

Clayton Nall. *The Road to Inequality: How the Federal Highway Program Polarized America and Undermined Cities.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 186pp. (\$99.99 cloth, \$29.99 paper).

In his new book, *The Road to Inequality: How the Federal Highway Program Polarized America and Undermined Cities*, Clayton Nall explores partisan geographic polarization through the lens of transportation policy. More specifically, he looks at the way federal transportation and infrastructure policy since the post-war period impacted residential patterns that we still see today.

First, Nall demonstrates that transportation infrastructure, fed by federal policy to finance a nationwide highway system, was a necessary condition for suburban growth and subsequently partisan change and sorting. The introduction of highways allowed people to sort themselves in ways previously unavailable. Until the federal subsidy to build highways and the construction of the Interstate Highway System, workers of all stripes functionally had to live near work. Workers show a primary preference for short commutes and quality neighborhoods and a secondary preference regarding the partisan makeup of their neighborhood. For the first time, the brand new sprawling highway infrastructure allowed people to act on both primary and secondary preferences. And so began the partisan sorting. People with more money tended to own more cars thus giving them the ability to act on those preferences. Those people tended to be Republican.

This also meant that people who did not own cars were still urban bound and could not enjoy the same geographic freedom. This translated into fewer opportunities for what came to be understood as ‘middle class’ life including things like single-family homes and employment opportunity. In this way, federal policy influenced spatial inequality. Nall finds the partisan geographic polarization is most active in metropolitan areas where highways were constructed. As highway networks developed, so did urban-suburban partisan geographic polarization. Also, the more highway infrastructure in the metropolitan area, the more politically polarized the area. They go hand in hand in cities across the country.

Second, Nall employs an impressive list of historic surveys and datasets to examine the relationship between partisan geographic polarization and the development of transportation policy. While we expect race, income, population density, and place-based interests to be strong explanations for transportation policy positions, Nall demonstrates that partisanship appears to be just as strong an explanation. The analysis is focused on partisanship, but Nall writes about the high correlation between race and geographic polarization. He thoughtfully conceptualizes partisanship as a social identity that captures multiple cleavages in the electorate and not just race. Nall shows the geographic polarization between urban and suburban areas cannot be simply explained away by ‘white flight’ or the suburbs as car-dependent neighborhoods. Rather, the geographic polarization is in part a consequence of federal transportation policy which had enduring effects including partisan polarization and systematic inequality.

Finally, Nall shows that when our cities are geographically partisan, American federalism and the importance of state and local politics fuel inequality. In this case, federally funded transportation planning was left to state and local actors. As he notes, the “longstanding devolution of transportation programs to state and local institutions exposes policy to a host of local biases, including those arising from the urban-suburban partisan geographic divide” (p. 8). Cumulatively, Nall argues, these factors explain why we see a partisan split on transportation politics, a traditionally low-salience issue.

The Road to Inequality is an important book right now given our aging and decrepit infrastructure, the lack of recent federal investment, and the partisanship of infrastructure and transit-based policy. In this book, we have a glimpse into how current-day geographic polarization began, how it crept across the nation, and where we stand now. This is an examination of a federal policy that quietly and stealthily created clear inequality that persists today, and a lesson on how to move forward.

Nall’s entire thesis is an inherently spatial question - how sprawling nationwide highways created localized geographic partisanship and deep inequalities demonstrable in urban life. Yet, the book is wholly void of maps. The book is a quick and enjoyable read while maintaining quantitative rigor but as a reader and unabashed map lover, I would have enjoyed maps illustrating the history, thesis, and findings. Nall focused on the results of federal transportation policy and explicitly not the intent. Given the deeply local nature of phenomena, an examination of the question of intent is a natural next step.

We hear a lot in our modern politics the notion of the urban/suburban divide. And it is now commonplace to see electoral support for any given candidate or issue sliced by the sub/urban divide and not just race, age, and gender. Academic literature also has much to say on the geographic divide. However, this partisan geographic divide did not always exist. We built the physical infrastructure of the country, remote bridges, urban rails, and the highways that connect us all. But in all of these arenas, there is very little examination into how that came to pass. Now, with Nall’s book, there is.

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