

Is There a Rural-Urban Political Divide in Britain?

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Abstract

A rural-urban political divide, characterised by rural mistrust in politics, dissatisfaction with democracy, and support for authoritarian-populist leaders and parties, has been identified in many Western democracies. Yet there has been little investigation of the extent to which British public opinion is divided in this fashion. Using newly-updated British Election Study data from 2016 and 2019 that combines large samples with finely-grained geographic identifiers, this paper investigates the possible presence and extent of a rural-urban divide in British political attitudes and values. We find that rural Britons are no less trusting of politicians or satisfied with democracy than urbanites. Neither are they more authoritarian or supportive of autocratic leadership. While there is evidence that rural Britons are more supportive of the Conservative party and more economically conservative than urbanites, these are long-standing issues of division. There is therefore little evidence of a substantial and growing rural-urban political divide in Britain.

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Introduction

Scholars and commentators seem to agree that Britain is politically divided. For Ford and Goodwin (2017) an ideological divide exists between socially liberal progressives and “left behind” conservatives; Jennings and Stoker (2016, 372) distinguish between “cosmopolitan areas of growth” and “backwater areas of decline”; for Goodhart (2017, 3), the nation is riven between “the people who see the world from Anywhere and the people who see it from Somewhere”.

Britain is not unique in this regard: the political landscapes of many other Western democracies are also shifting and polarizing (Hooghe and Marks 2018), often in response to the common drivers of globalisation (Kriesi 1998) and increasing levels of education (Ford and Jennings 2020). One of the key features of these new political landscapes is the re-emergence of the classic rural-urban cleavage in politics, decades after this cleavage was thought to have diminished in political relevance (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Indeed, significant urban-rural differences have recently been noted in the United States (Cramer 2021, 2016; Munis 2020; Scala and Johnson 2017), Canada (Borwein and Lucas 2022), the Netherlands (Huijsmans et al. 2021), Switzerland (Maxwell 2020), France (Brookes and Cappellina 2023), as well as Europe-wide (Kenny and Luca 2021; Mitsch, Lee and Morrow 2021).

Missing from these analyses is Britain. Although scholars have examined topics such as the political geography of British electoral choice (Johnson and Pattie 2006; Johnston, Pattie, and Allsopp 1988; McAllister and Studlar 1992); the territorial politics of the UK’s constituent nations (Rose 1982; Carman, Johns and Mitchell 2014; Henderson and Wyn Jones 2022), and the divide between prosperous and left-behind places (Hobolt 2016; Jennings and Stoker 2016), there has been limited investigation of the extent to which British public opinion is divided along rural-urban lines. This is a curious omission, not only because there is ample evidence

of political divides in Britain, which – as highlighted above – carry noticeable geographical connotations related to place, but also because Britain’s early and deep experience with industrialisation would suggest a potentially salient urban-rural cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

The purpose of this paper is to provide such an investigation into the possible presence and extent of a rural-urban divide in British political attitudes and values. We aim for a comprehensive analysis using newly updated British Election Study data from 2016 and 2019. These large samples of British residents ($N > 30,000$) are bolstered with geographic identifiers that allow us to link respondents to very small administrative areas in which they reside (middle layer super output areas in England and Wales; intermediate zones in Scotland). In turn, these areas can be categorised as rural, urban, or something in-between using official data. With more precise measures of rurality/urbanity in hand, we consider a wide range of political attitudes for evidence of a divide: at the most general level, people’s orientations to the political system; at the most specific: their attitudes to important issues of the time, such as the UK’s relationship with the European Union. We also consider ideological orientations and party preferences, the bread and butter of political behaviour.

On most dimensions of opinion, we find generally little difference between rural and urban residents of Britain. From 2016 to 2019 there are no sustained, substantial, and significant differences in political trust, support for and satisfaction with democracy, and liberal/authoritarian values. We do find, unsurprisingly, that rural voters are somewhat more likely to support the Conservative party (about 5-10 percentage points more supportive on average than urban voters). We also find a rural-urban gap in support for a closer relationship with the EU, but only in 2019, not closer to the referendum in 2016. The sole dimension of political opinion where we observe a large and sustained divide between rural and urban residents is economic ideology, with rural Britons holding substantially more conservative

economic views on policies regarding taxation and spending than urbanites. Therefore, in contrast to research from other Western democracies, we find limited evidence that the rural-urban divide is a major factor shaping British public opinion and politics.

Existing research on rural-urban political divides in Western democracies

Scholars have long been interested in the political significance of the geographical sorting of national populations. And perhaps the most important geographical divide in politics is that between cities and countryside. For Lipset and Rokkan (1967), the urban-rural divide is one of the fundamental political cleavages that shaped party systems in Western democracies. After appearing to have faded in importance in the mid to late twentieth century, recent years have seen a revival of scholarly interest in rural urban political divides, fuelled by a conviction that these divides are playing a role in ongoing political realignments, such as the rise of populism.

In the United States, researchers have shown growing rural-urban differences in vote choice (Scala and Johnson 2017) and partisanship (Gimpel et al. 2020). They have also described the identities and resentments that provide such political force to these divides (Cramer 2012, 2016; Munis 2020). In the European context, political scientists have identified a link between rurality, support for right-wing populists (Brookes and Cappellina 2023; Fitzgerald and Lawrence, 2011, Gavenda and Umit 2016, Strijker et al. 2015), and hostility to immigration (Huijsmans et al. 2021; Maxwell 2020). There is also substantial evidence that European ruralites show less trust in politics and are less satisfied with their democracies than urbanites (Kenny and Luca 2021; Lago 2021; Mitsch, Lee and Morrow 2021). Indeed, McKay, Jennings, and Stoker's (2022) global analysis of World Values Survey samples from more than 100 countries finds that Western European ruralites are fairly unique in showing less trust in politics. Overall, a large literature has identified a rural-urban divide in Western democracies

in which rural areas are characterised by what Stoker (2019: 144) refers to as “anti-politics – defined by negative attitudes toward politicians and institutions.”

Rural-Urban Divides in British Politics

In contrast to the wider comparative literature, there have been fewer attempts to measure and evaluate the presence and extent of urban-rural political divides in Britain. One partial exception is electoral behaviour, where political geography (if not always the rural vs. urban cleavage specifically) has long been regarded as important (e.g., McAllister and Studlar 1992). While a rural electoral advantage for the Conservative Party became apparent in the 1950s and 1960s, several scholars have argued that this advantage diminished during the New Labour period (Curtice and Steed 1982; Ward 2002). However, Johnston et al. (2004) find that rurality was negatively associated with support for Labour compared to support for either Conservatives or Liberal Democrats even during the 1990s. In any case, it seems clear that rural-urban electoral divides have been more pronounced since Cameron’s government: Jennings and Stoker (2017) demonstrate that support for Labour in urban-metropolitan and in high-density constituencies generally increased between 2005 and 2017. The Conservatives, on the other hand, had more of an edge in regional-coastal and low-density areas, even if they found themselves challenged by UKIP in rural England (Brooks 2020).

There has been surprisingly little attention to rural-urban differences in the Brexit vote. Possibly this is because little evidence of such a divide is evident (Johnston, Manley, Pattie, and Jones 2018): indeed only 56% of English voters in largely rural local authorities voted in favour of leaving the EU, compared with 53% of English voters as a whole (Wilson 2016). Yet it is also true that these aggregate analyses rely on coarsely-measured geographic units, i.e.,

local authorities, which may often include both rural and urban areas, thereby possibly diluting any association between rurality and Brexit vote.

More attention has been paid to geographic divides that opened up in the wake of Brexit, although – once again – they do not strictly align with the rural-urban cleavage. Most notable here is Jennings and Stoker’s (2016; 2017) account of two “Englands”, which shows that people residing in “cosmopolitan” areas hold more globalist, outwardly focused and progressive views, while those residing in “provincial backwater” areas are more politically conservative, less accepting of political change, and more supportive of restrictive immigration policies (see also Goodhart 2017). These geographies are not quite co-terminous with rural-urban areas, as mentioned: “cosmopolitan” areas are not necessarily cities, nor are provincial backwaters necessarily rural. If anything, the “two Englands” thesis depicts more clearly the economic divide between economically prosperous and economically disadvantaged areas than the divisions between explicitly urban and rural environs.

The most direct analysis of rural-urban divides in contemporary Britain is a recent article by McKay et al. (2021). Using population density as a proxy for rurality, they find that rural Britons are less likely to believe that politicians care about their area (what McKay and colleagues refer to as trust) and more likely to perceive social exclusion than urban respondents. At the same time, “population density predicts feelings of social marginality but not subjective economic deprivation...” (McKay et al. 2021: 10). It is only when explicitly measuring variation in economic deprivation (i.e., percentage of routine jobs in an area), rather than rurality, that perceptions of economic deprivation start to emerge as significantly different.

In sum, there is limited research on rural-urban political divides in contemporary Britain. This is a surprising omission because both the classic voting behaviour literature and the newer “two Englands” thesis argue for the political power of geography. Indeed, if Lipset and Rokkan’s theory of the emergence of the rural-urban cleavage is correct, then Britain –

which first experienced an industrial revolution – might be expected to have one of the longest standing and starkest rural urban divides with strong potential to influence the politics of the country.

Methodological Concerns with Urban Rural Analyses

Although research on rural-urban divides has grown apace, concern has been expressed regarding the somewhat inconsistent and often weak operationalisation and measurement of rurality (see Nemerever and Rogers 2021). Three specific problems stand out: the use of subjective, individual level measures of rurality, the use of objective but crude proxy measures, and the use of large and variegated units of analysis.

Subjective, self-reported measures of rural-urban residence are widely used. For example, the European Social Survey fields a question that asks respondents to identify if they reside in a big city, the suburbs or outskirts of a big city, a small city or town, a country village, or an isolated farm or house (e.g., Kenny and Luca 2021). Such responses are open to a wide degree of interpretation and show rather weak relationships with objective indicators of rural vs. urban residence (Nemerever and Rogers 2021).

Other studies have employed objective measures involving administrative areas categorised as rural or urban. This is typically accomplished by linking electoral data or individual level survey data to administrative districts, which are then classified as urban or rural using a variety of criteria such the district's population density or its dominant economic activity (e.g., Crewe and Payne 1976, Cutts and Shryane 2006, Furlong 2019, Jennings and Stoker 2016, Johnston et al. 2004, Kelley and McAllister 1985, McKay et al. 2021, Ward 2002). Two problems arise from this method. First, arbitrary thresholds (e.g., of population density or percent engaged in agricultural activity) are used to delineate rural from urban

places. And second, these often crude measures fail to recognise the diverse social and economic realities of the administrative areas in question, especially if they are large.

Even if analysts avoid the Scylla of subjective individual measures and the Charybdis of objective but crude proxies, a final problem to confront is the level of analysis of the geographical areas which are to be classified as rural or urban. Nemerever and Rogers (2021) demonstrate that different geographical levels may significantly alter the findings. And administrative definitions of “community” may not coincide with how individuals perceive their own communities. Nevertheless, when using administrative data, one usually has to choose *some* level of aggregation. In that light, more finely-grained units of analysis are likely to provide more accurate measures of rurality than large geographic units such as local authority districts in the UK. Such larger units would typically conceal variation: urban (or rural) pockets become submerged within a larger rural (or urban) whole (Ward 2002).

In sum, it is desirable, we think, to use objective measures of rurality rather than subjective. However, these objectives measures should be aggregated to as small an administrative area as is feasible, and crude proxy indicators should also be avoided.

Research design

Data

We use survey data from the British Election Study to determine whether political divides are visible in British public opinion. We analyse two particular waves of BES data: wave 10, which was fielded in November and December 2016, and wave 17, which was fielded in November 2019. Wave 10 is the first wave of publicly released data (at the time of writing) in which small area identifiers were included in the updated data release. Wave 17 was the last before the

COVID-19 pandemic struck, which likely affected opinions in idiosyncratic ways. Both waves also included all of the opinion variables we require (see below).

Dependent variables

As dependent variables we include a wide range of political values and attitudes that, we argue, are central in the political behaviour of UK citizens. First are three measures assessing *orientations towards the system*: political trust, democratic satisfaction, and democratic support. Second are *ideological orientations*, the positions respondents hold on economic and social issues. Third are *electoral preferences*, i.e., respondents' preferences regarding the main political parties. Finally, we include *attitudes toward Brexit* – one of the fundamental political issues of the time. If there is a divide in UK political attitudes between people who live in rural communities and those residing in urban areas, it should become apparent in this comprehensive set of measures. We describe the specific measures of these concepts below.

Orientations towards the system. As noted above, much of the research on the rural urban divide in Europe has focused on political trust and satisfaction with democracy. These opinions are indicators of the vitality and perhaps even legitimacy of the political system – for Norris (2011), for example, both are aspects of support for the regime. In addition to these two indicators, we also consider support for democracy itself. We include three items from the BES, measuring trust in MPs, satisfaction with democracy, and rejection of authoritarian rule (see supplementary materials for question wording).

Ideological orientations. Ideological orientations have long been thought important forces in shaping or “constraining” citizens’ attitudes towards specific political issues (Converse 1964,

Feldman 1988). Two ideological scales have long been included in the British Election Study: an economic (or redistributive) dimension in which “socialist” values are opposed to “laissez-faire” values and a second, cultural dimension in which “authoritarian” values are opposed to “libertarian” values (Heath, Evans, and Martin 1994). Additive scales were created for each values dimension using the relevant BES items (see the supplementary materials). These scales are reliable: Cronbach’s alpha varies from .83 (cultural values, both waves) to .85 (economic values, wave 17).

Electoral preferences. Electoral preferences are measured using the standard vote choice question employed by the BES: “if there were a UK General Election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?” Responses of Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats, and the Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties (in their corresponding nations) were retained as recorded; other options were recoded as “other”.

Attitudes towards Brexit. Finally, attitudes to the UK’s membership in the European Union were measured using the following question: “if there was another referendum on EU membership, how do you think you would vote?”, with possible responses being “remain in the EU” or “leave the EU”.

Measuring rurality

The updated public data files for waves 10 to 20 of the BES include indicators for small geographic areas in which respondents reside. In the England and Wales samples, these are “middle-layer super output areas” (MSOAs), which are small areas defined by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) for the reporting of administrative data. They have an average

population of 7,200 residents and are categorised by the ONS according to their degree of rurality / urbanity using a ten-point scale. We recode these to a trichotomous definition of urban, rural, and an intermediate category we call “small town” (see Table 1). This allows us to obtain a significant rural sample without lumping intermediate areas – which are ambiguous as to their urbanity – into either pole. Doing so provides a sharper comparison between the remaining core rural and core urban areas, and therefore a more dispositive test.

Tables 1 and 2 showing rural urban definitions

Scottish administrative data differ from those available in England and Wales. We use intermediate zones as the geographic area indicators; these are designed as vehicles for the communication of small area statistics and have populations ranging from 2,500 to 6,000. The Scottish rural-urban definitions also vary from those used in England and Wales (see Table 2). We again recode these into urban, rural, and an intermediate category of “small town”.

Empirical strategy

We proceed by examining the link between rural residence and each of our dependent variables separately. We generally use linear regression models, with the exception of electoral preferences, where – dictated by the variable’s nominal measurement – we use multinomial logit. Because official measures of rurality vary between Scotland, on the one hand, and England and Wales, on the other, we analyse these subsamples separately. In addition, since the party systems in Wales and Scotland differ from that in England, we present separate analyses of the three nations when it comes to electoral preferences. Fortunately, each wave of the BES has a sufficiently large sample ($N > 30,000$) that separate analysis of the Scottish and Welsh samples is feasible.

We consider both the simple, unadjusted (i.e., bivariate) differences between rural and urban areas in the three nations as well the differences after adjusting for covariates. The former approach arguably reveals whether any true rural-urban divide exists. Even if the effects of rural residence turn out to be a function of the different demographics of urban and rural communities, we would still expect the rural-urban distinction to have political and social consequences. However, at the same time we are also interested in whether rural-urban divides have deeper roots than the different compositional characteristics of rural and urban communities. This is a secondary question, but one that we think worthwhile investigating, because it suggests possible mechanisms that might mediate contexts and public opinion.

Based on a consideration of previous research on British public opinion, we include the following demographic covariates in all multivariate analyses: gender, ethnicity, education, age, income, employment status, religious identity, and occupational grade. In the analyses of electoral and EU preferences, we also include the economic and cultural values scales used earlier as dependent variables.

Since we ask whether there is a rural-urban divide in British public opinion, we should define what counts as a “divide”. For the purposes of our analysis, a public opinion divide is a *significant, substantial, and sustained* gap in political attitudes or behaviour observed between rural and urban residents. By significant, we refer to standard benchmarks of statistical significance. That however is not sufficient, especially with the large samples available in the BES. We therefore require the gap between rural and urban residents to also be large in substantive terms. For our purposes, this means that the rural (vs. urban) “effect” should be among the largest demographic effects observed for each particular dependent variable. Finally, any divide worth its name should be sustained: it should exist over a period of time. For the purposes of this paper, we require a divide to be an urban-rural gap that is significant and substantial in both the November/December 2016 and November 2019 BES samples.

Analysis and findings

Orientations towards the system

[Table 3 showing trust in MPs, England/Wales & Scotland]

We begin our analysis by focusing on citizens' orientations towards the political system itself. Table 3 shows our analyses of trust in MPs in England & Wales and Scotland, in 2016 and 2019. Living in a rural area (measured at the level of middle-layer super output areas in E&W and intermediate zones in Scotland) has little to no effect on political trust. There is a significant, positive effect in England and Wales in 2016, but not a sustained one: the effect vanishes three years later, likely due to the re-alignments in trust caused by Brexit (Gaskell et al. 2020). Yet even the 2016 trust gap is fairly insubstantial. The rural trust advantage of .08 (covariate-adjusted) is far smaller than the effects of many of the other demographic indicators. In Scotland, the trust effect is of a similar magnitude to that in England & Wales, but is statistically insignificant (and relatively insubstantial).

These results differ from the existing literature showing that rural areas in Europe suffer from lower political trust (Kenny and Luca 2021, Lago 2021; Mitsch, Lee and Morrow 2021). If anything, we find that there is a small positive effect of rurality on political trust in England (but not Wales). However, as discussed, this is never substantial enough to be described as a divide.

[Table 4 showing satisfaction with democracy, England/Wales & Scotland]

Next, we consider satisfaction with the way democracy is working, our second measure of public orientations to the political system. Results (shown in Table 4) are once again weak. There is no evidence of an urban rural divide in satisfaction with democracy. There are weakly significant effects in 2019 in both England & Wales and Scotland. However, neither of these are sustained nor substantial (the urban-rural gap also has different signs in England & Wales versus Scotland).

[Table 5 showing support for strong leader, England/Wales & Scotland]

Finally, we examine support for a strong, undemocratic leader, a measure of (low) support for democracy (Table 5). We see significant effects of rurality in both England/Wales & Scotland in 2016. However, these effects have the opposite sign in the two samples: a negative effect in England/Wales (i.e., ruralites are less likely than urbanites to support strong leaders) versus a positive effect in Scotland. Neither are these contrasting effects sustained in 2019. In addition, neither of these effects is substantial in comparison with other demographics: even in England & Wales, the negative effect of rural residence on support for an undemocratic leader is notably smaller than the negative effects of being a student, being white, having a university degree, or holding a managerial, administrative or professional occupation.

Ideological orientations

[Table 6 showing economic values, England/Wales & Scotland]

Our analysis of the economic dimension of political attitudes is shown in Table 6. We see a significant and sustained effect of rurality in England & Wales, with rural residents more

economically conservative than urban residents. This urban-rural gap is evident in both November 2016 and November 2019. It is also substantial in magnitude, the effect size of .16 to .20 is among the largest observed in Table 6, with only occupational grade A/B being a more substantial correlate of economic conservatism. The gap is observable in Scotland as well, although here it is not as strong. The effect is smaller in magnitude (.12 with controls to .15 without controls in the model) and does not meet our definition of sustained as it is statistically insignificant in 2016. Overall, the evidence suggests that there is indeed a sustained, significant, and substantial rural-urban divide in economic values in England and Wales (with one potentially emerging in Scotland in 2019), with ruralites exhibiting much more conservative economic values than urbanites.

[Table 6 showing cultural values, England/Wales & Scotland]

Turning to the cultural dimension of values (Table 7), we see less evidence of a divide. Ruralites in England & Wales are less authoritarian than their urban counterparts in 2016, but by 2019 there is no discernible gap at all. Neither is the 2016 gap that substantial: the effect (-.05 to -.09) is much smaller than the gap between white and non-white respondents (-.19) or between the religious and non-religious (.16 to .34). In Scotland, ruralites tend to be more authoritarian, not less, than urbanites. But neither is this effect particularly large nor robust when demographics such as age and religious identity are included in the model.

Electoral preferences

[Figure 1 showing electoral preferences in England]

We next consider electoral preferences. Given the complexity of these results, with separate analyses by nation with three or more significant parties in each, we present our findings graphically, with more detailed tables presented in the supplementary materials. Figure 1 shows the effects of rural (versus urban) residence on the probability of selecting any of the three main parties in England. Results for 2016 are presented in dark blue; 2019 in lighter orange. Models with demographic covariates are presented using dashed lines and those without any controls using dot-dashed lines.

We see a significant effect of rurality on choosing any of the three main parties in England, with ruralites less likely to support Labour and the Liberal Democrats and more likely to support the Conservatives. These gaps hold even when we factor in both demographic and ideological differences between residents of rural and urban areas. The gaps are also sustained over time, with similar effects evident in 2016 and 2019. These gaps are moreover substantial: the Conservative party enjoys around ten percentage points more support among rural respondents; the Labour party suffers a deficit of five to ten percentage points less support among rural respondents; and the Liberal Democrats around five percentage points less. Although not obvious from the figures, this effect of rurality is among the most important predictor of vote choice of any of the extensive set of demographics we include in our models (see the supplementary materials).¹ For example, in the pre-election survey of England in November 2019, the rural effect of -0.75, on preferring Labour over Conservative, is larger than the effect of any other demographic indicator, bar youth (18-39; effect size: 1.18). It is more substantial than being White (-0.60), having a degree (0.19), identifying as Church of

¹ The political values scales are generally more substantial. However, these are neither demographics nor is the metric of these scales readily comparable with the dummy variables used to capture demographics in our models.

England or Anglican (vs. having no religious identity; -0.41), being female (0.37), or holding a managerial, administrative, or professional occupation (vs. semi-skilled & unskilled manual occupations; -0.15).

[Figure 2 showing electoral preferences in Scotland]

[Figure 3 showing electoral preferences in Wales]

Electoral choice results for Scotland and Wales are shown in Figures 2 and 3. Instead of the Liberal Democrats, we include the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru. Results from both nations are otherwise similar to those we have found in England. Labour suffers from a small deficit in rural areas, with Conservatives enjoying a fairly substantial advantage of 5-8 (Scotland) and 10-12 (Wales) percentage points. There is no significant rural-urban gap in support for either of the nationalist parties. Similarly, as we saw in England, rurality is among the most consequential predictors of vote choice in Scotland and Wales. The rural effect with respect to the choice between Labour and Conservative in November 2019 in Wales was -1.03, which was eclipsed in magnitude only by the effect identifying as White (-1.40). In Scotland the comparable effect was -1.02, which was the single most important demographic predictor of Labour vs Conservative choice.²

Attitudes towards Brexit

[Table 7 showing EU opinion, England/Wales & Scotland]

² Ethnicity is a more potent predictor (effect size: -1.31) of the probability of choosing SNP over Conservative.

The final set of opinions we examine are public preferences on the major political issue of the time: the relationship between the UK and the EU. The results of our analysis of these opinions are presented in Table 7. In England & Wales, there is no rural-urban gap whatsoever in attitudes to the EU in 2016. By 2019, however, a significant and substantial gap has emerged, with ruralites more in favour of sticking to the “leave EU” decision. This is a substantial effect, but it is not one that persists when demographic and ideological controls are added to the model. Specifically, the gap in this case is partially a function of rural areas being older and whiter than urban areas (and these demographic groups tending to favour Brexit).³ In addition, conservative economic values became more closely linked with hostility to the EU between 2016 and 2019 (the coefficient in Table 7 rises from .13 to .22) and, as we have seen, ruralites are substantially more economically conservative than urbanites. In the case of attitudes to the EU, rural-urban differences in England & Wales are largely compositional differences between the types of people who live in rural and urban areas.

In Scotland, we also see evidence of a rural-urban gap in EU support, with ruralites again being more opposed to the EU. This gap is significant, substantial and – unlike in England and Wales – sustained, being evident in both 2016 and 2019. Similar to their counterparts in the rest of Britain, the hostility of rural Scots towards the EU is largely a function of their demographic and ideological composition (particularly the latter).

The emergence of a Brexit divide in British politics has been noted by other analysts. The link between Brexit support and political values (notably authoritarianism) has also been picked up by previous research (Sobolewska and Ford 2020). More novel is our finding that

³ See the supplementary materials for a summary of the demographic patterns across England & Wales and Scotland.

the new cleavage in British politics, whether nationalist vs globalist (Scotto, Sanders, and Reifler 2018), cosmopolitan vs non-cosmopolitan (Jennings and Stoker 2017), or the winners vs the losers of globalisation (Hobolt 2016) has a marked urban-rural dimension.

Conclusion

A large body of research has shown that substantial – and growing – urban-rural divides exist in public opinion and political behaviour in several Western democracies. In a bid to understand whether such a divide exists in Britain, we have analysed a comprehensive set of political opinions, using large survey samples from two points in time, and finely-grained indicators of rural vs. urban residence.

Our analysis reveals relatively little evidence for a rural-urban divide in Britain. On the major dimensions by which citizens are oriented to the political system – political trust, satisfaction with their democracy, principled commitment to democracy itself – we find no significant, substantial, and sustained gap between urban and rural Britain. Indeed, the modest levels of political distrust we observed in 2016 disappear by 2019. On this score, Britain differs from a number of other cases where rural areas are less trusting in government and less satisfied with democracy (e.g., Kenny and Luca 2021; Lago 2021; Mitsch, Lee and Morrow 2021).

Yet there is evidence for rural-urban divides on other political opinions. Rural Britons are substantially more economically conservative than their urban counterparts even though the two groups differ little in terms of social conservatism (i.e., authoritarian-libertarian values). There are also differences in partisan allegiances, with ruralites favouring the Conservatives and urbanites preferring Labour. Finally, there is evidence that a rural-urban gap emerged between 2016 and 2019 in one of the foremost political issues of the last decade, the relationship between the UK and the EU.

In sum, our evidence shows the limits of rural-urban divides as a major factor shaping public opinion and politics. Although the rural-urban divide may be an important feature of several Western democracies, there is limited evidence that it is politically significant in Britain. Not only do we find no sustained and substantial rural-urban gaps in system support, the gaps that we do observe – i.e., ruralites being more economically conservative and supportive of the Conservative party than urbanites – are arguably long-standing phenomena. The growth of urban-rural divides may therefore not be a universal phenomenon sweeping across Western democracies. Rather, it seems possible that the (re)emergence of rural-urban divides in a variety of cases has national, not international origins, even as some of the facilitating factors are international forces like globalisation.

This is not to say that political divisions are absent among the British public. Rather, the divisions that are the subject of much recent commentary and research, e.g., Goodhart's (2017) "Anywheres" vs. "Somewheres") are not co-terminous with rural-urban residence. In Britain, the geographic divides that may be more politically consequential are between progressive and prosperous towns and cities on the one hand and more peripheral and "left-behind" places on the other (e.g., Jennings & Stoker 2016).

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Table 1: Rural-urban definitions, England & Wales

England & Wales Official Classification			Our classification
Urban	(A1)	Major Conurbation	Urban
Urban	(B1)	Minor Conurbation	
Urban	(C1)	City and Town (>10k)	
Urban	(C2)	City and Town in a Sparse Setting (>10k)	Small town
Rural	(D1)	Town and Fringe	
Rural	(D2)	Town and Fringe in a Sparse Setting	Rural
Rural	(E1)	Village	
Rural	(E2)	Village in a Sparse Setting	
Rural	(F1)	Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings	
Rural	(F2)	Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings in a Sparse Setting	

Table 2: Rural-urban definitions, Scotland

Scotland Official Classification			Our classification
Urban	1	Large Urban Areas	Urban
Urban	2	Other Urban Areas	
Urban	3	Accessible Small Towns (3-10k)	Small town
Urban	4	Remote Small Towns (3-10k)	
Urban	5	Very Remote Small Towns (3-10k)	
Rural	6	Accessible Rural Areas	Rural
Rural	7	Remote Rural Areas	
Rural	8	Very Remote Rural Areas	

Table 3: Rural-urban differences in trust in MPs

	England & Wales				Scotland			
	Wave 10		Wave 17		Wave 10		Wave 17	
Intercept	3.35***	3.02***	2.69***	2.54***	3.08***	2.53***	2.53***	2.38***
	(.01)	(.06)	(.01)	(.05)	(.03)	(.20)	(.03)	(.18)
Rural	.11**	.08*	-.03	.01	.08	.08	.06	.08
	(.04)	(.04)	(.03)	(.03)	(.07)	(.07)	(.07)	(.07)
Small town	.07*	.04	-.06*	-.01	.11	.05	-.04	-.01
	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.08)	(.08)	(.07)	(.07)
Female		-.02		-.07***		.04		-.14**
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
White		-.01		-.18***		.08		-.15
		(.04)		(.03)		(.17)		(.14)
Has degree		.18***		.27***		.19**		.36***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.06)
Wales		-.13**		-.12***				
		(.04)		(.04)				
Age: 18-39		-.12**		.09**		.15		.13
		(.04)		(.03)		(.10)		(.09)
Age: 40-59		-.13***		-.05		-.11		-.15
		(.03)		(.03)		(.09)		(.09)
Income: Middle tertile		.14***		.07**		.22**		.17**
		(.02)		(.02)		(.07)		(.06)
Income: Upper tertile		-.03		-.15***		.03		-.00
		(.02)		(.02)		(.07)		(.07)
Employ. status: Student		.31***		.50***		.31**		.54***
		(.04)		(.04)		(.11)		(.11)
Employ. status: Retired		.04		.07*		.31**		.09
		(.04)		(.03)		(.10)		(.09)
Employ. status: Unemployed		-.09		.15**		-.06		.30*
		(.05)		(.05)		(.14)		(.13)
Employ. status: Other		-.22***		-.06*		-.18*		.07
		(.03)		(.03)		(.08)		(.09)
Religion: CoE/Anglican		.36***		.19***		.37**		.35**
		(.02)		(.02)		(.12)		(.12)
Religion: Catholic		.24***		.12***		-.05		-.04
		(.04)		(.04)		(.09)		(.09)
Religion: Other Christian		.45***		.30***		.34***		.06
		(.04)		(.04)		(.07)		(.07)
Religion: Other		.10**		.10**		.03		-.12
		(.04)		(.03)		(.10)		(.09)
Occupational grade: A/B		.36***		.26***		.35***		.25**
		(.03)		(.03)		(.08)		(.08)
Occupational grade: C1		.19***		.15***		.23**		.06
		(.03)		(.03)		(.07)		(.07)
Occupational grade: C2		.05		.01		-.05		.07
		(.03)		(.03)		(.08)		(.08)
Resid. std. dev.	1.59	1.56	1.47	1.43	1.34	1.30	1.32	1.29
Adj. R ²	.00	.04	.00	.03	.00	.05	-.00	.04
N	26083	26061	29434	28534	3328	3320	3250	3166

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05

Table 4: Rural-urban differences in democratic satisfaction

	England & Wales				Scotland			
	Wave 10		Wave 17		Wave 10		Wave 17	
Intercept	2.46***	2.36***	2.04***	2.00***	2.19***	1.88***	1.86***	1.59***
	(.01)	(.03)	(.01)	(.03)	(.02)	(.12)	(.02)	(.11)
Rural	-.02	-.02	-.04*	-.02	.06	.04	.08*	.07
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.04)	(.04)	(.04)	(.04)
Small town	-.05**	-.06**	-.03	-.01	.01	-.06	.01	.01
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)
Female		.06***		.05***		.16***		.09**
		(.01)		(.01)		(.03)		(.03)
White		-.06**		-.10***		.10		.06
		(.02)		(.02)		(.10)		(.09)
Has degree		-.07***		.00		-.17***		-.05
		(.01)		(.01)		(.03)		(.03)
Wales		-.08***		-.06**				
		(.02)		(.02)				
Age: 18-39		.03		.06**		.04		.08
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.06)
Age: 40-59		.01		.04*		-.02		.04
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Income: Middle tertile		.06***		.06***		.13***		.17***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.04)		(.04)
Income: Upper tertile		.00		-.06***		.09*		-.00
		(.01)		(.01)		(.04)		(.04)
Employ. status: Student		-.08***		.06*		-.09		.05
		(.02)		(.03)		(.07)		(.07)
Employ. status: Retired		-.03		.01		-.01		.09
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.06)
Employ. status: Unemployed		-.13***		-.06		.01		.08
		(.03)		(.03)		(.08)		(.08)
Employ. status: Other		-.18***		-.12***		-.27***		-.05
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.06)
Religion: CoE/Anglican		.21***		.13***		.38***		.34***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.07)		(.08)
Religion: Catholic		.13***		.13***		.01		.04
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.06)
Religion: Other Christian		.19***		.21***		.35***		.17***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.04)
Religion: Other		.08***		.10***		.05		.04
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.06)
Occupational grade: A/B		.08***		.04**		.05		-.01
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Occupational grade: C1		.06***		.02		.04		-.01
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.04)
Occupational grade: C2		.04*		-.02		.09*		-.00
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Resid. std. dev.	.82	.81	.84	.83	.77	.75	.78	.76
Adj. R ²	.00	.03	.00	.02	-.00	.06	.00	.02
N	24579	24557	27963	27108	3198	3191	3138	3057

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05

Table 5: Rural-urban differences in rejection of democracy

	England & Wales				Scotland			
	Wave 10		Wave 17		Wave 10		Wave 17	
Intercept	2.64***	3.14***	2.44***	2.90***	2.40***	2.57***	2.28***	2.33***
	(.01)	(.05)	(.01)	(.04)	(.03)	(.16)	(.03)	(.16)
Rural	-.18***	-.15***	.03	.02	.15*	.12*	.00	-.04
	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.06)	(.06)	(.06)	(.06)
Small town	-.04	-.03	.05	.02	.32***	.24***	-.06	-.06
	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.07)	(.07)	(.07)	(.07)
Female		.14***		.08***		.20***		.15**
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.05)
White		-.35***		-.12***		-.10		.01
		(.03)		(.03)		(.14)		(.13)
Has degree		-.45***		-.53***		-.54***		-.57***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Wales		.04		-.07*				
		(.03)		(.03)				
Age: 18-39		.08**		-.04		.06		.04
		(.03)		(.03)		(.08)		(.09)
Age: 40-59		.00		-.00		.06		.09
		(.03)		(.03)		(.07)		(.08)
Income: Middle tertile		-.09***		-.07**		-.01		-.05
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.06)
Income: Upper tertile		-.12***		-.11***		-.19***		-.05
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.06)
Employ. status: Student		-.40***		-.52***		-.56***		-.35***
		(.04)		(.04)		(.09)		(.10)
Employ. status: Retired		-.06*		-.05		-.13		-.03
		(.03)		(.03)		(.08)		(.08)
Employ. status: Unemployed		-.12**		.01		.04		.20
		(.04)		(.04)		(.11)		(.12)
Employ. status: Other		-.13***		-.11***		.09		-.06
		(.03)		(.03)		(.07)		(.08)
Religion: CoE/Anglican		.24***		.28***		.11		.27*
		(.02)		(.02)		(.10)		(.11)
Religion: Catholic		.23***		.16***		.22**		.40***
		(.03)		(.03)		(.07)		(.09)
Religion: Other Christian		.17***		.16***		.31***		.35***
		(.03)		(.03)		(.05)		(.06)
Religion: Other		.14***		.13***		.16		.39***
		(.03)		(.03)		(.09)		(.09)
Occupational grade: A/B		-.29***		-.35***		-.20**		-.27***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.07)
Occupational grade: C1		-.20***		-.26***		-.03		-.08
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.07)
Occupational grade: C2		-.00		-.03		.11		.19**
		(.02)		(.03)		(.06)		(.07)
Resid. std. dev.	1.25	1.21	1.32	1.26	1.07	1.01	1.20	1.14
Adj. R ²	.00	.07	.00	.08	.01	.10	-.00	.09
N	24168	24147	28208	27348	3153	3146	3132	3052

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05

Table 6: Rural-urban differences in economic conservatism

	England & Wales				Scotland			
	Wave 10		Wave 17		Wave 10		Wave 17	
Intercept	2.17***	1.66***	2.26***	1.80***	2.10***	1.72***	2.12***	1.70***
	(.01)	(.03)	(.01)	(.03)	(.02)	(.10)	(.02)	(.10)
Rural	.18***	.16***	.20***	.17***	.03	.06	.15***	.12***
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.04)	(.04)	(.04)	(.04)
Small town	.08***	.07***	.14***	.11***	.00	-.02	.05	.05
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.04)	(.04)	(.04)	(.04)
Female		.07***		.06***		.13***		.12***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.03)		(.03)
White		.11***		.15***		.15		.12
		(.02)		(.02)		(.09)		(.08)
Has degree		.04***		-.03**		-.04		-.04
		(.01)		(.01)		(.03)		(.03)
Wales		-.10***		-.13***				
		(.02)		(.02)				
Age: 18-39		.17***		.00		.15**		.11*
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Age: 40-59		.03*		-.01		-.05		.04
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Income: Middle tertile		.14***		.16***		.10**		.16***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.03)		(.04)
Income: Upper tertile		.18***		.16***		.16***		.14***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.04)		(.04)
Employ. status: Student		.10***		-.11***		.08		.04
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.06)
Employ. status: Retired		.02		.11***		-.07		.15**
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Employ. status: Unemployed		-.07**		-.11***		-.02		-.16*
		(.03)		(.03)		(.07)		(.08)
Employ. status: Other		-.11***		-.11***		-.20***		-.12*
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.05)
Religion: CoE/Anglican		.15***		.17***		.30***		.39***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.06)		(.07)
Religion: Catholic		-.01		.06**		-.04		-.10
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.05)
Religion: Other Christian		.15***		.18***		.19***		.18***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.03)		(.04)
Religion: Other		.05*		.05**		.23***		.01
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Occupational grade: A/B		.28***		.24***		.13**		.12**
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.04)
Occupational grade: C1		.15***		.15***		.04		.07
		(.01)		(.01)		(.04)		(.04)
Occupational grade: C2		.03*		.04**		-.03		-.02
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.04)
Resid. std. dev.	.77	.74	.79	.76	.66	.65	.70	.68
Adj. R ²	.00	.07	.01	.06	-.00	.06	.00	.06
N	23435	23413	27096	26262	3070	3064	2983	2913

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05

Table 7: Rural-urban differences in authoritarianism

	England & Wales				Scotland			
	Wave 10		Wave 17		Wave 10		Wave 17	
Intercept	3.64***	3.92***	3.55***	3.78***	3.37***	3.49***	3.40***	3.41***
	(.01)	(.03)	(.01)	(.03)	(.02)	(.12)	(.02)	(.12)
Rural	-.05*	-.09***	.03	-.03	.15**	.02	.10*	.01
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.05)	(.04)	(.05)	(.04)
Small town	.05*	.00	.10***	.04*	.24***	.09	.09	.06
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)
Female		.11***		.06***		.10***		.08*
		(.01)		(.01)		(.03)		(.03)
White		-.19***		-.02		.03		.13
		(.02)		(.02)		(.10)		(.09)
Has degree		-.39***		-.44***		-.50***		-.46***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.03)		(.04)
Wales		.00		.01				
		(.02)		(.02)				
Age: 18-39		-.24***		-.27***		-.23***		-.28***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.06)
Age: 40-59		-.02		-.01		-.03		.00
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Income: Middle tertile		.04**		.00		-.01		-.02
		(.01)		(.01)		(.04)		(.04)
Income: Upper tertile		-.01		-.01		-.10*		-.03
		(.01)		(.01)		(.04)		(.04)
Employ. status: Student		-.62***		-.66***		-.70***		-.51***
		(.02)		(.03)		(.07)		(.07)
Employ. status: Retired		.02		.05**		.04		.05
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.06)
Employ. status: Unemployed		-.20***		-.12***		-.14		.16
		(.03)		(.03)		(.08)		(.09)
Employ. status: Other		-.06**		-.03		.03		-.08
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.06)
Religion: CoE/Anglican		.34***		.35***		.50***		.37***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.07)		(.08)
Religion: Catholic		.26***		.26***		.16**		.28***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.06)
Religion: Other Christian		.26***		.30***		.47***		.40***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.04)
Religion: Other		.16***		.19***		.14*		.15**
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.06)
Occupational grade: A/B		-.16***		-.22***		-.14**		-.23***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Occupational grade: C1		-.11***		-.15***		-.05		-.04
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.05)
Occupational grade: C2		.02		.03		.07		.11*
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.05)
Resid. std. dev.	.86	.78	.89	.79	.80	.69	.85	.76
Adj. R ²	.00	.19	.00	.21	.01	.25	.00	.20
N	23260	23240	26549	25726	2957	2951	2822	2752

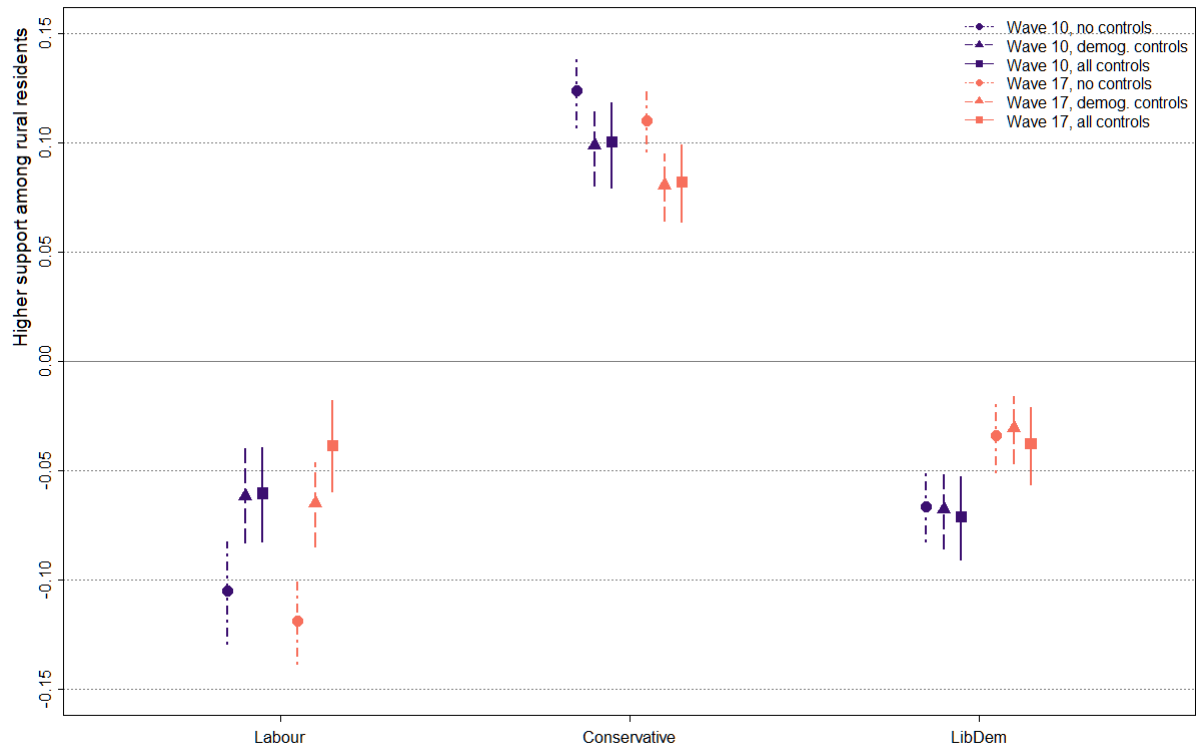
***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05

Table 8: Rural-urban differences in EU leave preference

	England & Wales				Scotland			
	Wave 10		Wave 17		Wave 10		Wave 17	
Intercept	.95***	-.65***	.92***	-.77***	.67***	-.73***	.63***	-.59***
	(.01)	(.05)	(.01)	(.04)	(.02)	(.15)	(.02)	(.15)
Rural	.01	-.02	.18***	.06**	.17***	.02	.20***	.12**
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.05)	(.05)	(.04)	(.04)
Small town	.09***	-.01	.17***	.04*	-.00	-.11*	.11*	.10*
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)
Female		-.10***		-.13***		-.06		-.14***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.03)		(.03)
White		.26***		.20***		.16		.13
		(.03)		(.02)		(.11)		(.10)
Has degree		-.17***		-.16***		-.09*		-.18***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.04)		(.04)
Wales		-.01		-.06**				
		(.03)		(.02)				
Age: 18-39		-.17***		-.26***		-.25***		-.12
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.06)
Age: 40-59		-.07**		-.12***		-.05		.03
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.06)
Income: Middle tertile		-.07***		-.08***		-.06		.05
		(.02)		(.01)		(.04)		(.04)
Income: Upper tertile		-.06***		-.04**		.01		-.00
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.05)
Employ. status: Student		-.11***		.02		.29***		.02
		(.03)		(.03)		(.08)		(.08)
Employ. status: Retired		.08***		.07***		.03		.15*
		(.02)		(.02)		(.06)		(.06)
Employ. status: Unemployed		.02		.05		.34***		.17
		(.03)		(.03)		(.09)		(.10)
Employ. status: Other		.08***		.05**		.13*		.08
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.07)
Religion: CoE/Anglican		.04*		.06***		.15*		.12
		(.02)		(.01)		(.08)		(.08)
Religion: Catholic		-.04		-.06**		-.10		-.08
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.06)
Religion: Other Christian		-.06*		-.13***		-.06		.09
		(.02)		(.02)		(.04)		(.04)
Religion: Other		.00		-.00		-.04		-.04
		(.02)		(.02)		(.07)		(.07)
Occupational grade: A/B		-.17***		-.13***		-.08		-.26***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Occupational grade: C1		-.10***		-.07***		-.09		-.18***
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Occupational grade: C2		.00		.02		.04		-.12*
		(.02)		(.02)		(.05)		(.05)
Authoritarian values		.38***		.38***		.37***		.30***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.02)		(.02)
Economic values		.13***		.22***		.10***		.15***
		(.01)		(.01)		(.02)		(.02)
Resid. std. dev.	.99	.89	.96	.81	.83	.75	.85	.76
Adj. R ²	.00	.20	.00	.29	.00	.19	.01	.21
N	25648	20926	28775	23293	3271	2711	3170	2517

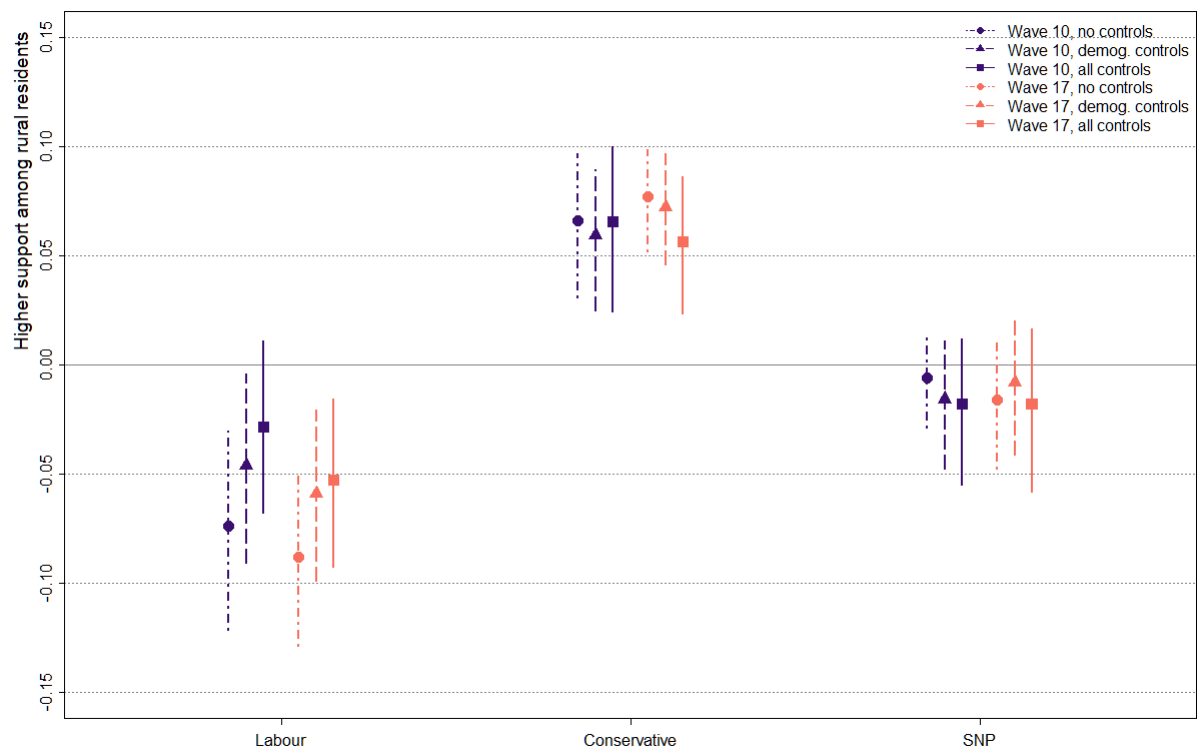
***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05

Figure 1: Electoral preferences, England



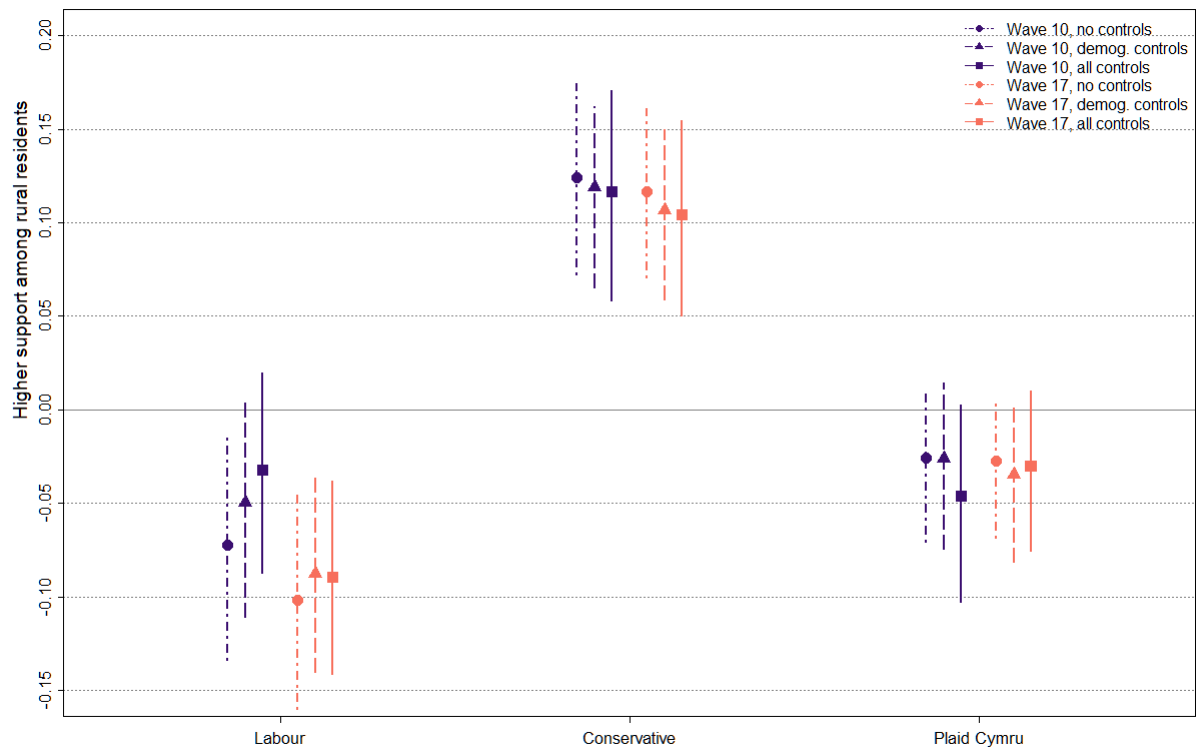
Note. The figure shows the differences between rural and urban residents in predicted probabilities of supporting each of three parties. Positive probabilities indicate a rural advantage for that party; negative probabilities, an urban advantage. Predicted probabilities based on a multinomial logit model; full results from the models with full controls are reported in the supplementary materials

Figure 2: Electoral preferences, Scotland



Note. See note for Figure 1

Figure 3: Electoral preferences, Wales



Note. See note for Figure 1