Faith no more? The divergence of political trust between urban and rural Europe

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Abstract

Events such as Brexit and the Gilet Jaunes protests have highlighted the spatial nature of populism. In particular, there has been increasing political divergence between urban and rural areas, with rural areas apparently having lost faith in national governments. We investigate this divergence using data on over 125,000 EU citizens from the European Social Survey from 2008-2018. We show that people in rural areas have lower political trust than urban or peri-urban residents, with this difference clear for six different forms of political institutions, including politicians, political parties, and national parliaments. There has been divergence of political trust between urban and rural Europe since 2008, although this is primarily driven by Southern Europe. While these results can partly be explained by demographic differences between cities and the countryside, divergent economic experiences, differences in values, and perceptions that public services are less effective outside of urban areas, there is a residual 'rural effect' beyond this. We argue that the polarization of urban-rural political trust has important implications for the functioning of European democracies.

Keywords: Political trust; Urban-Rural division; polarisation; European Social Survey

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Introduction

There is growing concern about political polarisation in Europe between urban and rural areas (Jennings & Stoker, 2019; Stein et al., 2019). In the UK, the Brexit vote was geographically uneven, with residents of cities, on average, more likely to vote to remain than those living in the country or small towns (Lee et al., 2018; Abreu & Öner, 2020). Hungarian populist Viktor Orban has been strongest in the countryside (Rachman, 2018). And in France, the Gilet Jaune protesters have travelled from peripheral rural areas to Paris to protest against Macron's policies (Boyer et al., 2019). Economic geographers have suggested that this might, in part, reflect patterns of uneven development and an urban-focused growth model where core areas and cities have done better than towns and the periphery (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Gordon, 2018). One explanation for this crisis of trust is economic failure, with lower incomes in the periphery shaping the perceptions of rural-dwellers who no longer feel the system 'works for them'. An alternative explanation is that the divide is cultural, with rural residents made anxious by urban government which they perceive as having different values to them.

The uneven geography of political trust represents a potentially important problem for European countries. Political trust is seen as underpinning the democratic process by ensuring citizens feel the government is likely to act fairly (Boyer, 1992; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Low levels of political trust are associated with a greater willingness to accept anti-social behaviour such as tax fraud (Marien & Hooghe, 2011) and may also drive populism, which entails the mistrust of experts (Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Citrin & Stoker, 2018). The apparent divergence of political trust between urban and rural areas may therefore have important consequences for democracy.

Despite the importance of political trust, few studies have – to the best of our knowledge – considered differences in trust in urban and rural Europe. This is an important omission. There has been widespread concern about the geography of the 'left behind' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), but relatively less consideration of the geography of distrust with government. In this paper, we address this gap. We use five waves of the European Social Survey for 18 European countries, giving us a sample of over 120,000 individuals. First, we show that the declining trust in politicians across Europe has been driven by residents in rural areas and towns. Even when we control for individual demographics (such as age, gender, and qualifications), economic outcomes (employment and income), and values (opinions about immigrants, lifestyle and so on), the residents of rural areas are more likely to have lower trust in government. Second, we show that there has been divergence over time. Since 2010, when there was little or no difference between urban and rural areas, we document a divergence in levels of trust – driven by trends in Southern Europe. Before the financial crisis, there was no difference in political trust between urban and rural Europe. Since then, levels of political trust have diverged significantly. We show that much of this divergence is explained by differences in perceptions of local economies, education, and healthcare – with education and healthcare most important. Rural areas are losing faith in national government because they perceive their

socio-economic infrastructure to be worse than core areas. However, a residual effect remains which suggests an underlying process of urban-rural polarisation.

Our research contributes to the growing literature on urban-rural political divides, which has been dominated by studies of the United States, where the election of Donald Trump was seen as the moment the "white rural voter roared" (Scala & Johnson, 2017, p. 162). Ethnographic work has begun to document a breakdown of the relationship between rural dwellers and urban institutions of government. In a classic study of rural America, Cramer (2016) highlights this phenomenon. Her interviewees suggest the elites looked down on the residents of rural areas, and unfairly focused funding on cities at the expense of towns and the countryside. The polarisation between urban and rural America has since become a well-documented, if complicated, fact (Hochschild, 2016; Scala & Johnson, 2017). In this respect, our paper contributes to the growing literature on trust in Europe, complementing national level studies such as Stein et al.'s (2019) work on Norway.

The paper is structured as follows. In section two we discuss the literature on urban-rural political polarisation and consider potential reasons for it. We develop four hypotheses which we test. In section three we present our data, and descriptive statistics to support our hypotheses. Section four presents a regression model which discusses our variables in more detail. Section five concludes with implications.

Geography and trust in government

Political trust can be defined simply as "*confidence in institutions such as the executive, the legislature, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and the police.*" (Uslaner, 2018, p. 5). It has long been seen as important in political science. Early research on political trust highlighted the relationship between trust in government and the functioning of democracy, predominantly in Europe and North America (Crozier, et al., 1975; Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2018). Trust matters as it ensures voters feel that government acts in the individual or public's interest (Boyer, 1992; Levi & Stoker, 2000). For Hetherington and Rudolph (2018) political trust helps bridge the ideological gap that inevitably exists between policy ideas of the governing party and those of the opposition party. They argue that political trust has become polarized along partisan lines. This is due to partisanship placing greater weight on the criteria that favour a partisan's preferred political party. Hooghe (2018) argues that taking part in elections can boost levels of political trust, however this effect might be limited to supporters of the winning party. Ideological allegiances increase or reduce trust if the 'right' party is currently governing (Listhaug, 1995). Research by Anderson et al. (2005) emphasizes that citizens who vote for parties who win elections are more likely to support the political system than those who vote for parties that are on the losing side in elections. Esaiasson (2011) does not deem 'losing' in an election an important factor and emphasizes that if trust in government declines, it is likely seen as a reaction toward violations of the democratic process.

Few studies have focused on the geography of political trust.[1] In a recent study of Norway, Stein et al. (2019) develop a framework based on that of the political scientist Stein Rokkan. They suggest that political trust may follow a core-periphery pattern, with trust in national politicians lower amongst those who are further away, possibly because distance from "decisions made in the political centre potentially fosters a sense of powerlessness and exclusion from the political system" (Stein et al., 2019, p. 4). Supporting evidence for his proposition is found in qualitative studies of urban and rural differences in the US. Hochschild's (2016) work on the narratives which develop amongst rural American voters shows a distrust of government which is often seen as providing good jobs for a few, over-regulating local economies, and helping disadvantaged groups, often from cities, rather than the average rural voter. Similarly, Cramer's (2016) work on the United States strongly highlights the loss of faith of urban areas and the cultural divide between residents of small-town America and those in cities.

Studies on the UK's 2016 referendum on EU membership have also suggested that trust and spatial division were relevant to the outcome. Hobolt (2016) observes that lower levels of trust in government are associated with higher probabilities of a leave vote, and Jennings and Stoker (2017) found cosmopolitan and metropolitan dwellers were both more supportive of the EU and immigration, and more inclined to vote Remain, than individuals in regional or coastal areas and post-industrial areas. However, the empirical results on whether greater population density was associated with the Brexit vote are equivocal. Using Local Authority level data, Obschonka et al. (2018) find that denser areas were less likely to vote for Brexit, but only before controlling for socio-demographic factors and individual psychology (they also find similar results for Trump votes). Matti and Zhou (2017) come to similar conclusions, suggesting that people were more likely to vote for Brexit if they lived in lower-population density areas.

Theory and hypotheses

What determines political trust? Much of the literature emphasises economic performance, with Hetherington and Rudolph (2008) observing that levels of trust covary with economic outcomes. Many scholars have found significant effects of macroeconomic performance on political trust (e.g. Lipset & Schneider, 1983; Van Erkel & Van der Meer, 2016; Kroknes et al., 2015; Miller & Listhaug, 1999). Although some scholars have found no significant relationship (e.g. Dalton, 2004; Van der Meer, 2010; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian 2017), within-country, longitudinal analyses show consistent strong effects of macroeconomic performance on political trust while controlling for corruption. Van Erkel and Van der Meer (2016) analyse 21 waves of the Eurobarometer between 1999 and 2011 and find that changes such as growth, deficits, unemployment and inflation influence political trust.

[1] In The Handbook of Political Trust (Zmerli & Van Der Meer, 2017), for example, no chapters consider geographical variation.

Assuming, then, that economic performance is an important determinant of trust, how do individuals assess economic performance? Here, there are two competing accounts. First, some studies have found that wealthier individuals are more trusting. Evidence from the World Values Survey 2005-2007 indicates that higher levels of trust are expressed by society's winners who, in addition to being wealthy and of high socioeconomic status, are healthy, well-educated and satisfied with their life (Newton et al. 2018, p. 47). Alesina and La Ferrara similarly found that income and education are positively correlated with trust (2000, p. 8). By contrast, Brehm and Rahn (1997) found that although individuals who perceived significant positive changes in family finances were more confident about federal institutions, as individuals became wealthier, they lost confidence in the government.

Within the EU, poverty is higher in rural areas than in cities (DG Agriculture and Rural Development 2018). GDP per capita is also lower in rural areas than the EU average whereas it is higher than average in urban areas (DG Agriculture and Rural Development 2018).

H1: Low-income individuals will be less trusting of government than high income individuals, and more low-income individuals live in rural areas rather than urban areas as a percentage of the overall population.

However, a second account of assessing economic performance argues that an individual's economic position is less important than the economic circumstances of his or her community. Rather than look at an individual's economic position, we should instead consider the broader economic circumstances of the community that he or she inhabits. Under this view, individuals are not only motivated by their own economic wellbeing, but are also motivated by the economic situation facing their society. This *geotropic account* suggests that voter preferences are grounded in what Ganga and McNamara (2018, p. 5) refer to as a 'geographically scaled economic reality' which might override both individual and national perceptions. Here, the emphasis is on the larger social interactions that both mould our identities and provide meaning to the ways in which we make sense of our economic interests; Ganga and McNamara (2018) contend that geography has both social *and* material effects, with citizens formulating their views as part of a wider community that is grounded in a specific geographic location.

Reeves and Gimpel (2012, p. 509) likewise observe that the contextual environment in which voters are living and working allow them to 'make observations and form impressions as they conduct their daily lives, and these shade their attitudes toward the state of the national economy'. The authors' (2012) study of how voters assess the nation's economic performance found that the local economy shaped evaluations of the national economy. As Reeves and Gimpel (2012) note, individuals do not directly experience national economic conditions such as the GDP or national unemployment rate. However, individuals do experience localised economic conditions through conversations with friends and family, and by observing factory closings and home foreclosures.

Although the overall unemployment rate within the EU is higher in cities than rural areas, those trends are reversed for youth unemployment (DG Agriculture and Rural Development 2018). Additionally, as Jennings and Stoker (2017) observe, it is the citizens in cosmopolitan and metropolitan areas who are the beneficiaries of global growth and the knowledge economy;

rural dwellers that are largely excluded from those opportunities may also believe that there is high unemployment.

H2: Individuals who live in rural areas are more likely to believe that unemployment is high and express dissatisfaction with the economy than individuals who live in urban areas.

Of course, the economy is not the only factor that individuals use to assess the performance of government, and their trust of it. A growing body of literature suggests that quality of government impacts trust. For example, Agerberg (2017, p. 582), highlights 'the importance of personal experience with the quality of state institutions in shaping political trust and political attitudes'. Agerberg (2017) contends that voter perceptions of low quality of government and local service delivery increase votes for populist parties. Low quality of government is linked to low levels of trust, and the anti-elite messages of populist parties are therefore more likely to appeal to voters who have experienced low quality of government. Morgeson and Petrescu (2011) reached similar conclusions in their study of trust of US federal government agencies, and found that citizens who were highly satisfied with a federal agency had greater trust in the federal government.

However, some scholars (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003, p. 3) contend that the hypothesis 'that people do not trust government because administrations do not work properly' is flawed. The authors (2003) suggest that citizens' pre-existing trust (or distrust) of government may impact their perception of government performance; here, it is contemplated that citizens evaluate government performance negatively because their perception of government is negative. However, while these problems of causality exist, it is also important to note that the public administration literature also suggests that citizens *can* form accurate perceptions of government services that are directly and frequently experienced (Van Ryzin et al., 2007). Research also suggests that the quality of certain services, including education and healthcare, are particularly salient to citizen satisfaction with, and trust of, government (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005; Van Ryzin et al., 2004).

Urban and rural inequalities exist when it comes to the provision of services. Within the EU in 2015, Eurostat (2018) report that 4.2 per cent of the population living in rural areas reported unmet healthcare needs in the previous 12 months. The share in cities was 3.5 per cent of the population. Rural dwellers are also more likely than residents in cities to leave education and training early. For the EU's rural inhabitants, the early leavers' rate in 2015 for those aged 14 to 24 years peaked at 12.2% as opposed to only 9.8% of city dwellers.

H3: Individuals who live in rural areas are more likely to be dissatisfied with education and healthcare than individuals who live in urban areas.

Writing in the 1960s, Lipset and Rokkan (1967, p. 14) identified a 'conflict between *the central nation-building culture* and the increasing resistance of the ethnically, linguistically and religiously distinct *subject populations* in the provinces and the peripheries' [emphasis in original]. This conflict or clash of cultures may be underpinned by differing *values*, defined by Rokeach (1973, p. 5) as 'an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state

existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-of-state existence'. Values express motivational goals such as safety, tolerance and religious commitment (Schwartz, 2007), and their convergence, or divergence, are relevant to *trust*: Tonkiss and Passey (1999, p. 272) found that 'trust is linked to shared values', and Beugelsdijk and Klasing's (2016, p. 523) observe that 'societies in which people hold diverse views regarding government intervention in markets and the need to redistribute income, have lower levels of trust'.

Jennings and Stoker (2019) note that urban values tend to be socially liberal and supportive of same sex marriage and immigration. By contrast, rural values often endorse traditional moral norms and oppose social welfare (Ashwood, 2018). Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (2007) used data from the European Values Survey to reveal that, relative to other occupations, farmers hold particularly conservative views relating to moral issues such as marriage, abortion and euthanasia. The authors also found that farmers are particularly opposed to economic redistribution, and hold stronger religious beliefs than non-farmers. An emerging body of qualitative research from the USA suggests that a perceived clash of values between rural dwellers, and urban lawmakers, has caused a breakdown in trust: Hochschild (2016) implies that the rural Louisiana participants of her study found it difficult to trust the far-off DC lawmakers, in part because of perceived dismissal of their conservative values, and Cramer (2016, p. 65) found that the rural Wisconsinites of her study held the view decision-making urbanites were unable to understand rural life and the economic concerns of its inhabitants. It is possible that urbanites are likely to possess values more aligned with those of lawmakers (who themselves tend to be city-dwellers). As alignment generates trust, those urbanites are therefore more likely to trust government bodies and decision-making processes than their rural counterparts, who hold more divergent values.

H4: Individuals with conservative values will be less trusting of government than voters with liberal values, and more individuals with conservative values will live in rural areas than urban areas as a percentage of the overall population.

Data: The European Social Survey

To test our hypotheses we draw on data from the European Social Survey. This is a cross-sectional, representative survey for a large number of European countries. We use the cumulative data file for ESS waves 4-9, which for convenience we will refer to by year (although the ESS fieldwork often takes place over the subsequent year as well). This is a period which should include the financial crisis, subsequent Eurozone crises, and the period of austerity afterwards. We only include countries for which we have data in all periods, to prevent sample variation affecting our results. The 18 countries we include are Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Together these account for a total population of 433 million in 2016. We exclude those who are aged under 16, as their political views are unlikely to be fully formed, and remove a small

number of individuals who have missing observations. The result is a final sample size of just over 125,000 individuals in 18 countries.[2]

Defining rural areas

There is no binary distinction between urban and rural areas. Instead, it is perhaps better to think of a spectrum ranging between the densest urban areas to the most isolated rural areas (Scala & Johnson, 2017), although even this ignores the great diversity of types of rural and urban areas (Geoetz et al., 2018). Our choice of indicator for this paper is limited by the data. The European Social Survey asks respondents to classify their own residence as one of five groups: a big city (18% of the sample), Suburbs or outskirts of big city (13%), Town or small city (32%), Country village (30%) and Farm or home in countryside (8%). This is self-reported rather than from an objective indicator, but we would argue this is an advantage in this case: self-reporting means that we are seeing perceptions. In our empirical work, we use this category as a five way-distinction. However, to ensure our results are clear we also run regressions using an urban / rural distinction, where rural is those living in country villages or farm or home in the countryside. While this is analytically simple, it means we cannot account for different types of rural or urban areas (for example, Scala et al. (2015) show there that different types of rural areas in the US tend to have different voter profiles).

Trust in government

The European Social Survey has a large number of variables for trust in government. These are: (1) Trust in the country's parliament, (2) Trust in the legal system, (3) Trust in the police, (4) Trust in politicians, (5) Trust in political parties, (6) Trust in the European Parliament and (7) Trust in the United Nations. Each is measured on a Likert scale from 0 (little trust) to 10 (high trust). We experiment with principal component analysis and measures of neutral and political institutions, but because trust in government tends to be highly correlated, doing so makes little difference to our results so we opt for the simplest strategy possible. Our measure of political trust is simply the composite measure political trust calculated using the average score across all 7 indicators.

Trust in government over time

We focus on the divergence of trust in government between urban and rural areas. Figure 1 presents the simple difference between average levels of trust in urban and rural areas, by ESS year and according to three different measures of trust: the average of all indicators, neutral institutions, and political institutions. In 2008, roughly the period before the crisis, residents in rural areas had lower average trust rates than urban residents. In the subsequent wave, rural areas had seen their relative trust levels converge with those of urban dwellers. But the period since 2010 has seen a divergence of trust between urban and rural Europe. Whereas in 2010 average trust differed little, by 2018 there was a relatively large divergence.

[2] We exclude missing observations and those who answer ‘don’t know’ but this makes little substantive difference to the results.

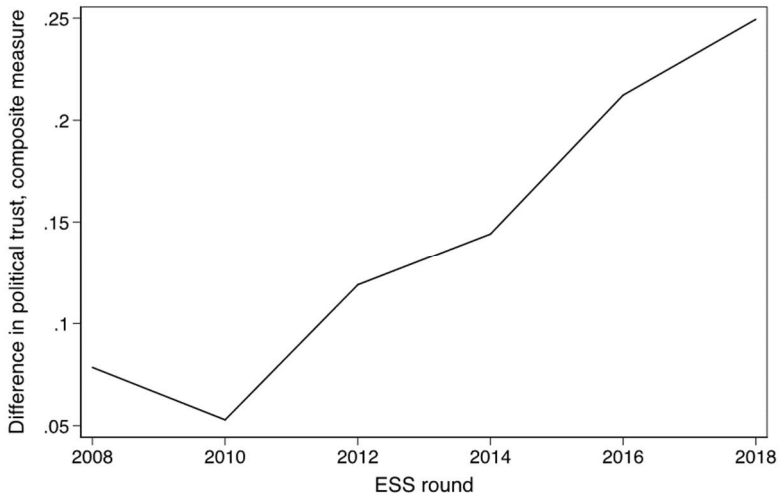

Figure 1. Difference in political trust between urban and rural Europe, 2008–2018

We break this down in figure 2, which gives changes over time in the seven indicators and seven indicators of trust in government and that for general social trust. We show a similar pattern of diverging trust for country's parliaments and legal system, with a narrow gap in 2008 which has expanded since. Trust in police has followed a different pattern, starting with a wider gap as rural residents trust the police more but with a generally similar trend for both urban and rural areas. Trust in politicians has diverged, but only by a small amount. Trust in political parties has diverged, driven by a slower increase in the countryside. Trust in the UN changes little relatively. Trust in the European parliament was lowest in 2014, increasing since but with some divergence. In the remainder of this paper we set out to investigate these trends.

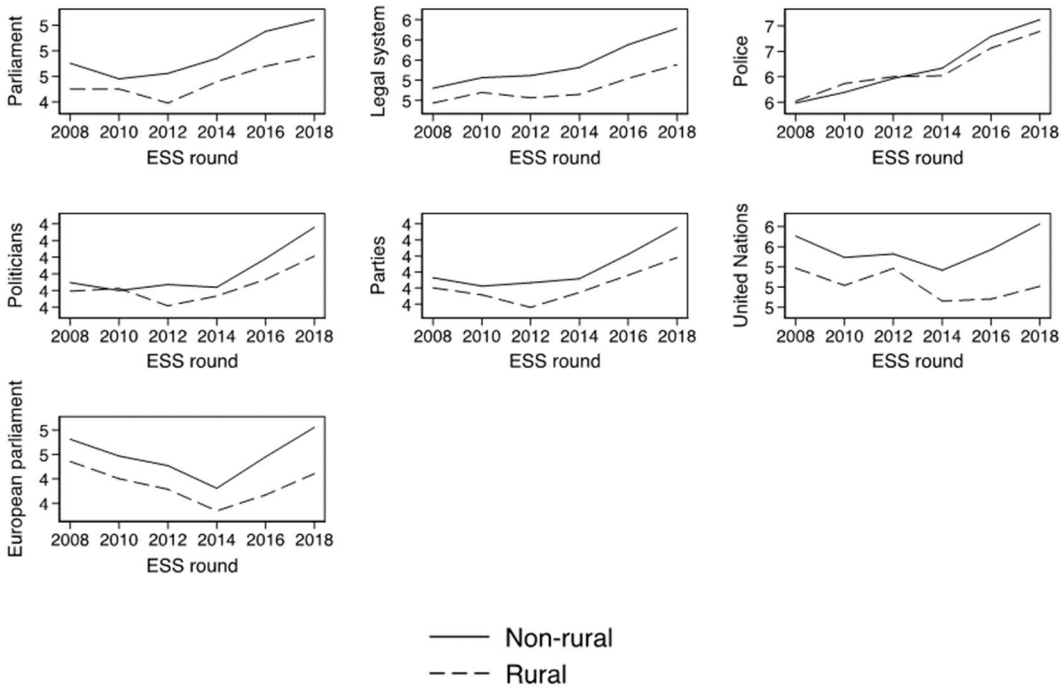

Figure 2. Change in individual trust variables in rural vs. non-rural, 2008–2018

Empirical strategy

The model

Trust in government will be influenced by the characteristics of the person, and so the geographical variation outlined above may simply be the result of a sorting of people with different characteristics or beliefs into rural areas (e.g. Rohla et al., 2018). To disentangle the effect of these individual characteristics from the effect of locating in a rural-area, we use a series of ordinal logit regression models which allow us to control for basic factors beyond locality which might influence trust. These take the basic form:

$$Trust_i = \alpha + \beta_1 Rural_i + \beta_2 Demographics_i + \beta_3 Economics_i + \beta_4 Values + \beta_5 Satisfaction + \varphi + \delta + \varepsilon$$

For individual 'i'. Where the variable 'Trust' is an indicator of trust in government and 'rural' is our main variable of interest, either a single binary variable for rurality or a series of binary variables which reflect the self-reported degree of urbanity of the respondent's residence. 'Demographics' are basic characteristics such as age, gender, qualifications and ethnicity; 'income' is the individual's position in the country's income distribution; and 'values' is a set of indicators of individual values around gay rights, lifestyle and so on. 'φ' is a set of country dummies which should control for country-specific factors; 'δ' is a set of year dummies designed to control for cyclical trends. Based on the existing literature, we envisage a horse-race between individual characteristics, in particular the older populations of rural areas, their economic circumstances, and values.

Control variables

We identify four main groups of control variables, each of which is intended to remove one set of explanations for the divergence in political trust (summary statistics for these variables are given in appendix table A1). The first set are *individual demographics*. Trust in government is likely to vary by age, with generational effects meaning some generations trust government more than others (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). We include a variable for the respondent's age to account for this. Gender is also likely to matter, and we control for this with a simple binary variable. Two of the issues facing European policymakers have been migration and growing ethnic diversity, and these will impact on an individual level. We include one variable for whether an individual was born abroad, and one for whether they are an ethnic minority in the country in which they live. One of the largest political cleavages across Europe has been between those of different levels of education. We include six educational categories, each roughly equivalent to an ISCED category: these range from not having completed primary education to having a Master's or PhD degree. We expect better educated workers to have a greater faith in government.

Our second set of variables are for individual *economic* factors. Our first hypothesis (H1) suggests that richer respondents are more likely to feel the system is 'delivering for them' and so have more faith in government. The less affluent will, in contrast, be more sceptical about the merits of government. It might also be, however, that richer respondents are resentful of taxes and have less contact with the state. We secondly include a series of variables related to

income. We are limited by the variables collected consistently in the ESS and incorporate dummy variables for each decile of the national income distribution each individual is in. We include participation in the labour market – a variable for unemployment and one for whether an individual is retired.

Third, to test H4, we include a series of variables for *values.* Qualitative research (Hochschild, 2016; Cramer, 2016) suggests that there are distinct values for rural residents relative to those in urban areas, and other studies (Tonkiss & Passey, 1999; Beugelsdijk & Klasing, 2016) observe that different values undermine trust. If urban and rural value differences exist, and governments are seen to act in accordance with urban values, then this may erode rural residents' trust in government. To determine whether an urban/rural clash exists, we control for a battery of variables related to values. These include beliefs about redistribution (Government should reduce differences in income levels), homosexuality (Gays and lesbians free to life as they wish), immigration (Immigration bad or good for country's economy') and also a further 19 variables around values about the environment, hedonism and so on.[3] These beliefs were selected because we believe they tap attitudes related to moral issues (i.e., private behaviour), ethnic issues (i.e., beliefs about immigrants) and political-economic issues (i.e., views about government economic intervention) (see Kalmijn & Kraaykamp 2007), and also attitudes that underpin the emerging Green-Alternative-Libertarian and Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist cleavage (see Hooghe et al., 2002).

Summary statistics presented in the appendix show that there are statistically significant differences in values between urban and rural dwellers for the majority of these (17 of 22).

H3 suggests that political trust may also vary because of *satisfaction* with services. An urban focused growth model, as highlighted by Rodríguez-Pose (2018), may have led rural dwellers to lose faith in national government, feeling their public services are worse than those in urban areas. We include three variables: satisfaction with education services, healthcare, and the economy (note we are already controlling for individual economic experiences, so the latter must be a contextual effect). These three indicators are closely correlated and, we assume, connected in people's minds, so we include them together.

Political trust in urban and rural Europe

We begin by showing a clear relationship between our aggregate measures of political trust and urban location. Table 1 presents ordinal logit models of political trust with different sets of control variables. Our focus is on the five geographical dummies, with 'big city' as the

[3] These are: Important to think new ideas and being creative; Important to be rich, have money and expensive things; Important that people are treated equally and have equal opportunities; Important to show abilities and be admired; Important to live in secure and safe surroundings; Important to try new and different things in life; Important to do what is told and follow rules; Important to understand different people; Important to be humble and modest, not draw attention; Important to have a good time; Important to make own decisions and be free; Important to help people and care for others well-being; Important to be successful and that people recognize achievements; Important that government is strong and ensures safety; Important to seek adventures and have an exciting life; Important to behave properly; Important to get respect from others; Important to be loyal to friends and devote to people close; Important to care for nature and environment; Important to follow traditions and customs; Important to seek fun and things that give pleasure

reference category. Column 1 focuses on overall political trust with only country and ESS wave dummies; controls for demographics, economic situation, values, and satisfaction with services are added in the columns 1–5. Without controls, all four dummy variables are negative and statistically significant. The results without controls (column 1) show that living in a farm or home in the countryside is associated with a -0.3 point lower average trust in government. When including all controls this is much lower – only -0.16, but still statistically significant. In terms of magnitude, this is roughly the same as the gender difference in the same variable. This result remains in columns 2–5 as we include variables sequentially, with geographical variation in each successive model, albeit declining in magnitude.

We also note that in terms of adding to the fit of the regression, both, demographic controls and individual economic situation add little explanatory power; although values seem relatively important. These findings suggest limited support for H1, and some support for H4. Personal economic standing is therefore unlikely to be driving declining trust in rural areas, whereas personal values seem to partially explain the increasing divide.

By contrast, the largest jump in the pseudo R^2 by far is when Satisfaction variables are included in column 5. While much of the difference in trust between urban and rural Europe is driven by composition and individual values, not all of it is. Satisfaction with public services and the economy explain a relatively large proportion of the variance. This suggests that quality of government is an important factor underpinning trust in government, and provides support for H3. Additionally, because we control for individual income, the relatively higher rural economic dissatisfaction suggests a degree of support for H2's geotropic account.

Table 1. Political trust by geographical location - Ordinal Logit results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Suburbs / outskirts of big city	-0.0699***	-0.0272	-0.0610***	-0.0342*	-0.0524**	0.0107
	(0.0203)	(0.0203)	(0.0203)	(0.0205)	(0.0204)	(0.0351)
Town or small city	-0.186***	-0.110***	-0.118***	-0.0574***	-0.0829***	-0.104***
	(0.0163)	(0.0164)	(0.0164)	(0.0166)	(0.0165)	(0.0288)
Country village	-0.270***	-0.157***	-0.172***	-0.0978***	-0.158***	-0.131***
	(0.0164)	(0.0167)	(0.0167)	(0.0169)	(0.0169)	(0.0294)
Farm or home in countryside	-0.338***	-0.191***	-0.198***	-0.0914***	-0.145***	-0.158***
	(0.0246)	(0.0249)	(0.0250)	(0.0248)	(0.0247)	(0.0433)
Country	X	X	X	X	X	X
ESS Wave	X	X	X	X	X	X
Demographics		X	X	X	X	X
Economic situation			X	X	X	X
Values				X	X	X
Satisfaction					X	X
Perceived unemployment						X
Obs.	125,164	125,164	125,164	125,164	125,164	42,199
Pseudo R^2	0.0216	0.0246	0.0267	0.0394	0.0730	0.0713

Dependent variable = composition measure of political trust. Reference category: Big city. Controls are for Age, Foreign Birthplace, Ethnic Minority, Gender, 5 Education dummies, unemployed, employed, retired, income decile, values, country dummies, and ESS year. Robust standard errors included. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Source: European Social Survey rounds 5–8.

We make one additional check of these results. One question – "Of every 100 people of working age how many are unemployed and looking for work" – provides a measure of perceived unemployment, which may provide an alternative environmental control, in addition

to the variable which we already include on satisfaction with the national economy. Unfortunately, this is only available for the 2008 and 2016 waves. We include this variable in column 6, which includes it alongside all other variables included in column 5. This leads to relatively little change in the results. Controlling for perceived unemployment, there is no difference between big cities and suburbs. But towns, country villages, and farm or home in the countryside remain significantly less trusting of government. This aspect of our results therefore undermines the geotropic account of H2.

We also consider which types of political trust differ geographically in table 2, which consists of our fullest regression model (table 1, column 5) for each of seven sub-categories of trust. There is evidence of an urban-rural split for six of these (parliament, legal system, politicians, political parties, the European parliament, and the United Nations). There is little geographical variation in trust in the police, however. This overall implies that this is a generally lower faith in political institutions, rather than a more specific one with any particular type.

Table 2. Geography and political trust subcategories - Ordinal Logit results

Trust in:	(1) Country's parliament	(2) Legal system	(3) Police	(4) Politicians	(5) Political parties	(6) European Parliament	(7) United Nations
Suburbs / outskirts of big city	0.00268	-0.0885***	-0.0292	-0.0312	-0.0493**	-0.0585***	-0.0195
	(0.0211)	(0.0206)	(0.0205)	(0.0207)	(0.0208)	(0.0206)	(0.0207)
Town or small city	-0.0930***	-0.0826***	0.0146	-0.0393**	-0.0656***	-0.0953***	-0.0456***
	(0.0167)	(0.0165)	(0.0166)	(0.0167)	(0.0167)	(0.0168)	(0.0167)
Country village	-0.151***	-0.136***	0.00123	-0.0811***	-0.114***	-0.193***	-0.0946***
	(0.0170)	(0.0169)	(0.0169)	(0.0171)	(0.0172)	(0.0172)	(0.0170)
Farm or home in countryside	-0.158***	-0.131***	0.0269	-0.0804***	-0.0799***	-0.194***	-0.0654***
	(0.0251)	(0.0249)	(0.0252)	(0.0252)	(0.0251)	(0.0248)	(0.0249)
Controls	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full
Observations	125,166	125,166	125,166	125,165	125,166	125,165	125,166
Pseudo R2	0.105	0.0987	0.0718	0.107	0.102	0.0612	0.0543

Reference category: Big city. Controls are for Age, Foreign Birthplace, Ethnic Minority, Gender, 5 Education dummies, unemployed, employed, retired, income decile, values, country dummies, and ESS year. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

We conduct two robustness tests (both reported in appendix A2). The first is to estimate this result as a multilevel model. We are concerned about the problems of multilevel models as they are unreliable with too few groups (Bryan & Jenkins, 2016), but column 1 shows that using a multilevel model makes little difference to our results. Another concern is that our use of self-reported location variables means we are capturing perceived rather than actual variation. To address this, we run our basic regression using – where NUTS2 is given in the ESS – an indicator of NUTS2 population density. We also include a measure of local unemployment at this stage, to capture concerns that this will be biasing our results. The results show that population density is positively associated with political trust.

Trust in government in rural areas over time

We next consider whether these trends have been changing over time. We do this by interacting variables for ESS waves with a geographical dummy, but – for simplicity – we use a simple binary between those living in a country village or farm / home in the countryside and those in the other categories. To present our results clearly and with confidence intervals, we present this as a plots with confidence intervals in figure 3. In these interval plots, dots represent the beta coefficient, and lines give 95% confidence intervals. If these do not pass through the line marking 0 we can be relatively confident the results are not driven by chance. As with table 1, we include controls sequentially – starting with country and ESS dummies, introducing demographics, economics, values, and finally satisfaction sequentially.

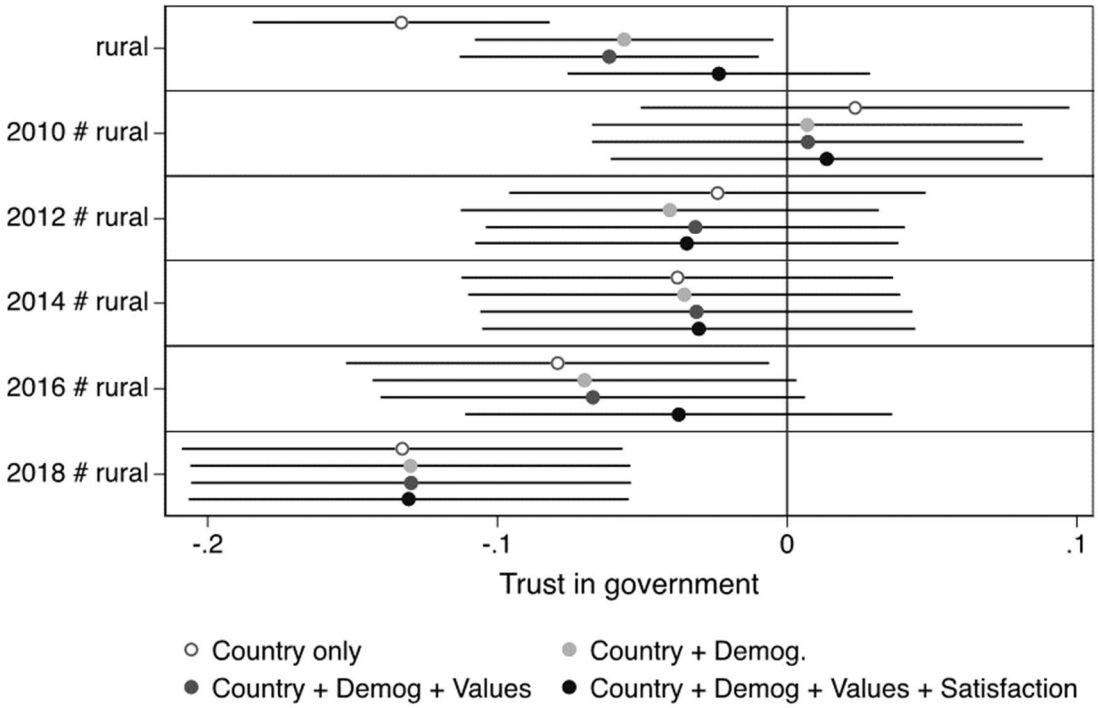

Figure 3. Coefficient plots: Interactions between ESS round and rurality

Note: Each line presents the interactions between each ESS round and rural residence in an ordinal logit regression where the dependent variable is the composite indicator of trust in government. Each coefficient is presented with four model specifications, with county dummies only, with country dummies along with controls for demographics and income (as in table 2), with country dummies, demographics, income and personal values. 95% Confidence intervals given by line either side of beta estimate. Source: European Social Survey rounds 5–8.

The results show a trend of growing distrust in government in rural areas. The rural variable, when not interacted with the time trend, is significant in three regressions – with no controls, demographic controls, as well as with demographic and value controls. Much of the effect, but by no means all, is driven by satisfaction with healthcare, education, and the economy. There is some variation of the time trend's statistical significance in all but the final column, but this is clearest in 2016, where it becomes statistically significant without controls, and 2018, where it is significant in all models.

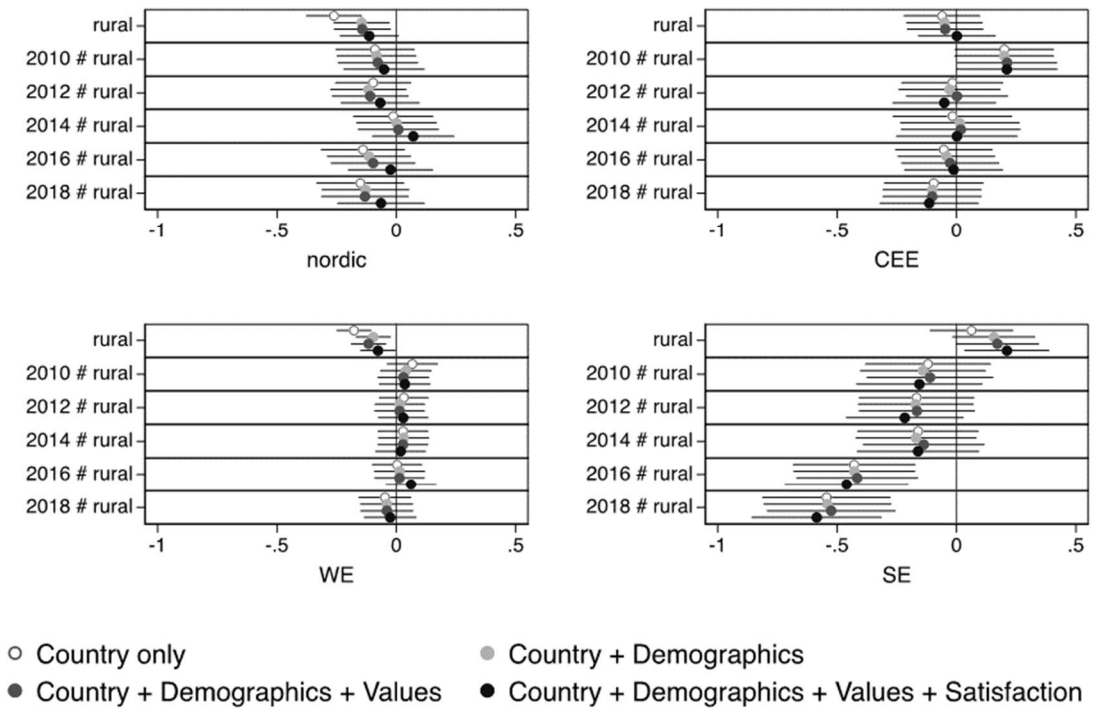

Figure 4. Coefficient plots: Interactions between ESS round and rurality, by country type

Note: Each graph gives the coefficients of the interaction between ESS round and rurality in an ordinal logit regression where the dependent variable is the composite indicator of trust in government. Each coefficient is presented with four model specifications, with county dummies only, with country dummies along with controls for demographics and income and with country dummies, demographics, income and personal values, and including satisfaction with services. 95% Confidence intervals given by line either side of beta estimate. Source: European Social Survey rounds 5–8.

To see if this relationship holds across all different parts of Europe, we also consider if these trends differ across four different regions (Nordics; Western Europe; Southern Europe; Central and Eastern Europe). The division into regions is not just geographic but takes into account their related political and social environments and experiences of the past (Kołczyńska et al., 2020). Our regression results (Table A3) show that a significant urban-rural difference in political trust can be observed in each of the four groups supporting our general finding of an urban-rural difference in political trust. In addition, as can be seen in figure 4, rural places show a downward trajectory in each of the four groups; however the overall trend is largely driven

by rural places in Southern European countries (Spain and Portugal). In short, we show that the urban-rural division exists for most of Europe, but the divergence exists only for Southern Europe.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite widespread concern about political trust in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, there is little analysis of its geography. This paper has two central findings. First of all, the more rural the self-reported residence of the respondent, the lower their trust in government. This difference is only partially explained by the personal values of the respondents. Second, and perhaps of greater concern, we also report that this difference is increasing over time. It has reached a stage where, for the first time since 2008, there are clear and statistically significant differences between rural and urban areas in the extent to which their residents trust government; these trends being driven largely by Spain and Portugal. Third, we show that the most important determinant of the difference is satisfaction with healthcare, education, and the economy, although this do not account for the full trend. Given that we control for individual educational and economic outcomes, we interpret this as a contextual effect.

The significance of our results is that they tell us why rural areas are losing faith; we test hypotheses that suggest income and values affect trust and find little or no support for them. Instead, our results suggest that rural areas are becoming less trusting of the government because they perceive worse education, worse health, and worse economies than urban areas. In this respect, our results show a trend similar to that portrayed by Rodríguez-Pose (2018) in his work on the places that don't matter. Because we control for actual individual income and employment, our economic effect, at least, is contextual: it is not the personal effect which matters, but the effect on the local area. The effect we observe coming from healthcare and education is more likely to be the result of personal experience than the economy; this is both because we control for individual income and because, as Reeves and Gimpel (2012) observe, an individual does not experience *national* economic conditions but does experience *local* economic conditions. These results overall indicate an apparent dissatisfaction in rural areas which is leading to them losing faith in the urban focused growth model pursued in many countries (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

We believe it is no coincidence that these trends have worsened since the global financial crisis began in 2008. The aftermath of the most significant economic downturn in nearly a century saw the introduction of austerity measures that, at times, created greater urban/rural disparities. This is particularly the case in Southern European countries, such as Spain and Portugal, that were subjected to expenditure control that led to divestments in rural projects and infrastructure; here, austerity policies have resulted in rural dwellers feeling disconnected to urban processes and with reduced access to key services (Camarero & Olivia, 2019). Indeed, our results show that the downward trend in political trust in rural areas is particularly pronounced in Southern European countries. Yet, even in countries such as the United Kingdom, where urban areas experienced the deepest cuts, austerity compounded pre-existing problems of rural poverty (May et al., 2020).

These results open up three key avenues for research. Firstly, we use indicators of urban-rural but do not control for wide differences between these categories: a rich rural area in affluent Southern Germany would show up the same as a deprived part of South Wales. More detail would help here. Future work may also want to focus on the extent to which this divergence of trust in shaping political change.

Second, political scientists should consider if rurality plays a unique role in what Ford and Jennings (2020) identify as '[t]he reawakening of centre-periphery conflicts' between prosperous major cities and 'declining hinterlands'. Within the United Kingdom, for example, scholarship in this area to date has typically focussed on post-industrial regions such as Barking and Dagenham (Gest, 2016), the North of England (Carreras, 2019), and traditional manufacturing areas (Colantone and Stanig, 2018). Because the countryside is not at the forefront of these analyses, it is unclear whether common causative factors underpin the centre-periphery conflict as it is manifested in post-industrial regions and rural areas.

Finally, policy makers should focus on how rural trust can be rebuilt. Here, attention should concentrate on ascertaining which services are particularly salient drivers of trust, and improving the quality of those services. This article has suggested that healthcare and education assume a prominent role in rural dissatisfaction; other research (Van Ryzin et al., 2004) suggests that police and transport play an outsized part in citizen (dis)satisfaction. Trust is hard won and easily lost; a failure to take timely action to stem rural dissatisfaction is likely to further erode trust and make remedial action increasingly onerous.

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Appendices

Table A1. Variables and urban rural differences

Domain	Variable	Urban (mean)	Rural (mean)	T-test
Trust	Political trust	4.92	4.82	***
	Trust in country's parliament	4.76	4.60	***
	Trust in the legal system	5.54	5.34	***
	Trust in the polices	6.47	6.48	
	Trust in politicians	3.80	3.76	**
	Trust in political parties	3.80	3.73	***
	Trust in European Parliament	4.54	4.35	***
	Trust in the UN	5.47	5.32	***
Demographic	Age	48.28	50.00	***
	Born overseas	0.12	0.06	***
	Ethnic minority	0.06	0.03	***
	Female	0.52	0.50	***
	Education 1 (Low)	0.00	0.00	
	Education 2	0.08	0.11	***
	Education 3	0.13	0.17	***
	Education 4	0.37	0.40	***
	Education 5	0.06	0.06	**
	Education 6 (high)	0.36	0.26	***
Economic	Unemployed	0.06	0.05	***
	Employed	0.54	0.53	***
	Retired	0.23	0.24	***
	Income relative to nation (low)	0.10	0.10	
	Income 3	0.10	0.11	
	Income 4	0.11	0.12	***
	Income 5	0.11	0.11	**
	Income 6	0.10	0.11	***
	Income 7	0.10	0.11	***
	Income 8	0.10	0.10	
	Income 9	0.09	0.09	***
	Income 10	0.10	0.07	***
Value	Gov should reduce difference in income	2.18	2.14	***
	Gays and lesbians free to live life	1.92	2.00	***
	Immigration bad or good for economy	5.28	4.95	***
	Important to think new ideas and being creative	2.53	2.53	
	Important to be rich, have money and expensive things	4.24	4.34	***

	Important that people are treated equally	2.03	2.07	***
	Important to show abilities and be admired	3.27	3.32	***
	Important to live in secure and safe surroundings	2.46	2.41	***
	Important to try new and different things in life	2.92	2.98	***
	Important to do what is told and follow rules	3.27	3.20	***
	Important to understand different people	2.27	2.33	***
	Important to be humble and modest, not draw attention	2.72	2.59	***
	Important to have a good time	2.85	2.91	***
	Important to make own decisions and be free	2.13	2.17	***
	Important to help people and care for others well-being	2.14	2.11	***
	Important to be successful	3.28	3.35	***
	Important that government is strong and ensures safety	2.40	2.41	
	Important to seek adventures and have an exciting life	3.86	3.97	***
	Important to behave properly	2.70	2.64	***
	Important to get respect from others	3.32	3.31	
	Important to be loyal to friends and devote to people close	1.87	1.88	***
	Important to care for nature and environment	2.12	2.07	***
	Important to follow traditions and customs	2.90	2.73	***
	Important to seek fun and things that give pleasure	2.97	2.97	
Satisfaction	How satisfied with present state of economy in country	4.85	4.89	**
	State of education in country nowadays	5.82	6.01	***
	State of health services in country nowadays	5.71	5.78	***
	Of every 100 working age how many unemployed and looking for work	4.75	4.80	*

Table A2. Robustness to alternative specifications

	(1)	(2)
Method	Multilevel model	NUTS2 population density
Population density (ln)		0.0195***
		(0.00661)
Suburbs / outskirts of big city	-0.0427***	
	-0.0127	
Town or small city	-0.0642***	
	-0.0239	
Country village	-0.114***	
	-0.0292	
Farm or home in countryside	-0.108**	
	-0.0421	
Observations	125164	85403
Pseudo R-squared		0.0779
Controls	Full	Full

Dependent variable = composition measure of political trust. Reference category: Big city. Controls are for Age, Foreign Birthplace, Ethnic Minority, Gender, 5 Education dummies, unemployed, employed, retired, income decile, values, country dummies, and ESS year. Robust standard errors included. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Source: European Social Survey rounds 5–8; Eurostat.

We defined a new variable nuts2 by extracting information from the regional variable cregion about the Nuts level 2 code for all observations with regional codes that were either Nuts level 2 or Nuts level 3 codes. We converted the outdated Nuts 2013 codes used in ESS rounds 5-7 (2010, 2012, 2014) to the current standard Nuts 2016 codes according to official guidelines to changes published by Eurostat[4]. Due to lack of information one Nuts level 2 region in Poland was excluded from the analysis (NUTS 2013: PL12) as it was split into two regions. Regional (contextual) data about population density and unemployment rates (in %) for the working age population at Nuts Level 2 from Eurostat were merged with the ESS dataset based on Nuts 2 level. ESS round 4 (2008) was excluded from the analysis as the regional information was largely missing from the ESS data. Respondents whose regional identifiers are too crude (i.e. Nuts level 1 or less) were excluded as well.

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/345175/629341/NUTS2013-NUTS2016.xlsx

Table A3. Rural location and different types of trust in government, by country groups – Ordinal Logit Results

Dependent variable:	Country's parliament	Legal system	Police	Politicians	Political parties	European Parliament	United Nations
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Nordic							
Rural	-0.153***	-0.134***	-0.0733***	-0.0734***	-0.0968***	-0.198***	-0.0435
	(0.0266)	(0.0270)	(0.0273)	(0.0271)	(0.0269)	(0.0268)	(0.0269)
Observations	23,984	23,984	23,984	23,984	23,984	23,984	23,984
	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
Central and Eastern							
Rural	-0.0539*	-0.0120	0.0304	-0.0229	-0.0556*	-0.106***	-0.0763**
	(0.0308)	(0.0314)	(0.0313)	(0.0314)	(0.0316)	(0.0305)	(0.0308)
	18,694	18,694	18,694	18,694	18,694	18,694	18,694
	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)	(19)	(20)	(21)
Western Europe							
Rural	-0.104***	-0.0768***	0.0409**	-0.0322*	-0.0457***	-0.130***	-0.0722***
	(0.0165)	(0.0168)	(0.0168)	(0.0166)	(0.0165)	(0.0167)	(0.0166)
Observations	61,571	61,571	61,571	61,571	61,571	61,571	61,571
	(22)	(23)	(24)	(25)	(26)	(27)	(28)
Southern Europe Rural	-0.107***	-0.0816**	-0.0575	-0.141***	-0.107**	-0.0737*	-0.0579
	(0.0409)	(0.0404)	(0.0400)	(0.0429)	(0.0422)	(0.0410)	(0.0407)
Observations	10,742	10,742	10,742	10,742	10,742	10,742	10,742

Each column gives the coefficient for the rural dummy variable in a regression equation as in table 2, but with the sample split by regional grouping. Western Europe is Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, France, UK, Ireland, the Netherlands. Eastern Europe: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary. Southern Europe: Portugal and Spain. Nordic: Finland, Norway, Sweden. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1