dramatically, but the basic political geography—and the dilemma faced by urban parties—is the same.

Second, in the early twentieth century, European countries enacted reforms that resolved this burgeoning dilemma: they abolished single-member district representation schemes and replaced them with systems of proportional representation. Political geography and the emergence of workers'

parties led broad coalitions of elites to embrace electoral reform in Europe—and hence preserve nascent multiparty systems—but not in Britain, North America, and Australasia.

Third, even though they were absorbed into the Democratic Party during the New Deal and have become a footnote in the history of the United States, James Maurer and the Reading Socialists allow a useful glimpse of a road not taken—an understanding of the ways in which the United States is unique among industrialized countries. The period of labor conflict, violence, and union mobilization was just as intense in the United States as in Europe—and perhaps even bloodier—but it never led to the emergence of a political party based purely on the interests of urban labor. Rather, urban labor became one of several factions within an existing political party that continued to be many things to many people. Without a nationwide threat from an urban workers' party beyond Reading and a few other hotspots, the United States developed neither the partisan division on the left that has characterized Canada and the United Kingdom, nor the broad constituency for electoral reform that emerged in Europe. It emerged from the era of labor conflict with one of the purest two-party systems in the world, thus setting the stage for the arrival of extreme urban-rural polarization in later decades.

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION left behind a geographic political legacy that we continue to grapple with today. The present-day geographic clustering of Democrats flows from the concentration of early manufacturing activity. But why was industrial activity in the early twentieth century so geographically concentrated? An obvious reason was the cost of moving inputs and finished goods between suppliers, producers, and customers. Another important factor had to do with the benefits of having a large group of specialized workers and relevant employers in close proximity to one another—an advantage known as "labor market pooling."[4] In the era of heavy industry, high transportation costs often led to the development of industrial activities in close proximity to natural resources, coal in particular.

Pennsylvania was no exception, and heavy industry developed in industrial cities arrayed on railroad lines near the bituminous coalfields of western Pennsylvania and the anthracite coalfields of eastern Pennsylvania. Reading is located in close proximity to the latter. After getting a start as a canal-based transportation hub for coal and finished goods on their way to Philadelphia, Reading developed into a successful base of innovation in railroad technology, anchored by the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad. For a brief period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, migrants came in droves to Reading to work in railroad, automobile, piano, and hardware manufacturing.

The era of steam and rail did not last long in Reading, and by the 1920s it was a labor-market pooling center for textiles, specializing in garments and especially hosiery. In addition to the large industrial cities that grew up during the nineteenth century, the northeastern manufacturing core of the United States is dotted with small rail-based manufacturing centers that

Manufacturing Employment as
Share of Population,
1880

0.00–0.001
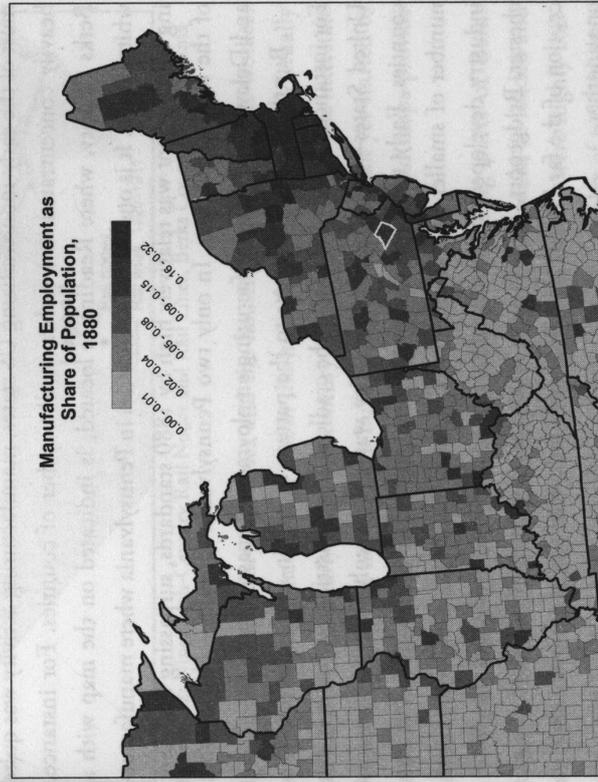0.002–0.004
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Figure 1.1: The County-Level Geographic Concentration of Manufacturing in 1880

once housed some kind of dynamic local manufacturing cluster during the era of rapid industrialization.

Something similar happened in all of the countries of North America, Europe, and Australasia that industrialized during that period. Port cities and hubs of transportation and commerce like Philadelphia, Chicago, Toronto, Manchester, Sydney, and Melbourne grew quickly, along with smaller, often more specialized cities that sprouted up on water and rail-based transportation routes connecting the larger cities. Small cities grew, and entirely new cities sprouted up around natural resource extraction points, such as in the German Ruhr area.

The map in Figure 1.1 focuses on what economic geographers refer to as the US manufacturing core: the region where the vast majority of manufacturing activity took place in the late nineteenth century.[5] Based on the 1880 census, the darker the shading, the higher the proportion of the county population that had a job in manufacturing. Not only was manufacturing activity regionally concentrated in the Northeast and upper Midwest, but within most of the early-industrializing US states, manufacturing activity was quite heavily concentrated in a rather small number of counties. For instance, Berks County, where Reading is located, is indicated on the map with a white border. It is one of twelve counties in Pennsylvania where manufacturing employment was relatively high by 1880 standards, surpassing 8 percent of the total population. In only two Pennsylvania counties—Philadelphia and Delaware—did manufacturing employment surpass 20 percent.

But there were exceptions to the pattern of within-state concentration. For instance, in New England—the cradle of the industrial revolution in the United States—manufacturing activity was quite evenly distributed across counties. Early textile factories were not concentrated in Boston, but in a number of smaller mill towns like Chicopee, Lawrence, and Lowell, and industry developed in a string of small and medium-sized cities like Manchester, Bridgeport, New Haven, Worcester, and Springfield. With the exception of the far North, New England's industrial towns are quite close to one another.

The county-level data used to produce Figure 1.1 do not come close to conveying the extent of geographic concentration of manufacturing in the
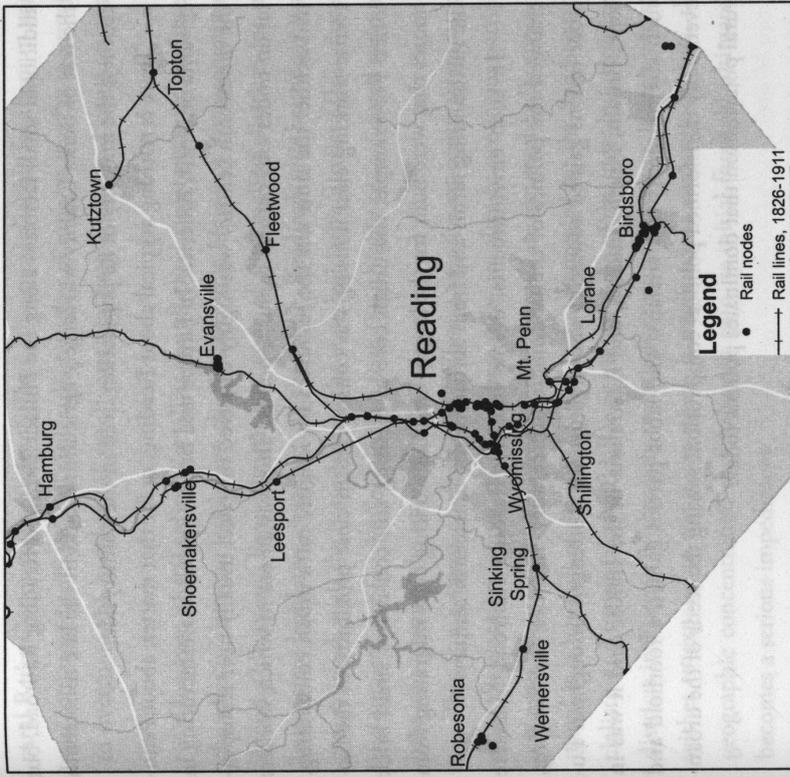
Figure 1.2: Nineteenth-Century Rail Nodes and Rail Lines, Berks County, Pennsylvania

late nineteenth century. Factories and the housing constructed for workers were also highly concentrated *within* the manufacturing counties. Virtually all factories in the early twentieth century required rail access. The interstate highway system had not yet been built, and trucking had not yet started to replace rail transport. Thus, early twentieth-century railroad maps provide an excellent proxy for factory location.[6]

Figure 1.2 zooms in on Reading and surrounding parts of Berks County, revealing that rail nodes—places where goods could be loaded and unloaded in the vicinity of nineteenth-century factories—were highly concentrated in the center of Reading, as well as in the complex of mills built in Wyomissing, just west of downtown, and in Birdsboro to the south, which was known for its large foundries and machine shops. There were some

additional small factories along the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, but the rest of Berks County was largely agricultural, and in the late nineteenth century, the majority of its population lived in the countryside.

There is nothing atypical about Reading, or for that matter, about Pennsylvania or North America. In Europe and Britain as well, manufacturing in the nineteenth century was highly clustered in space, usually near transportation nodes and natural resource points. This was an era in which workers had neither the time nor the resources for lengthy intra-urban commuting. Dense working-class housing was constructed in close proximity to the factories. For example, the urban core of Reading still consists of small brick houses that were built for the largely German working class migrating from the surrounding farms and from abroad in the nineteenth century.

In such environments, events like the Reading Railroad Massacre changed the politics of the late nineteenth century. In cities like Reading, labor unions gained adherents and organizational strength throughout Europe, Britain, North America, and Australasia in the 1800s. And it was in such environments that socialist and labor parties gained a foothold and eventually transformed political competition, sowing the seeds of the urban-rural polarization that dominates politics today.

FROM PENNSYLVANIA TO Britain to Belgium, once workers' parties entered the fray, they faced a basic problem with the system of winner-take-all districts. Since industrial workers were concentrated in urban working-class neighborhoods clustered around rail nodes, warehouses, and factories, even if these parties performed very well and earned the support of vast majorities of workers, their votes would inevitably be concentrated in well under half of the winner-take-all legislative districts.

James Maurer and the Reading Socialists understood this problem very well. Their intense mobilization efforts in downtown Reading were successful. They were able to win majorities in the urban city council wards dominated by manual laborers—which was enough to win some city council majorities—but it was much harder for them to prevail in wards with a larger mix of white-collar workers and business owners. Their support in

rural Berks County was minimal. Thus, it was not possible for them to win any countywide offices, and their urban pocket of support was far too small to overcome the numbers of rural voters in state senate and congressional races.

However, the Reading Socialists found their sweet spot in the lower chamber of the state legislature: the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Among US states, Pennsylvania has some of the smallest districts for its lower state legislative chamber. At that time, Reading's city boundary was coterminous with the boundary of the state legislative district. This created the opportunity for the Socialists to turn their highly concentrated support base into a seat in the state legislature.

This is a general phenomenon. When a small new party attempts to enter the electoral fray in a system where there are already two major parties, it is most likely to win some seats if its supporters are geographically concentrated in a handful of districts.[7] This is what happened for the Reading Socialists, and for socialist and labor parties in some of the most industrialized districts in Europe in the early twentieth century. However, if such a party wishes to expand to the point where it might win a majority of seats, the geographic concentration that helped it gain its initial foothold ultimately becomes a serious impediment.

This was true for workers' parties in two ways. First, they ended up "wasting" too many votes in their core districts; that is, winning by very large margins in some districts when those votes would have been more helpful elsewhere. This is often described as an "inefficient" geographic distribution of support. Second, if districts were drawn at the proper scale to allow for some seats in working-class districts, the party developed a coterie of incumbents who won their seats with a class-based appeal. In many cases, the party's most successful urban incumbents then came to have considerable influence over the party's platform and its reputation. Moderation in the pursuit of victory outside the proletarian districts did not come naturally to such individuals. Moreover, when those leaders organized strikes that turned violent, and earned their legislative seats in partnership with organized labor, using the language of class conflict—perhaps even participating in the Socialist International and traveling to the Soviet Union—the task of

broadening the party's class appeal became very difficult. Concerted efforts to form alliances with skilled workers, small business owners, or farmers often lacked credibility.[8]

From Reading to London and Liège, voters outside the urban core came to view these parties of the urban left with suspicion—as something vaguely foreign and menacing. Parties of the urban left were also riven by a perpetual battle for the party's soul, pitting the urban firebrands and true believers against those who wished to soften the party's reputation in order to win the crucial districts outside the urban core.

The stakes in battles like these are high in systems with winner-take-all districts. If the urban firebrands gain the upper hand for a long period, the party might condemn itself to perpetual electoral defeat—winning urban and mining districts but little else—perhaps even creating the opportunity for an alternative center-left party to supplant it in the moderate districts. However, if the moderates sacrifice too much in the pursuit of victory, the party might suffer from a debilitating fracture.

While the story of the Socialists' failure in the United States is multifaceted, this kind of internal conflict played a role. In fact, James Maurer and many of the Reading Socialists were noteworthy for their moderation, and much of their success in local politics was based on issues like property tax valuations, infrastructure, and competent city management.[9] However, a group of radicals attempted to pull the party to the left in the 1930s, and the Socialists—including the Reading contingent—fell into rancorous disarray, just as one of the old "bourgeois" parties—the Democrats—made a concerted effort to ally with labor leaders and take up the mantle of the railroad and hosiery workers in places like Reading.

In Europe, as workers' parties tried to gain initial traction in urban districts, they faced another vexing problem: there was already a party occupying the left side of the political spectrum when they arrived on the scene. For instance, the Liberal Party of Belgium already had a foothold among urban skilled artisans and workers. The same was true of Radikale Venstre ("the radical left," known in English as the "Social Liberals") in Denmark, an urban breakaway from a more rural liberal party, Venstre ("the left"), both of which competed against an aristocratic conservative party called Højre ("the

right"). In Britain's two-party system at the turn of the century, the Liberal Parry was the main competitor to the left of the Conservatives, having earned significant support among workers newly able to vote, by introducing reforms like health and unemployment insurance as well as pensions for elderly workers.

Unlike in North America and Australasia, at the turn of the century low-income industrial workers in many European countries did not yet have full and equal franchise. The old elites attempted to protect themselves from the demands of urban workers by instituting property and income requirements for voting, and in some cases by giving more votes to wealthier citizens, or by vesting power in unrepresentative upper legislative chambers that were dominated by the elites. An important part of the rallying cry of socialists and workers' parties in Europe was the extension of the franchise and the abolition of these practices. In some countries these reforms were sudden—following from periods of instability, strikes, and violent urban street protests—but in some cases the change was gradual, as workers slowly gained the franchise by surpassing income and property requirements during periods of wage growth.

As European socialist and workers' parties agitated for full and equal franchise, they debated what would happen if they ever got it. Around 1850, some optimists, including Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, believed themselves to be at the vanguard of a movement of the "immense majority," leaders of a proletariat that included "all but a handful of exploiters."[10] In their view, socialist candidates would quickly be able to win in districts throughout the country with free and fair elections. Old "bourgeois" parties like the liberals would be swept aside and supplanted.

However, it was wrong to conclude that all manual laborers would side immediately with the workers' parties. In many cases, the preexisting party of the left—like the UK Liberals and Danish Radical Left—had been making overtures to skilled laborers before the arrival of the workers' parties. In fact, these liberal parties often strategically opened the door to partial expansion of the franchise when this helped give them the upper hand vis-à-vis their conservative opponents. Liberals warned workers that even if they preferred the workers' or socialist parties, sincere votes for the socialist

candidates in urban districts would divide the left and allow conservatives to win. They convinced many workers that it was better to vote strategically for the largest party of the left—the liberals—even if this was their second preference, rather than run the risk that a conservative candidate would win the district. Thus, initially, labor unions often endorsed liberal candidates rather than the insurgent socialists.

From the very beginning, workers' parties faced a vexing coordination problem with liberals in districts with working-class populations. The uncomfortable solution was to form temporary cartels with the liberals in which each party would agree to strategically withdraw its candidates in selected districts to avoid handing the district to the minority conservatives. These deals were difficult to strike, and often undone by cheating. It was through such active coordination between the old and new left party that the latter was able to enter parliament for the first time in many European countries, including Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, and in New Zealand.[11]

When these new parties began contesting elections, they initially competed for very few seats, the vast majority of which were in densely populated urban industrial areas, though some were in districts with mines, ports, and commercial fishing operations.[12] In the early twentieth century, while the workers' parties were gaining strength and diversifying their support base, they still only threatened the old parties in a limited number of districts. This was true even in Germany and Denmark, which already had equal, universal male franchise in the early twentieth century.

The difficulty of the plurality electoral system became readily apparent for the socialist and labor parties. As they tried to expand beyond their initial districts and take over the left side of the political spectrum, they found that their seat share fell far below their vote share in almost every European country. Their support was too deeply concentrated in a handful of districts, and in many cases they were hamstrung by the need to coordinate with "bourgeois liberals," whom many socialist leaders detested.

Consider the Social Democrats in Germany. In every election from 1890 to 1907, they won more votes than any other party, but they never won the most seats. Their main competitor on the right sometimes received

twice as many seats despite receiving a million fewer votes. In the parliamentary elections of early twentieth-century Denmark, the Social Democrats routinely won the most votes while winning far fewer seats than their competitors. In 1915, the Liberal and Labor Parties in Norway won almost identical vote shares, but the Liberals received almost four times as many seats as Labor. In 1918, the Norwegian Labor Party had more votes than any other party, but the Conservative Party and Liberal Party *each* had twice as many seats.

Similar dramatic underrepresentation of the urban left was a source of consternation, anger, and in many cases street violence throughout Europe in the early twentieth century.[13] Several countries were on the cusp of civil war. The urban-rural polarization of the United States today is mild compared with the social polarization between the underrepresented urban working class and the vastly overrepresented conservative allies of European aristocracy at the outbreak of World War I.

RECOGNIZING THEIR ELECTORAL geography problem, leaders of European socialist and labor parties found a solution in the writings of British reform advocates like Thomas Hare, Henry Droop, and above all, John Stuart Mill. They came to see proportional representation (PR) as their salvation. Specific proposals varied from one country to another, but the basic idea of proportional representation was simple: small, single-member districts drawn around a single city or neighborhood would be replaced by much larger districts that encompassed an entire region, with each district electing several representatives. Each party's candidates would be placed on a ranked list, and its parliamentary representation would be drawn from that list in proportion to its vote share. With this system, 35 percent of the vote would correspond to roughly 35 percent of the seats. And under this system, supporters of workers' parties and liberal parties in urban areas would no longer need to worry that a sincere vote for their preferred party would split the left vote and hand the district to the conservatives. Wilhelm Liebknecht, leader of the German Social Democratic Party, made the case very clearly: "Under the present electoral system the greater part of our votes is lost—whereas

under proportional representation our strength in parliament would be doubled or tripled."[14]

After some debate, the adoption of large, multimember districts with PR became part of the official platform of socialist and labor parties throughout Europe in the early twentieth century. In street protests and legislative maneuvers, workers' parties called not only for full franchise and the end of plural voting, but also for proportional representation. Remarkably, in only a couple of decades, they achieved both.

The adoption of PR was in some cases, as in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, driven primarily by the agitation of the workers' parties. However, in most cases, electoral reform cannot be seen as a concession to the muscle of these parties and their supporters, either on the street or in the legislature. Rather, the workers' parties found willing reform partners among some legislators within the existing parties, especially the liberal parties, who saw the expansion of the franchise and the entry of socialist and labor candidates in their districts as existential threats to their political careers. In many countries, liberals from urban districts had advocated for limited franchise expansion, but they quickly came to understand that they had unleashed a process they could no longer control, and full franchise would soon lead many of them to lose their urban seats to socialist or labor candidates. If they tried to shade their platform to the left to forestall the rise of these parties, they would only give ground to the conservatives. Fearing that they would soon be squeezed out of existence, urban liberals became some of the strongest advocates of proportional representation in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Norway, among other countries. At a crucial moment, by bargaining for electoral reform, these parties saved themselves from likely obliteration.

Analysis of parliamentary votes on these electoral reforms reveals that while socialists and workers' parties voted uniformly in favor of reform, among the old non-socialist parties, support was concentrated among those whose seats were most threatened by socialists.[15] In some cases, that included conservatives as well. In Belgium, rural Catholic members of the legislature presided over safe seats, and they fought to keep the old plurality electoral system. However, urban representatives from the Catholic Party were beginning to fall below the winning threshold as the workers' party gained

strength, and they came to advocate for PR as a way of saving themselves. In Scandinavia, a large number of incumbent conservatives were from urban districts where the electoral incursion of the socialists put them at risk. Threatened with extinction, urban conservatives in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway also came to appreciate the merits of proportional representation, and they joined reform coalitions that voted for PR in parliament.

The rise of proportional representation in Europe was in many ways a direct result of the geographic dilemma of the urban left. As urban workers gained the franchise and leaned toward socialist and far-left parties, electoral competition in cities was thrown into disarray. The workers' parties were badly underrepresented in legislatures and plagued by coordination problems with existing parties. For their part, risk-averse urban representatives of the old parties realized they might be destined for the dustbin of history as politics transformed into a polarized electoral battle between parties of urban workers and their opponents.

For both the insurgent workers' parties and the urban incumbents from the old parties, proportional representation was a way out. After the introduction of PR, social democratic and workers' parties saw an immediate and sometimes dramatic increase in their legislative representation. After the transition to proportional representation in 1915, the Danish Social Democrats immediately received a seat share roughly equal to their vote share for the first time in their history. By 1924, they were at the head of a coalition government. In Norway, the Labor Party had received only 14 percent of the seats with 32 percent of the vote in 1918. After the transition to PR in 1919, it received a seat share much closer to its vote share, and by 1927 it was the largest party in parliament. After the adoption of proportional representation and the abolition of plural voting in 1919, the Belgian Workers' Party won 38 percent of the seats in the legislature and joined a coalition government, and by 1925, it was the largest party in the Belgian Federal Parliament.[16] The German Social Democrats had received 11 percent of the seats with 29 percent of the vote in 1907, and 28 percent of the seats with 35 percent of the votes in 1912. After the introduction of proportional representation in 1919, they received 38 percent of the vote and became the largest party in parliament with 39 percent of the seats. These parties went on to

thrive and form governments for much of the postwar period, and along with workers', socialist, and social democratic parties in other continental European countries, they helped build and maintain the Northern European welfare state.

Another lasting legacy of electoral reform in early twentieth-century Europe was the survival of urban liberal parties, which still play an important role in European politics today. Already in the nineteenth century, these parties had gained a base among urban artisans, business owners, professionals, and intellectuals who were opposed to the dominance of the monarchy, aristocracy, and church, but also alarmed by the rhetoric of the workers' parties. The survival of liberal parties meant that educated, middle-class urban voters were not forced to choose between the rural aristocracy and the workers' parties. Liberal parties like the Danish Social Liberal Party, the Swedish Liberals, and the German Free Democrats still play this role today, sometimes coalescing with the urban workers' parties and sometimes with more rural parties of the right. Moreover, in addition to these liberal parties, proportional representation also preserved urban parties of the right in many countries. In this way, proportional representation eased the pressure that was pushing industrializing European countries toward polarized two-party systems, pitting urban against rural interests.

IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE, uncertainty and fear associated with the rise of workers' parties in the cities ran so high that established parties took a gamble on reform. In Britain and its former colonies, however, the elites remained confident enough in their party's success that the existing system survived. Australia in particular followed a different historical path. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) was not an insurgent that threatened existing parties. On the contrary, the ALP is Australia's oldest political party. It had already been organized in some of the Australian colonies before the formation of the Federation of Australia in 1901, and it quickly came to dominate the left side of the spectrum thereafter. It did not have to fight a battle for entry against another left-wing party with strong links to workers' and labor unions in urban districts. The early non-socialist parties—the Free Traders

and Protectionists—were more like collections of local notables than coherent political parties, and soon after the formation of the federation, the two non-socialist parties merged. Thus, the pressures that led to electoral reform in Europe never emerged in Australia.

In the United Kingdom and New Zealand, however, labor parties entered the fray at the turn of the century in a context rather similar to that of most European countries: longstanding two-party competition between rural conservatives and urban liberals. Similarly, Labour in the United Kingdom started running candidates in industrial and mining districts, but struggled to successfully coordinate with the urban Liberals, and hence could not transform its growing support into legislative seats. Like its European comrades, Labour strongly advocated for proportional representation.

Faced with an expanding electorate in industrialized areas and the rise of the Labour Party, some Liberals began to see the benefits of electoral reform. But most of the party's legislative incumbents believed they could continue with the status quo and remain the dominant party in cities. Their strategy was to marginalize Labour, urging leftist voters that a vote for Labour was a wasted vote that would only hand urban districts to the hated Tories (Conservatives). When absolutely necessary, they pursued the sporadic coordinated withdrawal of candidates from urban districts in tense collaboration with Labour. The Liberals were confident in their ability to keep Labour at bay, and they were successful, until a sudden and devastating incursion of Labour candidates into their districts in 1918.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the British Liberals were in a position quite similar to that of their copartisans in Belgium and the Netherlands. As trade unionists defected to the Labour Party in urban districts, the UK Liberals were increasingly placed in the same impossible position as the Belgian Liberals—squeezed between the preexisting conservative party and the new challenger on the left. Proportional representation was their best hope. Yet parliamentary voting records reveal that opinion among British Liberals was still divided as late as 1918, with a majority still hoping to reclaim their rightful place as the dominant urban party.[17] Only a few years later, the Liberals were well on their way to being supplanted by Labour as the party of the left. Most Liberals soon realized they should have

fought tooth and nail for proportional representation while they had the chance. They quickly adopted PR as a platform, but it was too late. Before long they had become a minor party, replaced by Labour as the mainstream urban party.

For their part, once they had achieved dominance on the left, Labour leaders set aside their initial support for proportional representation. Seeing the opportunity to squeeze out the Liberals, they rallied around the retention of the plurality electoral system. As with elites in parties throughout Europe, the strongest voices in favor of single-member districts were of the safe urban incumbents with little to gain from reform. To this day, the left side of the political spectrum in Britain remains divided, with the descendants of the once-dominant Liberals (now called the Liberal Democrats) still underrepresented in Parliament and still pushing in vain for electoral reform.

The New Zealand Liberals suffered a remarkably similar fate. After a golden era of dominance in the late nineteenth century, they were squeezed out by Labour once it began fielding candidates in urban districts. By the onset of the Great Depression, Labour had become the dominant party of the urban left. Although proportional representation was one of the founding principles of the Labour Party, it was soon forgotten. As in Britain, once they tasted success and managed to vanquish the Liberals, Labour incumbents in New Zealand quickly learned to embrace the single-member district system under which they had achieved victory.

Unlike in Australia, New Zealand, and Britain, a workers' party did not make serious headway in Canada until the Great Depression. As a result, serious pressure for electoral reform did not emerge at all in early twentieth-century Canada. Labor unrest came to many Canadian cities in the 1910s and 1920s, along with socialist candidates. As with Reading and Milwaukee, small socialist hotspots emerged, but the socialists never congealed into a successful national movement. Winnipeg, which experienced a major strike and labor unrest in 1919, experienced a brief surge in support for socialist candidates, along with the industrial districts of Alberta and southern Ontario.

As with Maurer and the Reading Socialists, however, Canada's socialists were only able to win city and local legislative elections in working-class

neighborhoods. These parties typically advocated for proportional representation, but they never gained the strength to achieve it, and the Liberal Party never felt sufficiently squeezed to push for it.

Things got more interesting during the Great Depression, when a group of embattled wheat farmers in Canada's west formed the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). Starting as a prairie populist movement, the CCF focused on agricultural prices and the interests of farmers vis-à-vis banks and railroads, but it eventually forged links with urban labor groups. The CCF went through a gradual transformation into a party of urban labor, and merged with other labor groups to form the New Democratic Party (NDP) in the 1960s. Today, most of the NDP's support comes from urban constituencies with a history of early twentieth-century industrialization.

When Canada finally got a unified workers' party, the result was rather different than in the other countries with winner-take-all districts. Neither the Liberals nor the NDP has been squeezed out of existence, and neither has led a successful push for electoral reform. As in other places, the entry of a labor party into urban districts led to a coordination problem. Appealing to the same logic as liberal parties in early twentieth-century Europe, the Canadian Liberals have for decades warned urban voters that support for the NDP will split the left vote and allow the minority Conservatives to win urban seats. And indeed, this frequently takes place. Yet the Liberals have been able to maintain a tenuous upper hand for decades, relegating the NDP to only a handful of victories—mainly in core urban districts—while focusing on winning in the suburbs and achieving dominance in a large number of districts in Quebec. The Canadian Liberals have faced the same challenge as UK and New Zealand Liberals did around World War I: an insurgent party on their left flank. They chose roughly the same strategy as their Commonwealth counterparts. Rather than advocating for proportional representation, they held fast and attempted to occupy a broad swath of the center-left, appealing to urban workers to vote strategically for the Liberals rather than waste votes on a third party.

The Liberals were not overtaken and replaced by the insurgent labor-oriented party, as happened in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, but neither did they vanquish the left-wing insurgents, as the US Democrats

had eventually dispatched the Socialists. Rather, the Canadian Left has settled into a unique and uneasy long-term divide. Like other insurgent leftist parties in plurality systems, the NDP has lost out in the transformation of votes to seats over the years and, thus, has long been a staunch advocate of proportional representation. The Liberals have flirted with electoral reform on occasion—especially when it appears the NDP might finally overtake them—but like other mainstream parties with a taste of electoral victory, they have always found a reason to preserve the plurality system. That system has worked for the Liberals in Canada because of a geographic electoral quirk that was unavailable to Liberals in New Zealand or in the United Kingdom: the longstanding dominance of the Liberal Party in the province of Quebec.[18]

Each of these countries has its unique features, but the factors that led to the retention of single-member districts are easily summarized. In Australia, New Zealand, and Britain, workers' parties took over the urban districts quickly, and their leaders immediately lost interest in electoral reform that might offer a lifeline to alternative urban parties. In Canada, the insurgent workers' party pushed for electoral reform—and continues to do so today—but it never found allies among the traditional political parties. Many of the same dynamics explain the stability of the plurality electoral system in the United States.

LET US NOW return to the Reading Socialists and the road not taken in the United States. With some comparative perspective, it should now be clear why proportional representation never emerged as a serious nationwide proposal by a major American party. Although nineteenth-century labor unrest and unionization took place in American cities, as in European ones, neither of the major parties faced a serious challenge from Socialists outside of local, ethnically homogeneous pockets like Reading and Milwaukee. Since a serious threat never materialized, advocates of proportional representation have been largely limited to very small parties, like Greens and Libertarians, who are unable to achieve representation due to the logic of strategic voting in winner-take-all elections.

The failure of the United States to develop a workers' or socialist party is a topic that has received a great deal of attention.[19] Some of the cited explanations include the ethnic, racial, and religious fractionalization of the working class, high wages relative to Europe, effective use of coercion against strikers, a vast geography that included a frontier, and federalism. Some of the most popular explanations are cultural: Engels lamented the presence of a "bourgeois" political culture among the American working class, which he attributed in part to the lack of a feudal history that would facilitate class-based political mobilization.

Yet it is easy to forget that the strikes and violence of the late nineteenth century were as intense and bloody in the United States as the ones that gave rise to workers' parties in Europe. And it is simply not the case that the urban strikes and labor union mobilization of the late 1800s and early 1900s had no implications for future party conflict in the United States. The crucial difference is that instead of giving rise to a separate workers' party, this entire movement was eventually incorporated into the existing Democratic Party, which became the party of the urban left.

The United States followed a very different path to the emergence of a cohesive urban, left-wing party than any of the other former British colonies. Instead of supporting a new socialist party, urban labor unions eventually joined forces with an existing party—one that had historically favored rural interests, supporters of "free silver," and slaveholders, in addition to other groups. This uniquely American path is impossible to understand without first reckoning with an institutional feature of American democracy that sets it apart from the political systems of all of the countries of Europe and the Commonwealth discussed thus far: presidential rather than parliamentary democracy.

In all of the plurality, single-member district electoral systems of early twentieth-century Europe, as well as those of the contemporary United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, cabinet ministers and the chief executive are chosen after legislative elections, and they serve at the pleasure of the legislature. The prime minister and cabinet are drawn from the legislature, and they cannot stay in power if the legislature decides to remove them via a no-confidence vote. In the United States, on the other hand, the chief

executive is elected through a completely separate procedure, and cannot be removed by the legislature in the absence of such "crimes and misdemeanors" that would trigger the impeachment process. The same is true of state governors vis-à-vis state legislatures.

For good reason, a great deal of attention and resources are focused on presidential elections in the United States. In contrast, constituency-level organizational efforts are more important in parliamentary systems like Canada's, which created the right conditions for the successful entry of third parties such as the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in the 1930s.[20] In the United States, in contrast, it is typically difficult for third parties to enter the fray in gubernatorial or presidential elections, and the two-party competition of presidential elections is reproduced at the district level.

Perhaps the most important link between the American system of presidential democracy and the lack of third parties lies in the ability of congressional candidates to successfully differentiate themselves from the national party. The American party labels can have remarkably different meanings in different parts of the country, giving candidates flexibility to tailor their own platform to the needs of their district. Compare this with Canada, where if the voters in a particular district are dissatisfied with the platform of one of the major parties, a candidate from that party cannot credibly promise to buck the party leadership or reform it from within once in Ottawa. In a parliamentary system, voters and candidates alike know that leaders of the majority party can use a powerful tool called the no-confidence procedure to induce the cooperation of their members. The logic is simple: if renegade members of parliament (MPs) threaten not to vote for the party's agenda, the prime minister can threaten to call for a no-confidence vote, at which point the renegade MPs would bring down the government and force new elections by sticking to their oppositional stance. The party leadership reckons this would be as unpalatable to the renegade backbenchers as to everyone else in the party. As a result, party discipline around a coherent platform is much more pronounced in parliamentary systems than in presidential ones.[21]

In contrast, in the United States it is quite common for both Democrats and Republicans to run, and win, on a platform that is openly hostile to the leaders of their party. They can credibly claim that if elected, they will

go to Washington, or the state capital, and provide constant challenges to the party leadership, holding out on key issues and bargaining for a position preferred by the district's constituents. When there are geographically concentrated interests or ideological views that might facilitate the entry of a third party in certain districts in Canada or the United Kingdom, the result in the United States is the emergence of a different flavor of Democrat or Republican. Recent examples include "Tea Party" Republicans and "Democratic Socialists." For this reason, the two US parties—especially the Democrats—are famously heterogeneous. As Will Rogers joked, "I am not a member of any organized political party . . . I am a Democrat."

This important fact raises the question—Why is there no socialism in the United States?—in a different light. Some urban incumbents in the Democratic Party routinely espouse platforms that are at odds with the national party platform, and not notably different from the platforms of many European Social Democratic or workers' parties. It is simply not the case that after the Socialists failed in the early twentieth century, the United States never developed a party of urban labor. Rather, the Democrats under Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became such a party, at least in parts of the United States, while continuing on as something quite different elsewhere.

American-style presidential democracy led to a unique American solution to the dilemma of the urban left. Instead of birthing a new party in the era of rapid industrialization and labor mobilization, one of the major parties forged links with labor unions and took up the cause of urban workers, even while simultaneously representing the interest of a variety of other actors—Southern segregationists chief among them.

BEFORE MOVING ON to explore the evolution of urban-rural polarization in the United States after the New Deal, let us briefly summarize some lessons and preview their implications for current-day politics. In most advanced industrial democracies, contemporary party systems and patterns of political geography have their origins in events like the Reading Railroad Massacre and the working-class mobilization of the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries. In Europe, Britain, Australasia, and eventually Canada, that historical moment gave rise to new urban workers' parties that challenged or replaced existing urban parties, whereas in the United States, it eventually led to the partial transformation of the Democrats into an advocacy group for urban workers.

When workers' parties first entered the fray in industrialized societies, they faced a set of interrelated problems due to their geographic concentration. They had trouble coordinating with existing parties of the urban left. They found it difficult to select a platform that could lead to parliamentary majorities. And they lost badly in the transformation of votes to seats. Parties of urban workers throughout Europe came to understand that a system of winner-take-all districts was bad for them.

In Europe, these problems were nipped in the bud by the adoption of proportional representation in the early twentieth century, which led to the representation of both workers' parties and preexisting liberal parties throughout the twentieth century. In Britain and its former colonies, the old plurality systems survived, in large part because of the self-interest of elites from both conservative and workers' parties. In the Commonwealth countries that retained the old pre-industrial system of winner-take-all districts, this geographic dilemma continued throughout the postwar period.

In the United States, the full urbanization of the Democratic Party happened much later than with workers' parties in other industrialized countries. But the seeds were sown in the late nineteenth century. When we talk about the urban-rural divide in America, the most palpable causes are those most recent in memory: the realignment of the South, the rise of social and cultural partisan battles, and the emergence of the knowledge economy. But these factors only served to expand and sharpen a geographic divide that emerged in the era of iron, coal, and steam. The geographic dilemma facing the Democrats today is a variant of the dilemma faced by workers' parties throughout Europe, Britain, and Australasia in the early twentieth century.

The Long Shadow of the Industrial Revolution

FAST-FORWARD NINETY YEARS from the night of the Reading Railroad Massacre to a conversation in the 1960s at a working-class bar in the fictionalized version of downtown Reading, portrayed in the second of John Updike's "Rabbit" novels. Earl Angstrom is a proud union member who recently arranged a job for his son, Harry ("Rabbit"), at a unionized print shop. Over a Schlitz beer after work, Earl describes to Harry his deep appreciation for the Democrats, the New Deal, and the Great Society, effusing about Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ): "Believe me he did a lot of good for the little man." Speaking of Medicare, he says: "It's like a ton of anxiety rolled off my chest. There's no medical expense can break us now."

By the time Earl was sharing that beer with his son, he was approaching retirement, and the golden era of manufacturing in Reading was long over. The mills were closed and the entire hosiery industry had moved to the South. The long decline of Reading and other northern postindustrial cities and towns had already begun, and the Reading Socialists were a distant memory. Yet somehow the urban workers of Earl's generation had become loyal members of a party that, in the heyday of the Socialists, had been the party of rural farmers. Well into the 1920s, in fact, support for Democrats in the Northeast still came predominantly from rural areas, and Republicans

Chris Warshaw, as well as with other coauthors including Ernesto Calvo, Aina Gallego, Nolan McCarty, and Boris Shor. I am in debt to all of them.

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Democrats won majorities of the votes cast in state legislative elections for both chambers in Virginia, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, while failing to win majorities of seats. In Ohio, in the seventeen state senate seats up for election, Democrats won only six, in spite of winning 53 percent of the votes cast for the two major parties.

2. For each Senate since 1990, excluding special elections, I added up the votes cast for candidates of the two major parties in each of the three general elections that led to the composition of that Senate. In 2016 and 2018, this analysis was undermined by the presence of two Democrats on the ballot in California. So for those two California elections, instead of Senate votes, I use the votes cast for Democratic and Republican candidates in the presidential and gubernatorial elections, respectively.

3. David Dailey, *Ratf**ked: Why Your Vote Doesn't Count* (New York: Liveright, 2016).

CHAPTER 1: GEOGRAPHY AND THE DILEMMA OF THE LEFT

1. Joseph A. Dacus, *Revolution in Pennsylvania: A History of the Railroad Union Strike and the Great Uprising of 1877* (St. Petersburg, FL: Red and Black Publishers, 2011).

2. James Hudson Maurer, *It Can Be Done: The Autobiography of James Hudson Maurer* (New York: Rand School Press, 1938), 85.

3. Maurer, *Autobiography*, 83.

4. See Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics* (London: MacMillan, 1920); Paul Krugman, *Geography and Trade* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Edward Glaeser, *Triumph of the City* (London: MacMillan, 2011).

5. This map, like others throughout the book, was created using ArcGIS® software by Esri. ArcGIS® and ArcMap™ are the intellectual property of Esri and are used herein under license. Copyright © Esri. All rights reserved. For more information about Esri software, see www.esri.com.

6. The railroad map includes all railroads constructed before 1911. The data are from Jeremy Atack, "Historical Geographic Information Systems (GIS) database of U.S.

Railroads" (2016). Rail nodes are from the United States Department of Transportation "Railroad Nodes" database.

7. Ernesto Calvo and Jonathan Rodden, "The Achilles Heel of Plurality Systems: Geography and Representation in Multiparty Democracies," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 4 (October 2015): 789–805.

8. See Adam Przeworski and John Sprague, *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). This classic book points out that urban workers were never, strictly speaking, a majority of the population in any country when workers' parties started competing in elections. As a result, they faced a dilemma: "Given the minority status of workers, leaders of class-based parties must choose between a party homogeneous in its class appeal but sentenced to perpetual electoral defeats or a party that struggles for electoral success at the cost of diluting its class orientation" (p. 3). This dilemma is sharpened by the geography of these parties' support in a system with winner-take-all districts.

9. Henry G. Stetler, *The Socialist Movement in Reading, Pennsylvania, 1896–1936: A Study in Social Change* (Storrs: University of Connecticut, 1943).

10. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1967), 147.

11. The Norwegian Labor Party formally forbade its members to make any such agreements.

12. In Scandinavia, they also broke through in some rural areas populated with landless agricultural and forestry workers. Landless agricultural workers also formed a base of support for communists and socialists in the Italian "red belt" around Tuscany and Umbria, and in the Spanish region of Andalusia.

13. In many cases, the underrepresentation of workers' and socialist parties was also driven by the fact that reapportionment had not taken place as urban populations grew. The population of urban German constituencies, for example, was substantially larger than that of rural constituencies.

14. Cited in Josep Colomer, "The Strategy and History of Electoral System Choice," in *The Handbook of Electoral System Choice*, ed. J. Colomer (New York: Palgrave MacMillan), 47.

15. Lucas Leemann and Isabela Mares, "The Adoption of Proportional Representation," *Journal of Politics* 76, no. 2 (April 2014): 461–478; Gary Cox, Jon Fiva, and Daniel Smith, "Parties, Legislators, and the Origins of Proportional Representation," *Comparative Political Studies* (April 2018).

16. Technically, a form of proportional representation was introduced in Belgium in 1899, but that system included small, gerrymandered districts that led to a highly disproportionate transformation of votes to seats, and it retained the old system of plural voting.

17. Josephine Andrews and Robert Jackman, "Strategic Fools: Electoral Rule Choice under Extreme Uncertainty," *Electoral Studies* 24, no. 1 (March 2005): 65–84.

18. Richard Johnston, *The Canadian Party System: An Analytical History* (Vancouver, Canada: UBC Press, 2017).

19. Classic works include Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1976); Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York: Norton, 2000). Important recent books include Alberto Alesina and Edward Glaeser, *Fighting Poverty in Europe and the United States: A World of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006);

Robin Archer, *Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Karen Jusko, *Who Speaks for the Poor?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

20. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

21. Matthew Soberg Shugart and John Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

CHAPTER 2: THE LONG SHADOW OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

1. Because county-level population density is highly skewed, I present natural logs.

2. These regressions are weighted by county population. Both the dependent variable (Democratic vote share) and the independent variable (population density) are logged.

3. Note that there were some relatively rural counties in the manufacturing core where support for the Democrats was as high as in the urban districts during this period, such as unionized mining communities in places like western Wisconsin and northern Michigan.

4. Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright, 2013).

5. This is captured by the differences between the three lines for different regions in Figure 2.2, but it is also useful to explicitly divide the states according to their level of industrialization. From the 1930s to the 1980s, the positive relationship between population density and Democratic voting has been highly contingent on the presence of early manufacturing. Using data on manufacturing employment from the 1920 census, I divided the states into four quartiles according to the level of manufacturing intensity and examined the relationship between population density and Democratic voting for each group of states. The impact of population density on Democratic voting was over twice as high in the most manufacturing-intensive states as in the states in the second quartile. And in most years, there was no discernable relationship in the states falling into the third and fourth (least industrialized) quartiles.

6. Richard Walker and Robert Lewis, "Beyond the Crabgrass Frontier: Industry and the Spread of North American Cities, 1850–1950," *Journal of Historical Geography* 27, no. 1 (January 2001): 3–19.

7. Edward Glaeser and Joseph Gyourko, "Urban Decline and Durable Housing," *Journal of Political Economy* 113, no. 2 (2005): 345–375.

8. John Updike, *Trust Me* (New York: Random House, 1987), 97.

9. To draw this conclusion, I pursued two approaches. First, I regressed the precinct-level 2008 Democratic vote share on precinct-level density, allowing the effects to vary according to the county-level manufacturing share in the 1920 census. I found that the relationship was much stronger in counties with higher historical manufacturing employment. Second, I estimated models in which precinct-level population density was interacted with the proximity to the nineteenth-century rail network (my precinct-level proxy for historical manufacturing). I discovered that population density has a much larger positive impact on Democratic voting in precincts located near rail nodes.

10. To make these observations, I have used geographic information systems (GIS) to combine precinct-level election data, historical rail data, and contemporary census information at the level of census block groups.