



Full Length Article

Drifting further apart? Europe's trends of urban-rural political polarisation should not be overstated

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Urban-rural gap
Density divide
Polarisation
Individual outlooks
Europe

ABSTRACT

Urban-rural polarisation in political attitudes is widely argued to have become a distinctive feature of many Western democracies. Yet, have urban-rural gaps grown over time, as is often suggested? And, if so, do trends in this regard differ across countries? We address these questions leveraging individual-level data from over 300,000 respondents from the European Social Survey over the period 2002-2020 in 25 countries. Overall, we do find evidence of moderate divergence in outlooks between more urban and more rural publics, examining in particular trust towards the EU and views on migration. We also find that there is divergence in terms of feelings of trust in relation to the political system and levels of satisfaction with democracy since the early 2010s, most likely because of the financial and sovereign debt crises. But these gaps have significantly reduced more recently. Furthermore, trends are heterogenous across countries. Overall, this paper demonstrates that value polarisation along the urban density divide should not be over emphasised as divergence between urban and rural Europe is more moderate than in the US, and very issue-based and country-specific.

1. Introduction

It has become commonplace to depict the urban-rural gap in individual political outlooks as a characteristic feature of many Western democracies. The idea that fast-growing, progressive cities have grown apart from the conservative areas surrounding them is a familiar characterisation in the disciplines of geography and political science (inter alia: Cramer, 2016; de Dominicis et al., 2020; Ford & Jennings, 2020; Jennings & Stoker, 2016; Kemeny & Storper, 2020; Kenny & Luca, 2021; Luca, Terrero-Davila, Stein, & Lee, 2023; Mitsch et al., 2021; Wilkinson, 2019).

Yet, studies offering comparative analysis of trends in relation to urban-rural polarisation are scarce. This is a key gap. While analysing the impact and nature of contemporary divisions between urban and rural resident is clearly important, evaluating whether urban and rural areas may, over time, be drifting further apart is essential if we are to understand the extent to which contemporary divides are likely to continue into the future. In this paper, we aim to address this gap, by conducting a longitudinal, cross-country analysis of the urban-rural gap in political attitudes across Europe since the start of the 21st Century.

Focusing on the US, Rodden (2019) argues that the divide in political

attitudes along the urban/rural continuum has broadened, opening up after the 1930s and becoming an increasingly salient feature of the American political landscape since the late 1970s. In Europe, Huijismans et al. (2021) explore the evolution of cultural attitudes in the Netherlands and highlight a divergence along cosmopolitan-nationalist lines between more- and less-urbanised Dutch municipalities. Relatedly, Mitsch et al. (2021) explore the divergence in levels of political trust between urban and rural areas in Europe since the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, up to 2018.

Building on these recent contributions, we explore the extent to which differences in individual political outlooks have evolved over time between urban and rural areas in countries across Europe. Summarising the growing literature on the topic of urban-rural polarisation, we also test some potential explanations for why divergence may have occurred. The analysis draws on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), covering over 300,000 individuals across 25 European countries over the period 2002-2020. We focus on a set of key political attitudes commonly associated with urban-rural polarisation, namely perceptions of the political system, which we measure via levels of trust towards the national party system and of satisfaction with democracy, and views on the new 'transnational political cleavage' (Kriesi, 2010; Kriesi et al.,

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2006, 2012) which we operationalise as trust towards the European Union and views towards migration. While each of these questions has its own provenance and has been studied in depth in specific sub-literatures, we suggest that there is merit in considering them together, because they have all featured as widely accepted evidence in scholarly debates on urban-rural divergence.

Our analysis speaks to the growing comparative literature on urban-rural political divides. Two important recent contributions explore the polarisation of votes in Western democracies. Taylor, Lucas, Armstrong, & Bakker (2023) track the development of the urban-rural cleavage in election results in Canada, Great Britain and the US since the early twentieth century. Similarly, Huijsmans & Rodden (2024) explore long-term increases in urban-rural electoral polarisation across fifteen countries in Western Europe and North America. While election outcomes are clearly an important source of evidence in relation to this issue, ballot results can reflect political shifts both on the 'demand' and 'supply' side of politics and may well relate to changes in politicians' discursive strategies, manifestos, and framing of political issues (Bonikowski, 2017; Rodrik, 2021). We aim to add to the existing research on urban-rural political divides by providing novel evidence on the polarisation of individual outlooks, contributing in so doing to a better grasp of the 'demand side' of electoral politics.

Overall, we highlight that value polarisation along the urban density divide should not be over emphasised as divergence between urban and rural Europe is more moderate than in the US, and very issue-based and country-specific. In our analysis, we uncover some notable urban-rural gaps in individual outlooks and show how these are related to both compositional and contextual effects (i.e., respectively associated to the uneven distribution of people with different observable characteristics or, alternatively, plausibly linked to the influence of place on individuals). We also find evidence of moderate divergence on issues associated with the characterisations of the urban-rural divide, namely trust towards the EU and attitudes towards inward migration. And yet, we find that the gap in trust between residents in these areas felt towards the political system, and differential levels of satisfaction with democracy, significantly increased in the early 2010s, in the wake of the financial and sovereign debt crises but have significantly reduced since. Furthermore, these trends are highly uneven across countries. We conclude by demonstrating that, while on some issues and in some countries, urban-rural polarisation has marginally increased, we should overall be wary of overstating this divergence of attitudes or assuming that it is inexorably growing. The paper is structured as follows. Section two reviews the existing literature on the question of growing polarisation in attitudes between urban and rural residents, and explanations for divergence over time. The subsequent section describes the survey data we used, and the analytical framework we employed. In section four, we present our main results. Finally, in section five we conclude by briefly discussing the implications of our findings.

2. Explaining patterns of urban-rural divergence in political attitudes

In recent years, the polarisation of residents' attitudes in urban and rural areas has been described as one of the most salient cleavages in contemporary politics. This has rapidly become a widely accepted 'fact', in much academic research (Cramer, 2016; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Kenny & Luca, 2021; Lichter & Ziliak, 2017; Maxwell, 2019). Differences between these areas are by no means a new, or recent, phenomenon. At the peak of the second industrial revolution, between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, a number of eminent geographers observed how 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 large agglomerations and manufacturing (cf. Vidal de la Blache, 1913). While this stark divide partially faded in the second

half of the twentieth century, when political cleavages based on new issues – such as class divisions and the role of the state in society and economy – became predominant (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), it has been widely asserted that urban and rural areas are diverging again.

Studying election outcomes in Canada, the US, and Great Britain, Taylor, Lucas, Armstrong, & Bakker, 2023 explore how urban-rural cleavages in partisan support have developed over the last century. While each of the countries they consider exhibit some 'idiosyncratic' trends, they overall suggest that the urban-rural polarisation in party votes has significantly widened over the last decades, and particularly since the 1990s.¹ Similarly, Huijsmans & Rodden, 2024 explore long-term increases in urban-rural electoral polarisation since the 1970s across fifteen countries in Western Europe and North America. They find that while the urban-rural electoral divide has widened most of all in majoritarian systems, it has also emerged in other European multiparty systems because of the proliferation of smaller parties which have primarily rural or urban support.

The polarisation of votes along spatial lines can be explained by different mechanisms. Recent research, for example, indicates that the rise of radical populist votes can be attributed to distinctive dynamics (Bonikowski, 2017; Danieli et al., 2022) such as candidate-related factors and changes in the ways politicians' may foster polarisation through their discursive strategies by picking specific issues and/or framing them in a new way (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Ford & Jennings, 2020). These are factors that relate to the 'supply side' of politics (Bonikowski, 2017; Rodrik, 2021). On the 'demand side' it is possible to differentiate between: (1) changes in the ways in which specific issues, like immigration, are activated; and (2) underlying shifts in popular attitudes and demographic composition. In this paper, we specifically focus on the latter, and explore the urban-rural divergence of individual political outlooks.

Some commentators have identified an emerging 'geography of discontent' (McCann, 2020), arising from the frustrations of people living in places which are stagnating or facing comparative economic decline (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). The declining or stagnant position of peripheral towns and rural places tend to generate – it is claimed – a growing sense of disaffection, anxiety and resentment, driving citizens to adopt a more protective, "zero-sum, 'us or them' frame of mind" (Wilkinson, 2019, p. 5). By contrast, rising opportunities and growth in thriving cities are presented as key dynamics which attract younger, more educated, and more liberal individuals (Johnston et al., 2020; Rohla et al., 2018), and also help shift urban dwellers towards more progressive social values and cosmopolitan preferences (Luca, Terrero-Davila, Stein, & Lee, 2023).

The grievances underlying these views are not confined to economic issues. Differences between the cultures and values of 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 feelings of resentment which are often expressed in relation to questions of culture and identity (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). As Cramer (2016) highlights in the case of the US, what may look like disagreements over specific policy preferences can often be traced back to more fundamental 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).

An intersecting strand of literature focuses on how the cleavages structuring the political space have evolved over the last few decades. The literature that shapes this debate offers two main accounts, each proposing a distinct explanatory framework. Some scholars, for example, have highlighted the economic divide between winners' and disaffected 'losers' created by globalisation (Kriesi, 2010). An alternative strand of work highlights the 'transnational' conflict over values

¹ In the case of Britain, their results suggest that urban-rural polarisation has started earlier, already in the 1950s.

that has opened up between ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives, authoritarians, and/or nationalists’ (De Vries, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2018). These strands of research do not directly address the role of cities or the potential cleavage between urban and rural areas. But these, and other, scholars have, however, underlined how the deepening of political divides and the rise of a new ‘transnational cleavage’ are reflected in a distinctive geography, often epitomised by a division between economically flourishing, cosmopolitan, highly educated, and socially progressive urbanites, and nationalist and socially conservative residents of ‘hinterland’ areas (cf., *inter alia*: Jennings & Stoker, 2016; Luca, Terrero-Davila, Stein, & Lee, 2023; Maxwell, 2019).

2.1. Are attitudes in urban and rural areas diverging, and – if so – why?

While the literature on contemporary urban-rural sociopolitical cleavages has proliferated, we still know little about these differences and trends in comparative terms, and in particular whether European countries are similar to the US in this respect. Focusing on the US, Rodden (2019) argues that the density divide in political attitudes has broadened, opening up after the 1930s and becoming an increasingly salient feature of the American political landscape since the late 1970s. Numerous studies have indeed shown that electoral politics in the US falls into distinctive spatial patterns, with almost all large cities increasingly being Democratic strongholds and rural counties being mostly Republican (Huijsmans & Rodden, 2024; Rodden, 2019; Scala & Johnson, 2017; Wilkinson, 2019). While a broad division between ‘blue’ and ‘red’ America has been observed for some decades (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008), scholars suggest that 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.

Across Europe too, scholars have suggested that political systems are becoming increasingly polarised, with the inhabitants of cities and the countryside growing ever further apart in their political outlooks (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Mitsch et al., 2021). In their analysis of urban-rural cleavages in England, Jennings and Stoker (2016) point to a growing divergence over time and describe the nation as a territory experiencing a growing political ‘bifurcation’ between people with higher education and good employment opportunities who live in metropolitan areas and those living in ‘backwater’ areas associated with economic decline, a stronger sense of English identity, and hostility to immigration and the EU. Relatedly, Huijsmans et al. (2021) focus on the evolution of cultural attitudes in the Netherlands and suggest that more- and less-urbanised Dutch municipalities are diverging on cosmopolitan-nationalist lines. They argue that the divergence is primarily explained by the residents of large cities, who are increasingly pulling apart from people living in other parts of the country.

The empirical evidence to test whether this characterisation is valid for other countries is harder to find. Focusing on political trust, Mitsch et al. (2021) provide one of the first comparative explorations on the divergence of individual attitudes between urban and rural Europe since the 2008-2009 financial crisis. They argue that it was only after this event that levels of political trust in rural Europe started diverging from those in cities and suggest that this divergence was primarily driven by countries in Southern Europe. Building on these recent contributions, we aim to better understand *whether* and *why* the urban-rural polarisation of individual political outlooks may have increased over the last two decades across Europe.

Drawing on the broader literature examining the ‘geography of political discontent’, we identify four rival explanatory accounts of this urban-rural divergence in political attitudes, namely those which stress: (1) composition effects and dynamic demographic change; (2) absolute or relative territorial economic decline; (3) perceived decline in the quality of public service provision, especially after the waves of fiscal austerity that followed the 2008 financial crisis across many countries; and (4) the impact of immigration and increase in ethnic diversity.

Each of these mechanisms does not apply equally to the four outcome

variables we explore. For example, we can expect that the real or perceived increase in ethnic diversity may be particularly relevant for shaping views towards migration and, more generally, attitudes on the cosmopolitan-nationalist cleavage. Similarly, the perceived effects of declining levels of public service provision after austerity may be particularly relevant to explain political satisfaction variables (cf. Fetzer, 2019; McKay et al., 2023). At the same time, however, we believe that it is difficult to define in an ‘a-priori’ sense whether each of these mechanisms influences only one of the outcome variables we observe. For example, perception of government bias against rural areas in public service delivery, or local economic decline, may primarily affect trust towards the party system and satisfaction with democracy, but they may also indirectly affect views towards migration if immigrants start being perceived as ‘competitors for scarce public services and jobs’ (cf. Barone et al., 2016). Similarly, fiscal austerity and economic decline may also affect views of the EU if national politicians start shifting blame in that direction (as happened in the UK during the Brexit referendum with respect to immigration policy, or in Italy in relation to the economic recession of 2008).

The first of these mechanisms relates to the way in which people with different attributes ‘sort’ across space. Some scholars claim that observed differences in individual attitudes are primarily linked to compositional effects (Maxwell, 2019, 2020). Some research identifies the archetype of the anti-system supporter based on age, education, and income (Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Goodwin & Heath, 2016). Composition effects may be amplified over time because of trends in demographic ‘sorting’ among workers and/or voters along spatial lines and the selective mobility of more ‘progressive’ individuals into large cities (Hoogerbrugge & Burger, 2021). In a fast-changing social landscape, it is argued, large urban areas incubate more economic opportunities and attract younger, more educated and socially liberal individuals, while, conversely, rural areas and small towns based upon an older pattern of industrial production lose their younger, more skilled populations (Lee et al., 2018). The extent to which dynamic sorting may be significantly influencing the economic and political geography of Western democracies is, however, hotly debated (for a critical commentary, cf. Abrams & Fiorina, 2012; McCann, 2016). Across most European countries, for example, the mobility of people is much lower than across North America.² And, even in a country historically characterised by high mobility, such as the US, some research has cast doubt on the extent to which residential sorting can explain the recent increase in the geographical polarisation of political preferences (Martin & Webster, 2020).

The other explanations, by contrast, highlight the contextual role of place in shaping individual attitudes and, thus emphasise changes happening in local communities.

A second familiar explanation for the divergence between attitudes in urban and rural areas focuses on the impact of economic factors. In relation to Europe and North America, geographers and economists have observed that post-industrial countries have experienced increasing economic divergence between core cities and areas that are ‘lagging behind’ in socioeconomic terms (Iammarino et al., 2019; Moretti, 2012). As large cities transition towards service-based, high-tech economies, their inhabitants often identify with and benefit from features of globalisation, generally holding positive views of European integration and

² The urban economics literature that explores the link between sorting in/out of cities and individual earnings, for example, suggest that selective migration accounts for little of the skills differences between dense and less dense areas, suggesting that people with different characteristics are instead unevenly spread across places already from birth (Bosquet & Overman, 2019). These ‘sorting at birth’ effects can be explained both indirectly if parents and families sort themselves over generations, and directly if place of birth matters by contextually influencing the development of individual traits (McNeil et al., 2023).

inward migration. Conversely, facing the offshoring of manufacturing jobs and the prospect of economic decline, the inhabitants of rural areas may be more likely to develop nationalist attitudes and scepticism towards the EU and mass immigration. While this divergence is in part linked to processes of 'sorting', it also transcends individual economic status and is anchored in local economic conditions, influencing perceptions of national economic performance and levels of satisfaction with democracy (Mitsch et al., 2021). The 'geography of EU discontent' is a direct result of the more limited social and economic opportunities available to rural residents, leading to political alienation and a rise in support for populist movements (Dijkstra et al., 2020). Eurosceptic voting in these areas often stems from feelings of economic and cultural neglect, exacerbated by the concentration of economic production processes in very large cities. Driven by growing economic disparities and perceptions of spatial inequality, this divide may result in growing distrust in democracy, in rural areas, and greater receptivity for populist messages.

Third, any potential divergence in political attitudes between urban and rural areas may also be driven by differing perceptions of public service provision, especially since the austerity policies which were introduced in different countries following the financial crisis of 2008. Rural residents may feel that they are marginalised, and their needs overlooked by national governments, and often perceive their own socio-economic infrastructures to be inferior to those provided in large cities, leading to increased dissatisfaction. As Agerberg (2017) points out, dissatisfaction with the quality of government services is closely linked to anti-elite rhetoric and the rise in support for populist parties. The link between government performance and public trust, however, is not straightforward. Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003) underscore how this relationship is bidirectional, so that pre-existing levels of trust or distrust in the government influence citizens' perceptions of its performance. Despite these debates about causality, there is a fairly broad consensus in the literature that citizens hold relatively accurate perceptions of government services, particularly those that are directly experienced like education and healthcare (Van Ryzin, 2007). And so distrust towards the political system and democracy may be interpreted as a form of 'healthy scepticism', as disaffected citizens scrutinise and hold government accountable (cf. Jennings et al., 2016).

Fourth, some scholars focus on the increasing diversity of urban settings which may be pivotal in shaping political attitudes and may contribute to a growing divide between urban and rural perspectives. Characterized by greater density and more ethnic and cultural diversity, the residents of large urban areas tend to hold more cosmopolitan attitudes on issues like immigration and multiculturalism more generally. This trend is driven by the greater exposure of urban residents to diverse cultures and ethnicities, potentially fostering tolerance and acceptance (Luca, Terrero-Davila, Stein, & Lee, 2023). In contrast, rural areas with less diversity may be more likely to harbour more conservative views with residents viewing migrants and transnational institutions as threats to national interests and traditional ways of life. This value-based divide has, it is argued, led to a notable trust gap, particularly in rural areas where residents often feel alienated by urban-centric policymaking and governance (McKay et al., 2023; Mitsch et al., 2021). Furthermore, the different demographic and social composition of urban and rural areas, shaped by migration and socio-economic factors, may play a crucial role in reinforcing these divergent attitudes and may themselves contribute to the widening urban-rural cleavage in political attitudes. While the most obvious influence of immigration may be on perceptions of migrants, it is also possible that migration patterns may more broadly influence political satisfaction and views towards the EU.

To conclude, while there is growing debate around the urban-rural divide at the level of individual social and political attitudes, it remains unclear within these literatures whether it has increased over time and whether there are significant differences in this trend across different countries of Europe.

3. Measuring individual attitudes along the urban-rural continuum

3.1. Data source

We follow other recent contributions from the literature (e.g., Kenny & Luca, 2021; Maxwell, 2019; Mitsch et al., 2021), and analyse pooled, repeated cross-sectional individual-level data from the European Social Survey. We exclude countries that have not been observed consistently over the period of study. This leaves us with 25 European countries and over 300,000 individuals over the entire panel (cf. Appendix A.1 for an overview of the countries covered in each ESS wave). The dataset is representative of all persons aged 18 and over (we discard respondents aged between 15 and 18 on the grounds that their political opinions may not yet be fully formed) and covers the period 2002-2020.³ Respondents are identified through a multi-stage random probability sampling plan. We adopt country population size weights, to ensure that each country is represented in proportion to its actual population size. To reduce sampling errors, we also adopt the ESS country-specific post-stratification weights, which are constructed considering information on gender, age, education, and region of residence.

3.2. Measuring political attitudes

We do not analyse election results, as such events relate not only to underlying shifts in popular attitudes, but also to candidate-related factors and changes in how issues are 'strategically activated' by political elites. We instead consider attitudes on four core areas which have featured prominently in debates about urban-rural polarisation. We are, first, interested in differences in levels of satisfaction in relation to the political system. We explore 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.

Second, we analyse respondents' attitudes towards issues relating to the cosmopolitan-nationalist divide which, in the European context, we proxy via perceptions of the EU, as well as attitudes towards immigrants. We focus on these two themes because the urban-rural divide has often been described as a rural reaction against urbanites who are perceived as being increasingly globalist in their orientation by those more inclined to identify with national identities and social traditions (Ford & Jennings, 2020; Goodhart, 2017; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Overall, it is important to stress that these four outcome variables measure separate facets of the urban-rural polarisation of individual outlooks. While we believe that studying them together can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, in conceptual terms, each of them should be treated as separate and distinct.

In line with other recent research in this area which has employed a similar methodology, our analysis does not claim to provide a causal interpretation of the link between attitudes and place of residence. More modestly, we aim to explore and discuss a broad range of comparative and descriptive inferences, which might be analysed with more advanced econometric tools by future researchers. Our baseline model takes the following form:

$$Y_{i,r,c,t}^j = \beta_1 U_{i,r,c,t} + \beta_2 X_{i,r,c,t}^L + \beta_3 R_{r,c,t}^R + \alpha_c + d_t + \varepsilon_{i,r,c,t} \quad (1)$$

³ The survey is run every two years, meaning that the dataset covers the years 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020. At the time of writing this footnote, in July 2024, wave 11 covering 2023 has not yet been fully released.

Where Y is a vector of ordinal variables measuring individual attitudes on issues J of person i living in region r , in country c in the ESS wave t . (It is important to note that we are only able to identify NUTS regions of residence r from ESS wave 4 onwards. When including regional variables in the analysis, we hence reduce the dataset to the period 2008–2020.)

U is our main regressor of interest. It represents a categorical variable indicating whether each respondent lives 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.⁴ Out of the total weighted, pooled sample, 20.08% of respondents report that they live in a big city, 12.17% in suburbs, 31.04% in towns or small cities, 30.19% in a country village, and 6.52% in a farm or isolated home in the countryside.⁵ (Cf. Appendix A.2 for a detailed breakdown by country.)

Unfortunately, the dataset does not include a more specific city size variable, or the exact coordinates of respondents from which to develop more fine-grained geographical taxonomies. This is a limitation with this approach, especially considering the inherent challenges associated with developing a comparative measure of urbanization. Indeed, the very notion of which areas count as ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ may vary across countries.⁶ Furthermore, our measure does not capture where places of residence are located relative to other urban/rural areas e.g. a rural place may be located close to a large urban core and be substantially different from remote rural settlements. It must also be stressed that the variable is self-reported. While we do not have ways to cross-validate individual responses to objective measures, we are left with no other variable. Although these are potential limitations of the ESS, in our approach we aim to maximise the longitudinal, cross-country coverage offered by the ESS.

To explore trends in relation to urban-rural divergence, we expand equation (1) to include an interaction term between dummy variables for each ESS wave t and place of residence.⁷ For easier readability of results, in this specification we collapse the five categories of U into a dummy variable taking value one for respondents living in countryside

⁴ From the ESS wave of 2008, it is also possible to distinguish between large cities and very large cities. In the part of analysis where we consider the regional regressors, we hence include an additional category for Europe’s largest cities, defined as one of the following urban areas: Vienna, Brussels, Sofia, Zurich, Prague, Berlin, Copenhagen, Madrid, Helsinki, Paris, London, Athens, Budapest, Dublin, Milan, Rome, Amsterdam, Oslo, Warsaw, Lisbon, Bucharest, Stockholm.

⁵ A potential concern is that the ESS might under-sample rural areas (we thank one anonymous referee for raising this point). While it is difficult to do an exact comparison between the ESS and official population distribution statistics, we believe that under-sampling of rural areas should not be an issue. As an example, according to Eurostat data across the EU28, in 2017, 41.7% of people lived in dense areas (cities), 31% in semi-dense areas (suburbs and towns), and 27.3% in sparsely-populated (rural) areas. See: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/RCL/#?vis=degurb.gen&lang=en> (accessed in July 2024). The figures from the table in Appendix A.2 suggest that in our pooled ESS sample, around 32.3% of respondents lived in large cities, and suburbs of large cities, around 31% of respondents lived in towns and small cities (it is difficult to ascertain if suburbs of large cities should be grouped with town or not), and 36.7% lived in rural areas.

⁶ It is also important to stress how, conceptually, a growing number of critical urban scholars has challenged the view of urban areas as clearly separated from the ‘non-urban’, since ‘urbanity’ increasingly permeates human ‘spatialities’ and interactions beyond traditional urban cores (inter alia: Brenner & Schmid, 2015). While acknowledging that our territorial taxonomy may not fully represent the real-world complexity, we believe that it allows us to achieve comparative cross-country generalisation (cf. Storper & Scott, 2016).

⁷ It is important to remember that ESS survey is a repeated cross-section, and participants are not reinterviewed across waves. We hence cannot run an individual-level panel regression.

villages or isolated farms and taking value zero for residents of urban areas, which we define as cities, suburbs, and towns.⁸ We estimate the following equation:

$$Y_{i,r,c,t}^j = \beta_1 U_{i,r,c,t} * d_t + \beta_2 X_{i,c,t}^L + \beta_3 R_{r,c,t}^R + \alpha_c + \varepsilon_{i,r,c,t} \quad (2)$$

In the robustness checks, we test alternative specifications where, for example, we compare large cities against all other categories, or where we class towns in the ‘rural’ rather than ‘urban’ areas. Alternatively, we also replace the individual ESS wave dummies d_t with a linear time variable (and its quadratic term to test for non-linearity). Results are qualitatively similar across specifications.

Each of the j dependent variables included in the vector Y is ordinal categorical. Scholars debate whether, in these cases, it is advisable to adopt ordinal/non-linear logit estimators (since, because of the data structure, the assumptions of OLS are violated) or if, instead, it is preferable to adopt linear OLS models. For simplicity, we adopt OLS, showing Ordinal logit estimates in appendix as a robustness.

Since European countries are highly unequal in many socioeconomic and geographical respects, in our aggregate results we include country fixed-effects (FE) α_c , which will help control for any country-specific idiosyncrasies. As a baseline, we also add ESS wave fixed-effects d_t , to account for cross-sectional common shocks throughout the years. We then separately relax country- and year-fixed-effects in the second part of the analysis to comparatively explore cross-country differences and time variation. $\varepsilon_{i,c,t}$ is the error term. We adopt robust standard errors in all regressions.

X is a vector of individual sociodemographic controls L which may affect individual attitudes. The vector, which helps testing for composition effects, includes the following covariates:

Gender. We control for the gender of the respondent since we may expect it to correlate with political dissatisfaction.

Age. Following the literature, we may expect attitudes to be highly affected by age, with younger generations being more likely to embrace progressive views and, at the same time, being less engaged in electoral politics, given their familiarity with less conventional forms of political engagement. We place respondents into three groups (below 39, between 40 and 59, and over 60).

Native. We add a dummy for people born in the country of residence, as we may expect the indigenous population to show higher levels of political disenchantment with respect to migrants.

Educational attainment. Another factor highlighted by the literature as a key potential determinant of political disenchantment is education. 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. We may expect a positive association between lower degrees of education and higher levels of anti-establishment feeling, as well as more nationalistic sentiments.

Occupation. Growing political resentment has been linked with economic insecurity in sectors and occupations under higher threat from automation and trade competition. We hence include dummy variables for each type of occupation, following the International Labour Office’s (ILO) two-digit ISCO-08 (International Standard Classification of Occupations) codes, and distinguishing between each of the 50 different categories (out of the 96 codes) represented in the ESS sample.

Employment status. We include dummies for each of the following statuses: employed in paid work; education; unemployed and looking for job; unemployed but not looking for a job; permanently sick or disabled; retired; in community or military service; housework or looking after children; and other.

Unemployment spells. While employment status already captures current unemployment, we include a dummy for respondents who, in

⁸ We do so as, otherwise, we would have to report 50 coefficients, that is, five categories of residence multiplied by the ten ESS waves.

previous years, have been unemployed for more than three months.⁹

Benefits. We control for whether the main source of household income claims state benefits, to account for potential divides between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the contemporary economy.

Household income feelings. Similarly, we create a dummy capturing whether respondents feel that life with their present level of household income is difficult or very difficult.

To control for the context-specific potential mechanisms, we further consider the following regressors.

Satisfaction with public health provision. We control for respondents’ satisfaction with the provision of public health services. While the question asked in the survey is not inherently linked to the *local* provision, we believe that it is nevertheless a good proxy of individual perceptions of public services.

Regional unemployment rate. Regional variations in unemployment rates provide insights into labour market conditions, which can shape political attitudes. By examining how unemployment rates differ across regions, we aim to uncover how regional-level economic disparities may contribute to political discontent.

Regional crude migration rate. Migration patterns impact demographic composition and cultural dynamics within regions, thereby influencing political attitudes. Incorporating data on the rate of immigration enables us to examine how demographic shifts may contribute to urban-rural political divides.

Regional GDP pc. Economic prosperity at the regional level influences perceptions of government efficacy and political preferences. Assessing regional GDP per capita allows us to explore the relationship between economic conditions and political attitudes within urban and rural areas.

Δ Regional GDP pc (%). Economic fluctuations over time affect individuals’ perceptions of their economic well-being, thereby shaping political attitudes. Analysing changes in regional GDP per capita provides insights into how economic trends may influence political sentiments across regions.¹⁰

Regional/national GDP pc. Disparities between regional and national economic performance can foster perceptions of inequality and influence political attitudes. Examining the ratio between regional and national GDP per capita elucidates the role of relative economic disparity in shaping regional political views.

Appendix A.3 reports key weighted summary statistics, while Appendix A.4 provides a detailed description for each variable included in the analysis.

4. Exploring the results

4.1. The urban density divide: pooled results

As a baseline reference, in Fig. 1 we plot the overall urban-rural differences in attitudes that we find when pooling all ESS waves together. For each issue j , the plots present the OLS 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 ESS wave fixed-effects. (The underlying OLS regression results are reported in Appendix Table.B.1, while ordinal logit results are presented in Appendix Table.B.2. Results are qualitatively very similar to the OLS outputs.¹¹)

The plots show how urban-rural differences in attitudes are statistically significant and noteworthy in magnitude, particularly on the two

issues related to the ‘transnational cleavage’, namely trust towards the European Parliament and views towards migration. When controlling for observable individual characteristics, the size of coefficients significantly shrinks. This suggests that composition effects play an important role in explaining the urban-rural divide, as highlighted by Maxwell (2019) in the case of attitudes towards migration. At the same time, even controlling for composition effects, all coefficients remain significant and sizeable. For example, with respect to trust towards the EP, while the coefficient for living in the countryside shrinks from around -0.6 to below -0.4 after including individual controls, its magnitude remains comparable to the effect of having a university degree and half the effect of being ‘native’ rather than an immigrant. In the case of views towards migration, when controlling for observable individual regressors, the size of the coefficient for living in the countryside halves from around -0.8 to -0.4 . This is comparable to half of the effect of holding a university degree, or the effect of being ‘native’.

Besides, it is important, we suggest, to explore urban-rural differences at the aggregate level without controlling for individual characteristics because, irrespective of whether divides in attitudes are explained by the uneven distribution of individuals with different characteristics or by the influence of places on people, the overlapping of territorial and attitudinal cleavages signals an important geographical fracture in European societies. And this may, in the long term, have significant implications for the challenges of generating social cohesion and renewing the legitimacy of democratic politics. From a conceptual point of view, one could even argue that the contraposition of compositional and contextual explanations is flawed, as the uneven distribution of people with different educational attainments, occupations, age, etc., is integral to differences in attitude in different kinds of places. In line with existing research, we conclude that urban-rural divides in political attitudes are undoubtedly present in all of the countries that we consider.

For readability, in Fig. 1 we did not report the country-fixed effects. Yet, country-specific intercepts can help us understand urban-rural gaps in attitudes in a comparative perspective. In Appendix B.3 and B.4 we hence plot the same results of Fig. 1 reporting, instead of the individual controls, the country fixed-effects. These results echo the findings of (forthcoming) who argues that differences in support for democracy between cities and other areas are highly heterogeneous across individual European countries and are relatively minor when compared to between-country variation.

In Fig. 2 we then test, via a simple mediation analysis, the extent to which the potential mechanisms discussed in the literature contribute to explaining existing urban-rural gaps. Since it is only possible to link individuals to regional characteristics from ESS wave 4 onwards, the sample is here restricted to the period 2008–2020. Importantly, from the 2008 ESS wave, it is possible to distinguish between large urban areas and Europe’s biggest cities.¹² We hence include this additional residence category which, in the results below, becomes the baseline. For each outcome, the figure reports the results of four different specifications, obtained respectively, including: (1) only country and ESS wave fixed effects; (2) adding individual controls; (3) as in (1), but adding regional controls; and (4) including all controls. For reasons of space, in the figure we do not distinguish between the different potential regional mechanisms, which are considered jointly (detailed, broken-down results distinguishing between them are reported in online Appendix Tables.C.1 to C.4).

Overall, including all sets of controls leads to a sizeable reduction in

⁹ Data on long-term unemployment is not available for most respondents.

¹⁰ We calculate growth over four years, i.e. an even-numbered interval of years so that the indicator coincides with the ESS rounds.

¹¹ In Appendix Table.B.6, we also add a measure of individual religiosity, to check whether it may affect results which, however, are qualitatively similar. We thank one anonymous referee for suggesting adding this robustness check.

¹² Following Maxwell (2019), and in absence of more detailed measures, we define largest city residents as the respondents who report living: (a) in a big city; (b) and in a NUTS2 region where one of these cities is located: Vienna, Brussels, Sofia, Zurich, Prague, Berlin, Copenhagen, Madrid, Helsinki, Paris, London, Athens, Budapest, Dublin, Milan, Rome, Amsterdam, Oslo, Warsaw, Lisbon, Bucharest, Stockholm.

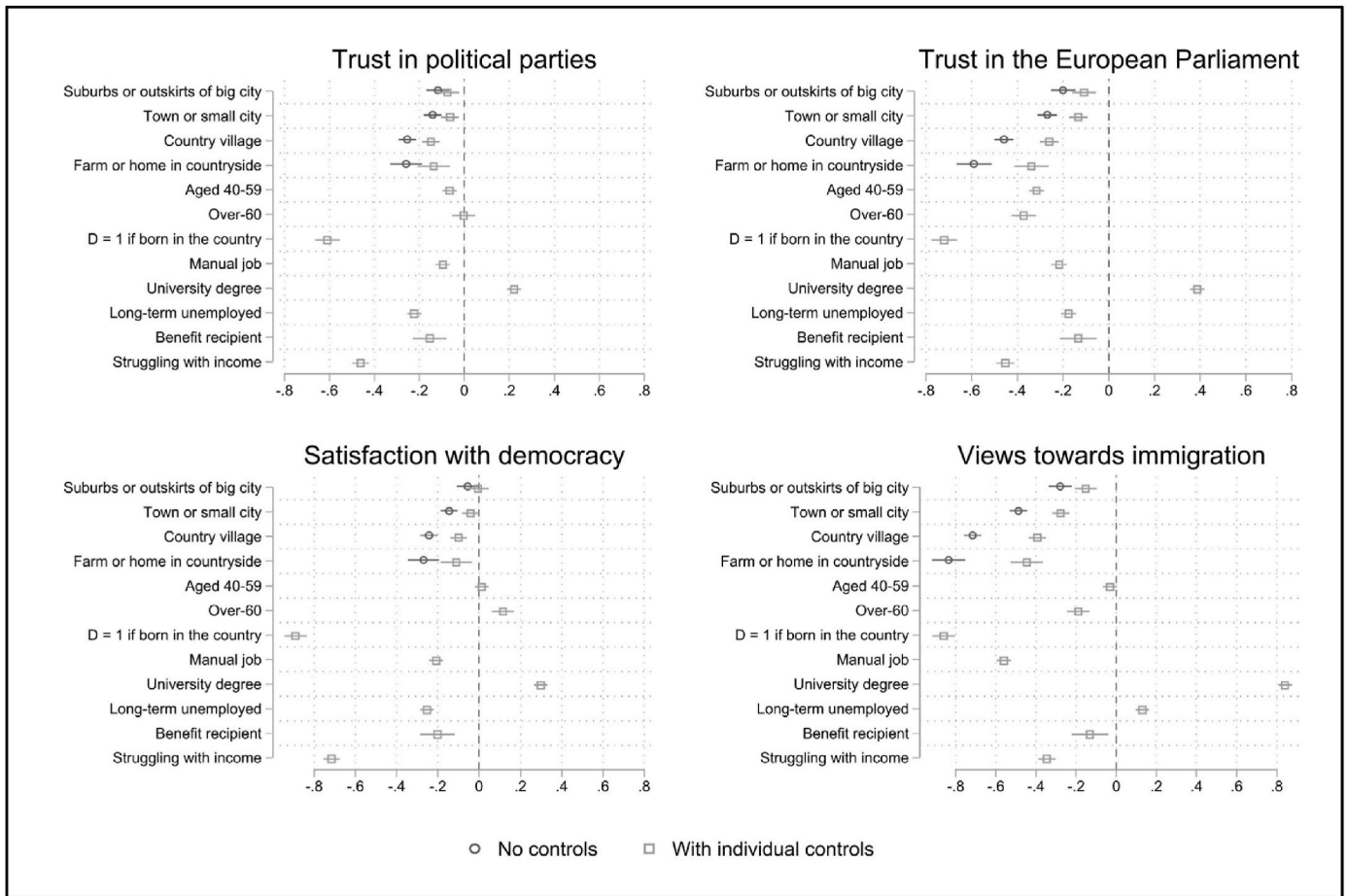


Fig. 1. Place of residence and individual attitudes: robust OLS estimates.

Notes: For each variable, the figure reports coefficients of each categorical place of residence with respect to residents living in big cities, the baseline category. Each figure reports results from two models, respectively excluding/including individual control variables. All regressions control for country- and ESS wave fixed-effects. For better readability, education, occupations and employment status are combined into the two following dummy variables: with/without university degree, with manual vs non-manual job. Robust standard errors in parentheses ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

the urban-rural gaps (cf. model 4), even though part of the urban-rural variation remains unexplained. This is especially true in terms of levels of trust towards the EU, suggesting that views of European institutions may be explained by other determinants not accounted for in our analysis. While both individual characteristics and regional-level controls explain a large part of the urban-rural gap, individual controls tend to have a slightly stronger mediating power (in each plot, cf. specifications 2 vs 3). Because of this, and to maximise the length of our panel to explore trends of divergence over time, in the rest of the analysis we only include individual-level covariates, for which we can exploit all ESS waves 1-10.

4.2. Unpacking country-specific trends of divergence

Do the aggregate results mask country-specific longitudinal trends?

To answer this important question, the following paragraphs aim to unpack the pooled cross-country results. We first explore if there has been overall divergence across Europe. Results are reported in Table 1. As anticipated in Section 3.2, when presenting the empirical model, for easier interpretation of results we now collapse the five urban-rural categories into a dummy variable distinguishing between rural and urban respondents. We define rural residents as those living in villages and countryside houses.¹³ (In online Appendix B.5, we test the sensitivity of results to altering this urban-rural categorisation. Results are stable overall.)

Overall, while we do find evidence of moderate divergence, trends are relatively small in magnitude, and highly issue-specific. As can be seen in Panel A, the interaction between rural residents and the linear time trend is relevant and significant across all outcomes, suggesting how, overall, urban and rural Europe have slightly diverged over the

¹³ While it could be argued that town residents should be classed together with rural ones, we base our approach on the baseline findings of Fig. 1 and its ancillary table reported in Appendix B.1. For example, if one looks at Panel A of Appendix Table B.1, the coefficients for town residents are exactly in between those of urban dwellers and residents of isolated rural houses. When controlling for composition effects in Panel B of Appendix Table B.1, town residents then appear as slightly closer to inner city dwellers than rural residents on trust in parties, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in the EU parliament (even though their views on migration are slightly closer to those of rural residents).

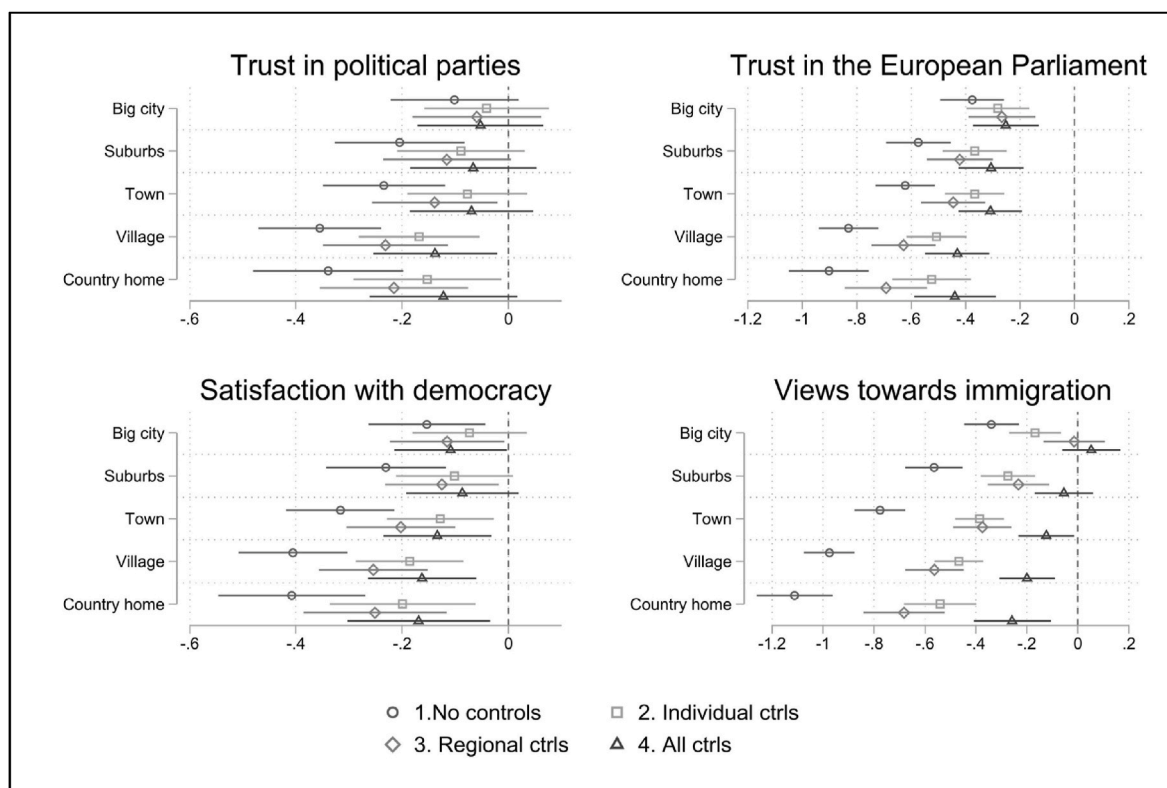


Fig. 2. Place of residence and individual attitudes: potential explanatory mechanisms

Notes: For each variable, the figure reports coefficients of each categorical place of residence with respect to residents living in Europe’s largest cities, the baseline category here. Since ESS wave 4, it is indeed possible to distinguish between big cities (the reference category in Fig. 1) and largest cities. These are: Vienna, Brussels, Sofia, Zurich, Prague, Berlin, Copenhagen, Madrid, Helsinki, Paris, London, Athens, Budapest, Dublin, Milan, Rome, Amsterdam, Oslo, Warsaw, Lisbon, Bucharest, Stockholm. Each figure reports results from four models, respectively controlling for: (1) only country and ESS wave fixed effects; (2) as in one, plus individual controls; (3) as in one, plus regional controls; (4) all controls together.

period of analysis.¹⁴ At the same time, however, the size of this divergence is small.

More importantly, when unpacking the linear time trend into the individual ESS waves, the picture that emerges is more nuanced, and the results from Panel B show issue-specific patterns. Column 2 suggests that the urban-rural gap on trust in political parties only became apparent in 2012, in the aftermath of the sovereign debt crisis, and this can primarily be explained with reference to composition effects. Its magnitude however decreased in the subsequent waves and, by 2020, the gap shrunk to become insignificant and indistinguishable from zero. Satisfaction with democracy follows a relatively similar, but also more pronounced, pattern (cf. column 3). The urban-rural gap for this indicator widened over the 2000s to peak in 2012 (again, plausibly, during the sovereign debt crisis) but, since then, has almost halved. By contrast, the gap in levels of trust towards the EU Parliament marginally widens across the whole period (even though it is not always significant).

Finally, the urban-rural gap in views towards migration is insignificant during most of the period, becoming apparent only after 2014, and peaking in the 2020 ESS wave. This is consistent with the large influx of non-EU asylum seekers during the 2014-16 period, and the salience that the issue of migration acquired in subsequent years. In both panels A and B of Table 1, we also include individual controls to account for composition effects. As expected, when including individual regressors, the magnitude of coefficients slightly decreases. The overall picture is however similar. Taken together, these findings suggest that there has

been moderate divergence between urban and rural Europe but, at the same time, they underscore how the magnitude of such divergence is small, while trends are issue-specific.

We then explore the extent to which countries have experienced different trajectories. For each country, Fig. 3 plots the average values observed in the ESS on each of the four main outcomes. At the time of the 2007-8 financial crisis and the sovereign debt crisis of the early 2010s, some of the Southern European countries experienced an overall decrease in trust in parties, satisfaction with democracy, and trust towards the European Parliament (cf. Cyprus, Greece, Spain and, partly, Slovenia and Italy). Just before the 2016 ESS wave, Bulgaria also experienced a decline, but only on views towards migration and trust in the European Parliament. By contrast, for most other countries, it is difficult to identify clear, distinguishable patterns.

This cross-country comparison of average values is instructive because it allows us to put the magnitude of the regression results from Table 1 into perspective. As an example, as set out in Table 1, levels of satisfaction with democracy exhibited the highest urban-rural divergence during the 2010s, with urban and rural areas drifting apart by around 0.5 points (out of a scale 0 to 10). While this divergence is not negligible as it represents around one fifth of a standard deviation of the variable’s value, such a magnitude is significantly smaller than the differences observed across countries (cf. Fig. 3). In 2012, for example the average level of satisfaction with democracy in Slovenia and Spain was around 3 points lower than in Sweden, Norway and Switzerland.

In Figs. 4-7 we then present the country-specific estimated regression coefficients of the urban-rural gap trends. For each country, plots report the urban-rural gap coefficient obtained from robust OLS estimates, interacting a dummy for residents living in rural areas with ESS waves. They show both the magnitude of the urban-rural gap in each

¹⁴ In the table reported in online Appendix D.1 we also include the quadratic term of the linear time variable which, however, is only significant in a subset of regressions, and does not add explanatory power to the model.

Table 1
Place of residence and individual attitudes: divergence over ESS waves.

	Trust in parties	Satisfaction with dem.	Trust in EU Parl.	Migration good for culture
	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Panel A1: measuring divergence with a linear time variable				
Rural	-0.070*	-0.030	-0.126***	-0.238***
	(0.036)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.034)
ESS round	0.045***	0.060***	0.012**	0.068***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Rural # ESS round	-0.014**	-0.023***	-0.029***	-0.032***
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)
Observations	279,063#	306,870	306,870	306,870
R-squared	0.120	0.088	0.039	0.068
Country FE	yes	yes	yes	yes
Ind. ctrls	no	no	no	no
Panel A2: divergence with a linear time variable, controlling for composition effects				
Rural	-0.013	0.044	-0.023	-0.067**
	(0.036)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.033)
ESS round	0.040***	0.052***	0.001	0.023***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Rural # ESS round	-0.014**	-0.021***	-0.025***	-0.021***
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Observations	279,063#	306,870	306,870	306,870
R-squared	0.148	0.133	0.089	0.151
Country FE	yes	yes	yes	yes
Ind. ctrls	yes	yes	yes	yes
Panel B1: interacting rural with ESS wave dummies				
Rural	-0.157***	0.070	-0.099**	-0.295***
	(0.046)	(0.050)	(0.050)	(0.051)
Rural#ESS_2004		-0.162**	-0.236***	-0.092
		(0.070)	(0.069)	(0.072)
Rural#ESS_2006	0.147**	-0.151**	-0.017	0.039
	(0.061)	(0.066)	(0.066)	(0.070)
Rural#ESS_2008	0.033	-0.242***	-0.209***	-0.135**
	(0.059)	(0.065)	(0.065)	(0.067)
Rural#ESS_2010	0.069	-0.161**	-0.101	-0.057
	(0.061)	(0.067)	(0.067)	(0.069)
Rural#ESS_2012	-0.125**	-0.432***	-0.255***	-0.039
	(0.062)	(0.068)	(0.070)	(0.073)
Rural#ESS_2014	-0.031	-0.337***	-0.214***	-0.169**
	(0.061)	(0.068)	(0.068)	(0.070)
Rural#ESS_2016	-0.025	-0.231***	-0.228***	-0.201***
	(0.060)	(0.066)	(0.066)	(0.068)
Rural#ESS_2018	-0.019	-0.248***	-0.314***	-0.248***
	(0.060)	(0.065)	(0.066)	(0.069)
Rural#ESS_2020	-0.029	-0.255***	-0.339***	-0.315***
	(0.071)	(0.075)	(0.078)	(0.080)
Observations	279,063#	306,870	306,870	306,870
R-squared	0.120	0.088	0.039	0.068
Country FE	yes	yes	yes	yes
Ind. ctrls	no	no	no	no
Panel B2: interact. rural with ESS wave dummies, controlling for composition effects				
Rural	-0.096**	0.144***	0.011	-0.124**
	(0.045)	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.050)
Rural#ESS_2004		-0.152**	-0.234***	-0.068
		(0.068)	(0.068)	(0.070)
Rural#ESS_2006	0.142**	-0.152**	-0.019	0.057
	(0.060)	(0.065)	(0.065)	(0.067)

Table 1 (continued)

	Trust in parties	Satisfaction with dem.	Trust in EU Parl.	Migration good for culture
	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Rural#ESS_2008	0.046	-0.221***	-0.176***	-0.084
	(0.058)	(0.064)	(0.063)	(0.065)
Rural#ESS_2010	0.058	-0.171***	-0.089	0.004
	(0.060)	(0.066)	(0.065)	(0.066)
Rural#ESS_2012	-0.129**	-0.423***	-0.239***	0.036
	(0.061)	(0.067)	(0.068)	(0.071)
Rural#ESS_2014	-0.030	-0.322***	-0.190***	-0.085
	(0.060)	(0.066)	(0.067)	(0.068)
Rural#ESS_2016	-0.025	-0.216***	-0.202***	-0.134**
	(0.058)	(0.064)	(0.064)	(0.066)
Rural#ESS_2018	-0.009	-0.222***	-0.265***	-0.146**
	(0.059)	(0.064)	(0.064)	(0.066)
Rural#ESS_2020	-0.028	-0.252***	-0.301***	-0.221***
	(0.070)	(0.074)	(0.075)	(0.075)
Observations	279,063#	306,870	306,870	306,870
R-squared	0.148	0.133	0.089	0.151
Country FE	yes	yes	yes	yes
Ind. ctrls	yes	yes	yes	yes

Notes: For each variable, the table reports coefficients of respondents living in rural areas, here defined as dwellers of villages and isolated rural homes with respect to residents living in urban areas, here defined as dwellers of large cities, suburbs, and towns. Robust standard errors in parentheses ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1. In Panel B, the baseline time category is the ESS_2002. #Trust in parties is not available for ESS Wave 1.

country (whereby a negative value means that an average rural resident reports a lower score on a specific outlook), as well as the trends of convergence/divergence over the period of analysis. With respect to trust towards political parties (cf. Fig. 4), while in a few countries, namely Estonia, Lithuania, Norway, Slovakia and Hungary, there is evidence of moderate divergence, patterns in other countries are less clear.

With respect to levels of satisfaction with democracy (cf. Fig. 5) the patterns are slightly clearer, and it is possible to observe moderately growing polarisation, especially during the early 2010s. This is for example the case in Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark (although moderately), Estonia (after 2012), France, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Slovakia, and Spain. The magnitude of the divergence, however, is not large.

The urban-rural gap on trust in the European Parliament (cf. Fig. 6) widened in Austria (although it shrank significantly from 2016) and in Greece (in the aftermath of the 2008 recession), and did so marginally in Belgium, Estonia, Hungary, Norway, Spain, and the UK. The case of Germany is an interesting outlier, as there the gap shrank over this period. Considering how in Germany the overall level of trust in the EP has moderately increased since 2010 (cf. Fig. 3), we can infer that trust has grown quite markedly in rural areas.

Finally, the urban-rural polarisation on views towards migration is particularly evident in Austria and, to a lesser extent, in Bulgaria, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Across some countries, there is an evident widening of the urban-rural gap after 2016. This is particularly visible in Estonia and Lithuania, but also, to some extent, in Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Sweden.

In Appendix Figures D.2 to D.5, we finally replicate the analysis replacing the dummy for rural areas with a dummy that also includes town residents. Results are overall similar to those presented in Figs. 4–7.

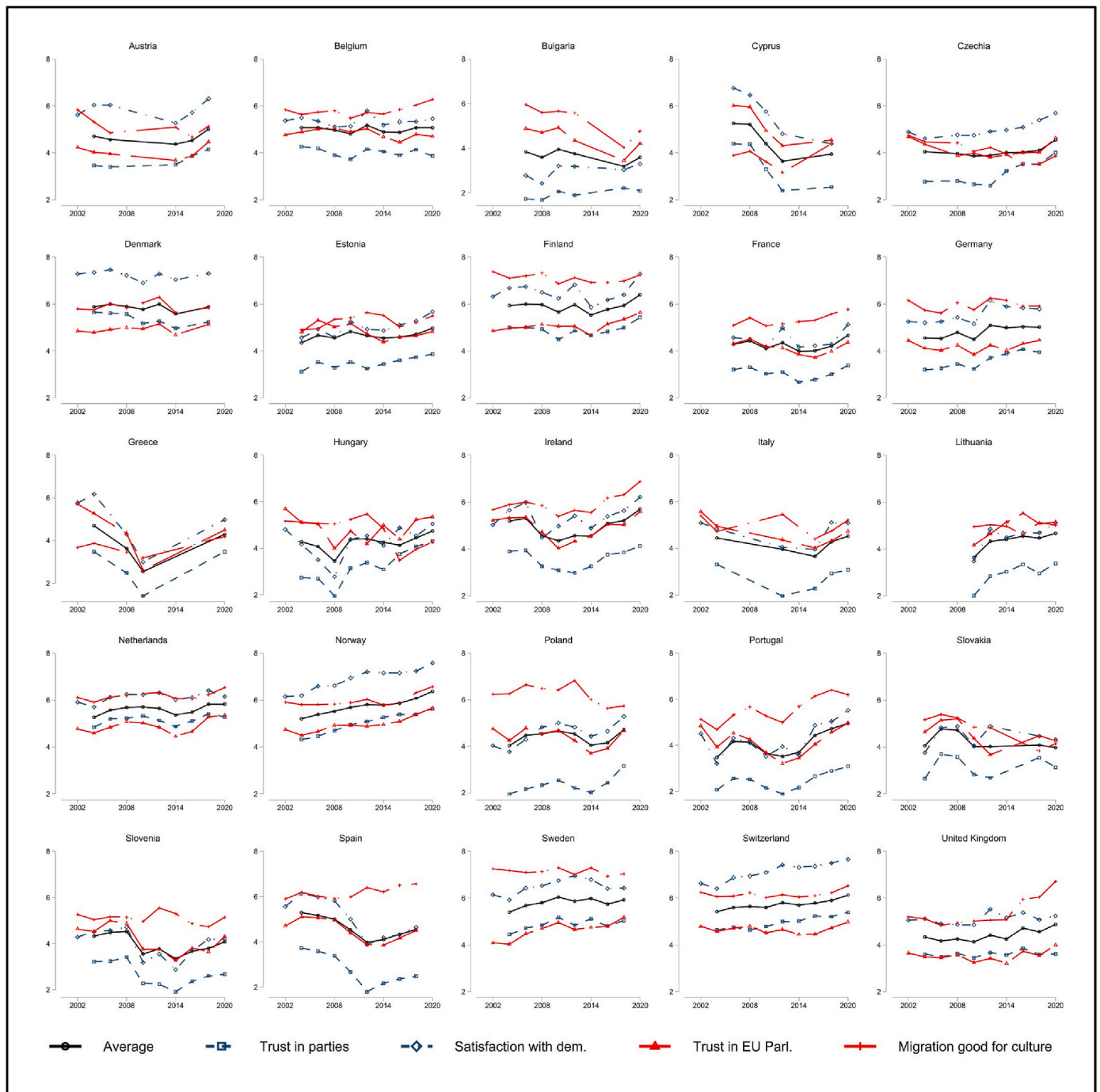


Fig. 3. The trends in political attitudes across individual countries: average scores reported in the ESS.
 Notes: For each country, each plot reports the variation in average response across the following four outcomes: Trust in parties, satisfaction with democracy, trust in the European Parliament, and views towards immigration. Each plot also reports an overall score calculated averaging the values across the four items.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS) in 25 countries, this paper investigates how linkages between place of residence along the urban-rural continuum and political attitudes have changed between 2002 and 2020. Importantly, while we uncover how urban and rural areas have marginally drifted further apart, especially in the early 2010s, we find that the size of such divergence is small compared to differences between countries. Furthermore, trends are highly issue-specific. For example, the urban-rural gap in views towards migration has moderately increased since

2015 but, by contrast, the gap in trust towards the political system that appeared in the early 2010s disappeared by the 2018 ESS wave. Similarly, the gap in satisfaction with democracy increased in the early 2010s in the wake of the financial crisis but has halved since then. Compared to previous research on this topic, we also find that the overall continental averages mask noteworthy country-specific heterogeneity. Our conclusions echo the recent findings of [Vigna \(forthcoming\)](#) on urban-rural differences in trust towards democracy across Europe. Taken together, our analysis indicates that, the divergence in political attitudes between urban and rural Europe should not be overstated as urban-rural gaps are highly issue- and country-specific.

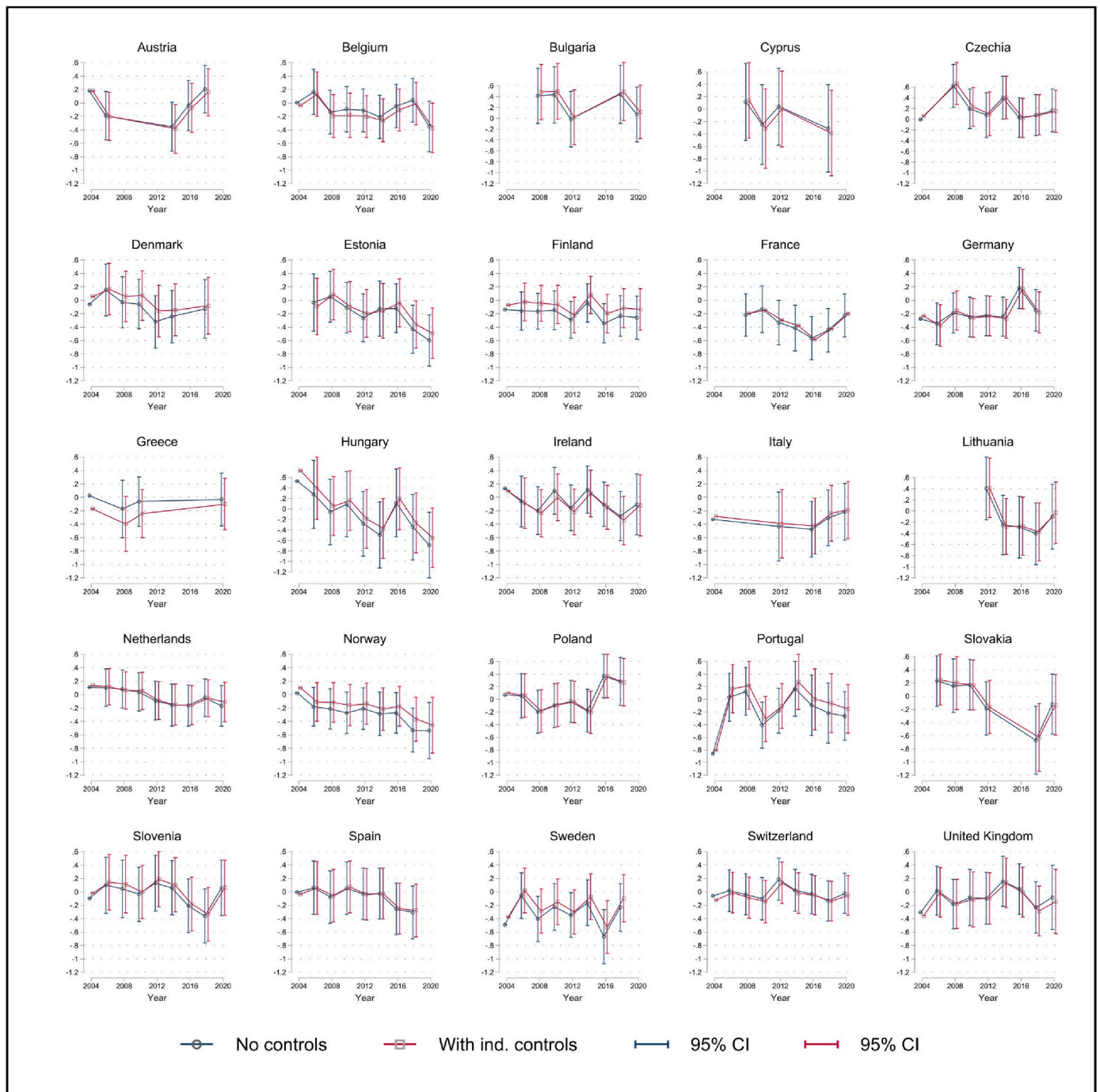


Fig. 4. Urban-rural divergence on trust towards political parties: robust country-specific OLS estimates.
 Notes: For each country, each plot reports the urban-rural gap coefficient obtained from robust OLS estimates, interacting a dummy for residents living in rural areas (villages and countryside houses vs the rest) with ESS waves. All ESS wave coefficients are relative to the 2002 wave, which is the baseline. Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Overall, our results carry significance for debates about the causes and nature of the spatial polarisation of political attitudes and behaviours, and the fertile soil this provides for nationalist and populist parties. They also lend weight to the argument that the deepening divisions between urban and rural areas that are apparent in the United States should not be used as a template for what is overall happening across Europe. Under such light, Europe and North America are different in many ways, and we hence call for caution when considering the external validity of findings from the US.

While our analysis provides general comparative evidence, future

research in this area may wish to probe more deeply some of the general findings reported here in two respects. First, more analysis is needed to compare the evidence we supply of a limited urban-rural divergence in outlooks with other recent findings about the spatial polarisation of votes in western democracies (Huijsmans & Rodden, 2024; Taylor, Lucas, Armstrong, & Bakker, 2023). Election results reflect not only underlying shifts in popular attitudes on specific issues and priorities, but also relate to candidate-specific factors and changes in how issues are ‘strategically activated’ by political elites (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Ford & Jennings, 2020) – what can be described as the ‘supply side’ of

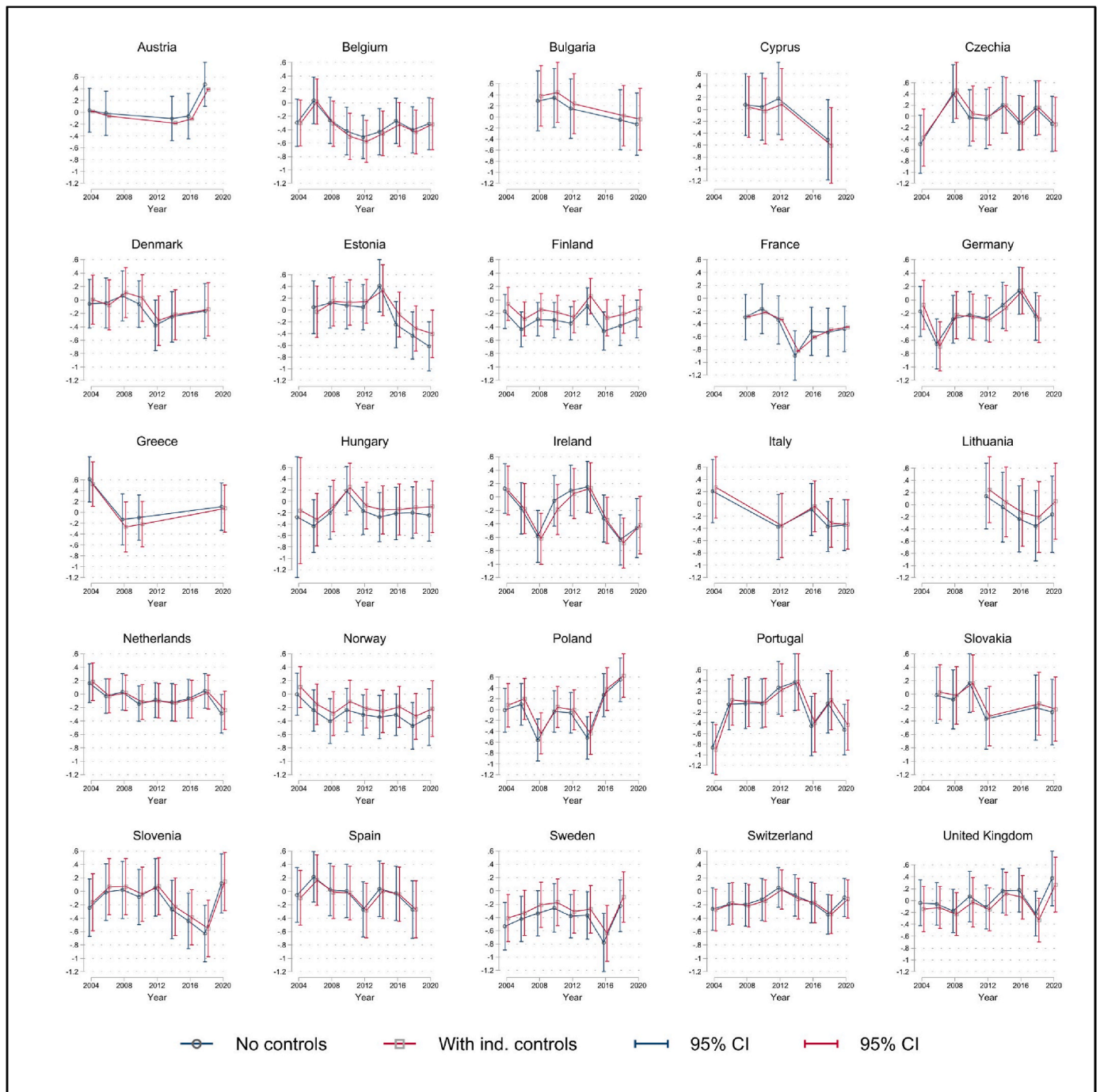


Fig. 5. Urban-rural divergence on satisfaction with democracy: robust country-specific OLS estimates.
 Notes: For each country, each plot reports the urban-rural gap coefficient obtained from robust OLS estimates, interacting a dummy for residents living in rural areas (villages and countryside houses vs the rest) with ESS waves. All ESS wave coefficients are relative to the 2002 wave, which is the baseline. Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

politics (Bonikowski, 2017; Rodrik, 2021). While the recent papers by Taylor, Lucas, Armstrong, & Bakker, 2023 Huijsmans & Rodden, 2024 focus on the growing urban-rural polarisation in terms of election results, our analysis contributes to an understanding of the ‘demand side’ of urban-rural politics. There is a clear need for further research to examine the interactions between the ‘demand’ and ‘supply’ sides of politics in relation to these issues.

Recent research on the rise of the populist radical right suggests that the success of such parties can only be marginally explained by shifts in party positions or changes in voters’ opinions and demographics

(Bonikowski, 2017; Danieli et al., 2022). By contrast, these authors hypothesise that the primary driver behind the electoral success of right-wing populism are voters’ changing priorities. They argue that ballot results may change even if the underlying attitudes of voters remain the same. For instance, if a voter consistently held negative views on immigration but did not prioritize this issue in relation to other questions, such as the role of the state in economic redistribution, when immigration does become more politically salient, this voter may find themselves drawn towards the populist radical right, even if their stance on the topic has not changed (Danieli et al., 2022).

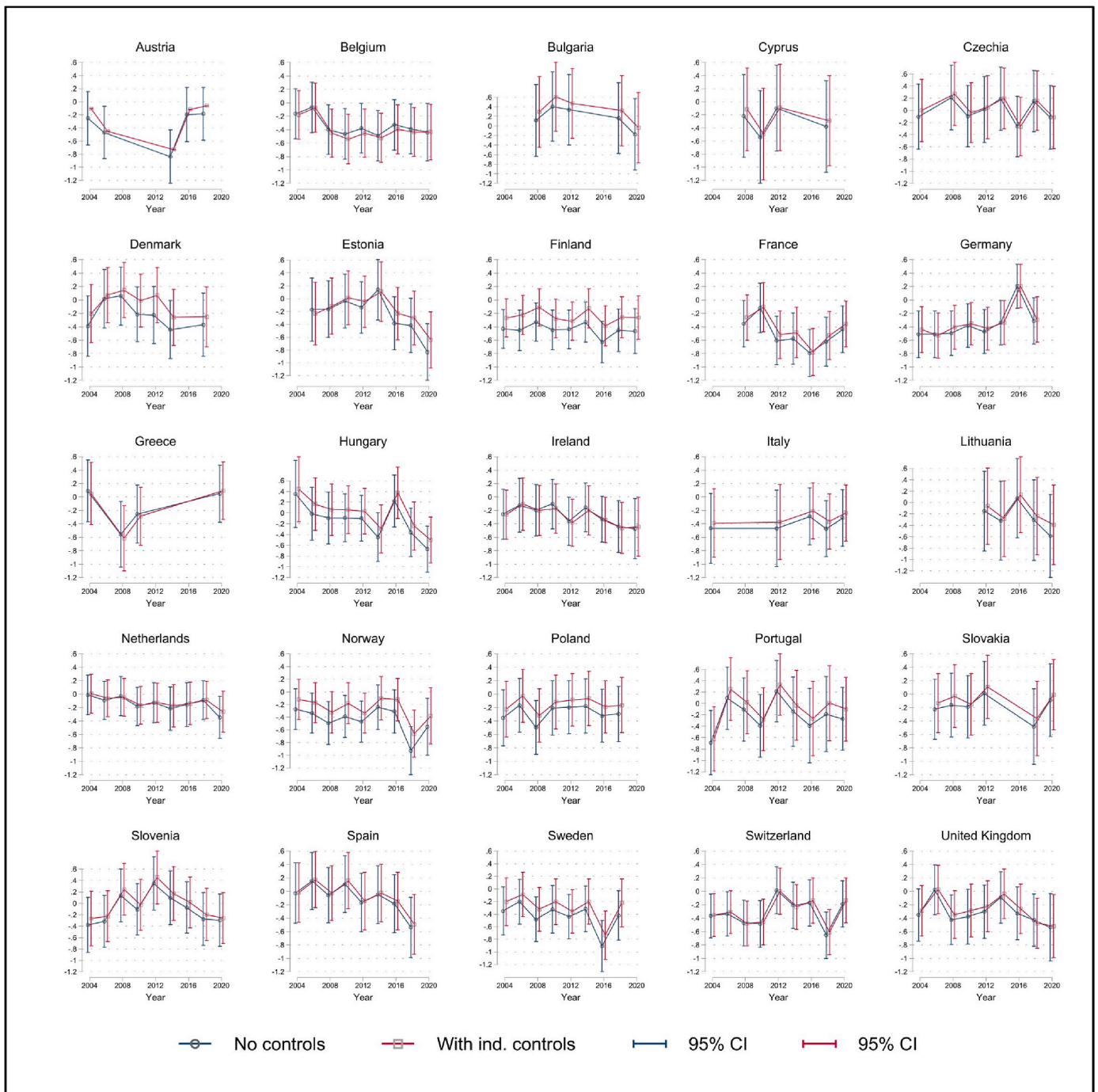


Fig. 6. Urban-rural divergence on trust in the European Parliament: robust country-specific OLS estimates.
 Notes: For each country, each plot reports the urban-rural gap coefficient obtained from robust OLS estimates, interacting a dummy for residents living in rural areas (villages and countryside houses vs the rest) with ESS waves. All ESS wave coefficients are relative to the 2002 wave, which is the baseline. Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

And second, there is not space in our analysis to examine the different forms in which urban-rural divergence takes in individual countries, or consider the contextual social and political factors which are relevant in them. Further qualitative work combining the approaches of political science and geographical scholarship would complement our study by exploring in a more fine-grained manner the ways in which individual outlooks may have polarized over time across different levels of ‘urbanity’, ‘suburbanity’, and ‘rurality’. Relatedly, while our paper strikes a cautionary note about the risk of overstating the divergence of attitudes between urban and rural Europe, further

work may well wish to employ qualitative approaches and/or more advanced causal inference techniques to explore in more detail the micro-mechanisms underlying the patterns we report.

Data statement

The data used in the research is available on request.

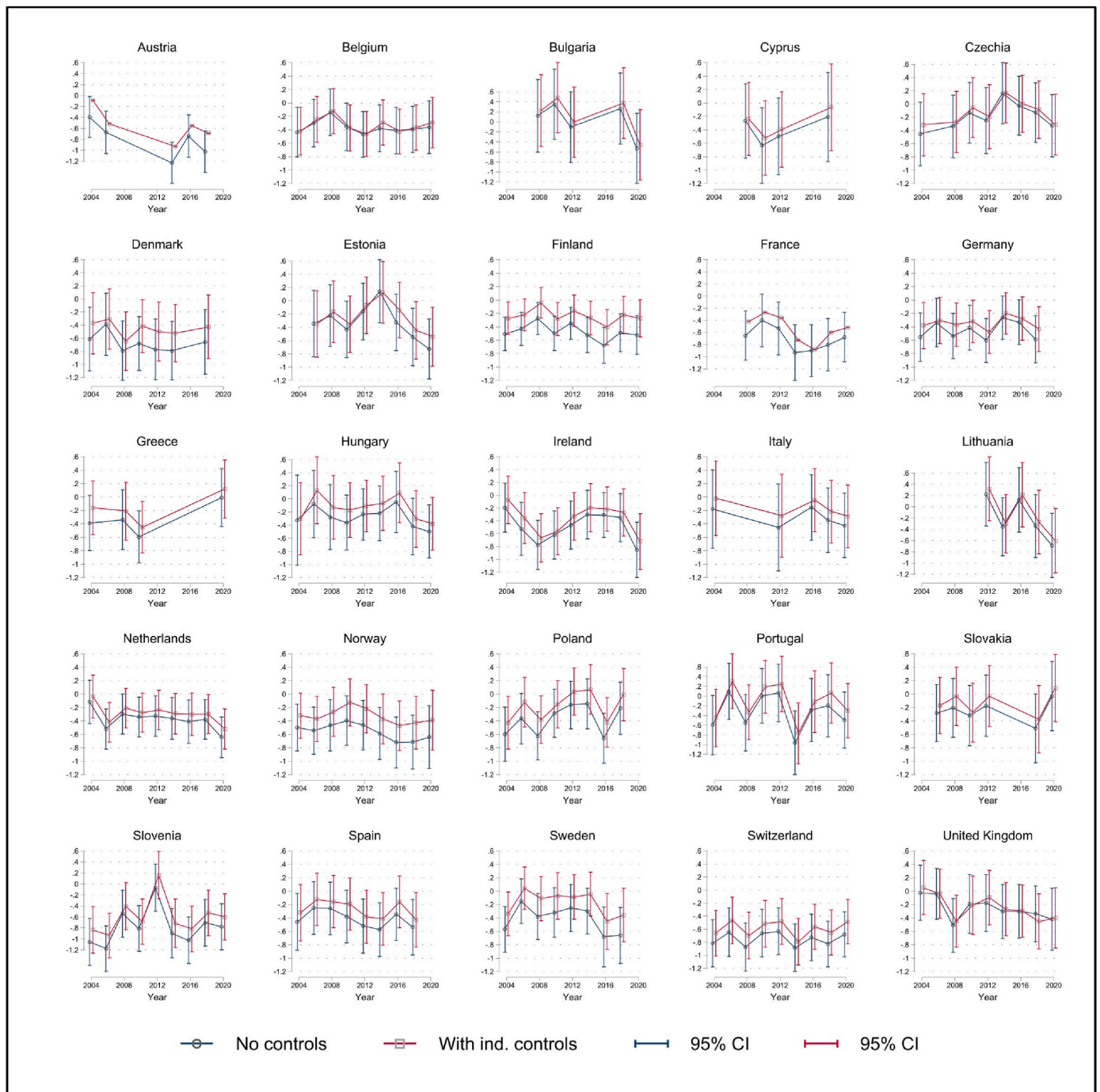


Fig. 7. Urban-rural divergence on views towards migration: robust country-specific OLS estimates.
 Notes: For each country, each plot reports the urban-rural gap coefficient obtained from robust OLS estimates, interacting a dummy for residents living in rural areas (villages and countryside houses vs the rest) with ESS waves. All ESS wave coefficients are relative to the 2002 wave, which is the baseline. Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Davide Luca: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Michael Kenny:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Shan Yu for her excellent research assistance during the first round of manuscript revisions, and the editor and the anonymous referees for their extremely helpful suggestions and recommendations. We would also like to thank Maria Abreu, Neil Lee,

Nathalie Vigna, Daniel Oesch and Marco Mariani for comments and discussions that helped to significantly improve the original research idea. Davide Luca acknowledges the support of the Cambridge Humanities Research Grants Scheme 2021/22. All errors and omissions are our own.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103181>.

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