

Is There a Rural-Urban Political Divide in Britain?

Supplementary Materials

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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 as the district's population density or its dominant economic activity (e.g., Crewe and Payne 1976, 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 objective measures should be aggregated to as small an administrative area as is feasible, and crude proxy indicators should also be avoided.

References

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The Measurement of Rurality and Urbanity

There are a number of ways to conceptualise and measure rurality (see previous section for a discussion). Rather than using subjective, individual-level identities, we use administrative classifications that are based on objective information, e.g., population size and remoteness, and aggregated to small areal units. Our administrative measures are drawn from the 2021 release of the BES waves 1-20 internet panel (Fieldhouse et al. 2021), which included 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 (average population of 7,200 residents) defined by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) for the reporting of administrative data. In the Scottish samples, indicators for “intermediate zones” (IZs) are provided (Scottish administrative measures differ from English and Welsh), which have populations that range in size from 2,500 to 6,000 residents.

Table S1: Rural-urban definitions, England & Wales

England & Wales 2011 Rural-Urban Classification, ONS			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	

Source:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/ruralurbanclassifications/2011ruralurbanclassification>

Both MSOAs and IZs are classified according to their rural vs urban status, with different classification schemes being used in England and Wales versus Scotland. In England and Wales, a ten-point scale is employed (see Table 1). This incorporates three dimensions of geographical variation:

1. size: an output area is urban if it is part of a settlement with a population of 10,000 or greater, otherwise it is rural;
2. morphology: whether an (urban) output area is part of a conurbation (urban agglomeration) or not;
3. sparseness: the density of the surrounding area.

We recode this ten-point classification to a trichotomous definition of urban, rural, and an intermediate category we call “small town” as described in Table S1. This provides a more stringent definition of urbanity or rurality than the official one, which allows us to obtain a significant rural sample without lumping intermediate areas, which may be ambiguous as to their urbanity, into either pole.

It is important to acknowledge that our classification (and indeed, the underlying ten-point scale) includes urban cores together with urban peripheries. However, although some

research indicates that urban cores and peripheries differ in their opinions and orientations (e.g., Gest 2016), such differences, we submit, are a result of a different dimension of geographical variation than the urban-rural divide that is the focus of this paper.

An entirely different, eight-point urban vs rural classification scheme is used in Scotland, although the official definition of an urban output area / intermediate zone mirrors that used in England and Wales, i.e., part of a settlement with population of 10,000 or more residents. We again recode the classification scheme to form a trichotomous scale include urban areas, intermediary “small towns”, and rural areas (see Table S2).

Table S2: 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	

Survey Questions Used as Dependent Variables

All variables are from the British Election Study 2019 internet panel (waves 10 and 17; Fieldhouse et al. 2021).

Economic values scale

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off
2. Big business takes advantage of ordinary people
3. Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth
4. There is one law for the rich and one for the poor
5. Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance

Response set: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree

An additive scale is created

Cultural values scale

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values
2. For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence
3. Schools should teach children to obey authority
4. Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards
5. People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences

Response set: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree

An additive scale is created.

Political trust

- "How much trust do you have in Members of Parliament in general?"

Response set: No trust (1) - A great deal of trust (7)

Satisfaction with democracy

- "On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way that democracy works in the UK?"

Response set: (1) very dissatisfied, (2) a little dissatisfied, (3) fairly satisfied, or (4) very satisfied?

Support for democracy

- "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The best way to run the country would be to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections."

Response set: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree

Electoral preferences

- “If there were a UK General Election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?”

Response set: (0) I would not vote, (1) Conservative, (2) Labour, (3) Liberal Democrat, (4) Scottish National Party (SNP), (5) Plaid Cymru, (6) United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), (7) Green Party, (8) British National Party (BNP), (9) Other, (11) Change UK – The Independent Group, (12) Brexit Party, (13) Independent Candidate, (99) Don't know

Responses 1-5 are retained as recorded, all other responses are recoded as (6) Other.

Attitudes towards Brexit

- “If there was another referendum on EU membership, how do you think you would vote?”

Response set: (1) “remain in the EU”, (2) “leave the EU”

References

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Additional Tables and Figures

Table S3: Rural-urban differences in voting preferences, England, wave 10

	Labour	Lib Dems	Others
Intercept	8.26*** (.20)	6.08*** (.24)	4.24*** (.19)
Rural	-.82*** (.09)	.28** (.09)	-.38*** (.07)
Small town	-.19* (.08)	.03 (.09)	-.18** (.07)
Female	.43*** (.04)	-.07 (.05)	.26*** (.04)
White	-1.04*** (.08)	-.63*** (.11)	-.21* (.08)
Has degree	-.01 (.05)	.21*** (.06)	-.16*** (.05)
Age: 18-39	.72*** (.08)	.32** (.10)	.63*** (.07)
Age: 40-59	.55*** (.07)	.38*** (.10)	.52*** (.06)
Income: Middle tertile	-.27*** (.06)	.02 (.07)	-.24*** (.05)
Income: Upper tertile	-.63*** (.07)	-.13 (.09)	-.49*** (.07)
Income: Refusal/DK	-.50*** (.06)	-.38*** (.08)	-.00 (.05)
Employ. status: Student	.08 (.10)	.19 (.12)	-.49*** (.10)
Employ. status: Retired	-.01 (.08)	.35*** (.10)	-.04 (.07)
Employ. status: Unemployed	.42*** (.12)	.38* (.16)	.29* (.11)
Employ. status: Other	.27*** (.08)	.30** (.11)	.29*** (.07)
Religion: CoE/Anglican	-.31*** (.05)	-.19** (.07)	-.44*** (.04)
Religion: Catholic	.10 (.08)	-.30** (.11)	-.31*** (.07)
Religion: Other Christian	-.09 (.08)	-.15 (.11)	-.13 (.07)
Religion: Other	.08 (.09)	.23* (.11)	.17* (.08)
Occupational grade: A/B	-.39*** (.07)	.31*** (.09)	-.43*** (.06)
Occupational grade: C1	-.35*** (.06)	.27** (.09)	-.38*** (.06)
Occupational grade: C2	-.02 (.07)	.15 (.10)	.03 (.06)
Authoritarian values	-1.02*** (.03)	-1.37*** (.04)	-.40*** (.03)
Economic values	-1.78*** (.03)	-1.01*** (.04)	-1.08*** (.03)
N	20031	20031	20031

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05. Reference party is Conservatives, analyses are weighted

Table S4: Rural-urban differences in voting preferences, England, wave 17

	Labour	Lib Dems	Others
Intercept	9.13*** (.20)	5.60*** (.21)	4.74*** (.17)
Rural	-.75*** (.10)	.02 (.08)	-.18** (.07)
Small town	-.21** (.08)	.06 (.08)	-.02 (.06)
Female	.37*** (.05)	.10* (.05)	.27*** (.04)
White	-.60*** (.09)	-.08 (.10)	-.39*** (.08)
Has degree	.20*** (.05)	.51*** (.05)	-.02 (.04)
Age: 18-39	1.19*** (.09)	.47*** (.09)	.86*** (.07)
Age: 40-59	.54*** (.08)	.13 (.08)	.38*** (.06)
Income: Middle tertile	-.09 (.06)	.22** (.07)	-.19*** (.05)
Income: Upper tertile	-.19* (.08)	.55*** (.08)	-.46*** (.06)
Income: Refusal/DK	-.11 (.07)	.21** (.07)	.16** (.05)
Employ. status: Student	-.07 (.13)	-.09 (.14)	-.50*** (.12)
Employ. status: Retired	-.22** (.08)	-.12 (.08)	-.29*** (.06)
Employ. status: Unemployed	.26* (.13)	.13 (.16)	.03 (.12)
Employ. status: Other	.13 (.09)	.06 (.10)	.06 (.07)
Religion: CoE/Anglican	-.41*** (.06)	-.23*** (.06)	-.45*** (.04)
Religion: Catholic	.16 (.09)	.01 (.10)	-.30*** (.08)
Religion: Other Christian	.35*** (.09)	.22* (.10)	-.38*** (.08)
Religion: Other	-.07 (.09)	-.04 (.10)	.03 (.07)
Occupational grade: A/B	-.14 (.07)	.29*** (.08)	-.32*** (.06)
Occupational grade: C1	-.25*** (.07)	.16* (.08)	-.30*** (.06)
Occupational grade: C2	-.14 (.07)	-.03 (.09)	-.09 (.06)
Authoritarian values	-1.39*** (.03)	-1.30*** (.03)	-.48*** (.03)
Economic values	-1.97*** (.04)	-.98*** (.03)	-1.02*** (.03)
N	22569	22569	22569

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05. Reference party is Conservatives, analyses are weighted

Table S5: Rural-urban differences in voting preferences, Wales, wave 10

	Labour	Plaid Cymru	Others
Intercept	6.72*** (1.05)	6.88*** (1.31)	5.45*** (1.01)
Rural	-.78** (.27)	.27 (.34)	-.13 (.22)
Small town	.21 (.31)	.73 (.41)	.36 (.29)
Female	.42* (.20)	.17 (.28)	.43* (.18)
White	-.22 (.75)	-.54 (.91)	.19 (.74)
Has degree	.19 (.24)	.35 (.32)	.07 (.22)
Age: 18-39	.84* (.36)	.37 (.50)	.88** (.32)
Age: 40-59	.52 (.31)	.22 (.44)	.69* (.28)
Income: Middle tertile	-.79** (.25)	-.42 (.34)	-.57* (.22)
Income: Upper tertile	-1.25** (.41)	-.81 (.55)	-.83* (.36)
Income: Refusal/DK	-.70** (.26)	-.28 (.37)	-.07 (.23)
Employ. status: Student	.15 (.48)	.34 (.61)	.13 (.45)
Employ. status: Retired	-.01 (.32)	-.34 (.46)	.14 (.29)
Employ. status: Unemployed	.71 (.73)	.72 (.87)	.91 (.69)
Employ. status: Other	.47 (.35)	-.92 (.61)	.26 (.33)
Religion: CoE/Anglican	-.28 (.24)	-.79 (.41)	-.11 (.21)
Religion: Catholic	-.35 (.39)	-1.30 (.72)	-.58 (.36)
Religion: Other Christian	.71 (.42)	1.14* (.51)	.78* (.38)
Religion: Other	.96* (.41)	1.66*** (.47)	.70 (.39)
Occupational grade: A/B	.45 (.30)	.78 (.44)	.27 (.27)
Occupational grade: C1	.26 (.25)	.72 (.38)	.32 (.23)
Occupational grade: C2	.91** (.29)	1.14** (.42)	.74** (.26)
Authoritarian values	-.87*** (.14)	-1.06*** (.17)	-.69*** (.13)
Economic values	-1.65*** (.15)	-2.01*** (.21)	-1.47*** (.13)
N	1658	1658	1658

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05. Reference party is Conservatives, analyses are weighted

Table S6: Rural-urban differences in voting preferences, Wales, wave 17

	Labour	Plaid Cymru	Others
Intercept	9.40*** (1.05)	6.79*** (1.25)	5.81*** (.93)
Rural	-1.05*** (.25)	-.20 (.30)	-.49** (.18)
Small town	.08 (.28)	.06 (.39)	.05 (.24)
Female	.76*** (.18)	.39 (.25)	.52*** (.15)
White	-1.40 (.78)	-1.61 (.91)	-1.98** (.71)
Has degree	.26 (.23)	.86** (.28)	.35 (.19)
Age: 18-39	.19 (.33)	.03 (.43)	.28 (.27)
Age: 40-59	.21 (.29)	.24 (.39)	.56* (.24)
Income: Middle tertile	-.10 (.24)	-.07 (.31)	-.14 (.20)
Income: Upper tertile	.50 (.35)	-.09 (.46)	.26 (.30)
Income: Refusal/DK	.13 (.25)	-.10 (.35)	.34 (.20)
Employ. status: Student	-.35 (.44)	-.81 (.60)	-1.45** (.45)
Employ. status: Retired	-.48 (.31)	-.76 (.42)	-.28 (.25)
Employ. status: Unemployed	-.71 (.49)	.25 (.57)	.29 (.39)
Employ. status: Other	-.40 (.31)	-.90 (.47)	-.25 (.25)
Religion: CoE/Anglican	-.27 (.24)	-.18 (.34)	-.14 (.18)
Religion: Catholic	-.58 (.44)	-.69 (.69)	-.09 (.34)
Religion: Other Christian	.23 (.36)	.79 (.42)	-.39 (.31)
Religion: Other	.13 (.36)	.65 (.43)	.61* (.29)
Occupational grade: A/B	-.30 (.29)	.36 (.40)	.11 (.23)
Occupational grade: C1	-.36 (.25)	.27 (.36)	.02 (.21)
Occupational grade: C2	-.05 (.27)	-.01 (.41)	.18 (.22)
Authoritarian values	-1.23*** (.12)	-1.08*** (.16)	-.50*** (.11)
Economic values	-1.71*** (.14)	-1.31*** (.18)	-.87*** (.10)
N	1682	1682	1682

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05. Reference party is Conservatives, analyses are weighted

Table S7: Rural-urban differences in voting preferences, Scotland, wave 10

	Labour	Lib Dems	SNP	Others
Intercept	10.66*** (1.05)	-2.38 (28.45)	11.27*** (1.02)	7.71*** (1.03)
Rural	-.72** (.24)	.13 (.33)	-.16 (.20)	-.27 (.21)
Small town	-.00 (.27)	.13 (.42)	.02 (.24)	.61** (.23)
Female	.67*** (.17)	.12 (.25)	.37* (.15)	.68*** (.15)
White	-2.55*** (.77)	6.10 (28.43)	-1.83* (.78)	-2.37** (.76)
Has degree	-.28 (.20)	.36 (.27)	-.07 (.18)	-.35 (.19)
Age: 18-39	.60 (.31)	.76 (.52)	.55 (.28)	.96** (.30)
Age: 40-59	.03 (.29)	.33 (.48)	.44 (.25)	.64* (.26)
Income: Middle tertile	-.40 (.22)	-.27 (.34)	-.50* (.20)	-.30 (.21)
Income: Upper tertile	-.33 (.32)	.14 (.42)	-.11 (.27)	.10 (.29)
Income: Refusal/DK	-.74** (.23)	-.71 (.37)	-.50* (.20)	-.05 (.20)
Employ. status: Student	-.51 (.39)	.58 (.46)	-.90* (.37)	-.71 (.39)
Employ. status: Retired	-.16 (.29)	.47 (.49)	-.17 (.26)	-.15 (.27)
Employ. status: Unemployed	-.97* (.44)	-1.36 (1.14)	-.95* (.39)	-1.13** (.42)
Employ. status: Other	.35 (.30)	.91 (.48)	.21 (.28)	.25 (.28)
Religion: CoE/Anglican	-.42 (.34)	-.07 (.53)	-.80* (.31)	-.61* (.31)
Religion: Catholic	.65* (.31)	.00 (.59)	.95*** (.28)	.46 (.30)
Religion: Other Christian	-.39 (.21)	.34 (.30)	-.10 (.18)	-.44* (.19)
Religion: Other	-.46 (.37)	-.48 (.61)	.13 (.29)	.43 (.29)
Occupational grade: A/B	-.40 (.26)	1.45** (.52)	-.59** (.23)	-.70** (.24)
Occupational grade: C1	-.20 (.23)	1.53** (.50)	-.35 (.20)	-.48* (.21)
Occupational grade: C2	-.21 (.25)	1.60** (.53)	-.08 (.22)	-.39 (.23)
Authoritarian values	-.99*** (.12)	-1.28*** (.17)	-1.19*** (.11)	-.52*** (.12)
Economic values	-1.87*** (.13)	-1.12*** (.18)	-1.90*** (.11)	-1.44*** (.12)
N	2801	2801	2801	2801

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05. Reference party is Conservatives, analyses are weighted

Table S8: Rural-urban differences in voting preferences, Scotland, wave 17

	Labour	Lib Dems	SNP	Others
Intercept	8.39*** (1.00)	4.93*** (1.06)	10.11*** (.86)	6.85*** (.84)
Rural	-1.02*** (.27)	-.22 (.22)	-.45* (.18)	-.43* (.18)
Small town	-.31 (.27)	-.01 (.26)	-.06 (.21)	-.14 (.21)
Female	.22 (.18)	.45* (.18)	.45** (.15)	.49*** (.15)
White	-.81 (.75)	-.47 (.83)	-1.29* (.64)	-1.47* (.63)
Has degree	-.01 (.21)	.56** (.20)	.13 (.17)	.12 (.17)
Age: 18-39	.26 (.33)	.27 (.36)	.43 (.28)	.41 (.28)
Age: 40-59	-.16 (.29)	.25 (.31)	.31 (.24)	.41 (.24)
Income: Middle tertile	-.65** (.24)	-.53* (.25)	-.79*** (.20)	-.98*** (.20)
Income: Upper tertile	-.68* (.31)	-.52 (.31)	-1.10*** (.26)	-1.08*** (.26)
Income: Refusal/DK	-.36 (.25)	-.26 (.26)	-.50* (.20)	-.10 (.19)
Employ. status: Student	-.51 (.41)	-.94* (.48)	-.76* (.36)	-.73* (.36)
Employ. status: Retired	-.69* (.31)	-.13 (.31)	-.33 (.25)	-.45 (.24)
Employ. status: Unemployed	-.47 (.56)	-.59 (.67)	.05 (.43)	-.56 (.44)
Employ. status: Other	.29 (.38)	-.43 (.47)	.35 (.32)	.07 (.32)
Religion: CoE/Anglican	-.71 (.46)	-.54 (.38)	-1.38*** (.38)	-.67* (.29)
Religion: Catholic	.80* (.32)	-.10 (.39)	.22 (.29)	-.32 (.31)
Religion: Other Christian	-.46 (.24)	-.23 (.22)	-.53** (.18)	-.99*** (.18)
Religion: Other	.18 (.33)	-.39 (.39)	-.30 (.29)	-.02 (.28)
Occupational grade: A/B	.34 (.28)	.63* (.29)	.28 (.23)	-.27 (.23)
Occupational grade: C1	.01 (.26)	.33 (.28)	.19 (.21)	-.22 (.20)
Occupational grade: C2	.60* (.28)	.52 (.30)	.56* (.23)	.19 (.22)
Authoritarian values	-1.01*** (.12)	-.99*** (.12)	-1.17*** (.10)	-.55*** (.10)
Economic values	-1.71*** (.14)	-.76*** (.13)	-1.70*** (.11)	-1.01*** (.10)
N	2615	2615	2615	2615

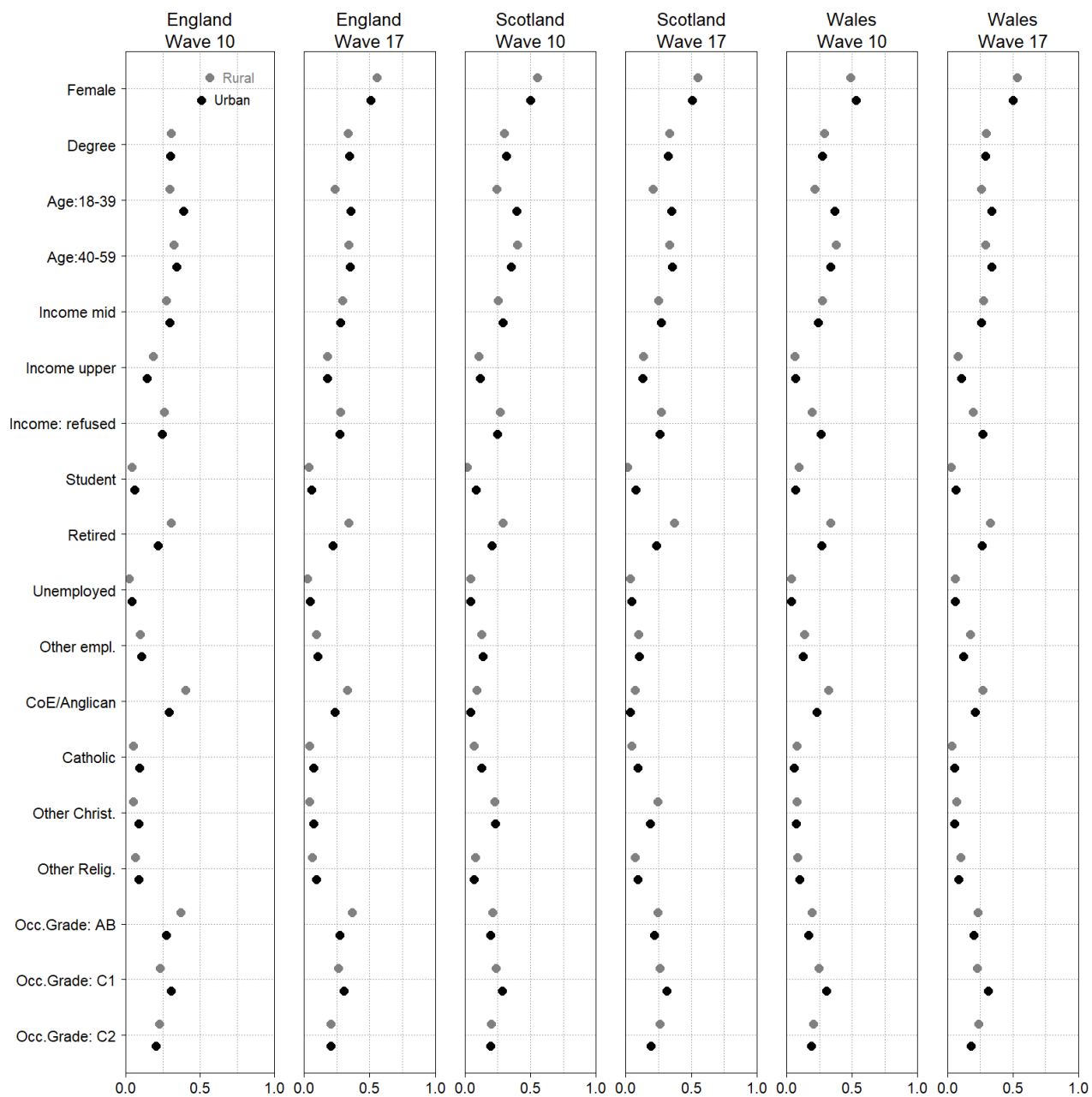
***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05. Reference party is Conservatives, analyses are weighted

Table S9: Rural-urban differences in reported household income

	England		Wales		Scotland	
	Wave 10	Wave 17	Wave 10	Wave 17	Wave 10	Wave 17
Urban	6.77*** (.03)	7.23*** (.03)	5.50*** (.09)	6.20*** (.10)	6.36*** (.08)	6.47*** (.09)
Rural	7.37*** (.10)	7.54*** (.09)	5.58*** (.18)	5.84*** (.18)	6.10*** (.17)	6.64*** (.17)
Small town	7.10*** (.09)	7.30*** (.08)	6.09*** (.23)	6.27*** (.23)	6.22*** (.20)	6.46*** (.20)
Adj. R ²	.79	.80	.77	.78	.77	.77
N	18664	21125	1500	1578	2532	2492

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; income is reported on a scale ranging from 1 to 15; analyses are weighted

Figure S1: Demographics by Nation, Wave and Urban-Rural



Note. Points show the proportion of rural residents (grey) and urban residents (black) within each demographic category (y-axis) and nation and survey wave (columns). Residents of “small towns”, as defined in the main paper, are not included.