American Electoral Institutions

Session 3

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17.263: American Elections

Roadmap

Electoral Geography
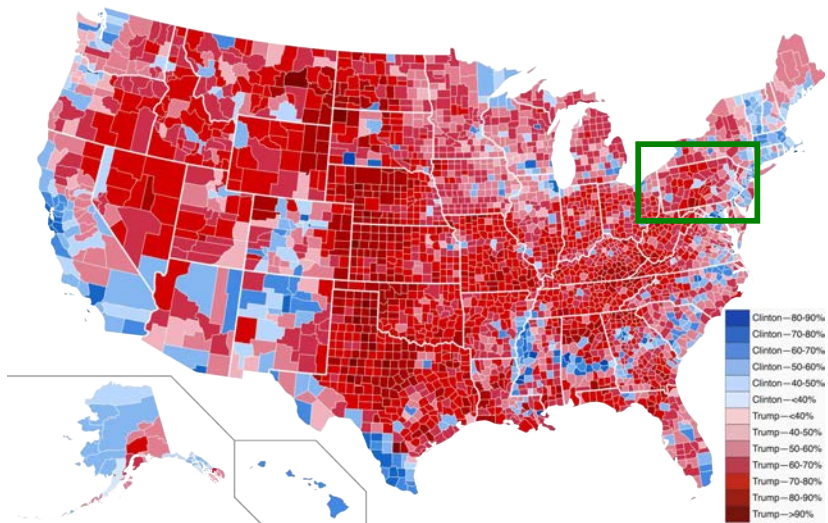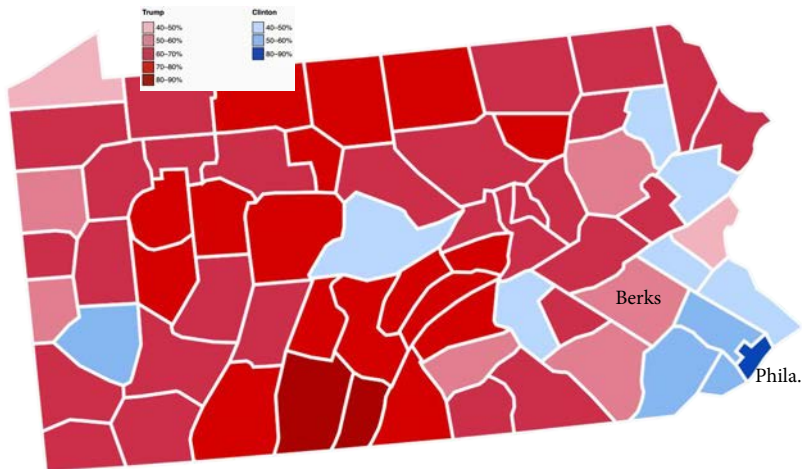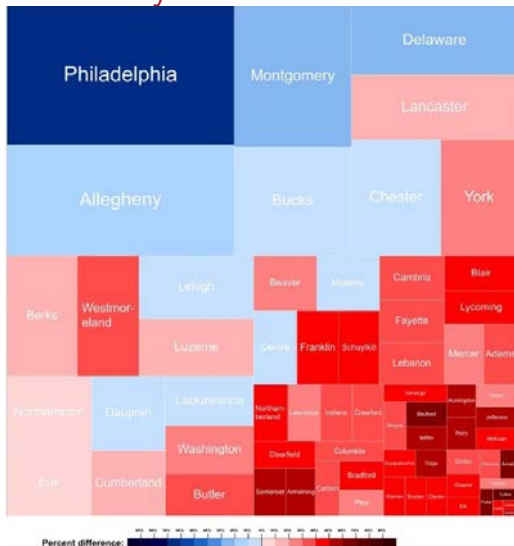
A Closer Look at Pennsylvania (Trump +0.7% in 2016)

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A Closer Look at Pennsylvania (Trump +0.7% in 2016)

A Treemap of Pennsylvania Counties
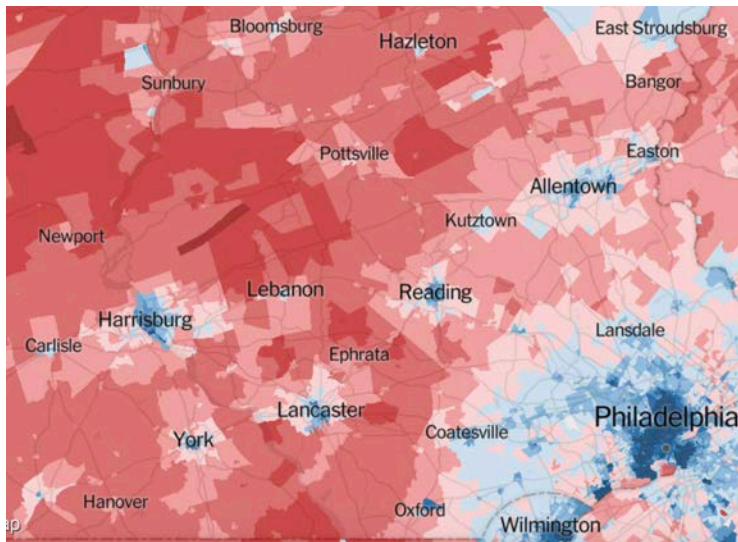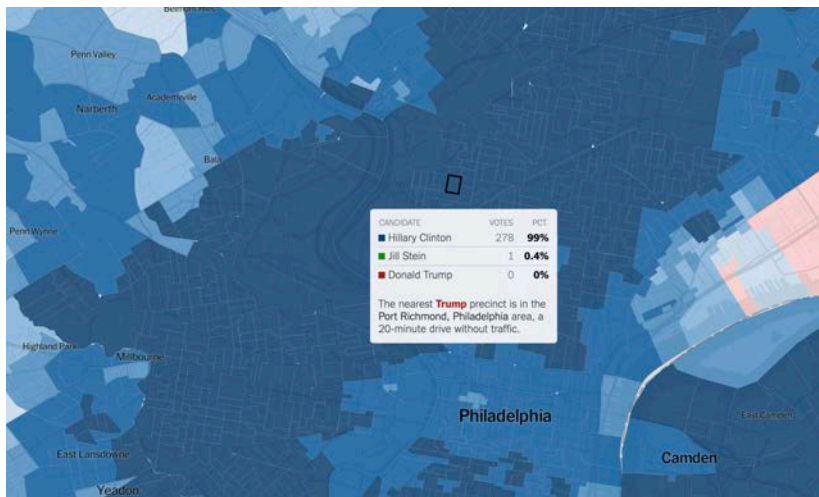

Percent difference

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Southeastern Pennsylvania

Bloch, Matthew, Larry Buchanan, Josh Katz, et al. "An Extremely Detailed Map of the 2016 Election," *New York Times,* July 25, 2018. © The New York Times Company. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.

Philadelphia, PA

CANDIDATE	VOTES	PCT
Hillary Clinton	278	99%
Jill Stein	1	0.4%
Donald Trump	0	0%

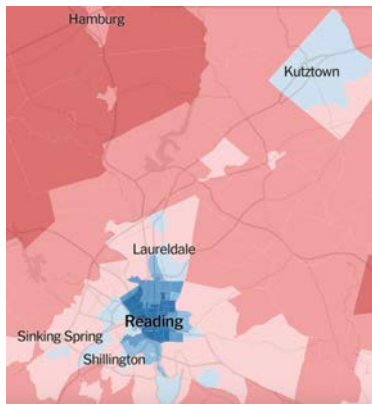The nearest **Trump** precinct is in the Port Richmond, Philadelphia area, a 20-minute drive without traffic.

Bloch, Matthew, Larry Buchanan, Josh Katz, et al. "An Extremely Detailed Map of the 2016 Election," *New York Times*, July 25, 2018. © The New York Times Company. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.

Reading, Berks County, PA

Key patterns:

► Political support is geographically clustered (homophily, context).
► Democratic support is correlated with density (Republicans dominate space).
► Democrats are more spatially concentrated than Republicans are (true most places since 1930s).

Histogram of presidential vote margin in 2016 (counties)
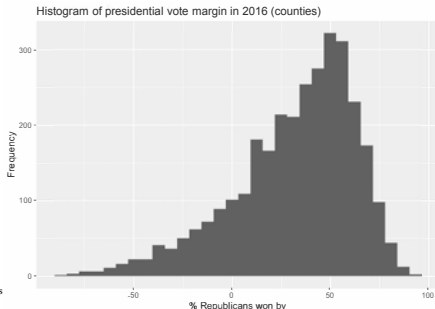
Reading, Berks County, PA
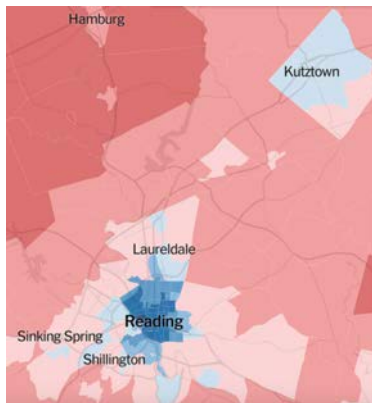
The legacy of the 2nd
Industrial Revolution ⟶

Institutions and Rules

Democratic Institutions

- As Manin et al. (1999) emphasize, institutions powerfully shape how (well) democracy functions.

- In particular, institutions facilitate political coordination and cooperation, reducing information, transaction, and other costs and discouraging individually rational but collectively destructive actions.
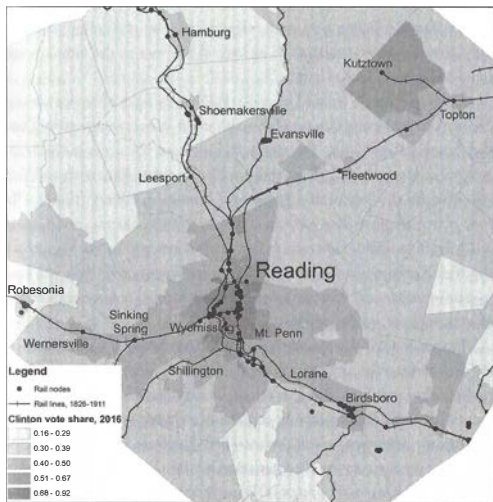
- Institutions can be governmental or societal and formal or informal.

- Examples:

    - Formal governmental: the Electoral College (written in Constitution).

    - Informal governmental: the Senate filibuster (pre-1917)

    - Formal societal: party organizations (though regulated by law)

    - Informal societal: journalistic objectivity (enforced by reputation)

Rules and Norms

▶ As these examples suggest, many institutions are (or contain) rules: they specify a standard of conduct and they are enforced.

    ▶ e.g., the Electoral College is a formal rule specifying how many electors each state receives and how electors select the president.

▶ Rules that are informal are called norms and serve several functions:

    ▶ Completing: fill in gaps and ambiguities in formal institutions

        ▶ e.g., two-term presidency

    ▶ Parallel: jointly regulate behavior in conjunction with formal rules

        ▶ e.g., Senate obstructionism

    ▶ Coordinating: integrate multiple, intersecting institutions

        ▶ e.g., informal coordination of presidential nomination mechanisms

▶ Trump has violated *a lot* of norms (not to mention rules): tax return disclosure, avoiding ethnic slurs, accepting election results, nonpolitical use of pardons, noninterference in federal investigations, avoiding conflicts of interest, generally acting "presidential", ...

Consequences of Rules

Rules (and other institutions):

1. Affect who wins and who loses.

2. Shape political strategies.

3. Induce institutional conflict and manipulation.

Example: First-Past-the-Post Elections

Single-Member District Plurality Elections

▶ Most elected offices in the USA are filled using single-member district plurality (SMDP), or "first-past-the-post," elections.

  ▶ "Single-member": Each office or seat is filled by one occupant, for which each voter can cast a single vote.

  ▶ "District": Each office represents a specific geographic constituency.

  ▶ "Plurality": The winning candidate is the one with the most (but not necessarily a majority of) votes.

1. Winners and Losers of SMDP

▶ SMPD makes it hard for geographically concentrated parties to win nat'l majorities b/c so many votes are "wasted" in lopsided districts.

▶ Thus, SMDP systems (e.g., USA, UK) disadvantage leftist parties (Democrats, Labour), which everywhere are concentrated in cities.

2000 Election

Bush % of two–party vote: 49.7%
Districts carried by Bush: 52.4%

left skew

207 Gore districts   228 Bush districts

Number of Districts

District Margin for Bush Relative to Nation (%)
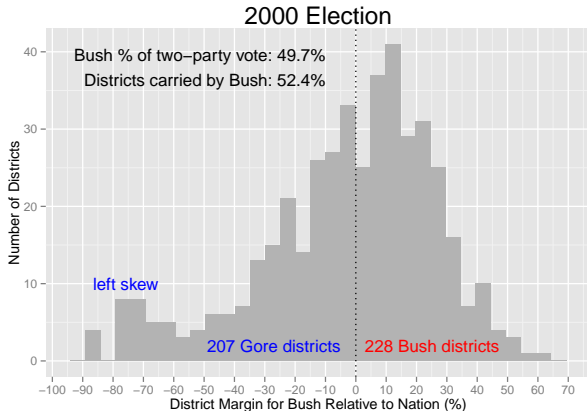
2. Strategic Adaptation to SMDP

▶ Two important strategic effects of SMDP:

1. Discouraging politicians from creating small parties, because unless they form local majorities these parties will be unable to win legislative seats, let alone a legislative majority.

2. Encouraging voters to support whichever of the two largest parties they like more (or dislike less).

▶ The result of these effects is Duverger's Law: the strong tendency for SMDP systems to have only two parties in each district (non-SMDP systems almost always have > 2 two parties).

▶ The USA, the Electoral College fosters a *national* two-party system because a party cannot win the presidency unless it is competitive in a elector-weighted majority of states.

▶ SMDP also creates incentives to cater to the median *district* rather than the median *voter*, fostering conflict within left parties between hard-left urban core and moderate non-urban swing districts.

3. Conflict over Electoral Rules

▶ By the mid-20th century, most European democracies abandoned SMPD in favor of proportional representation (PR).

▶ PR was a major demand of the socialist left, but many center-left liberals came to support it to avoid being squeezed out of cities.

▶ Nothing in the US Constitution requires SMPD elections, and states and cities have strategically experimented with various alternatives.

    ▶ e.g., multi-member legislative districts; at-large city council seats

▶ One prominent contemporary reform proposal, adopted in Maine and in many municipalities, is ranked-choice voting (aka instant-runoff or alternative vote), which keeps single-member districts but replaces plurality voting with a system in which voters rank candidates, who are then eliminated in reverse order of their first-choice votes.

▶ Key point: Electoral rules advantage some interests over others, so strategic actors try to manipulate them to their advantage.

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