Geography and Representation

Interview with Jonathan Rodden on EconTalk, Hosted by Russ Roberts

October 4, 2012

Roberts: We're going to talk about your research on voting and geography, and if we have time we'll explore some other issues you've been working on as well. But I want to start by talking about the book you are working on, which has at least the tentative title, *The Long Shadow of the Industrial Revolution: Geography and the Representation of the Left*. Let's start with what seems to be true in the United States geographically. People in cities seem to vote differently from people in suburbs and rural areas, with a lot of consistency. What do we know about this pattern in the United States and outside the United States?

Rodden: It's something that I think anyone who looks at an electoral map in the United States can easily identify. We've been mainly looking at county-level maps over the last few elections, and it's hard not to see that kind of a pattern. When you look at a state like Missouri, for instance, you'll see that St. Louis County and the counties around Kansas City are blue, and the rest of the state is kind of some shade of red or purple.

Roberts: Where blue means supporting Democrats and red means voting for Republicans.

Rodden: Unfortunately, those are the colors that American cartographers have picked up. In the rest of the world, of course, red means Left. We have to do things a little bit differently; makes it hard for me when I make the maps to try to explain the argument in the book and elsewhere. But yes, Americans are always referring to the Democrats as blue for some reason. But this is something that shows up in those county-level maps. But what we didn't see, that is something I've found interesting, is I've been investing a lot of time and effort into collecting precinct-level data, and then trying to make some precinct-level maps–and I've been doing this for a variety of other countries as well—is that this kind of correlation between population density and voting behavior seems to hold even at much lower levels of analysis. So that even if we go within some county, even in rural Missouri, and we go from the very sparsely populated periphery of that county and we move into the County Seat, a place that has a little bit of rental housing, maybe clustered along some railroad tracks, we see that correlation between population density and voting behavior. It shows up even at that fine-grained scale. And that's something I found really interesting and started looking around to see where is that kind of more generally. And it's true in lots of places. I'm discovering it's not completely universal. There are conservative cities. There have been, some of them kind of a long history. So, Stockholm is a good example of a place where there is a clustering of conservatives in the city center, and there has been for some time. There are well-known neighborhoods in Madrid that are kind of, everyone can point to, that are densely populated and are conservative. In the United States, it's really quite striking—I think the only example of a place that is very densely populated that votes consistently for Republicans is little Havana in Miami.

Roberts: Kind of the exception that proves the rule.

Rodden: Exactly. So that correlation is especially strong in the United States, and what I've found is that it's very strong in the other countries that use these winner-take-all, majoritarian fusions. Which, really I'm referring to places colonized by Great Britain and Britain itself. So we see that correlation between density and voting in Britain; in New Zealand, especially before they changed their electoral institutions; in Canada, it's very striking as well—so, I've made some precinct-level maps of Canada where you look at the

Great Lakes states in the United States and you look at Southern Ontario and that part of Canada, and the electoral maps look identical. You can't even tell where one country stops and the other one begins. You have that clustering of Left votes in the cities. So, it's a very common pattern. And one of the things I'm still trying to understand is under what conditions do we really see, is that pattern most clear. And this is where—the book ultimately doesn't have in the title anything about urbanization or cities. It says something about industrialization. And I think that is really the story. That when I mention that Stockholm has these dense conservative neighborhoods, I think that has something to do with the fact that the process of industrialization was different in Sweden than in the United States.

Roberts: Now, Jon, before you get to that, just explain for a minute: When you use the phrase "winner take all," you are referring to the fact that once you get more votes than the other person, you get the seat. It doesn't matter whether you win 80, 90%, or 50.1%; or if there are multiple candidates, if you win by one vote. Right?

Rodden: Right. And this is the way elections were conducted in most of the world up until a period around WWI. You divide up a country into districts, and there are candidates running in those districts, and the person with the most votes wins. It could be a four or five party split and someone could win with 30% of the vote. And in fact, that happened quite frequently in the late 1800s and early 1900s. So, most European countries had a system much like the United States with winner-take-all districts. But then there was a big transformation between the turn of the century and the tail end of WWI, where a lot of continental European countries switched to a system of proportional representation, where the number of seats you received in the legislature is proportionate to the number of votes received by a party. Which has the effect of inviting, of creating more political parties. So, when I teach a course on political institutions, one of the things we think about for the United States is that if the United States had proportional representation, what kind of a party system would we have? And most students, when they kind of think about it, believe there would be a Libertarian Party that would be more successful; and perhaps there would be a party that was more focused on African Americans. Those are at least a couple of the possibilities. Finer grained distinctions on the two.

Roberts: Green Party.

Rodden: Yeah, Green Party. And maybe a party that is economically liberal but socially conservative; and vice versa. That's the kind of thing that seems to emerge. So these electoral rules can have a really important impact on who gets represented and what politics looks like in a country. And what I'm doing in this project is thinking about that from a perspective that's a little different from the way we usually think about it. I'm linking it to geography and I think that's part of the reason why these countries look very different. When you combine the geography of preferences with these electoral rules you get really different kinds of results.

Roberts: Which countries have proportional representation right now? What are some countries that do it that way rather than districts with winner-take-all, one seat per district or a number of seats per district?

Rodden: Most of continental Europe uses some type of proportional representation. So, maybe the country that people tend to think of as the purest form of proportional representation is the Netherlands, where there is a very high proportionality between the percentage of the votes and the seats. And there's really just one single national district. The country isn't even divided up into various electoral districts. The same is true of Israel. So, these are kind of thought of as the purest forms of proportional representation. But there are also proportional electoral systems in most of continental Europe. One country after another made that switch. To the point where it's really the wealthy developed countries that still use single member districts are limited to France and the former British colonies that I mentioned earlier, including the United States.

Roberts: What about the United Kingdom?

Rodden: The United Kingdom is still the classic case of a winner take all, majoritarian system. And it's one that is still—many of the other countries that were colonized by Great Britain also use these institutions.

So, once we move beyond the wealthy countries—India uses a single-member, district, winner take all system, very much like Great Britain. And a lot of the islands in the Caribbean that were colonized by England , and several African countries.

Roberts: A lot of people have looked at—I know it is real and speculated whether it's relative instability of party leaders and prime ministers is a result of its fractious party system, where there are lots and lots of parties, along the lines that you talked about. Do other countries have that? I mean, in the United States, we only have two strong major parties. That has benefits, but lots of negatives. The result of that is that the president usually stays in power for 4 years, unless, God forbid, there is an accident, or a crime. It's very rare—the House can turn over every two years but often stays in the hands of one party for a relatively long period of time. And so people claim that the United States, because of that and because of the Constitution, tends to be a little bit inertial. Doesn't have a lot of ability to change dynamically and quickly. Whereas these other systems change more quickly but they are less "stable." Which obviously there are costs and benefits of either system. But is that true about proportional representation? Is it less stable, more "fractious," whatever that means?

Rodden: Well, I think the problem with that claim is that proportional representation contains such a wide variety of different types of systems. And so Israel might be kind of at one extreme. There are ways of making a proportional representation system a little bit less chaotic. So, kind of an earlier example of exactly that complaint—some people blamed the rise of the Nazis and the breakup of Weimar Germany to an excessively proportional system that created lots of parties and chaos, and constantly coalitions falling and new ones forming, and elections being called. So in the German, post-War, constitution, they created a system that is far less fractious. And they have a thing called a constructive vote of no confidence: so you can't take apart a government unless you have another one prepared, already in place. They also have a 5% hurdle—so, you have to have 5% of the vote to get representation in Parliament. So, lots of proportional countries have institutions like these that make them a lot more stable. And it's also the case, and voters in many Scandinavian countries for instance, have a pretty clear sense of which parties will coalesce. And so they go to the polls almost thinking, even though there are 5, 6, 7 parties in some instances, there are often two big blocs of parties; and it's pretty clear which parties will work together. It doesn't always create as much chaos and kind of blackmail potential for the small parties as one might expect. But certainly there are some countries when that happens. The proportional system in Italy in the past has been blamed for some of its difficulties. And Belgium as well in the past has again been a case where a lot of fiscal indiscipline that people have blamed on multi-party coalitions.

Roberts: Well, it gives minority parties more power than they might otherwise have, not just in terms of number of seats, but in ability to be part—or as you say, blackmail, or veto a coalition-creation. That's something that as Americans we don't have that experience via that mechanism. There are, within each party and sometimes within the legislature, minority viewpoints that can be decisive in similar ways. But it's not the same structure.

Rodden: Yes. All that diversity gets reflected within the two major parties in the United States. And a lot of the negotiations take place in a kind of a different way. Whereas they might take place between parties in a proportional system. They take place between, say, the Tea Party Caucus and the rest of the Republicans. Or the Congressional Black Caucus and the rest of the Democrats.

Roberts: Going back to this point about density—so, we just had a little digression on forms of government. Let's go back to your point about geographical density and the implications for political views. So, there's this strong correlation between population density and political preferences of the voting population. When did that start? When could you first point to that as an empirical regularity? How old is it?

Rodden: I think that the answer is it's a little different in Europe than in North America. It seemed to correspond to the Industrial Revolution in Europe. Once peasants left farms and moved to cities and started working as wage laborers in factories, they became targets for the mobilization efforts of Socialists and Social Democrats and workers' parties. The very fact of this density and the creation of labor unions is what generated the kind of Left/Right politics that we know, in many developed countries. And urbanization

became almost a prerequisite for the generation of the Left as we know it. In the United States it happened a little bit later. The Democrats didn't clearly become the party of urban workers until around the New Deal. So, one of the things, some graphs that I've made that haven't quite made it into the manuscript yet—if you look at the county-level correlation between population density and voting, you just see a lot of nothing up until the 1920s. And then toward the end of the 1920s and into the 1930s all of a sudden this relationship emerges. And it just gets stronger and stronger over time. And that's one of the things that I've puzzled over, is that it seems to have a lot to do with the location of factories and railroads and shipping routes and things like this, warehouses. But the relationship has become even stronger, even in the last 15 or 20 years. So, there seems to be something even more to this relationship in the United States than the mere fact that we have 19th century housing and sort of dense working class housing in the city centers. There seems to be a bit more to it. Maybe it has something to do with—because some of the neighborhoods that are voting for the Left that are very dense are not proletarian kinds of places at all. They are downtown San Francisco and the Upper East Side in Manhattan; downtown Seattle; places like this that are very high-income.

Roberts: Not a lot of folks working the assembly line.

Rodden: Exactly. And this is something kind of fascinating that's happened in a lot of cities, not just in the United States. There is this moment at which the working class housing of the early 20th century empties out; there are no longer workers there; and sort of a very new type of person moves in, who is mainly interested in buying, being able to walk out the door and get a certain type of latte, or certain style of sushi. And that's what the city brings them. It's not proximity to a place where they are sharing tools with a bunch of other workers. It's something about consumption opportunities. And so from Sydney to London to San Francisco and New York, the vote share of the Left remains remarkably consistent as the working class moves out and this new class of urban, for lack of a better word, yuppie, moves in. The labor vote share in Australia, in England, stays the same. It stays at 85% or something.

Roberts: And as you point out, and this is one of the most striking correlations—it's hard to imagine that it's causal, but you make an interesting case—you point out is that voting patterns in U.S. Presidential elections don't mirror the location of manufacturing. Tell me if I got this right. Do not mirror the location of current manufacturing jobs, but do mirror the location of manufacturing jobs decades ago.

Rodden: Exactly. This is one of the things that really hits you over the head. If you go into the current, 2000 or 2010 Census and you get some data on manufacturing employment as a share of total employment, and you plot that against the Obama vote share or the Kerry vote share or something like that, there's no relationship at all. But if you go back in the 1880s Census or the 1910 Census and you do the same thing, manufacturing as a share of total employment, you see this striking positive relationship between historical manufacturing employment and current Democratic vote share. And so what my argument is about is that these places that are voting, you know, 85, 90% for the Democrats tend to be places like downtown Cleveland, where there's no manufacturing to speak of any more. But all of the housing that was built for the workers in the early part of the century is still there. And so all these places that industrialized before the rise of the automobile have these dense kind of proletarian neighborhoods with affordable dense apartments. These places kind of attract the type of person who tends to vote for the Left, and that happens in lots of different countries. That's kind of, I think, the thing that links all this together in these various countries. And this is where that density correlation comes from.

Roberts: Now, you just said that in a particular way. You said it attracts people who tend to vote for parties on the Left. I think when the average person—well, let's not say the average person. As an economist, when I think about this phenomenon, which fascinates me: Why are cities so—it's not, as you point out, 55-45, Democrat-Republican. It's 85-12, it's 90-to-7. Your natural thought as an economist is—there are kind of two natural ways to think about it. One is the way you just describe it: that people who are attracted to these types of living arrangements of high density happen to be people of the Left. The other alternative way to think about it is when you live in close proximity to other people you have a taste for larger government, say, or you are going to want more government services; you are going to rely more on government. Another argument would be: in a dense urban area people are a little more scary, strangers are more prevalent, you don't have the ties you'd have in a rural environment with your neighbors because you

are not building a barn together. And so you've got to have something to substitute for community. And these sort of—these are kind of cheesy, I don't know what you'd want to call them, armchair explanations. Have people written about this? I assume they have, in Political Science. Is there any argument there?

Rodden: Yeah, there's kind of less than you would think, but these arguments, they are all kind of there in one way or another. To me it all kind of boils down to: the different stories you are telling right now, is it a selection effect or a treatment effect?

Roberts: Correct.

Rodden: So, do cities actually—if we could randomly assign individuals to suburban, rural, and urban environments, would we see that the city actually changes your preferences? Because you understand something about the value of public transportation, for example, if you are an urban resident. You are tripping over drug addicts on the way to work and you want something done about that. Or, is it the case that people with Leftist preferences are more comfortable–

Roberts: Want to live near drug addicts.

Rodden: Exactly. High income people who have the choice. So that's another further refinement. There are people who have the choice of whether or not to live in cities. There are also those—a lot about the housing—I think the combination of the housing availability and actually there is some good work by Ed Glaeser suggesting that one of the reasons why the poor cluster in cities in the United States is because of the transportation infrastructure and the lack of automobile ownership among the poor. So that a combination of this 19th century housing with a bus and train network makes it so that—it could be income that's doing most of the work in the story. And I think that probably still is the case. The stories about the Upper East Side and the Gold Coast of Chicago and San Francisco—those are a little bit unique. For the most part we are talking about people at the bottom of the economic spectrum, the clustering of poor people in cities. That has various explanations.

Roberts: When we talk about density, right now, most of the time we've been talking about urban density—that is at one end of the extreme, very dense. How does Left/Right vary with suburbs, and then rural?

Rodden: So, if you think about a graph that on the x-axis, the horizontal axis, is just the origin is the center of some U.S. city, and as you travel along the horizontal axis you are getting more and more miles from the city center, the Republican vote share is pretty much an increasing function of that distance. So, as you move out into the early developed suburbs of the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, you end up with places that are sort of modestly Democrat. And then you get into the middle suburbs and you find these really purple places. And then you get out to the exurbs and it's pretty Republican. And then you get to rural areas and it's very Republican. But rural areas are never—the precincts are never as Republican as the urban precincts are Democratic. So, you don't really find 85, 90% Republican precincts. Really almost anywhere. Which is sort of an interesting fact. I'm not quite sure what explains it.

Roberts: It's fascinating. So, let's get back to this role of industrialization. What does that have to do with it? Is it just this strange, how this housing stock that's left over from the fact that workers once lived very close to where they worked—they didn't have cars to commute; there was a big factory that hired a lot of people so a lot of people lived near it, and so they were going to be densely housed? And whether it's treatment or selection, it's that housing stock today that's still affecting political outcomes? Is that your story?

Rodden: Yeah, that's my best explanation for what we see. Because housing stock is so resilient. Once you put the bricks and mortar into place, they don't go away. Housing doesn't really just disappear. I mean, we have our efforts at urban renewal that we occasionally go after. Europe, much of Europe was bombed in WWII; but the striking thing about that was that they often built on the same footprint that the bombed out building—they built a pretty similar style of building, similar height, similar kind of number

of units and for a similar type of worker. So you didn't really see the change in, say, German residential neighborhoods after WWII that you might have guessed. So, my point is that there is something about the built environment—that once a city gets built up, its basic structure, while there's plenty of suburbanization that takes place, but that urban core generally something about it is very resilient. And it kind of makes these patterns last a very long time. It's not even just the cities.

Roberts: So, when Europe moved away from winner take all to a proportional representation system, you tell a story in the book about the role that, as you said earlier, the factories start up because of industrialization; workers become unionized; they are more sympathetic to Socialism; the far Left party emerges as a Socialist Party. And of course that's a threat to existing parties on the Left and to some extent to parties on the Right. How did that urbanization and industrialization affect the evolution of political systems in Europe? And why didn't that happen here in the United States?

Rodden: That's a good question. Kind of more broadly I'm interested in trying to understand why does Britain still have a single-member district system? Why did it also not switch to proportional representation? Because it came very close. Now, we've never really had a moment in the United States where we were really on the verge of choosing proportional representation nationally. But they did have a moment like that in the United Kingdom. And in fact they have made the transition in the 1990s in New Zealand. As I try to understand it, the way I think these proportional representation systems ended up coming into being is there were actors, there were people who had safe seats in cities. Often it was in Europe it was liberals versus conservatives were the main parties in the early part of the century. And as the working class gained the franchise and was able to vote, these Leftist parties started to win in the cities. And so what that was doing was it was squeezing out the existing parties, who saw that they could only win 30% of the vote, whereas they used to be able to win, say, 60% in some district. And so they still had this sizeable share of the vote, but it was spread out around the population, across the districts. And so it became obvious to these parties that they were going to be squeezed out of existence if they didn't make a change in the electoral system before it was too late. And so those pre-existing parties often tried to make a deal; the various parties that were going to get squeezed out tried to make a deal that led to the adoption of proportional representation. But there was never really a far Left party in the United States that started this squeeze. The Socialists and the Progressives, the Socialist platform was adopted, taken over by the Democrats in the 1930s. And so there wasn't really this moment when an insurgent party was going to push the Democrats out of existence. And perhaps at that moment, the Democrats, they if were smart, would have pushed for proportional representation. But that never happened. Yet in Great Britain, the Liberals were the party of the Left before the Labour Party came around. The Labour Party started to quickly gain support. And the Liberals, had they seen where things were going, they would have insisted on proportional representation. In fact, they eventually tried. And to this day, the Liberals are still pushing for proportional representation in the United Kingdom. But they didn't see that they would be squeezed out and that the Labour Party would become the main party of the Left. And so they kind of missed their opportunity. And they've been ruing that ever since. And they've been squeezed into a kind of marginal, third-party status. It's another version of that classic question about the United States: why did the United States not develop a strong socialist party that squeezed out the center-left party? It's probably something that lies a little bit beyond the story that I'm telling about geography. There's probably a lot more to it.

Roberts: So, the story that you are telling—see if I have the intuition of it. The intuition is: If I used to get 55% of the vote in my district, and now I get 45%, or 30%, I get nothing. Because I have to win.

Rodden: Right.

Roberts: So proportional representation lets some of my team stay in power. It reminds me of the way you hear some people talk about redistricting in the United States. So, you take a guy who has got a 60% vote share, a 70% vote share; and you know he's of the other party. And you know you are never going to win. So you give him a piece of somebody else's district that makes him win by 90%. But that doesn't cost you anything, because he still gets his one seat. You take the other people and you redistrict and you get your share up above 50%. It's somewhat similar in terms of the intuition.

Rodden: Yeah. The intuition is somewhat similar. There's an underlying distribution of political preferences in space. But then when you map onto that some district boundaries and you make them winner take all, and then you have the legislature that is made of those representatives, you can end up with a very different distribution in that legislature than you saw in the society. And it matters a lot how you draw those lines. And that's what redistricting is all about in the United States.

Roberts: And you suggest in the book that because of the dominance of left-oriented voters in urban areas, in winner take all systems such as in the United States, the Left in the United States does not get the power it might otherwise get in a proportional representation system. Because it is sort of dissipated in this surplus of extra votes it doesn't get any extra credit for in these cities. Is that a fair statement?

Rodden: Yes. So I think for a while now, people have noticed that there are urban districts in the United States that are extremely Democratic; and they end up—if it's true that at the precinct level you have a bunch of precincts clustered together that are 80% Democratic, it stands to reason that you draw a winner-take-all district around them and you will have an 80% or 75% Democratic district. So what we end up with in a lot of states, certainly not all states but a lot of the more industrialized states, larger states, we end up with one or several districts, say, like the Cook County, the Chicago districts. The way in Missouri around St. Louis or Kansas City; or in Indiana, it's Indianapolis and Gary—where there will be a Congressional district that is extremely Democratic but then all the other Democrats who are spread throughout the state, in these smaller cities and in the rural areas, there are not enough of them to win districts in those places. And there are too many of them, so they win by large majorities in the cities. And so you end up with an asymmetry in the transformation of votes to seats.

Roberts: And you get what economists call infra-marginal and other types of words that describe the competition. So if you are in a very safe seat, you don't have to work very hard to please your constituents, because you've got a big margin of error—or of corruption, depending on your preference. How you describe it.

Rodden: Exactly.

Roberts: So all the competition takes place at the Primary level, at the jockeying for who is going to get the blessing of the party's powerful. Because once you get that nomination, you are in. There is almost no chance—I live in Montgomery County, Maryland. Very hard to get a Republican on the County Council, or a Republican in my Congressional district. So, you'd think that would change the incentives of the people in power to please their constituents.

Rodden: Yes. In urban America, the only election is the Primary. That's a pretty basic and interesting fact I don't think we've fully understood. The only thing you have to worry about is if you somehow screw up and attract a certain type of Primary challenger. But the general election is a foregone conclusion.

Roberts: Right.

Rodden: And so you can think about the various ways in which that might affect incentives of incumbents. It's great for the incumbents. It's not good for the Democratic Party. In a state like Florida, you end up with the incumbents in the party are people from Miami-Dade who represent very left-wing constituencies. And then when the voters in the rest of Florida look at the Democratic Party in Florida and try to assess what they are all about, that's what they see.

Roberts: Sure.

Rodden: And that's the kind of conclusions that they draw. They look at the kind of representation they think they receive from those individuals. And it makes it hard for the Democrats to compete in state politics. A state where the Democrats do very well in Senate elections and gubernatorial elections and presidential elections of course are notoriously close. But in state districted elections, the Republicans are dominant.

Roberts: We've been talking about this—the implications—at the national level. Think about urban national politics and policy outcomes. When you think about it at the urban level, we have a lot of core cities in the United States that are not doing very well. There are a few that are—New York being one of them. San Francisco has done pretty well. But I used to live in St. Louis—the urban core there is very dysfunctional. Kansas City is not very healthy. Detroit—an obvious failure. Cleveland, not so good. Part of my first thought as to why those cities have done so poorly and why their suburbs have done so well is because of this lack of competition for urban policies and urban choices. We have what you could call one-party rule in the cities. And that's not because they are Democrats. There's nothing bad about Democrats' policies per se. It's that any time you have a monopoly—essentially what feels like a monopoly—even though there's an election every four years for the mayor, but if the party that the mayor represents wins every time, it can't be very good for serving the customer.

Rodden: Yeah, I think that's right. It seems pretty obvious that competition is good. And there's lots of evidence to that effect—that the politicians who are forced to contend with very close and difficult re-election battles are much more in tune to the preferences of their constituents. They put forth more effort. They just try harder. It's a very intuitive thing to claim, and I think there's a lot of evidence to back that up. How much of the kind of bad governance in urban America can we attribute to this? How much of urban decline, what caused what—that's a harder question. I don't think I have all the answers to that.

Roberts: For sure.

Rodden: Pretty complex one.

Roberts: Fair enough.

Rodden: But I think that basic claim is a good one. And I think we see similar things are true in lots of places. It's better for the voter to have competition.

Roberts: Now, we're recording this in October of 2012. So we are just about a month from a Presidential election. And we have this weird thing in the United States called the Electoral College. We have this other weird thing, which is not that different from it, which is: Wyoming gets 2 Senators. Wyoming gets 1/50th of the Senate even though they are nothing close to 1/50th of the population. So, on the surface it's an historical accident. When the Constitution was voted on and decided, there were all these political forces, urban and at the agricultural versus cities in terms of jockeying for political power. And one of the ways that competition emerged was through this strange system we have, where every state gets 2 Senators; but being a Representative is more proportional to population. Although every state gets 1. You can't get a third of one. So, as a result, we have a policy that you could argue over-represents that sparsely populated, rural, Republican-leaning Wyoming and doesn't fairly represent New York City or Los Angeles or Chicago at the national level. Is that an accurate description?

Rodden: Yes, it is, and I think the aspect of that that I've looked at most carefully is just looking at the flows of intergovernmental transfers and other resources that are transferred from the Federal government to the states. There's a pretty striking correlation between the states's Senate representation per capita, legislative representation per capita, and the amount of Federal funds it receives, so that the states like Wyoming are at the very top; and they've received far more funds per capita than the large states. And as for the implications for national policy and whether it pulls policies to the Right, it certainly would seem to—it's not a stretch to imagine that if there's an urban/rural dimension to politics that's going to push things a bit in the rural dimension. I mean, it's not quite as dramatic as we might think, because some of the overrepresented states are actually densely populated, like Rhode Island and Delaware, the initial states that actually created the rule in order to protect themselves. But eventually, it's kind of interesting, the story of how some of the sparsely populated Western states came to be states. You know, there was once a Dakota Territory, and it became North Dakota and South Dakota, explicitly because it was useful at the time in bolstering a political majority, to create four Senators rather than two. And that certainly continues. One of the interesting things about this is that within Senate delegations—so within a state like Ohio, or Tennessee, or one of these ones that has a really asymmetric distribution of partisans within the

state, sometimes you see the Senate delegation is actually a little bit to the Left of the House delegation. Because the Senate is just a kind of winner take all for the whole state; and so, these urban votes that don't matter so much in the House elections, they matter just as much in the Senate election as any other vote. So you sometimes see that a kind of Left-leaning Democrat can actually win as a Senator in one of these states. And so in some of these moments you have a Senate delegation that is a little bit to the Left of the House delegation. But in general it's correct that these Western, sparsely populated states are overrepresented and it kind of pulls the Senate as a whole to the Right.

Roberts: You'd think that would bother some folks, just the way the Electoral College does as well. I think a lot of people resent—of course, it depends who you are rooting for and how you feel about it may change depending on the nature of the Electoral College, but you always get these appeals that we need to abolish the Electoral College and it's such a weird thing and it should just be the popular vote that elects the President. We started off our conversation before we were recording—I think it was before we were recording: you emphasized your interest in positive outcomes. By positive you meant merely—not the everyday use of that word—but rather, in social science positive means the way things are. Not whether they are good or bad. That's what we call normative outcomes. Normative outcomes, we judge whether the outcomes are good or bad. So right now, we are describing positive effects, meaning: these are the natural implications of these kinds of systems of representation. But of course, many people have normative feelings about them. They think: Well, if this pushes politics to the Right, we ought to go to a better system. Those who are on the Right would say: No, this is a great system; this is the way it should be. What are your thoughts on the Electoral College? Is there anything normative to say about it? It obviously encourages certain kinds of campaigning which affect how the national vote turns out. If it were a majority rule election people would campaign very differently than they do now.

Rodden: Yeah. My basic take on these things is I'm such a positivist on them—as a social scientist I'm always trying to understand how these differences affect outcomes. And of course every once in a while you see something that really strikes you as just unfair. I think Senate representation in the United States has that quality. I think it's hard to come up with a really good normative justification for Wyoming having two Senators and California having two Senators. And the Electoral College as well seems to be something that emerged from a set of negotiations that took place a long time ago, with issues in mind that are very different from the issues people have today. So, I can certainly see why the Electoral College might emerge as something that people are offended by. But it seems—these things are so difficult to reform. Mainly because someone always thinks they might benefit from the status quo.

Roberts: Yeah. Some do.

Rodden: But the interesting thing about it is that these things change over time. I told a story earlier about how the Liberals in the United Kingdom should have latched on to proportional representation earlier, and they could have been much better off. And I think interesting in the U.S. context, who latches on to what kind of electoral reform—these things change over time depending on who thinks they might have an advantage. For the Electoral College, lots of analysis has been done on this. It is just like we were describing in the case of the House and the Senate. It is a majoritarian, winner take all way of transforming preferences for a party into a legislative seat. In this it's just one seat—it's the executive. So the question is: is this thing biased in favor of one party or the other. And the answer seems to be: Not really. It changes. There are scenarios. If you go to the website 538.com, Nate Silver has situations in which Romney can lose the Electoral College but win the popular vote, and also some scenarios in which the same can happen for Obama. The same is true when we go back historically. In this urban geography that I'm describing, the states are large enough units that it doesn't really seem to affect the Electoral College. So, it's not systematically biased, every election clearly in one direction. As far as I can tell. So at least that aspect of it is not as troubling as one might make it out to be.

Roberts: And, like many things that the Founders did—which I think is a blessing, not a curse—they made it hard to change. I think it's not just that people are worried whether they would benefit in the future from the Electoral College. It's just that it's very costly to change it; and it gives you that inertia which I think is often a good thing, not a bad thing.

Roberts: As I said, we're in October in 2012 and we are going to be hearing a lot about red states and blue states—red America, blue America. And you have a paper called "Purple America." Is there anything in there you'd like to talk about in terms of generalizing the state of the electorate in the United States?

Rodden: Well, there's lots of work where we just talk at the individual level about voters. Because of the Electoral College and the importance of the Senate and the states, we talk a lot about states. What I've been doing in this project is trying to get lower than that and not just counties but even down to precincts, and really trying to understand how people are arranged in space, and try to understand the polarization that we hear so much about at the elite level, to try to understand what it looks like at the individual level. And so, my colleague has done a lot of work to try to show that individuals are not really very polarized; that a lot of people are kind of in the middle. And this kind of bimodal distribution that we see in the legislature is not really what we'd see in society. So, I've been trying to understand how that works in metro areas, in cities: where are the moderates? And as we discussed earlier, the suburbs are most of the purple places. The geography isn't always what it seems. But certainly the campaigns have a couple of different strategies that they can—we are accustomed to thinking about them as going after Independents in places where there are a lot of Independents. So, one way to try to win an election is to go to these purple suburbs and try to swing, change the minds of Independents. But of course another way is to go to places where there are lots and lots of your supporters and try to make sure as many of them as possible show up to vote.

Roberts: At least in a swing state.

Rodden: Exactly.

Roberts: In a safe state you don't really care so much.

Rodden: Right. So your strategy varies a lot depending on what kind of state it is. And so, using these kind of fine-grained, precinct-level maps you can start to learn about what kinds of neighborhoods—if you look at what the candidates are doing, what kinds of ads they are purchasing, you can kind of figure out what type of a strategy they are employing. Both parties seem to be working pretty hard to mobilize their base. But at the same time you've got to try to—it's a complicated set of tradeoffs to decide how much to work on the base and how much to work on these suburban moderates.

Roberts: I want to close with a conversation about, sort of about the normative side, but maybe that's the wrong way to describe it. I think a lot of people have a romance about majority rule. Certainly one way that small groups of people settle disputes is they say: Well, let's take a vote. And whatever gets the most votes wins. And I think to a lot of people that's obviously the fairest, best way to decide stuff. And so all of these things that we've been talking about that mitigate that—whether it's the Electoral College, winner take all districts—a lot of people say that's just not the right way to do things. Everything should be decided by a majority vote. And yet, as we know from work by Kenneth Arrow and others, majority vote in the normative sense, meaning leading to outcomes we like, isn't so strong as it seems. On the surface, nothing could be fairer than majority rule. And yet when you look a little closer you start to see that majority rule's got some very deep flaws in it. Talk about that argument. Why is it that majority rule is not the best system? Even though I think most people have that as a starting place; that's their default.

Rodden: Yeah. This is one of the things that when I teach courses to undergraduates on institutions, we do this in the first or second week. It's a very easy think you can do to have the students give their rank ordering of their preferences for what type of pizza that they would like; you have each student rank three and then you put them together. And it's very easy to find groups of students who have what in the social choice literature is called cycling majorities, where you can show that there is no such thing as the majority will. If I set up the institutions in such a way that there's first a round robin tournament of pepperoni versus vegetarian and then the winner of that is paired off against sausage, I can get a different outcome than if I do the initial pairings in another way. And so I can show that whoever controls the agenda controls what kind of pizza the students are having. It's kind of something that we've known since Condorcet and Arrow, the classics of social choice theory: it's simply nonsensical to say that the majority has some kind of will that we will then translate into policy. And so the students are always sort of surprised by this. We like to

believe that there is such a thing as the collective will. And I think one of the basic lessons of politics and institutions is, unfortunately, it's possible to aggregate those preferences in very different ways in different institutions and get different outcomes. So we should attribute so much importance to something that we believe was the outcome of some kind of majority choice. Often the truth is much more complicated. Agenda control and political power are often used in getting us to the outcomes we see. It leads us to kind of think in a different way about how we interpret the decisions that are made by legislatures and what they actually mean.

Roberts: The other problem I have with "will of the people" is majority election. Whether it's 55-45, or 90-10, the loser obviously felt differently. So it's not the will of the people. It's will of those who won that election, whether it's a majority or whether it's proportional or whether it's this weird system we have in the United States. We don't have referenda on every item. It's this weird thing called the Legislature, Congress, Senate; we have committees; all this baggage, this incredible superstructure and infrastructure around the way political outcomes are coming out of our preferences. It's not just a majority rule referendum. And I think most people—there's a lot of problems with our political system—but I think most people think: Well, the best way to do it would obviously be a referendum because that would reflect the will of the people. And it doesn't, for all kinds of reasons. One of which is, as you said, the order of the voting can be manipulated. Information can be manipulated. There are a thousand things along the way. But the most important thing to me is that we all have different preferences. And so once you put it into a political process you are basically saying: We are going to get one outcome, and you are stuck with it—because it was the result of a vote. And I don't see that as necessarily fair at all.

Rodden: Well, right. So one other way to think about democracy: instead of thinking there is some will of the majority and we are trying to use democratic institutions to aggregate that and then turn it into policy, a very different way of thinking about democracy is: We're going to put some people in charge; and they are going to do some stuff. And after four years we are going to look backwards, retrospectively at what they've done, and decide whether we like it or not. And if we like it, we'll give them another chance. And if we don't, we'll dip into the pool of candidates and we'll pull out another one and see if they can do better. This is really a view of democracy that is more about accountability than about representativeness of some underlying will. But, as you already kind of described, in the United States it's becoming very difficult to do what I just described because we have a Senate, a House, lots of committees, a filibuster. We have the Executive, we have the Judiciary, and we have state governments which then have two chambers and an executive. And it's very hard for us to figure out who is responsible for the policies we see and then somehow hold them accountable. And so that's why, to some minds, kind of a very clear British style of accountability system would even be better. Again, that's a normative question. There's tradeoffs going both directions.

Roberts: As a—I'll make a normative comment. Because political decisions will struggle to reflect anything remotely like the will of the people, I want as few decisions as possible put into that sandbox. I'd rather have the competition of free association and free choice make those decisions and allow for the diversity of outcomes that private markets and private decisions have rather than political decisions, which are inevitably coercive. But that's my normative preference.

Rodden: Yep. Thinking about how institutions reflect the will of individuals—these are basic questions that people don't often think about. But they really should shape the way you answer these bigger normative questions about, say, how large should the state be? What kinds of things should the state do?

Roberts: Exactly. Well, we're almost out of time. Do you want to say anything about this upcoming election as a positive political scientist? Either at the national level—the Presidential, the House, or the Senate?

Rodden: Well, it seems likely that we will have more of the same in that we'll have divided government of some kind. That seems the most likely outcome. So, if we are hoping for a big resolution to all the uncertainty that we think characterizes the current moment, I suspect there won't be much uncertainty resolution. That said, it is something that will be exciting and interesting to watch, and there's a lot that still has to happen. It's certainly not a done deal in either direction.