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The mechanisms behind affective polarization between urban and rural citizens: place-based resentment and perceptions of differentness

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Abstract

Why do urban and rural citizens come to dislike each other? Answering this question is key amid growing evidence of urban-rural electoral and affective polarization. This article investigates the roots of urban-rural affective polarization using 2024 survey data from Belgium. It hypothesizes that place-based identity translates into urban-rural affective polarization through two distinct mediators: place-based resentment and perception of differentness. The article finds evidence of asymmetric urban-rural affective polarization, concentrated primarily among rural inhabitants. For rural residents, place-based identity translates into affective polarization through both higher place-based resentment and perception of differentness, with the latter mechanism explaining most of the variance in our models. For urban residents, by contrast, perception of differentness is the only mediating mechanism. These findings show that, in addition to resentment, feeling like a different kind of person is an important and more fundamental source of place-based affective polarization, pointing to different challenges for policymakers as well as avenues for future research.

Keywords

Affective polarization, urban-rural, place-identity, place-based resentment, perception of differentness

Introduction

The urban-rural divide constitutes one of the traditional cleavages identified in political science (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Although it has often lacked a clear partisan expression or dedicated party family (Crulli & Emanuele, 2025), it remains a socially and politically salient line of conflict. Scholarly interest in the divide has experienced a marked revival, partly because of its intensification across representative democracies (Pautonnier et al., 2026; Emanuele, 2018; Taylor et al., 2024).

This line of research shows that being urban or rural has important consequences. Urbanity and rurality have become increasingly associated with polarization in both political attitudes and voting behavior (Albrecht, 2022; Crulli 2024; Gimpel et al., 2020; Hegewald, 2024; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Huijsmans, 2023a; Lago, 2022; Maxwell, 2019; Zollinger, 2024). These opposing views translate into diverging electoral outcomes between urban and rural areas (Arzheimer & Bernemann, 2024; Brown & Mettler, 2024; Huijsmans & Rodden, 2025; Scala et al., 2015). Although these differences do not extend to political violence or pose a direct threat to democracy (Munis et al., 2024), recent work suggests that urban and rural residents are also becoming affectively polarized toward one another, pointing to strong negative feelings and prejudice between these groups (Hegewald & Schraff, 2025; Lyons & Utych, 2023, Zumbrunn, 2025).This article directly contributes to the new line of research on the urban-rural divide, which is based on the recently coined concept of urban-rural affective polarization (Hegewald & Schraff, 2025, Zumbrunn, 2025). We do so by investigating the mechanisms through which place-based affective polarization, and more specifically (dis)like among rural and urban people, develops. We address the following main research question: Through which mechanisms does place-based identity translate into urban-rural affective polarization? Theoretically, we align with research that puts an emphasis on the key role of social identities beyond partisanship (Westheuser and Zollinger, 2025; Zuber et al., 2026). But we go one step further by arguing that social identities such as place-based identities need activation to generate affect. We focus on two distinct activation mechanisms: place-based resentment, that is, the perception of being left behind compared to citizens who live elsewhere (Cramer, 2016; Munis, 2022), and perception of differentness, that is, the perception of people living in other spatial contexts as being different from oneself (Goovaerts et al., 2026).

In doing so, this article extends Hegewald and Schraff (2025)'s findings on urban-rural affective polarization in two ways. First, we go beyond identity to examine mediating

mechanisms through which urban-rural affective polarization emerges. Second, we bring perceptions of differentness into the analysis, thereby testing a more sociological and identitarian dimension that may exist independently of resentment.

We present evidence from Belgium as a least likely case given its high level of urbanization (Eurostat, 2024), leveraging unique data on voters' perception of other social groups from the NotLikeUs (NLU) 2024 Panel Survey (Eck et al., 2025).

We find that affective polarization can indeed manifest beyond partisanship, among other social groups such as rural and urban inhabitants. Our findings confirm that mostly rural inhabitants (who also identify as such) are affectively polarized vis-à-vis urban citizens, while urbanites on average do not hold polarized views. More importantly, the article confirms the key role of our two mechanisms. Among rural people, place-based identity translates into affective polarization through both higher place-based resentment and greater perception of differentness, with the latter mechanism playing the lion's share. Among urban people, by contrast, only perception of differentness mediates the relationship between urban identity and affective polarization towards rural people. These findings challenge our understanding of the roots of urban-rural affective polarization: not only does place-based resentment, and therefore perceived unequal treatment, explain affective polarization, but the mere notion of being a different type of citizen also matters. This suggests that reducing this type of affective divide – assuming that it is needed – may require different policy responses than those focused solely on addressing perceived inequalities between places.

The urban-rural divide as an affective divide

In recent years, scholarly interest in the urban-rural conflict (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) has regained grounds, both from a social identity perspective (Cramer, 2016) as well as through the lens of transformations associated with the creative and knowledge society (Florida, 2005; Zollinger, 2024). This renewed attention is partly due to growing evidence that the divide itself has intensified, both in the United States (Pautonnier et al., 2026; Rodden, 2019), and across European contexts (Emanuele, 2018; Marcinkiewicz, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Taylor et al., 2024; Valero, 2022). This increase points to a global phenomenon rather than isolated national dynamics.

This line of research has highlighted that the urban-rural divide expresses itself through political attitudes and voting behavior (Bornschier et al., 2021). Rural and urban citizens

increasingly differ on a wide range of political attitudes such as political trust (Hegewald, 2024; Luca & Kenny, 2024; Mitsch et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2021; Zumbrunn, 2024a), satisfaction with democracy (Lago, 2022; Luca & Kenny, 2024; Vigna, 2024), and political alienation (García del Horno et al., 2024; Rowland et al., 2024). Urban residents have been associated with cosmopolitanism (Ford & Jennings, 2020; Gimpel et al., 2020; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Maxwell, 2020), whereas rural residents have been associated with populism (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023), conservatism (Albrecht, 2022), nativism and authoritarianism (Arzheimer & Bernemann, 2024; Crulli, 2024; Huijsmans, 2023a; Luca & Kenny, 2024; Maxwell, 2019, 2020; Zumbrunn & Freitag, 2023), and discontent towards the EU (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Kenny & Luca, 2021).

These opposing political views between rural and urban residents also increasingly translate into different partisanship (Bolet, 2023; Bornschier et al., 2021; Cramer, 2016; Ford & Jennings, 2020; Huijsmans & van der Brug, 2025), leading to diverging vote choices between rural and urban areas in a multitude of contexts, pointing to a global trend (Armstrong et al., 2022; Arzheimer & Bernemann, 2024; Brown & Mettler, 2024; Crulli, 2024; Emanuele, 2018; Huijsmans & Rodden, 2025; Marcinkiewicz, 2018; Pautonnier et al., 2026; Rodden, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Scala et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2024; Valero, 2022). Rural residents are overrepresented among populist radical right and – where existing – agrarian electorates; urban residents among left-wing and progressive voters (Arzheimer et al., 2024; Auerbach et al., 2024; Bornschier et al., 2021; Borwein et al., 2026; Lago & Lago-Peñas, 2025). Interestingly, Haffert & Mitteregger (2023) have shown that this gap in electoral behavior is growing in younger age groups.

Embracing the 'affective turn' in political science (Thompson & Hoggett, 2012), recent work suggests that affective polarization takes place beyond partisan-based groups (Maes et al., 2024). Urban and rural residents seem to be among such groups, as they have been shown to be affectively polarized toward one another (Hegewald & Schraff, 2025; Zumbrunn, 2025). This indicates that the divide is not merely ideological or electoral, but also affective. Even if these affective reactions do not necessarily extend to political violence or pose a direct threat to democracy (Munis et al., 2024), they can lead to discriminatory behaviours and prejudice (Lyons & Utych, 2023). Despite evidence that the urban-rural divide is intensifying and has deep political consequences (Mettler & Brown, 2022) we still have limited understanding of *the mechanisms* underlying urban-rural affective polarization. Therefore, this article specifically seeks to grasp the drivers of urban-rural affective polarization. We understand this

as a more specific instance of place-based affective polarization, that is, 'an individual's propensity to like people from their own place more than people from a respective geographic out-group' (Hegewald & Schraff, 2025, p.10).

The mechanisms behind urban-rural affective polarization

In line with previous work, we argue that place-based identity is a key prerequisite of place-based affective polarization (Hegewald & Schraff, 2025; Zumbrunn, 2025). However, our contribution lies in disentangling how place-based identity leads to affect, and on the role of place-based resentment and perception of differentness in this process.

Partisan affective polarization has been linked to partisanship as a social identity (Bankert & Stone, 2025; Russo et al., 2025). Extending this logic of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) beyond partisanship (Zuber et al., 2026), we link place-based affective polarization to place-based identity. We consider rural or urban identity as a social construct rather than an objective measure of geographical context, along which people differentiate themselves from others (Bornschier et al., 2021; Zollinger, 2024). Understanding place from an identity perspective is not new and finds its roots in other fields such as social geography or environmental psychology (Proshansky et al., 1983). In political science, attention to place-based identity flourished after the work on rural residents in the United States by Cramer (2016) and Wuthnow (2018). Cramer highlighted the existence of a 'rural consciousness', where rural residents' evaluation of politics is shaped by identification to their rural communities. Focusing on rural and urban residents and identity in this article, we follow Zumbrunn et al. (2025, p. 2), who conceptualize place-identity explicitly as 'an abstract category instead of a specific location. Place-based identification therefore does not refer to identification with a specific city or village, but with a specific type of place, i.e. rural or urban'.

Place-based identity has been shown to matter for urban-rural affective polarization, especially for rural identifiers (Hegewald & Schraff, 2025; Lyons & Utych, 2023b; Zumbrunn, 2025). Therefore, our baseline hypothesis is the following:

> H1: Rural identifiers are associated with affective polarization towards urban identifiers, and vice-versa

Perceived differential status between groups can lead to grievances (Huddy, 2013; Miller et al., 1981). A specific type of grievance that has been connected to the urban-rural divide and affective polarization is place-based resentment. Place-based resentment is a unique political attitude that accounts for a perceived unequal political representation, a perceived unfair distribution of resources and a lack of respect and appreciation for the lifestyle of a place-based group (Claassen et al., 2025; Cramer, 2016; Hegewald, 2024; Huijsmans, 2023a; Munis, 2022; Zumbrunn, 2025). The attitude has been mainly linked to rural residents, although urban or suburban residents too have been shown to experience this to some extent (Borwein & Lucas 2023). Place-based resentment requires in-group identity, that is, place of residence as a social identity that allows in- and out-group membership (Zumbrunn, 2024b). Therefore, we expect the following:

H2: Stronger individual place-based resentment is associated with higher levels of urban-rural affective polarization

Previous studies have shown that rural and urban residents also perceive each other as distinct social groups that hold different values, adopt distinct lifestyles, and experience different social realities (Bornschier et al., 2021; Hegewald, 2024; Lyons & Utych, 2023; Zollinger, 2024), regardless of whether they are resentful towards each other. For instance, Bornschier and colleagues found that 'a clear majority of respondents felt that urban/rural (…) groups of people also differ "somewhat" or "very much" regarding occupation, social class, and lifestyle/leisure' (Bornschier et al., 2021, p. 2116). These perceptions of differentness can solidify into stereotypes (Breitenstein et al., 2025; Morgan et al., 2026), and even discriminatory behaviours (Lyons & Utych, 2023). Speaking more generally, scholars are ever more investing in non-political differences among people and how they lead to in- and out-group formations, defined as 'perception of differentness or similarity' (Goovaerts et al., 2026). Contrary to some prior studies (Pautonnier, 2026), we argue that this perception of differentness is conceptually distinct from place-based identity, meaning that citizens can develop a place-based identity (e.g., rural identity) without a strong perception of differentness with the out-group (e.g., urban people). We assume that part of the affective dislike that rural or urban people feel towards each other can be explained by their perception of being different from another. Therefore, we expect the following:

H3: Stronger perception of being different as a person compared to urban(rural) people, is associated with higher levels of urban-rural affective polarization among rural(urban) people

However, our main argument is that identifying as a rural or urban person is unlikely to only directly explain the emergence of affective polarization. Place-based identity as a source of in- and out-group formation needs to be *activated* to lead to affective reactions toward the out-group. We argue that place-based resentment and perception of differentness can act as activation mechanisms of negative evaluations. In this conception, place-based identity, place-based resentment, and perception of differentness do not operate all at the same level. This argument aligns with a conception of place-based identity as a social construct that can be activated. When activated, social identities highlight the significance of the lines of conflict that can lead to polarization.

The link between place-based identity and place-based resentment has been debated. For some, both are part of the same construct, place-based consciousness (Arzheimer & Bernemann, 2024; Borwein & Lucas, 2023; Cramer, 2016; Huijsmans, 2023a; Jacobs & Munis, 2019, 2023; Lyons & Utych, 2023; Trujillo & Crowley, 2022). Existing research has thus looked at how place-based identity and place-based resentment relate to each other, and found that, as place-based identity increases, place-based resentment also increases, especially among rural identifiers (Auerbach et al., 2024; Ziblatt et al., 2024). In other words, place-based identity has been shown to feed place-based resentment (Borwein & Lucas, 2023; Cramer, 2016; Munis, 2022; Zumbrunn, 2024b). In addition, Huijsmans (2023a) argues that place-based resentment mediates the relationship between place and political attitudes. Relatedly, Hegewald & Schraff (2025) found a clear positive effect of place-based resentment on place-based affective polarization, whereas place-based identity was only clearly related to in-group liking, rather than also to out-group dislike.

Building on these works, we expect that:

H4: The positive association between identity and urban-rural affective polarization is mediated by place-based resentment

Recent work (Goovaerts et al., 2026) has also emphasized how non-political differentness relates to partisan affective polarization and social distancing. By extension, we apply this

mechanism to urban-rural affective polarization rather than partisan affect, and expect the following:

H5: The positive association between identity and urban-rural affective polarization is mediated by perception of differentness

Finally, previous studies on the urban-rural divide have repeatedly shown asymmetrical patterns, with rural identities being stronger than urban identities (Auerbach et al., 2024; Borwein & Lucas, 2023; Lyons & Utych, 2023), rural citizens experiencing more resentment, and rural identifiers being more affectively polarized towards urban residents than vice versa (Hegewald & Schraff, 2025; Zumbrunn, 2025). This asymmetry can find roots in intergroup power relations, where grievances develop predominantly among the minorized or 'challenger' group toward the dominant group. Therefore, we expect the following:

H6: The relationships hypothesized in H1-H5 are stronger for rural than for urban people.

Research design

Case selection and data

We focus on Belgium, a least likely case for urban-rural affective polarization to emerge, whilst allowing within-country comparison. First, due to its federal state structure, competition and conflict at the level of the three regions, Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region, dominate the political sphere. Research on identity is often dominated by a focus on regional and linguistic identity (Lecours, 2001). Therefore, urban-rural differences in Belgium might be less salient compared to other countries, as they are in the shadow of the regional discourse. A second reason why rural and urban identities are not salient in the public debate can be attributed to Belgium's history of independent local powers and therefore strong local identities (Deschouwer et al., 2026). Third, in Belgium, strong demarcations between rural and urban territories are weak given the overall high population density. More specifically, one could even argue that Flanders has virtually no rural areas – while Wallonia offers more territorial diversity, and Brussels is fully urban (Bernier et al., 2026). However, previous works highlight perceived differences to be even more politically consequential than actual differences.

Therefore, this article focuses on the role of distinct rural and urban identities rather than the strength of local attachment or regional identity.

The empirical analysis draws on data from the NotLikeUs (NLU) 2024 Panel Survey, a large-scale multi-wave study of Belgian voters conducted by a consortium of political scientists from seven Belgian universities (Eck et al., 2025). The panel consists of four waves, fielded between 24 January and 27 November 2024 at different stages of the electoral cycle. However, we focus on the first wave available for each region: Wave 1 for Flanders and Wallonia (collected between 24 January and 17 March 2024), and Wave 2 for Brussels (collected between 23 April and 8 June 2024), as these represent the first available measurement for each region. This yields a total analytical sample of 9,392 respondents: 3,670 from Flanders, 3,827 from Wallonia, and 1,895 from Brussels. Given the special, symbolic status of capital cities (Rickardsson et al., 2021; Vampa, 2025), we replicated the analysis excluding respondents from Brussels and the results were fundamentally unaltered.

Operationalization

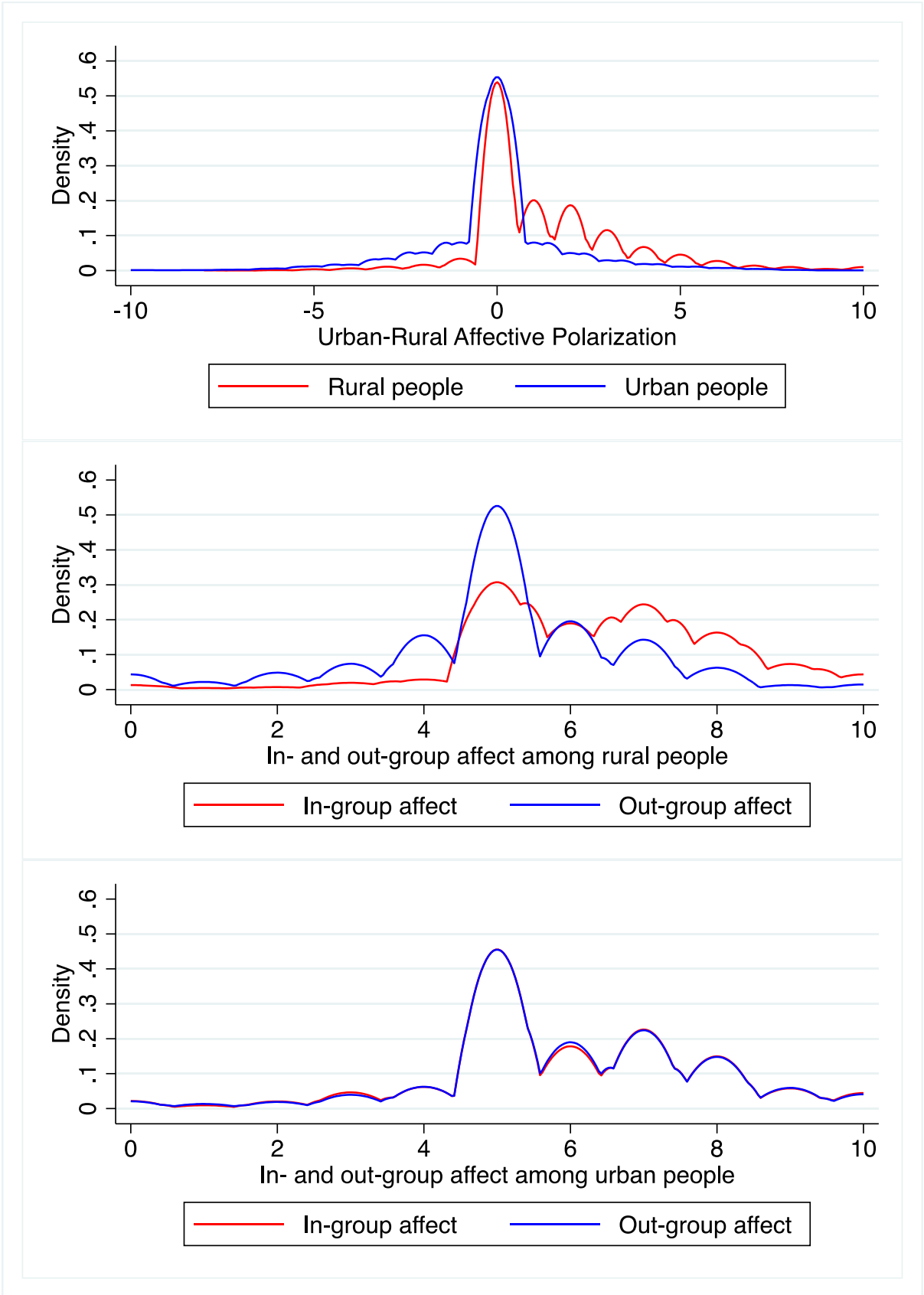
The first, delicate operational choice we faced was how to define and measure 'urban' and 'rural'. Scholars have used objective markers (e.g. population size, density) or subjective measures of place (Cain, 2020; Guinjoan, 2022). There is evidence that the two types of measures do not fully overlap (Kenny & Luca, 2021; Nemerever & Rogers, 2021). We use a subjective measure for our main analysis. Rural and urban respondents were therefore identified based on the question 'How would you describe the type of living environment where you are currently living?'. Respondents were given the following options: City (36.6%), Suburbs (23.5%), Village (27.1%), and Rural Areas (12.8%). Following Hegewald and Schraff (2025), people living in the suburbs were excluded from the analyses, as grouping them with either urban or rural people would be inaccurate. Indeed, suburbs are hybrid spaces, neither city nor countryside (Damon et al., 2016; Simon, 2008), characterized by geographic proximity to metropolitan centers but also sociological separateness, and distinct from urban and rural worlds in terms of attitudes and political behavior (Borwein et al., 2026; Borwein & Lucas, 2023; Crulli, 2026; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Lyons & Utych, 2023; van Gent et al., 2014; but see Kenny & Luca, 2021; Zumbrunn, 2024a). Following Pautonnier (2026), we merged people describing themselves as living in villages and in rural areas into the same category of 'rural' respondents, as this is essentially a distinction *within* the rural camp. This pre-processing yields

a dichotomous variable where 0 = urban and 1 = rural, with a balanced distribution: 3,372 respondents from urban areas (47.9%) and 3,670 respondents from rural areas (52.1%).

Dependent variable

After identifying urban and rural people, we can create our dependent variable, i.e., the respondent's level of urban-rural affective polarization, defined as *the propensity of a person living in rural (urban) areas to like people from rural (urban) areas more than people from urban (rural) areas*. Following Hegewald & Schraff (2025)'s operationalization of place-based affective polarization, we use feeling thermometers rather than social behavior (Lyons & Utych, 2023). The variable was constructed from two feeling thermometer items asking respondents what feelings people living in cities and people living in rural areas evoke in them, on a scale ranging from 0 (cold and negative) to 10 (warm and positive). In line with other studies measuring affective polarization via a thermometer, we computed the difference between in-group and out-group feelings (Iyengar et al., 2012). For rural respondents, this is the rural thermometer score minus the urban thermometer score, and vice versa for urban respondents. Positive values thus indicate pro-in-group affective polarization, while negative values indicate pro-out-group affect. A value of zero signals the absence of urban-rural affective polarization.

Figure 1 Distributions of (a) urban-rural affective polarization by residence in urban or rural areas, (b) in- and out-group affect among rural people, (c) in- and out-group affect among urban people.



The upper part of Figure 1 (Panel a) shows the distribution of urban-rural affective polarization by self-classified residence in urban and rural areas. The differences between the two groups

are striking: rural people display much higher levels of urban-rural affective polarization aligning with previous research (Hegewald & Schraff, 2025; Jacobs & Munis, 2023; Zumbrunn, 2025). Indeed, the mean level of polarization among rural people is 1.35, whereas among urban people it is 0, a remarkable descriptive finding, as it suggests that urban people are, on average, not affectively polarized. Panels (b) and (c) shed light on the asymmetry visible in panel (a) by decomposing affective polarization into its two constituent elements: in-group affect and out-group affect. Among rural people (panel b), the two density distributions are clearly separated, with in-group affect (mean = 6.4) concentrated at substantially higher values than out-group affect (mean = 5.0). On average, rural people feel warmer toward fellow rural residents than towards urban people. In-group affect is thus the primary driver of urban-rural affective polarization among rural people. Among urban people (panel c), by contrast, the distributions of in-group and out-group affect almost perfectly overlap, indicating that urban respondents evaluate both groups in a virtually identical way (mean equal to 5.9 for both in- and out-group affect). This is what produces the mean polarization score of 0 for urban people: it is not that urban people lack in-group affect, but rather that they do not systematically differentiate between the two groups in affective terms.

We can further appreciate the differences between the two groups by looking at Table 1, which reports the percentage distributions of urban-rural affective polarization, recoding the continuous dependent variable into three categories: affectively polarized in favor of the out-group (i.e. negative values), not affectively polarized (0), and affectively polarized in favor of the in-group (i.e. positive values). Among rural people, the majority are affectively polarized in favor of the in-group (52.7%), many are not affectively polarized (41.6%), and only a small minority display polarization in favor of the out-group (5.7%). Among urban people, the picture is reversed: most are not affectively polarized (57.3%), and there are more people polarized in favor of the out-group (21.5%) that is, of rural people – than in favor of the in-group (21.2%). This descriptive finding is in line with previous research showing that people in rural areas display higher levels of place-based resentment and polarization (Auerbach et al., 2024; Borwein & Lucas, 2023; Claassen et al., 2025; Munis, 2022; Zumbrunn et al., 2025). However, comparing our findings on Belgium with the comparative research by Hegewald and Schraff conducted in nine European countries (2025, p. 18) – which did not include Belgium – also suggests that both rural and urban people in Belgium are somewhat less affectively polarized towards the geographic out-group compared to the European average. Indeed, in their

comparative analysis, 66.3% of rural people and 26.9% of urban people turned out to be affectively polarized in favor of the in-group.

Table 1 Percentage distributions of urban-rural affective polarization among urban and rural people

	Urban-Rural Affective Polarization	
	Among Rural People	*Among Urban People*
Affectively polarized: Pro-Out-Group	5.7	21.5
Not affectively polarized	41.6	57.3
Affectively polarized: Pro-In-Group	52.7	21.2

Independent variables and controls

We operationalize *place-based identity* using the item asking respondents to identify primarily as a city person, suburban person, village person, or rural person. The item's wording ('Regardless of where you currently live, you primarily identify as a...') allows us to cleanly separate identity from residence and perception of differentness, which is crucial for our research design. In line with the operational logic described above, respondents with a suburban identity were treated as missing, and those identifying as 'village' or 'rural' persons were considered to have a 'rural' identity. This yields a dichotomous variable where 0 = urban identity (45.3%) and 1 = rural identity (54.7%).

Place-based resentment is measured as an additive index combining three items, inspired by the items from de Lange et al. (2023): the perception (1) that the national government has done too little to improve the local economic situation, (2) that people elsewhere in Belgium do not sufficiently appreciate people from the respondent's hometown, and (3) that national politicians are not interested in their area, each answered on a 7-point agree-disagree scale. The Cronbach's alpha for this index is 0.66, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

We operationalize *perception of differentness* using the items asking how different or similar respondents perceive themselves as a person compared to people living in cities and to people living in rural areas, respectively, each measured on a 0–10 scale. While other researchers (Pautonnier, 2026) have included similar measures as part of a measure of identity, we argue in the theoretical part that perception of differentness is conceptually distinct from identity. Rather, we consider it as an activating mechanism. For analytical purposes, we reverse the scale so that higher values reflect greater perceived differences from the geographic out-group.

For instance, for rural respondents, 0 = completely similar to urban people and 10 = completely different from urban people.

Table 2 reports the pairwise correlation coefficients for the key variables under investigation. This helps support our argument that place-based identity, perception of differentness, place-based resentment, and urban–rural affective polarization, are distinct constructs. Most correlations are negligible or weak, except for a moderate correlation between rural identity and perceptions of differentness from urban people among rural respondents. We interpret this moderate association as consistent with our argument that rural identity is conceptually distinct from perception of differentness. Similarly, place-based resentment is conceptually distinct from perception of differentness, pointing to distinct constructs and thus possibly distinct mechanisms.

Table 2 Correlation matrix

RURAL PEOPLE	Urban-rural AP	Rural identity	POD from urban people
Rural identity	0.18		
POD from urban people	0.34	0.42	
Place-based resentment	0.20	0.05	0.10
URBAN PEOPLE	Urban-rural AP	Urban identity	POD from rural people
Urban identity	0.25		
POD from rural people	0.27	0.32	
Place-based resentment	-0.04	-0.05	-0.05

Notes: entries are Pearson's correlation coefficients. All coefficients are statistically significant at $p<0.05$.

We include two place-related controls: a measure of the perceived quality of access to local services (1–7 scale) and a dummy indicating whether the respondent spent most of their childhood in a different type of area from their current residence. The former is included because urban-rural divides have been shown to be related to scarce or low-quality public service provision in rural areas (Arzheimer et al., 2024; Arzheimer & Bernemann, 2024; Claassen et al., 2025; Cremaschi et al., 2025; de Lange et al., 2023; Huijsmans, 2023a, 2023b; Lago & Lago-Peñas, 2025; Lenzi & Perucca, 2021; McCann, 2020; McKay, 2019; Patana, 2022; Salomo, 2019; Velthuis et al., 2024). The latter captures residential mobility, which may confound the relationship between place-based identity and affective polarization. Indeed, Zumbrunn et al. (2025) highlight that place-identity strength is impacted by mobility history.

Related to this, Hegewald and Schraff (2025) showed that mobility tends to decrease place-based affective polarization.

To rule out composition effects (Huijsmans et al., 2021; Kenny & Luca, 2021; Luca et al., 2023; Martin & Webster, 2020; Maxwell, 2019, 2020; Pautonnier et al., 2026), standard socio-demographic controls are also included: gender (0 = male; 1 = female), age cohort (0 = 18–43; 1 = 44–59; 2 = 60+), educational attainment (on a sliding scale from no education to university degree), and household average net monthly income (on a sliding scale from less than €1,800 to more than €14,500, treated as quasi-interval).

Tables A1–A2 in the Appendix report the descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analysis.

Modelling strategy

To test the direct effects posited in H1–H3, we estimate a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models in which urban-rural affective polarization is regressed on place-based identity, place-based resentment and perception of differentness, respectively, while controlling for the full set of covariates described above. OLS is appropriate given the continuous and approximately symmetric nature of the dependent variable.

To test the mediation hypotheses H4 and H5 – which posit that the effect of place-based identity on affective polarization is channeled through place-based resentment and perceptions of differentness, respectively – we employ generalized structural equation modelling (GSEM). This approach allows us to simultaneously estimate direct and indirect effects within a single coherent model, providing a formal test of the proposed mediation pathways. All models are estimated separately for urban and rural respondents, enabling us to test H6, which predicts that the hypothesized relationships are stronger among rural individuals. Given prior research and the substantially larger share of rural respondents who are affectively polarized in favor of their in-group (52.7%, versus 21.2% among urban respondents), we have strong reasons to expect asymmetries between the two groups.

Post-stratification weights correcting for gender, education, and age are applied throughout the analysis to account for deviations between sample and population distributions. Continuous variables are standardized (mean = 0, SD = 1) to facilitate interpretation – since they have different scales.

Results

Table 3 presents the results of six OLS models estimating the direct effects of place-based identity (H1), place-based resentment (H2), and perception of differentness from the geographic out-group (H3), on urban-rural affective polarization, separately for rural and urban respondents.

Starting with H1, place-based identity is a strong and highly significant predictor of urban-rural affective polarization in both subsamples. Among rural respondents, having a rural identity increases affective polarization by 1.4 points ($p < 0.001$), against a constant of 1.1. In other words, a rural living citizen who also has a rural identity has a level of affective polarization against the geographic out-group which is more than double that of an equivalent rural citizen without such identification. Among urban respondents, having an urban identity increases affective polarization by 1.3 points ($p < 0.001$), against a constant of -1.9. Interestingly – and in line with the descriptives in Table 1 – this tells us that urban respondents remain non-affectively polarized towards the geographic out-group even when they hold an urban identity. For both subsamples, these are the largest coefficients in the respective models, indicating that place-based identity is the most powerful direct driver of affective polarization for both groups. H1 is thus strongly supported.

The results for H2 are more nuanced. Place-based resentment has a statistically significant and positive effect on affective polarization among rural respondents ($b = 0.4$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2 for this group. However, among urban respondents, the coefficient is not statistically significant. H2 is therefore supported only for the rural subsample. This finding is substantively important: while place-based resentment fuels affective polarization among rural residents, it does not operate as an analogous predictor among urban residents, for whom place-based grievance may be less salient.

Turning to H3, the perception of differentness from out-group residents is a strong and statistically significant predictor of affective polarization in both subsamples ($p < 0.001$). The coefficient is notably larger for rural respondents (0.8) than for urban respondents (0.5), suggesting that perceptions of differentness matter more – or are more consequential for polarization – among rural voters. H3 is supported for both groups, with a pattern consistent with the asymmetry anticipated in H6.

Table 3 Regression models predicting urban-rural affective polarization

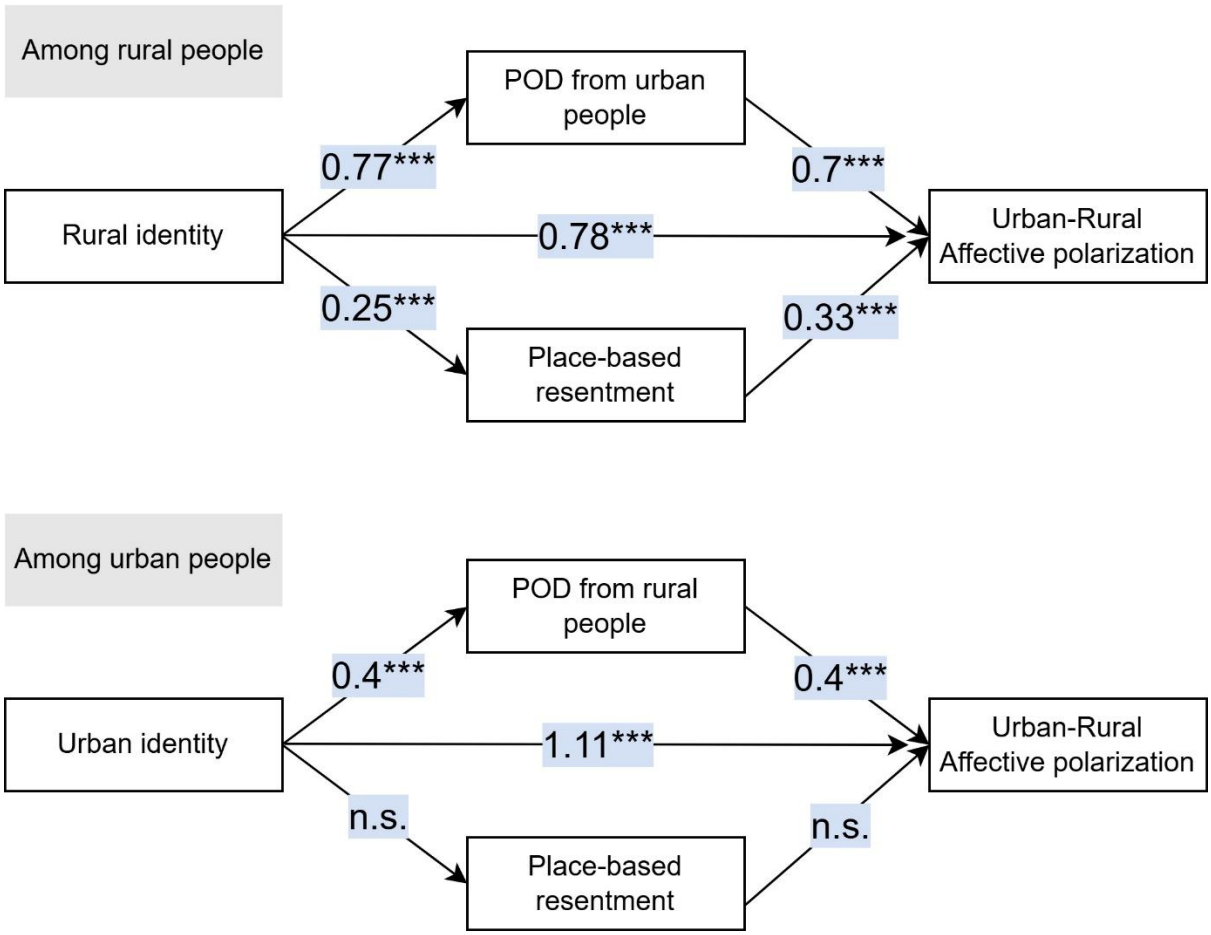
	H1		H2		H3	
	Effect on urban-rural AP among rural	Effect on urban-rural AP among urban	Effect on urban-rural AP among rural	Effect on urban-rural AP among urban	Effect on urban-rural AP among rural	Effect on urban-rural AP among urban
Rural Identity	1.379***					
	(0.147)					
Urban Identity		1.264***				
		(0.101)				
Place-based resentment			0.408***	-0.0571		
			(0.0383)	(0.0347)		
POD from urban people					0.797***	
					(0.0385)	
POD from rural people						0.508***
						(0.0345)
Bad service provision	-0.00792	-0.0716	-0.117***	-0.0724+	-0.0940**	-0.0595
	(0.0371)	(0.0442)	(0.0348)	(0.0427)	(0.0336)	(0.0418)
Female	-0.370***	0.0364	-0.306***	0.0656	-0.347***	0.0633
	(0.0797)	(0.0772)	(0.0750)	(0.0750)	(0.0724)	(0.0732)
44–59 yo	-0.00299	-0.295**	0.109	-0.388***	0.154+	-0.369***
	(0.0980)	(0.0964)	(0.0922)	(0.0944)	(0.0892)	(0.0920)
60+ yo	-0.324**	-0.149	-0.0357	-0.106	0.0316	-0.0408
	(0.0985)	(0.0920)	(0.0916)	(0.0892)	(0.0887)	(0.0869)
High school, not finished	0.00902	0.565*	0.200	0.628**	0.135	0.728**
	(0.225)	(0.248)	(0.215)	(0.239)	(0.209)	(0.258)
High school, finished	-0.362+	0.841***	-0.113	0.786***	-0.136	0.932***
	(0.211)	(0.236)	(0.201)	(0.228)	(0.196)	(0.247)
Higher, non-university	-0.466*	0.921***	-0.179	1.027***	-0.219	1.161***
	(0.229)	(0.252)	(0.218)	(0.243)	(0.212)	(0.260)
University education	-0.413+	1.066***	-0.154	1.055***	-0.197	1.163***
	(0.229)	(0.244)	(0.217)	(0.236)	(0.211)	(0.254)
Net income household	-0.0620**	0.0153	-0.0473**	0.0374*	-0.0442*	0.0445*
	(0.0194)	(0.0182)	(0.0183)	(0.0179)	(0.0177)	(0.0174)
Mobility Urban->Rural	-0.197+		-0.410***		-0.288***	
	(0.103)		(0.0889)		(0.0862)	
Mobility Rural->Urban		0.153+		-0.155*		-0.0911
		(0.0798)		(0.0745)		(0.0723)
Constant	1.062***	-1.886***	1.831***	-0.869***	1.468***	-1.246***
	(0.256)	(0.250)	(0.210)	(0.234)	(0.206)	(0.255)
Adjusted R^2	0.0481	0.0807	0.0548	0.0237	0.138	0.0875
Observations	2,914	2,666	3,280	3,025	3,214	2,981

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Reference categories are: male (for sex); millennials/Gen Z for age cohort; none or lower education for education; no mobility for mobility.

Several noteworthy patterns emerge regarding the control variables. Female respondents display significantly lower levels of affective polarization among rural residents across all three models. Residential mobility – specifically having moved from an urban to a rural area – is negatively associated with rural affective polarization, consistent with Hegewald & Schraff's

(2025) finding that mobility attenuates place-based affective polarization. Education exhibits a striking divergence between the two groups: higher educational attainment is negatively associated with affective polarization among rural respondents (although the effects are statistically significant only in the model testing H1) but strongly positively associated with it among urban respondents. This opposite effect of education across the two groups may be due to social sorting (Brown and Mettler, 2024; Hopkins, 2017; Maxwell, 2019, 2020; Taylor et al., 2024) and reflect the clustering of the educated, 'creative class' in cities (Florida, 2005; Zollinger, 2024), suggesting that the urban educated class may come to dislike rural people more than their urban uneducated counterparts as a way to demarcate their cultural distinctiveness.

Figure 2 GSEMs with perception of differentness and place-based resentment mediating the effect of identity on urban-rural affective polarization



Notes: $^{+}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$. Controls not shown for simplicity. The full GSEMs outputs are available in the Appendix (Tables A3-A4).

To test H4 and H5 – which propose that the effect of place-based identity on affective polarization is mediated by place-based resentment and perceptions of differentness, respectively – we estimated two GSEMs, one for each subsample. Figure 2 displays the path diagrams with the effects of place-based identity on both mediators and on the outcome, as well as the effects of the mediators on the outcome – i.e., affective polarization. Table 3 reports the decomposition of total effects into direct and indirect components.

Among rural respondents, as already shown by the OLS models, rural identity has a strong and significant direct effect on urban-rural affective polarization ($b = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$). Crucially, however, rural identity also generates substantial indirect effects through both mediating pathways. The indirect effect operating through perceptions of differentness from urban people is 0.53 ($p < 0.001$), and the indirect effect through place-based resentment is 0.08 ($p < 0.001$). Together, these two pathways constitute a total indirect effect of 0.62 ($p < 0.001$), which represents approximately 45% of the total effect of rural identity on affective polarization (total effect = 1.39, $p < 0.001$). Both H4 and H5 are therefore supported for the rural subsample. Notably, the mediation pathway through perceptions of personal differentness is considerably larger than that through resentment. This suggests that the sense of being a different kind of person from urbanites is a more prominent mechanism than place-based grievances in translating rural identity into affective polarization. Therefore, while place-based resentment has dominated the scholarly narrative on the urban-rural divide (García del Horno et al., 2024; Hegewald, 2024; Jacobs & Munis, 2023; Zumbrunn, 2024b), our findings suggest that the subjective sense of being a *different kind of person* from the geographic out-group explains urban-rural affective polarization even more. The perception that urban people are simply different kinds of people – with divergent values, lifestyles, and social worlds – plays a crucial part in what ultimately leads rural citizens to be cold and negative towards them.

Table 3 Estimated coefficients for the direct and indirect effects of identities on urban-rural affective polarization, corresponding to Figure 2.

	Direct effect on AP	Indirect effect through POD from out-group	Indirect effect through place resentment	Total indirect	Total effect	% Indirect
Rural identity among rural	0.78***	0.53***	0.08***	0.62***	1.39***	45
Urban identity among urban	1.11***	0.18***	0	0.18***	1.29***	14

Notes: $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The picture among urban respondents diverges in theoretically informative ways. Urban identity also has a strong and significant direct effect on urban affective polarization (b = 1.11, p < 0.001), and there is a significant indirect pathway through perceptions of differentness from rural people (b = 0.18, p < 0.001), confirming H5 for this group. However, the indirect effect through place-based resentment is zero and non-significant, meaning that H4 is not supported for urban respondents. This is consistent with the null finding for place-based resentment in the OLS models above. It reinforces the conclusion that place-based resentment is a mechanism specific to place-based affective polarization of rural people. The total indirect effect for urban identity amounts to 0.18, representing only 14% of the total effect (total effect = 1.29, p < 0.001) – a substantially smaller proportion than that observed for rural respondents.

Table 4 Outcome of hypotheses' testing

Hypothesis	**Rural**	**Urban**
H1: Place-based identity → affective polarization	Supported	Supported
H2: Place-based resentment → affective polarization	Supported	Not supported
H3: Perception of differentness → affective polarization	Supported	Supported
H4: Identity → resentment → affective polarization	Supported	Not supported
H5: Identity → perception of differentness → affective polarization	Supported	Supported
H6: H1–H5 relationships stronger for rural than urban	Supported	

Taken together (Table 4), these findings lend clear support to H6, too. The indirect effects linking place-based identity to affective polarization are both more numerous and proportionally larger among rural than among urban respondents: for rural voters, nearly half of the total effect of place-based identity operates through the two mediators, compared to only 14% among urban voters. Furthermore, the resentment pathway is entirely absent for the latter group. These asymmetries suggest that the mechanisms driving urban-rural affective polarization are qualitatively different across the two sides of the divide. Rural affective polarization is fueled by a combination of perceived personal differentness and accumulated place-based grievances, while urban affective polarization is driven more exclusively and directly by place-based identity with perceptions of differentness playing a more limited

mediating role. This is consistent with a broader body of research indicating that it is rural communities – not urban ones – that harbor the more intense and multidimensional forms of place-based resentment and out-group affect (Borwein & Lucas, 2023; Zumbrunn, 2024b).

Robustness checks and further evidence

We conducted additional analyses both to test the robustness of our findings and to provide readers with further evidence supporting our interpretation. A first potential concern relates to our use of respondents' self-classification to distinguish between urban and rural residents, as individuals may not always categorize their place of residence accurately. Indeed, although all respondents living in Brussels should, in principle, classify their residence as urban or suburban, 3.8% of respondents in our sample described it as rural.

To address this issue, we replicated the analyses using two alternative classifications based on more 'objective' measures of urbanity and rurality. The first relies on Eurostat's DEGURBA classification. Because respondents' zip codes are available in the survey data, we linked these codes to NIS codes, which allowed us to assign respondents to one of the three DEGURBA categories: cities, towns/suburbs, and rural areas.

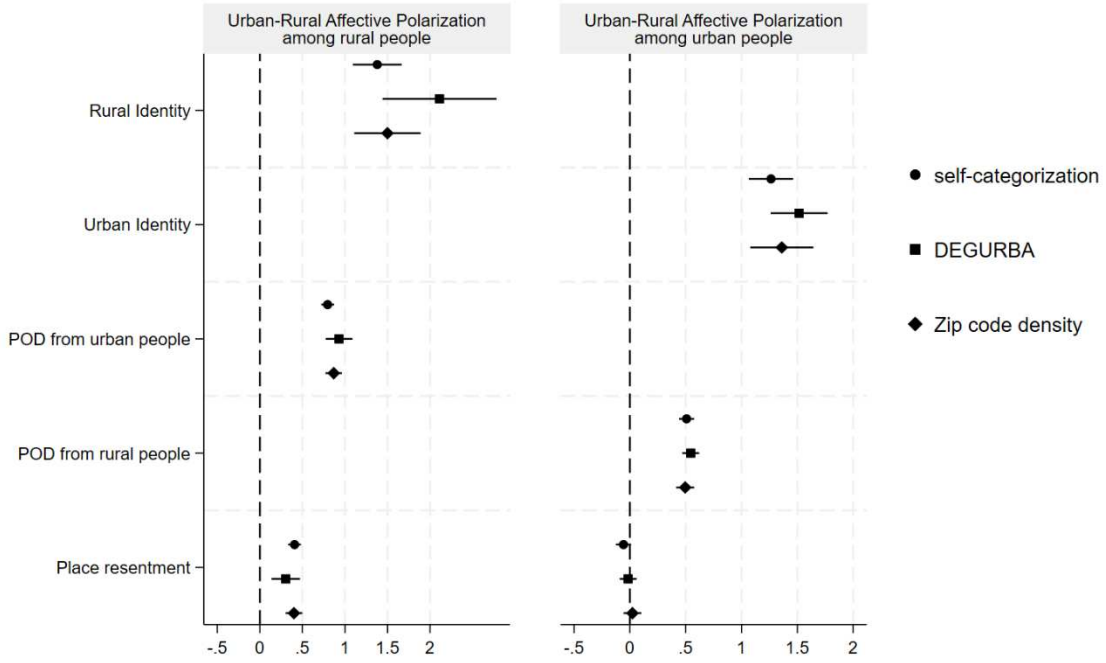
However, the standard DEGURBA classification may not be ideally suited to the Belgian context. Belgium is one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, with a national average population density of 385 inhabitants per square kilometer. Consequently, the 300 inhabitants/km² threshold used by Eurostat to define rural areas may misclassify a substantial number of Belgian communes as urban, particularly in Flanders, where many territorially rural communes exceed this density simply because of the country's overall compactness. Population density averages 501 inhabitants/km² in Flanders, compared to 218 inhabitants/km² in Wallonia and 7,694 inhabitants/km² in Brussels.

For this reason, and following contributions such as Huijsmans and Rodden (2025), which advocate the use of relative and country-specific measures of urbanity and rurality, we also tested a third operationalization based directly on the population density of zip code areas. We classified areas with 0–500 inhabitants/km² as rural, 501–1,499 inhabitants/km² as suburban (and therefore excluded from the analysis), and areas above 1,500 inhabitants/km² as urban.

Figure 3 reports the regression analyses testing H1–H3 across all three operationalizations of urban and rural residence: the self-classification measure used in the main analysis (Table 2), the DEGURBA classification, and the population-density classification. A visual inspection of the coefficient plots immediately shows that the results are remarkably consistent across the

three different operationalizations. The substantive conclusions discussed above therefore do not depend on the specific classification strategy adopted.

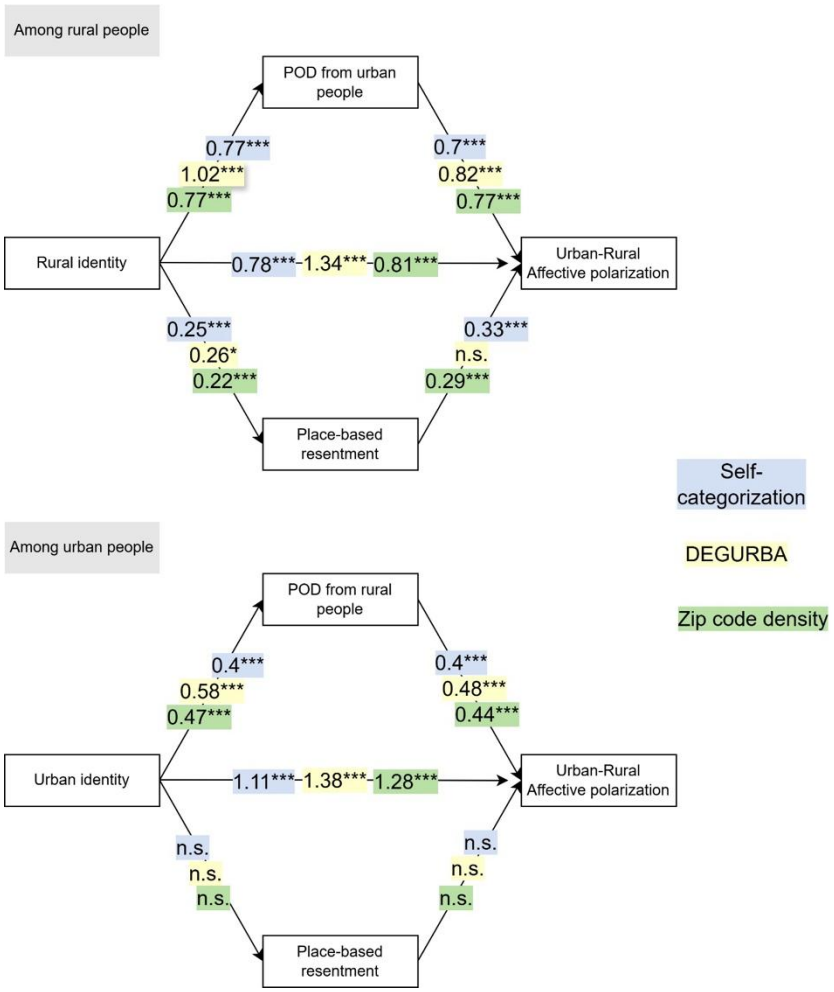
Figure 3 Summary results of regression models predicting urban-rural affective polarization based on different classifications of urban and rural



Notes: the complete regression outputs for the two alternative operationalizations (DEGURBA and zip code density) are available in the Appendix (Tables A5-A6).

Figure 4 replicates the mediation analyses testing the remaining hypotheses. Once again, the three distinct operationalizations of urban and rural residence yield highly consistent findings. The only exception concerns the effect of place-based resentment on urban-rural affective polarization among rural respondents, which is not statistically significant when using the DEGURBA classification ($p = 0.104$), although the coefficient remains positive. This may be due to the considerably smaller size of the rural subsample generated by the DEGURBA operationalization (approximately one thousand respondents), reflecting the previously discussed limitations of applying the standard DEGURBA thresholds to the Belgian case.

Figure 4 Replication of Figure 2 using different classifications of urban and rural



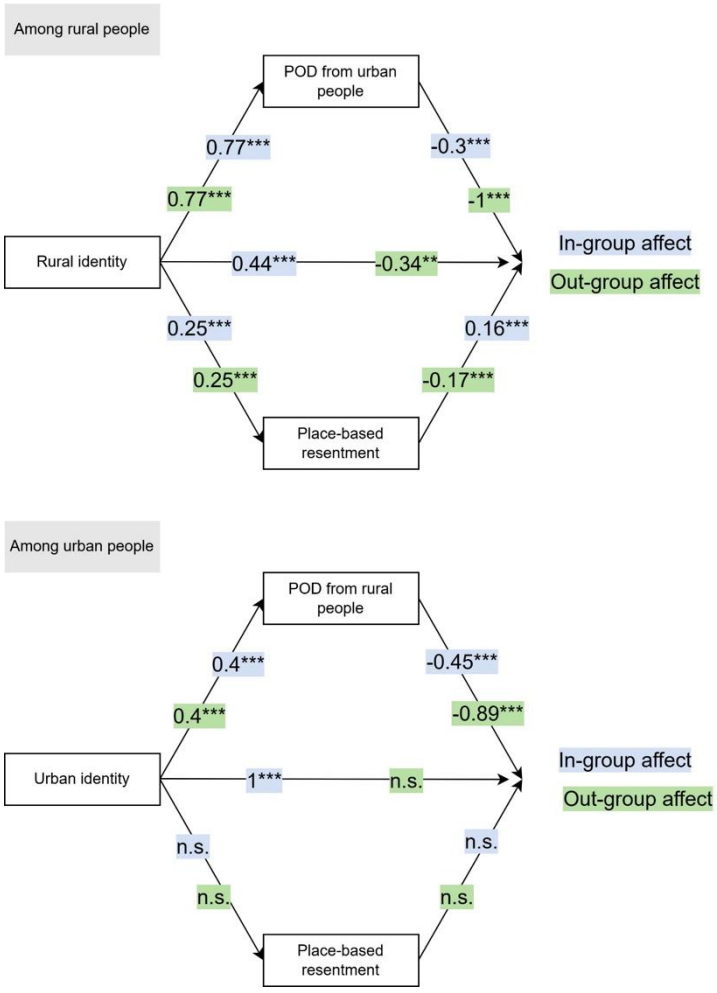
Notes: $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Controls not shown for simplicity.

Overall, these robustness checks provide strong reassurance that our main findings and interpretations remain stable across different criteria for classifying urban and rural respondents.

As a second important test, we replicated both the regression analyses (Tables A7–A8) and the GSEMs (Figure 5) by predicting the two components of urban-rural affective polarization - in-group affect and out-group affect - separately. The results are substantively similar to those obtained when predicting overall urban-rural affective polarization, with one notable nuance. Among urban respondents, urban identity has a positive direct effect on in-group liking but no direct negative effect on out-group evaluations. Instead, its effect on out-group disliking appears to be entirely mediated by perceptions of differentness. In our view, this finding suggests that the identity of the dominant or privileged group in the conflict (in this case, urban identity) is not, by itself, sufficient to generate negative feelings toward the disadvantaged or 'losing' group (in this case, rural people). Rather, out-group disliking emerges when that

identity is activated by a perception that the two groups are fundamentally different from one another. In other words, merely identifying as urban increases attachment to the in-group, but it is the perception of difference that translates identification into hostility toward the out-group. This interpretation is consistent with our theoretical argument that group identities and perceptions of differentness are analytically distinct constructs and should therefore be kept conceptually separate.

Figure 5 Replication of Figure 2 using in-group and out-group affect as dependent variables.

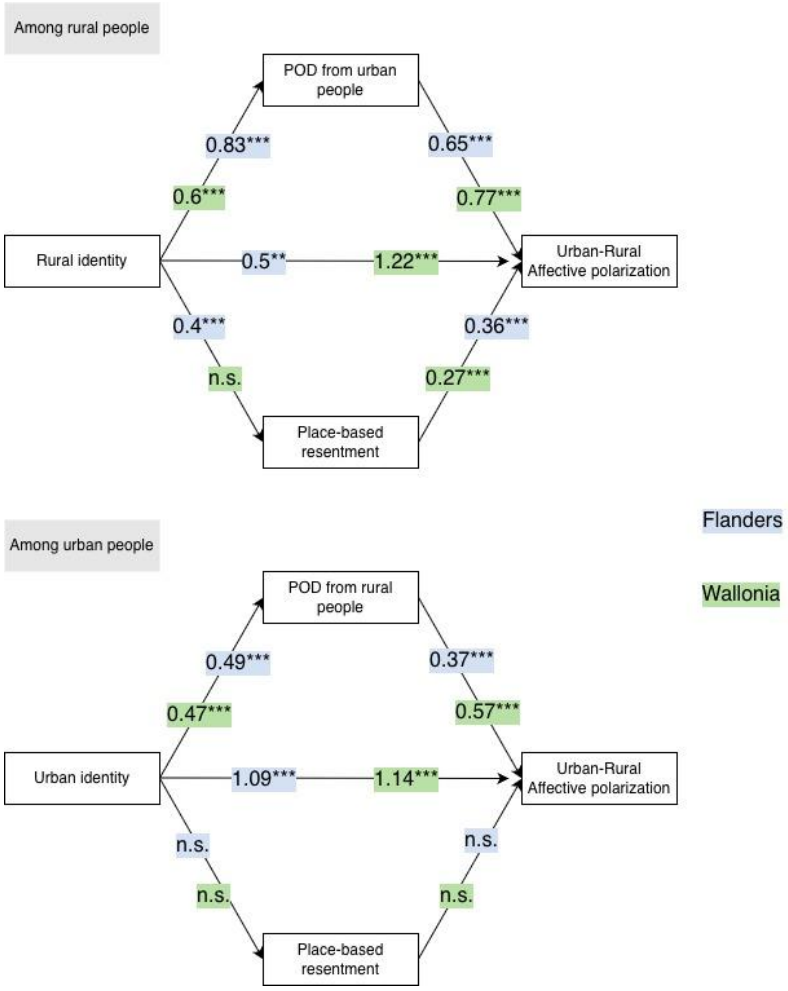


Notes: $^{+}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$. Controls not shown for simplicity.

Third, we replicated both the regression analyses (Tables A9–A10) and the GSEMs (Figure 6) predicting urban-rural affective polarization by considering only respondents from Flanders and Wallonia, respectively. Some minor differences in effect sizes emerge across the two regions, but the only notable departure from the pooled analysis presented in Figure 2 is that

rural identity does not lead to place-based resentment in Wallonia. This may simply reflect the fact that many rural areas in Wallonia are as affluent as – or even more affluent than – urban areas, whereas cities in this part of the country often bear the socioeconomic costs of post-industrial decline.

Figure 6 Replication of Figure 2 for Flanders and Wallonia separately.



Notes: $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Controls not shown for simplicity.

Conclusion

This article investigated the drivers of urban-rural affective polarization, using the 2024 NotLikeUs voter panel survey in Belgium, a least likely case for urban-rural polarization to emerge. First, we explored the direct effects of identities, place-based resentment, and perceptions of differentness. Second, and more innovatively, we tested the roles of place-based resentment and perception of differentness as mediators of the relationship between place-

based identity and urban-rural affective polarization. In doing so, we put a strong emphasis on place-based identity as a social construct, and theorize that it needs to be activated to translate more clearly into place-based affective polarization.

The most immediate takeaway of our analysis is that place-based affective polarization is an asymmetric phenomenon, for two reasons. First, urban dwellers are, on average, not affectively polarized towards the geographic out-group. Second, both rural and urban dwellers tend to polarize when they hold a strong identity, but the mechanisms behind why they do so differ fundamentally, suggesting that similar place-based affective polarization has a different socio-psychological architecture for the two social groups.

For rural residents, identity can be activated by a chain of socio-psychological mechanisms involving both perceived differences, and, to a lesser extent, resentment over being neglected, before translating into out-group affect. This pattern looks like an 'integrated syndrome' of place-based marginalization: identity feeds into a sense of being socially distant from urban people and, albeit to a lesser extent, into a feeling that institutions and society at large do not care about rural communities, both of which then fuel hostility toward the urban out-group. This is consistent with the broader literature on the 'politics of resentment' (Cramer, 2016) and the 'left behind' thesis (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). In other words, rural affective polarization is not merely about identity pride, but neither is it only, or even primarily, about resentment.

Urban residents are not very affectively polarized based on place. Moreover, for this group identity largely speaks for itself: the effect on polarization is mostly direct and not rooted in grievance at all. Urban dwellers with a strong urban identity tend to perceive themselves as different from rural people and like rural people less, but not because they feel wronged by them or by the state. They are not aggrieved; they simply feel different, which could equate to a form of social distinction. This may reflect the cultural confidence of urban, often more educated populations, who do not mobilize a narrative of victimhood to sustain their in-group distinctiveness. The fact that higher levels of education predict stronger urban affective polarization seems to confirm this interpretative line.

This asymmetry maps onto a more general insight about the political psychology of dominant/established vs. subordinate/challenger groups (e.g. Crulli & Emanuele, 2025). Rural communities, like other groups that may come to perceive themselves as culturally or economically disadvantaged, develop richer and more emotionally charged group identities – precisely because identity is doing more defensive work. Urban communities, closer to the

cultural and economic center of gravity of modern societies (Florida, 2005; Zollinger, 2024), can afford a thinner, less emotionally loaded form of place-based identity.

Despite Belgium being a least likely case, our results found strong evidence of the role of identity, perception of differentness, and resentment in the development of place-based affective polarization. We expect our findings to travel to other advanced industrial democracies. Wherever the urban-rural divide is sharpest – in terms of identities, but also economic divergence, service deprivation, and cultural stigmatization of rural life – the asymmetry in affective polarization should also be most pronounced. Comparative analyses beyond Belgium are needed to test whether this is the case.

We argue in favor of a specific causal pathway where place-based identity can be activated by place-based resentment and perception of differences. While this argument is theoretically grounded and consistent with previous findings, our data is cross-sectional. Future research should rule out alternative pathways, for instance where place-based identity acts as a mediator, through experimental designs.

Future research should also further unpack the mechanisms behind urban-rural affective polarization. In particular, efforts may be directed towards a closer examination of perceived differentness as a mechanism, potentially more complex to analyze than resentment. To use the terminology recently introduced by Westheuser and Zollinger (2025), this perception of differentness is likely to develop through both a bottom-up process of 'social closure' and top-down 'classification struggles' by the media or political elites (see also Haffert et al., 2024; Pautonnier et al., 2026). Both types of processes should be placed under the magnifying glass of political scientists in the future.

Our findings have important implications, for both the scholarly debate and politics at large. As for the former, since the activation of salient social identities is crucial for the consolidation of proper cleavages (Mierke-Zatwarnicki et al., 2026; Zollinger, 2024), this article suggests that both the rural and urban sides of the conflict have the potential to congeal into a cleavage, although currently the urban-rural conflict appears more like an asymmetric affective divide. As for the latter, while place-based affective polarization does not pose a direct threat to democracies, it has been linked to discriminatory behaviour (Lyons & Utych, 2023) and to radical voting behaviour, indirectly impacting the future of democracy. Our findings suggest that policymakers seeking to reduce hostility toward the urban out-group could partly do so by reducing place-based resentment, for instance by improving public services in rural areas. But it may not be enough. Rather, our results suggest that working on perceptions of differentness

between rural and urban residents may be a promising avenue. This may require changing media or party narratives, next to developing targeted policies.

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