

## BOOKSHELF

# ‘Why Cities Lose’ Review: Where Politics Meets Geography

Reliably liberal voters are usually clustered together more tightly than their conservative opponents, a problem for the Democratic Party.

*By Lyman Stone*

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Why have American politics become so polarized? One reason is that in recent years, while Democratic politicians have increased their dominance in urban areas ever further, the traditional rural support base for Democratic candidates in Appalachia and the South has collapsed. Conservative “blue dog” Democrats are nearly extinct.

At the same time, the urban-centered coalition of the left is winning fewer elections than you would expect, given its share of the overall electorate. In the 2000 and 2016 elections, the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate lost the Electoral College despite winning the popular vote. Beyond this, at every level—the House and Senate and especially state legislatures—Democratic candidates win fewer elections than their raw vote tallies suggest should be the case. As Stanford political scientist Jonathan Rodden writes in his new book, “Democratic voters have been inefficiently distributed across districts for decades.” This isn’t because of partisan gerrymandering; instead, Mr. Rodden says, “the Democratic Party has a political geography problem.”

“Why Cities Lose” explores the current concentration of left-of-center voters in American cities, and along the way explains why that urban-rural divide is mirrored around the world. Filling his book with maps and charts, the author excels in analyzing the historical roots of urban political movements. In perhaps the most fascinating section, Mr. Rodden presents maps of 19th-century railroad nodes and shows that the past presence of those steam-age crossings strongly correlates with Democratic Party vote shares today. He traces similar connections between old railroad hubs and leftist voting in political systems the world over.

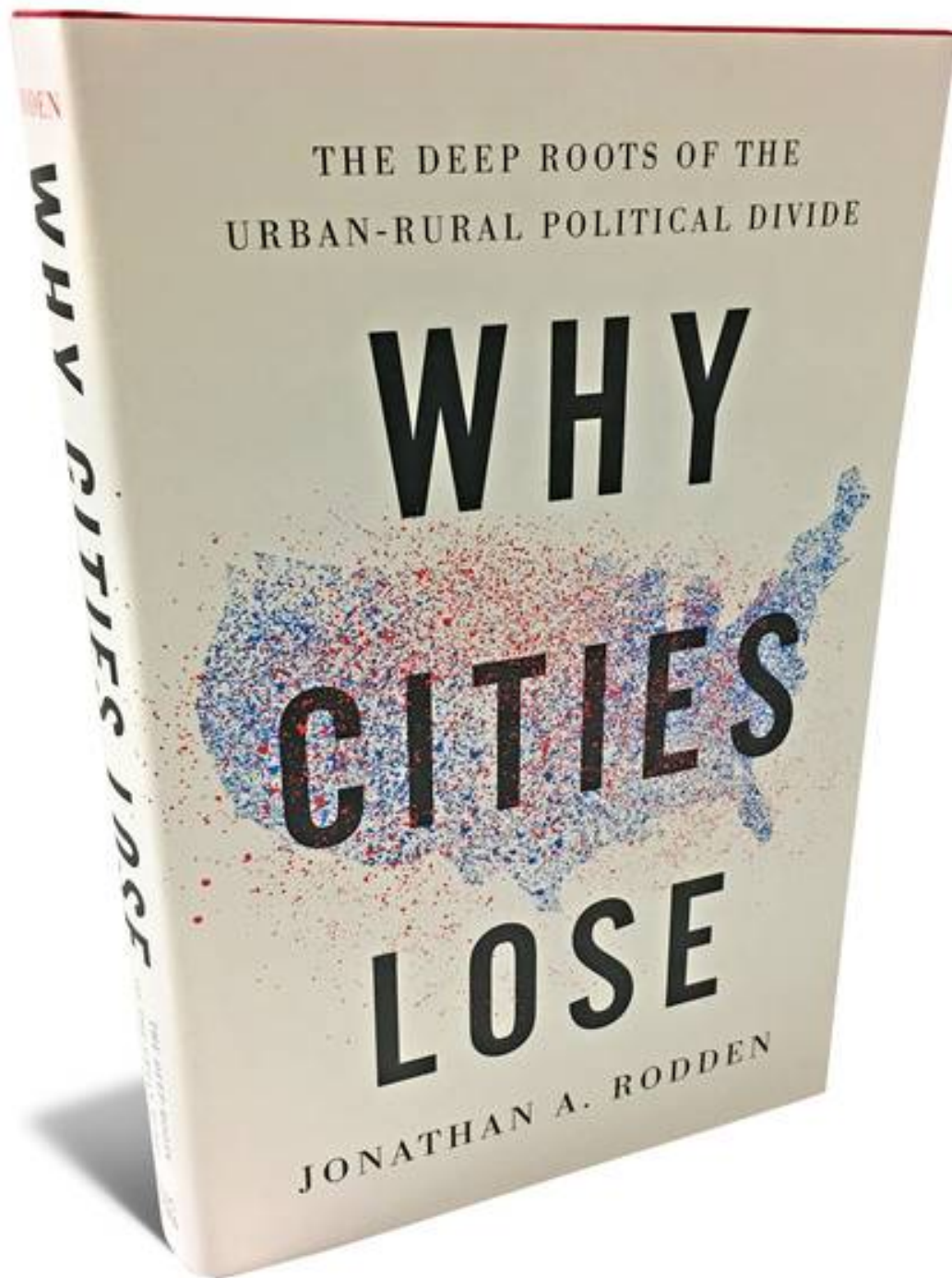


PHOTO: WSJ

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## WHY CITIES LOSE

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By Jonathan A. Rodden  
*Basic, 313 pages, \$30*

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The exact mechanics that Mr. Rodden proposes for this particular phenomenon are a bit vague. The railroads aren't the force they once were, and the individuals who make up today's urban

left often have no connection to those who made up the urban left in the past, so the channel perpetuating political leftism must be institutional or environmental. Perhaps, the author speculates, urbanites living in dense neighborhoods like these simply become acclimated to large municipal governments and powerful civil-society organizations like unions.

Whatever the cause, it cannot be doubted that dense urban areas are, and long have been, power bases for the left. Thus these voters are almost always clustered together more tightly than their conservative political opponents. The problem for Democrats, as Mr. Rodden documents, is that any electoral system based on geographically contiguous electoral districts will end up underrepresenting voters densely clustered by ideology.

While American leftists often complain that the system is rigged against their candidates, the electoral problem for Democrats isn't about the urban-rural divide per se but about relying for votes on areas with little political diversity. In fact, at one point the author lays out potential future scenarios in which a Republican Party that overrelies on less densely populated areas could see its candidates become proportionally underrepresented in government. He suggests this is already the case in a state like Utah.

The problem of the political left being clustered too densely in cities has been widely understood since at least the late 19th century. It led leftists in many countries to advance their aims by advancing proportional representation, which ensures that legislative seats are apportioned not by district but according to a party's share of the overall vote. Meanwhile, Anglophone countries stuck with the system of elections by district, and today the smaller burden of government in Anglophone countries can be accounted for, to a large degree, simply by the difference in election systems.

"Why Cities Lose" was written, in part, to describe a political path forward for American progressives, and Mr. Rodden thus strongly recommends they should push for a shift to proportional representation. But considering that such a drastic change may never come, the author has other advice. "In that event," he writes, "the United States might fall back on the coping mechanism it has always used to deal with geographic sectionalism: a strong tradition of federalism and decentralization."

Federalism, though, isn't a coping mechanism. The fundamental principle of American government isn't "try the Federal government first, and when that fails, try the states." It is, in

fact, the reverse: The structure of American government was devised to prevent local cliques from dominating national affairs. In a quite fitting and Jeffersonian sense, the system forces urban parties to develop platforms that appeal to voters outside their own narrow faction.

So what else might Democrats do, besides altering the political system? “Perhaps the clearest path to reducing urban-rural polarization,” Mr. Rodden suggests, “would be for the Democrats to return to the era of the blue dogs, allowing suburban and rural moderates to thrive in a heterogeneous party.” Democrats can reduce their electoral deficit simply by changing their platform to appeal to more moderate voters. Talk more about health care, less about wokeness.

Appealing to moderates could be good politically for Republicans, too, who could themselves crack the urban-rural divide if they found ways to appeal to urban voters disillusioned with machine politics, corrupt leaders and wasteful governments. With luck, books like “Why Cities Lose” might provoke both parties to recognize that our electoral system has always rewarded politicians that strive to build a politically diverse coalition.

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