

# The urban-rural polarisation of political disenchantment: an investigation of social and political attitudes in 30 European countries

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**Relatively little research has explored whether there is a systemic urban-rural divide in the political and socioeconomic attitudes of citizens across Europe. Drawing on individual-level data from the European Social Survey, we argue that there are strong and significant differences between the populations in these different settings, especially across western European countries. We suggest that this divide is a continuum, running on a gradient from inner cities to suburbs, towns and the countryside. The differences are explained by both composition and contextual effects, and underscore how a firmer appreciation of the urban-rural divide is integral to future place-based policy responses.**

*Keywords:* urban-rural divide, regional inequality, geography of discontent, political disenchantment, Europe

*JEL codes:* D72, R20, R58, Z13

## Introduction

While social scientists for much of the 20th century tended to assume that political cleavages in western democracies revolved around differences in class position and attitudes towards distributional questions and the role of the state, in recent decades there has been a growing emphasis on those associated with various kinds of group identity and, latterly, with the importance of place (Kenny, 2014; Kriesi, 2010). In the US, a large body of work has documented how political differences are increasingly driven by a distinctive—and

deepening—geographical cleavage, with almost all large cities being Democratic strongholds and rural counties being a cornerstone for the Republicans (McKee, 2008; Monnat & Brown, 2017; Scala & Johnson, 2017).

Across Europe too, notable political events such as the UK 2016 Brexit vote, and the 2018 *Gilet Jaunes* protests in France have shed light on marked political divergences between urban and rural places. Yet despite growing evidence from individual countries such as the UK (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Jennings and Stoker, 2016), France (Guilluy, 2016; Ivaldi and

Gombin, 2015) and Italy (Agnew and Shin, 2020; Rossi, 2018), relatively little research has explored in a systematic way whether the growing political divide between urban and rural areas mapped in some countries is apparent across the whole continent.

The current article aims to fill this gap. Drawing on individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS), it provides systematic comparative evidence across 30 European countries over the period 2002–2018. We explore links between place of residence and attitudes on a range of different socioeconomic and political issues. To anticipate our conclusion, we find that there is a strong and significant divide between the political outlooks of urban and rural Europe. But this divergence is not best seen in binary terms, and is better understood as a gradient running from inner cities to metropolitan suburbs, towns and the countryside (as anticipated by Scala and Johnson, 2017 in the US context). We show how, compared to dwellers in inner urban cores, respondents living in suburbs, towns and rural areas are more likely to be conservative in their orientation, dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in their country, and less likely to trust the political system, even though they are strikingly more likely to participate in it, especially by voting – a finding which has an important bearing on current debates about the future of democratic politics (Runciman, 2018). However, while our analysis highlights some stark geographical variances in attitudes towards migration and globalisation, we do not find significant variation on issues that have traditionally been at the core of left-right cleavages, such as support for welfare state redistribution. And, finally, we show that these differences, which are particularly strong across western European countries, are explained by both compositional *and* contextual effects.

This article contributes to the literatures in geography and political science devoted to the spatial dimensions of political disenchantment

in three distinctive ways. First, we show how differences associated with the urban/rural continuum are significant across a wide range of attitudinal dimensions. Most recent studies of the ‘geography of discontent’ (inter alia, Dijkstra et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) consider the evidence supplied by voting patterns in elections and referendums. Yet such events may well be linked to candidate-related factors and contingent political developments, and may relate only indirectly to underlying shifts in popular attitudes (Abrams and Fiorina, 2012; Ford and Jennings, 2020). In fact, numerous political scientists suggest that electoral campaigns do not change public opinion that much, but rather ‘activate’ some considerations over others (Mutz, 2018), increasing the extent to which particular issues matter for voters when they choose a candidate. It is therefore important to understand in more depth the factors explaining the underlying dynamics of public opinion. We seek to address this challenge using attitudinal data, and our findings suggest that the linkage between the place of residence and political attitudes encompasses a wider range of political and socioeconomic issues including perceptions of political behaviour and trust in political institutions.

Second, in line with the work of Scala and Johnson (2017) on the US, we show that the geographical divide in European political attitudes should not be thought of as a dichotomy between urban and rural places—as suggested for instance by Cramer (2016) in relation to the US—but conceived instead as a gradient. This finding is in line with some recent analyses which underline how inequalities and residential segregation between inner urban areas and suburbs are increasing in many European cities (Musterd et al., 2017).

Third, we provide a preliminary analysis of some of the factors that may explain the differences that exist along the urban/rural continuum. In his analysis of attitudes to immigration, Maxwell (2019) argues that differences

between urban and rural areas are more strongly driven by sociodemographic characteristics—that is, by compositional effects—than by the influence of place of residence upon individual outlooks. In contrast, we underline how attitudes vary across sociodemographic *and* geographical dimensions. While people’s attitudes are heavily stratified by key individual observable characteristics, such as age, education and occupational status, we uncover a non-negligible correlation between places and their inhabitants’ attitudes towards various political and social issues. This conclusion has important implications for the ongoing debate about what kinds of policy solutions are best equipped to address growing territorial inequalities, and whether these should be place-sensitive or not (cf. Barca et al., 2012; Crescenzi and Giua, 2019; Iammarino et al., 2019). The article is structured as follows. The second section reviews the existing literature on the urban-rural polarisation, and develops our main, empirical hypotheses. Section three describes the data and the analytical strategy that we have employed. We then present the key results in section four. In the final section, we offer some discussion of their implications in relation to ongoing policy debates, and suggest areas where further research would be profitable.

### **Political polarisation along the urban-rural divide**

The polarization of electorates across the urban-rural divide is by no means a new, or recent, phenomenon. At the peak of the industrial revolution, between the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th, many European and North American countries were divided politically between the interests of rural and small-town dwellers, engaged in agricultural production, and those of urban residents, experiencing rapid change and a new spatial economic order dominated by manufacturing in large agglomerations (cf. Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Vidal de la Blache, 1913).

In the second half of the 20th century this stark divide faded partially, as sharper political cleavages, which reflected economic issues, class divisions and the role of the state in society, emerged (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Yet across many advanced economies, the processes of economic globalisation over the last three decades have generated new socio-economic divides (Ford and Jennings, 2020) and contributed to the emergence of a new dimension of political conflict, cutting across these older divisions. Although the extent and nature of this divide remains contested among social scientists (Norris and Inglehart, 2019), a growing number of studies show that the classic class-based Left-Right cleavage in party competition is today overlaid by a new division based on education and cultural attitudes. Scholars support this claim with reference to survey data, the positioning of political parties, and the composition of party supporters (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Piketty, 2018).

Three accounts figure prominently in this debate, each proposing a distinct explanatory framework to explain this new cleavage: “materialism” as opposed to “post-materialism” (Inglehart, 1997); the divide between “winners” and “losers” of globalisation (Kriesi, 2010); and a “transnational” conflict of values between “liberals” and “conservatives, authoritarians, and/or nationalists” (De Vries, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2018). While each approach emphasizes a specific trigger, the literature overall points to the increasing salience of geography in relation to this new attitudinal cleavage, and to growing political disagreements between cosmopolitan, highly educated, and socially progressive urbanites, and nationalist and socially conservative residents of ‘hinterland’ areas.

In the US, a significant amount of work has documented how electoral politics falls increasingly into distinctive spatial patterns, with almost all large cities being Democratic strongholds and rural counties being the cornerstone for the Republicans (Gimpel and Karnes, 2006;

Monnat and Brown, 2017; Rodden, 2019; Scala and Johnson, 2017). While a broad division between ‘blue’ and ‘red’ America has been observed for some decades,<sup>1</sup> the emergence of a salient divide between urban and rural areas has become more palpable over time and was particularly clear during the 2016 presidential campaign (Wilkinson, 2018). Analysing recent opinion polls and the latest US presidential elections, Scala and Johnson (2017) for example identify a consistent gradient of conservative sentiment from the most urban to the most rural counties on a wide range of socio-economic issues.

Across Europe too, there are signs that many different political systems are adapting to this new cleavage, and an increasingly spatially divided electoral geography is emerging (Agnew and Shin, 2020; Hooghe and Marks, 2018). France is a much-cited exemplar of this trend. There is a growing political divide between the ‘globalised’ and ‘gentrified’ large urban centres, the *banlieues* populated by immigrants of recent arrival, and the remaining medium and small-sized cities and rural areas, where long-time immigrants and the ‘native’ working classes experience economic decline and are increasingly disaffected with the political system (Eribon, 2013; Guilluy, 2016; Ivaldi and Gombin, 2015).

Similarly, England has witnessed a gradual ‘bifurcation’ (Jennings and Stoker, 2016) in political terms between people with higher education and good employment opportunities who live in metropolitan areas and those living in ‘backwater’ areas associated with economic decline, hostility to immigration and the EU, and a stronger sense of English identity (Garretsen et al., 2018; Kenny, 2014, 2015). While there is a strong regional dimension to the geography of discontent in Britain (McCann, 2019) in the UK and elsewhere, the urban-rural fault-line has become increasingly prominent.

But while many commentators observe this pattern in a few, paradigmatic countries, little research has explored whether there is a

systemically rooted urban-rural divide across the whole European continent. And there is still considerable disagreement between two broad accounts about the causal dynamics and processes underpinning this division.

The first of these relates to composition effects, that is the spatially heterogeneous distribution of individuals with different characteristics. Research on political disenchantment and populism primarily identifies the archetype of the anti-system supporter based on gender, age, education and income (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Goodwin & Heath, 2016). Composition effects may be amplified because of increasing demographic ‘sorting’ among voters along spatial lines (Bishop, 2009)—which occurs primarily through the dynamic self-selection of younger, more educated and socially liberal individuals in large, urban cores. In this changing social landscape, large urban areas incubate more economic opportunities and attract those with greater skills and more liberal-minded, while, conversely, smaller towns, rural areas and cities with an outdated industrial mix become increasingly ‘left behind’, losing their younger, more skilled populations and facing economic stagnation or decline (Crescenzi et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018).

The second explanation focuses on the socio-economic trajectory of places and their contextual role in shaping individual attitudes. Across Europe, there is increasing economic divergence between core cities and areas that are lagging behind in economic terms (Iammarino et al., 2019). Commentators hence point to an emerging ‘geography of discontent’, reflecting the unhappiness of people living in places which are stagnating or facing comparative economic decline (Garretsen et al., 2018; Los et al., 2017; McCann, 2019). Rodríguez-Pose (2018, p. 201) for example claims that “[i]t has been thus the places that don’t matter, not the ‘people that don’t matter’, that have reacted”. Rising opportunities and growth in thriving urban cores not

only attract younger, more educated and more liberal individuals, but also contributes to shifting urban dwellers towards more progressive social values and cosmopolitan preferences (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002). Conversely, declining or stagnant material prospects in peripheral towns and rural places tend to generate a growing sense of disaffection, anxiety and resentment, driving citizens to adopt a more protective, “zero-sum, ‘us or them’ frame of mind” (Wilkinson, 2018, p. 5).

Place-related grievances are not confined to economic issues. The differences between urban and rural life, and feelings among rural and town dwellers that their places have been neglected by economic and political elites, have led to growing resentment based on cultural-identity issues which shape a growing sense of mutual alienation (Lichter and Ziliak, 2017). As Cramer (2016) argues, what may look like disagreements over specific policy preferences can often be traced back to this more fundamental difference of worldview, which is rooted in questions about identity and contending “ideas about who gets what, who has power, what people are like, and who is to blame” (Cramer, 2016, p 5).

In summary, there is considerable evidence within a wide-ranging body of literature to suggest that there is a clear political fracture between metropolitan and rural (and semi-urban) communities. But, as yet, it remains unclear whether this pattern works similarly across the European continent. One study—Maxwell (2019)—has provided a body of comparative evidence about popular attitudes towards immigration in European countries. Our analysis builds on his work, seeing to explore a broader range of socioeconomic and political issues. Drawing on the existing literature, our first research hypothesis is the following:

H.1 = There are discernible differences in the collective outlooks of people who live in urban and rural places.

But, as Scala and Johnson (2017) suggest in relation to the US case, it may be misleading to

think of the urban/rural divide in dichotomous terms. For example, even within metropolitan areas, there are significant differences between urban cores and suburbs (Musterd et al., 2017). Drawing on such insights, our second research hypothesis is the following:

H.2 = the urban/rural divide is best understood as a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

In addition, we aim to provide a preliminary exploration on the determinants of attitudinal differences across places. We test whether differences in attitudes across the urban/rural continuum might not be exclusively explained by compositional effects. Our last two hypotheses are the following:

H.3 = differences in attitudes across the urban/rural continuum are explained by compositional effects.

H.4 = differences in attitudes across the urban/rural continuum are not exclusively explained by composition effects and, hence, are linked to some of the intrinsic characteristics of places.

## Research design

### Data

We analyse pooled, cross-sectional individual-level data from the European Social Survey which, since its inception in 2002, has conducted, every other year, face-to-face interviews across most participating countries. We draw upon data from the EU27 Member States plus the UK, Norway and Switzerland from all the nine available waves, covering the period 2002–2018. The Survey is representative of all persons aged 15 and over, regardless of their nationality or language (we exclude respondents below 18). Individuals are selected through a multi-stage random probability sampling procedure. The ESS uses sampling designs where some groups or regions have higher probabilities of selection. To reduce sampling errors and potential non-response bias, we apply country-specific ESS post-stratification weights constructed

using information on age, gender, education, and region.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, we also apply country population size weights to account for the fact that countries participating in the ESS have relatively similar net sample sizes (roughly between 900 and 2700 individuals per country) even if the size of their general population varies considerably (for example from 1.1 million residents in Estonia to 71 million in Germany during ESS wave 8). These weights ensure that each country is represented in proportion to its actual population size.

### Model and estimation strategy

To test our research hypotheses, we estimate the following equation:

$$Y_{i,t}^j = \beta_1 U_{i,t} + \beta_2 X_{i,t}^L + \alpha_c + d_t + \varepsilon_{i,c,t} \quad (1)$$

Where  $Y$  is a vector of ordinal variables measuring individual attitudes on each issue  $j$  of person  $i$  in the ESS wave  $t$ .  $U$  is our main regressor of interest, and represents a self-reported categorical variable indicating whether each respondent resides in a big city (the baseline category), in the suburbs/outskirts of a big city, in a town/small city, in a country village, or in a farm/home in the countryside. Alas, due to the nature of the data we cannot control for more fine-grained geographical determinants, nor can we match individual observations with more objective measures of urbanisation. While this is a potential limitation of the analysis, in our approach we follow earlier work on the urban/rural divide (Maxwell, 2019) and aim to maximise the cross-country coverage offered by the ESS.

$X$  is a vector of sociodemographic controls  $L$  which may affect individual attitudes. European countries are highly unequal in many geographical (for example land size) and socioeconomic aspects. We hence add state fixed-effects (FE)  $\alpha_c$ , which are included to absorb any country-specific idiosyncrasies. We also add ESS wave fixed-effects  $d_t$ , to account for cross-sectional

common shocks throughout the years.  $\varepsilon_{i,c,t}$  is the error term. We adopt robust standard errors in all regressions.

Each of the dependent variables  $J$  included in the vector  $Y$  is either a dummy or ordinal categorical. In these cases, adopting a linear regression model (cf., for instance, Maxwell, 2019) would be inappropriate because the assumptions of OLS are violated. We hence estimate model (1) by means of a logit estimator when the outcome is binary, or by means of a proportional odds estimator (ordinal logit) when the outcome is ordinal categorical. In the second case, we assume that, for each outcome  $j$ , there is only one model and one set of coefficients, and the only dependent variable parameter to change across the values of the explanatory ordinal variable are the specific intercepts  $\alpha$  (the cut-off points) – what is called the proportional odds assumption. Brant tests, available on request, confirm the assumption is not violated (significant at the 1% confidence level).

It is important to bear in mind that this analysis does not claim to provide a causal interpretation of the link between place of residence and political attitudes. Instead, it seeks to present a broad and systematic analysis of a set of quantitative, stylised facts, which might well be explored in more depth, with the use of more advanced causal-inference tools, in future research.

### Variables and definitions

$Y$  is a vector of either binary or ordinal categorical variables measuring individual attitudes on each issue  $j$  of person  $i$  in the ESS wave  $t$ . We consider ten issues, grouped along two main dimensions:

#### *Attitudes towards the political system and political engagement*

First, we are interested in the link between place of residence and individual attitudes towards the political system, as well as the ways in which people engage with politics. We focus

on attitudinal responses and views of modes of political behaviour as these are also revealing expressions of deeper-lying attitudes towards the political system. We explore, specifically, the extent to which people engage via conventional political channels, such as voting, and the extent to which respondents evince trust in political parties, since recent research has identified a close correlation between discontent with the parties and a deeper mistrust of the political system (Bromley-Davenport et al., 2019; Cramer, 2016). Relatedly, we explore the extent to which people feel satisfied with the way in which democracy functions in their country. To provide a comparison, we also present evidence on how people feel satisfied about their life more generally, in order to help us understand better the nature and extent of individual satisfaction and dissatisfaction with politics.

#### *Attitudes towards specific issues*

We are also interested in exploring how people respond to specific socioeconomic questions. We first consider people's self-placement along the left-right political spectrum, and then explore their attitudes in three areas: welfare state support, which is conventionally treated as integral to the left/right divide; law and order, and trust in the police, drawing on the extensive literature on the rise of 'authoritarian values' (Foa and Mounk, 2016); and attitudes towards globalisation, which we consider via perceptions of immigrants and the EU, where we draw from an emerging literature on a new 'transnational cleavage' in politics (Ford and Jennings, 2020; Hooghe and Marks, 2018). Political disenchantment has been widely interpreted as an essentially populist reaction against elite politicians who are perceived as being increasingly globalist in their orientation by those more inclined to identify with national identities and social traditions (Goodhart, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

As anticipated,  $U$  represents a self-reported categorical variable indicating whether each

respondent resides in the inner part of a large city (the baseline category), the suburbs/outskirts of a big city, a town/small city, a country village, or a farm/home in the countryside. Out of the total pooled sample, 19.46% of respondents report that they live in a big inner city, 12.04% in suburbs, 30.59% in towns or small cities, 31.41% in a country village, and 6.5% in a farm or isolated home in the countryside.

$X$  is a vector of individual sociodemographic controls  $L$  which may affect attitudes, and for which micro-level information is available. In particular,  $X$  includes the following covariates:

#### *Age*

Following the thrust of much recent literature, we may expect attitudes to be highly stratified by age groups, with younger generations being more likely to embrace cosmopolitan and progressive views (inter alia: Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Harris and Charlton, 2016) and, at the same time, being less engaged in electoral politics, given their familiarity with social media and less conventional forms of political engagement (Foa et al., 2020). The variable is expressed in Ln.

#### *Gender*

We control for the gender of the respondent, since the literature primarily identifies the archetype of the anti-system supporter as not only older, but also male, native, and with a lower level of education (inter alia: Goodwin and Heath, 2016).

#### *Native*

We consequently add a dummy for people born in the country of residence, as we may expect this variable to affect our outcomes. For instance, on net, we may expect natives to be more prone to express dissatisfaction towards migration and globalisation.

### *Educational attainment*

Some contributions have established a positive association between lower degrees of education and higher levels of anti-establishment feeling, as well as more nationalistic/inward-looking sentiments (inter alia: [Dijkstra et al., 2020](#)). We hence control for respondents' highest level of education attainment by including dummy variables for each of the ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) levels.

### *Occupation*

The literature on political discontent has linked growing resentment with economic insecurity in sectors and occupations under higher threat from automation and trade competition ([Colantone and Stanig, 2018](#)). We hence additionally include dummies for each different type of occupation. We follow the International Labour Office's (ILO) two-digit ISCO-08 (International Standard Classification of Occupations) codes, distinguishing between each of the 50 different categories (out of the 96 codes) represented in the ESS sample.

### *Employment status*

We similarly include dummy variables for each of the following statuses: employed in paid work, in education, unemployed, inactive, permanently sick or disabled, retired, employed in community or military service, doing housework or looking after children, and other. Following the research on the "winners" and "losers" of globalisation ([Kriesi, 2010](#)), we may expect disenchantment to be higher among those unemployed, inactive or retired.

### *Unemployment spells*

While employment status captures current unemployment, we further include a dummy for

respondents who, in previous years, have been unemployed for more than three months.<sup>3</sup>

### *Partner's unemployment*

We also include a dummy if a respondent's partner is unemployed.

### *Benefits*

We control for whether the main source of household income claims state benefits. We include this variable, as well as the following ones, to account for potential divides between 'winners' and 'losers' in the contemporary economy.

### *Household income feelings*

We create a dummy capturing whether respondents feel that life with their present household income is difficult or very difficult.

### *General economic satisfaction*

The variable captures the overall level of individual satisfaction towards the national economy.

Research on the 'geography of discontent' has pointed to a link between political disenchantment and relative regional economic status and decline ([Rodríguez-Pose, 2018](#)). In the final part of the analysis we will hence also include three regional-level economic indicators which may affect individual attitudes. (While for most countries the ESS matches respondents to their NUTS2 level region, in some cases persons are matched with either NUTS1 or NUTS3 regional identifiers. See [Supplementary Appendix A.1](#) for more details.) The variables we consider are:

### *Average regional per-capita GDP*

This is included to account for the overall economic development of the region where respondents live.



### *Regional per-capita GDP growth*

We control for changes in GDP levels over the previous four years.<sup>4</sup> We may expect disenchantment to be higher in regions where growth has been sluggish or negative.

### *% ratio regional per-capita GDP / national average*

We add a measure of relative regional economic wealth. We add this variable following the empirical research that suggest how political discontent is higher in areas which are suffering relative, rather than absolute, economic stagnation or decline (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2018).

Supplementary Appendix A.2 reports key weighted summary statistics, while Supplementary Appendix A.3 provides a detailed description for each variable.

## Results

This section presents the baseline results of our analysis. In Table 1, we explore the overall differences in attitudes that we find along the urban/rural continuum, when not controlling for composition effects. For each issue  $j$ , the table presents the proportional odds ratios (that is the exponentiation of the ‘raw’ logit/ordinal logit coefficients) of respondents living in each of the geographical categories compared to respondents residing in large urban cores, the baseline category. In all models, we include country and year fixed-effects.

The first four columns of Table 1 report outputs for attitudes towards modes of political engagement and the political system, and illuminate the extent to which people engage via ‘traditional’ political channels such as voting (column one), whether they trust political parties (column two), or whether they are satisfied with democracy in their country (column three). And, as a point of comparison, we also report respondents’ satisfaction with life (column four). Column five provides insights

into people’s self-placement on the left-right spectrum, while the last five models focus on specific socioeconomic issues. Models six and seven, respectively, focus on attitudes towards welfare state support and trust in the police. Finally, the last three models report results relating to the ‘transnational cleavage’, namely perceptions towards immigrants (columns eight and nine) and attitudes towards the EU (trust in the European Parliament, column ten). The results broadly confirm our prior assumptions, and provide strong evidence in support of hypothesis H.1. Across most issues covered, there are stark and statistically significant differences between urban and rural places. Besides, in line with hypothesis H.2, Table 1 shows that the divide in attitudes is a gradient linked to urban density, running on a continuum from inner cities to suburbs, towns, villages, and isolated rural houses.

Controlling for country and year idiosyncrasies, respondents living outside large inner cities are, on average, significantly more likely to vote. At the same time, however, they tend to show less trust towards the political system. For instance, the odds of somebody voting, or reporting a one-unit higher level of trust in parties (which is measured on a scale 0–10), if they live on a farm or in an isolated rural area (the last category), are, respectively, 33.5% higher and 16.2% lower than those of an average resident of a large urban core. These results suggest that, while levels of trust in the political system are lower in rural areas, in these places traditional modes of political engagement are more prevalent.<sup>5</sup> Our results, more generally, confirm that the residents of these places are far less likely to engage in non-conventional political behaviours, like signing petitions and boycotting products.<sup>6</sup> But they are also, paradoxically, more sceptical than their urban counterparts about the political system and the choices it presents them with.

In line with characterisations of a cosmopolitan/conservative divide between large urban

**Table 1.** Place of residence and individual attitudes: robust logit / ordinal logit estimates.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	<b>Attitudes towards the political system</b>									
	Voted in elections	Trust in parties	Satisfaction with democracy	Satisfaction with life	L-R placement	Welfare state support	Trust in police	Migration good for economy	Migration good for culture	Trust in EU Parl.
Suburbs	1.102*** (0.038)	0.902*** (0.021)	0.961* (0.022)	1.049** (0.024)	1.169*** (0.026)	1.012 (0.024)	1.016 (0.023)	0.837*** (0.019)	0.806*** (0.019)	0.830*** (0.018)
Town	1.029 (0.027)	0.884*** (0.016)	0.895*** (0.016)	1.038** (0.018)	1.180*** (0.021)	0.941*** (0.017)	1.035** (0.018)	0.716*** (0.013)	0.701*** (0.013)	0.802*** (0.014)
Village	1.150*** (0.030)	0.821*** (0.015)	0.849*** (0.015)	1.169*** (0.020)	1.366*** (0.024)	0.937*** (0.017)	1.063*** (0.018)	0.633*** (0.011)	0.602*** (0.011)	0.710*** (0.012)
Rur. house	1.335*** (0.069)	0.838*** (0.027)	0.829*** (0.026)	1.271*** (0.041)	1.572*** (0.051)	0.967 (0.032)	1.075** (0.033)	0.619*** (0.020)	0.544*** (0.018)	0.649*** (0.020)
Observations	244,690	222,293#	244,690	244,690	244,690	244,690	244,690	244,690	244,690	244,690
Country FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Ind. ctrls	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no
Econ. status	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no

Robust standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p < 0.01, \*\* p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1. # Not available for ESS wave 1. For each issue *j*, the table presents the proportional odds ratios (that is the exponentiation of the 'raw' logit/ordinal logit coefficients) of respondents living in each of the geographical categories compared to respondents residing in large urban cores, the baseline category.

centres and elsewhere (Guilluy, 2016), the results of column five show that people living in urban fringes, towns and the countryside are significantly more likely to identify as conservatives, tending to place themselves on the right of the political spectrum. As an example, the odds of a person living in a country house feeling one-unit closer to the political right on the left-right spectrum (which is measured on a scale 0–10, where zero is left and 10 is right) is 57.2% higher.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, however, we do not find any substantial difference in support for the welfare state (model six), an issue which has traditionally played an important role in left-right political cleavages in western democracies, or, indeed, in the trust they place in the police. It may well be that in the era of populism, worries about welfare and law and order are no longer a source of significant divergence between those who live in different parts of a country.

By contrast, results from the last three models provide clear evidence of a stark urban/rural divide on issues associated with the new ‘transnational cleavage’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Kriesi, 2010). The results of columns eight and nine show significant differences in attitudes towards international immigration. As an example, compared to an inner-city dweller, the odds for a rural home resident reporting a one-unit higher level of belief in the positive role of migration in enriching the national culture (measured on a scale 0–10) are more than 55% lower. A very similar picture emerges with respect to attitudes towards the EU (column ten).

In [Supplementary Appendix B.1](#) we plot the predicted probabilities for models three and eight from [Table 1](#). The graphs provide visual evidence of the differences in attitudes across the urban/rural continuum.

In [Table 2](#) we test hypotheses H.3 and H.4, and present the results, controlling for individual observable characteristics. We are unable to control for unobservable factors

such as cognitive traits and personality types. Nevertheless, we work from the assumption that any residual correlation between place of residence and attitudes that is not explained by personal socioeconomic characteristics might well be related to places, and their contextual effects. With the exception of life satisfaction and, partially, also for trust in the police, for all other outcomes the differences across places after conditioning on individual covariates reduce in magnitude and significance, lending support to hypothesis H.3.

In [Supplementary Appendices A.4 and A.5](#) we break down the results of [Table 2](#), respectively controlling for only sociodemographic or only economic observables, to explore the extent to which composition effects are linked to demographic factors such as education, age, and indigeneity, as opposed to labour market and economic factors. The results suggest that both groups of regressors are important in explaining attitudinal differences along the urban/rural continuum (in fact, including either group leads to relatively similar reductions in the size of the urban/rural coefficients). Among the economic regressors, additional tests we ran suggest that only employment status and sector of occupation play a role in mediating the link between place of residence and individual attitudes, while proxies for individual deprivation such as being dependent on public benefits, anxiety about household income and overall satisfaction with the economy, have a very minor mediating effects.<sup>8</sup>

In [Supplementary Appendices A.6 and A.7](#) we stratify the sample of [Table 2](#), respectively distinguishing between Western European countries (EU14 Member States plus UK, Norway, and Switzerland) and the 13 countries which joined the EU in the 2004/07 enlargements, most of which were formerly part of the Eastern Bloc. The outputs suggest how attitudinal heterogeneity along the urban/rural continuum is particularly pronounced across all the countries of Western Europe. By contrast,

**Table 2.** Place of residence and individual attitudes: robust logit / ordinal logit estimates controlling for sociodemographic and economic individual characteristics.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Attitudes towards the political system				Attitudes towards specific issues					
	Voted in elections	Trust in parties	Satisfaction with democracy	Satisfaction with life	L-R placement	Welfare support	Trust in police	Migration good for economy	Migration good for culture	Trust in EU Parl.
Suburbs	1.068* (0.038)	0.934*** (0.022)	0.994 (0.022)	1.064*** (0.024)	1.129*** (0.025)	1.043* (0.025)	1.021 (0.023)	0.905*** (0.020)	0.882*** (0.020)	0.888*** (0.020)
Town	1.058** (0.029)	0.947*** (0.017)	0.971* (0.017)	1.110*** (0.020)	1.144*** (0.021)	1.019 (0.019)	1.071*** (0.019)	0.841*** (0.015)	0.824*** (0.015)	0.893*** (0.016)
Village	1.189*** (0.033)	0.882*** (0.016)	0.919*** (0.016)	1.252*** (0.022)	1.272*** (0.023)	1.022 (0.019)	1.094*** (0.019)	0.793*** (0.014)	0.769*** (0.014)	0.811*** (0.015)
Rur. house	1.262*** (0.068)	0.903*** (0.030)	0.897*** (0.029)	1.392*** (0.046)	1.389*** (0.046)	1.051 (0.035)	1.094*** (0.035)	0.800*** (0.026)	0.738*** (0.024)	0.768*** (0.025)
Observations	244,690	222,293#	244,690	244,690	244,690	244,690	244,690	244,690	244,690	244,690
Country FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Ind. ctrls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Econ. status	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Robust standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p < 0.01, \*\* p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1. # Not available for ESS wave 1. For each issue *j*, the table presents the proportional odds ratios (that is the exponentiation of the 'raw' logit/ordinal logit coefficients) of respondents living in each of the geographical categories compared to respondents residing in large urban cores, the baseline category.

EU13 Members show significantly less marked differences.

In [Supplementary Appendices B.2, B.3, and B.4](#) we then plot the predicted probabilities for models three and eight of [Table 2](#). In each of the appendices we plot probabilities distinguishing between age groups, educational attainments, and occupation, and holding other variables constant at their means. As the results suggest, the role of age, education and occupation in explaining variation in attitudes is significantly larger than the residual variation attributable to idiosyncratic place effects. Hence, the findings from [Table 2](#) suggest that attitudes are significantly stratified by sociodemographic measures, as suggested, for instance, by [Maxwell \(2019\)](#). Nevertheless, we underscore how, even after controlling for individual observable characteristics, places still have a non-negligible correlation with people's political attitudes, especially on the dimensions of voting behaviour (column 1 of [Table 2](#)), left-right placement (column 5), and migration and globalization (that is those relating to the 'new transnational cleavage', columns 8 to 10). For instance, compared to an inner-city dweller, even after controlling for individual observables, the odds for a rural home resident reporting a one-unit higher level of satisfaction with democracy in their country (measured on a scale 0–10) are more than 10% lower, while the odds of them reporting a one-unit higher level of belief in the positive role of migration in enriching the national culture (measured on a scale 0–10) are more than 26% lower. In other words, we do not fully reject hypothesis H.4, but instead conclude that, while compositional effects are very important in shaping attitudes, they are not sufficient to explain the urban/rural divide in political views in these European countries.

To understand what may explain the link between place and individual attitudes, we re-estimate equation (1), controlling for sociodemographic observables and economic status, while also adding regional economic characteristics. Before wave 4 the ESS did not report

respondents' region of residence. Besides, not all individuals are matched with a regional identifier, while we do not have regional economic data for the latest ESS wave 9. We are hence able to merge regional-level characteristics only to waves 4–8 and a sub-set of respondents. (For comparison, [Supplementary Appendix A.8](#) re-estimates the regressions of [Table 2](#) on the restricted sample. With the exception of 'Satisfaction with democracy', which partially loses significance, results are overall similar to those from the full sample.) Results, reported in [Supplementary Appendix A.9](#), suggest that controlling for regional economic dynamics has only a minor effect on the link between place of residence and individual socio-political attitudes. Additional tests we ran equally suggest that the regional economic variables do not act as moderators, as their interactions with place of residence are statistically insignificant.<sup>9</sup> Some recent analyses of the 'revenge of places that don't matter' ([Dijkstra et al., 2020](#); [Rodríguez-Pose, 2018](#)) have underlined a link between contemporary electoral political grievances and territorial economic stagnation and decline. While our methodology and data are not closely comparable, our findings underscore how differences in attitudes along the urban-rural continuum may be also linked to broader cultural-identity issues, as highlighted for example by [Cramer \(2016\)](#) on the US. Future research may explore through individual country studies the conclusions of our paper, and consider in more depth the extent to which cultural-identity and territorial economic factors interact in determining political disenchantment in attitudes and at the ballot box.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion and implications for policy

Drawing on individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS), this article explores linkages between place of residence and attitudes on a range of different socioeconomic and political issues, providing

systematic comparative evidence across 30 European countries over the period 2002–2018. Confirming earlier research on North America (Gimpel & Karnes, 2006; Monnat & Brown, 2017; Rodden, 2019; Scala & Johnson, 2017), we show that there is a strong and significant divide also between urban and rural Europe, a finding that carries significance for debates in relation to two broad phenomena. One is the growth of political disenchantment in many non-metropolitan locations across Europe, and the fertile soil this provides for nationalist and populist parties and causes. The other is the debate about what kinds of policy agenda and political response are required in order to re-engage the inhabitants of what are commonly termed ‘left-behind’ places.

In relation to current debates about the underpinnings and scope of political disenchantment, our findings suggest the importance of a place-sensitive conception of this phenomenon, and simultaneously serve to undermine overly generalised characterisations of ‘rural consciousness’ or ‘left-behind’ disillusion (Cramer, 2016; Harris & Charlton, 2016). The clear gradient that we identify in terms of political attitudes and social values, and their correlation with different spatial scales and kinds of community—ranging from metropolitan centres at one end of the spectrum through to more remote, rural areas at the other—suggest the need for a more detailed and contextual understanding of the geography of disillusion. Our analysis shows how, compared to inner urban core residents, respondents living in suburbs, towns and rural areas are more likely to have anti-immigration and anti-EU views, to be conservative in their orientation, dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in their country, and less likely to trust the political system, even if they are strikingly more likely to participate in it through voting (while, by contrast, people living in inner urban areas are more likely to engage in non-conventional political behaviours, like signing petitions and boycotting

products). This last finding, in particular, has an important bearing on current debates about the future of democracy (Runciman, 2018), and the potential risk that democratic politics may become ‘eroded from within’ by individuals who engage with elections while, at the same time, distrust the political system and are drawn to populist, anti-system politics (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

The analysis also contributes to an ongoing debate about whether people’s outlooks are ultimately shaped by sociodemographic characteristics—that is, by compositional effects and the geographical sorting of people with different attributes and outlooks—or by place effects (Abreu & Öner, 2020; Maxwell, 2019). Even though attitudes are highly stratified by individual characteristics such as age, educational attainments, and occupation, we underline how place still appears to have a non-negligible correlation with values and outlooks after controlling for individual covariates. More work is needed to understand better the mechanisms through which this relationship works. Recent research has shown how place of birth and the context where individuals spend their ‘impressionable years’—that is the period of late adolescence and early adulthood during which people form durable political attitudes—have a significant influence in moulding both observable characteristics such as education (Bosquet and Overman, 2019) and unobservable cognitive capacities (Rentfrow et al., 2008). Even in some of the most dynamic and developed economies in the world, it appears that where you are born and grow up is one of the most important facts about the life of any citizen, and this should give policy-makers food for thought. There are large numbers of people resident in areas where trust in politics and the political system is low, and where socially liberal values have only a thin presence. Yet, successful majoritarian politics require that parties of the political mainstream find ways to win the support of many of these voters, while also pursuing policies—in areas like climate change or migration—which may well be anathema to many of them.

This challenge connects with the second main implication of these results. Our analysis suggests that a firmer appreciation of the geographical specificities of different rural areas, towns and cities is integral to a more contextually informed and tailored policy responses to the challenges posed by regional inequality and discontent (Iammarino et al., 2019; Rossi, 2018). Place-sensitive policies will have to be developed in a way that integrates an understanding of regional forms of inequality, but also the degree of urbanisation and proximity to urban agglomerations. For instance, with reference to economic processes, research has shown that the European Cohesion Policy has contributed to generating economic growth in rural areas close to urban agglomerations, but not in those farther away from cities (Gagliardi and Percoco, 2016). Similarly, recent work from both the US and Europe underlines how many rural areas face social and demographic challenges which undermine governments' efforts to deliver public services and, ultimately, the wellbeing of residents as well as their perception of being excluded by the broader society (Accordino, 2019; OECD, 2021). Hence, 'place-sensitive' public policies require a deeper and more contextual appreciation of the different patterns of disenchantment apparent in different places, as well as an understanding of how economic and non-economic factors interact in driving individual dissatisfaction.

Finally, our results lead to the conclusion that there are common important trends and dynamics at work across the continent and, especially, across western European countries. Of course, there are still key differences of political economy, history and institutional structure at work in these different countries and regions. Yet, understood as a wider phenomenon, we are much more likely to grasp the underlying economic and cultural dynamics that are driving and perpetuating these spatially embedded patterns of political disillusion.

This article does not claim to provide a causal interpretation of the link between place of residence and political attitudes, but, instead, seeks to present a broad and systematic analysis of a set of quantitative, stylised facts. Each of these could be explored in more depth in the future. Further research could, in particular, explore how and why the kinds of setting where people live can influence the development of individual traits (Bosquet and Overman, 2019; Rentfrow et al., 2008). Besides, to our best knowledge, there is still very limited evidence on whether the growing political divide between urban and rural areas mapped on both sides of the North Atlantic is also prevalent around other parts of the world. Future research should explore this issue, expanding the analysis to include countries from both the 'Global North' and the 'Global South'. Last but not least, further work is needed to disentangle potential compositional effects based on unobservable—rather than observable—characteristics such as intrinsic 'cognitive underpinnings' (cf., for example, Rentfrow et al., 2008). Yet, overall we find that irrespective of whether divides in attitudes are driven by compositional effects or the contextual influence of places on people, the overlapping of territorial and attitudinal cleavages signals a deepening geographical fracture in European societies which, in the long term, may have significant implications for the challenges of generating social cohesion (Wilkinson, 2018) and addressing the implications of rising disenchantment with democracy (Foa et al., 2020).

### Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society Journal* online.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have challenged the view of America as a country divided into two clearly distinct and politically homogeneous areas (cf. Abrams & Fiorina, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology>, accessed on 5 July 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Data on long-term unemployment is unfortunately missing for the majority of respondents.

<sup>4</sup> We calculate variations over an even-numbered interval of years so that the measure coincides with ESS waves.

<sup>5</sup> Levels of trust in parties are virtually identical to levels of trust in politicians. By contrast, levels of trust in the national parliament are slightly lower, consistent with the hypothesis that disenchanted rural dwellers may be more trustful of individuals or specific political parties than the political system overall. These additional results are available on request.

<sup>6</sup> These additional results are available on request.

<sup>7</sup> Results not presented but available on request equally show statistically significant differences on matters such as family issues and women rights.

<sup>8</sup> These additional results are available on request.

<sup>9</sup> They are available on request.

<sup>10</sup> We thank one anonymous referee for providing such suggestion.

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### Data statement

The data used in the research is available on request.

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