

The psychological basis of the urban–rural divide: Evidence from Germany

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, scholarly attention to the political relevance of “place” has increased, especially regarding the far right and in the contexts of Europe and the United States. Within the field, the urban-rural divide is of particular interest. While rural areas often display more right-leaning attitudes than urban ones, it remains uncertain whether these differences constitute a full-fledged cleavage, as this would require not just socio-structural conflict and political mobilisation but also a collective identity. Using Germany as a case study, this article investigates the psychological underpinnings of the urban–rural divide and its intersection with the division between the eastern and the western regions of Germany. The findings reveal a strong asymmetry: rural residents express stronger place-based identification and perceive greater conflict than urban citizens. In addition, we find that exclusively eastern identities are more prevalent than exclusively western ones, and that the urban–rural and the East–West cleavages operate independently. These results underscore the importance of analysing multiple geographic cleavages jointly and contribute new insights into the emotional and perceptual foundations of spatial divides in Germany.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade or so, interest in the potential effects of “place” on political attitudes and behaviour has grown considerably, particularly where the far right is concerned (see e.g., Arzheimer and Bernemann, 2024, for an overview). As part of this broader development, there has also been a resurgence in research that specifically studies the importance of the urban-rural divide for politics in Europe and the US.

However, while there is widespread agreement that many rural areas are more right-leaning than their urban counterparts and vote accordingly, it is far from certain that these differences reflect a fully-fledged urban-rural “cleavage”. Common definitions of what constitutes a cleavage stipulate, at a minimum, the existence of a socio-structural conflict between two or more groups, the politicisation of this conflict by parties and other organisations, and an identity component that undergirds this configuration (see e.g., Bartolini et al., 2011).

There can be little doubt that distributional conflicts between urban and rural areas exist in most countries, but their respective denizens do not necessarily form homogeneous groups with clear-cut interests. Similarly, parties may appeal primarily to urban or to rural interests, but usually this is just one of many concerns that they aim to represent. Conversely, parties that focus on a purely rural or agrarian agenda have

become a rarity, with the Dutch BBB (see e.g., Siegmann, 2024) as a notable exception. Most importantly, there is only very limited evidence of an identity component to the urban-rural divide (Breitenstein et al., 2025). While place-based resentment exists, it is not at all clear that citizens identify primarily as rural or urban, and where such identities exist, they seem to be asymmetric (Borwein and Lucas, 2023; Claassen et al., 2025). We therefore seek to answer the question of *what the psychological underpinnings of the urban-rural divide are and how they relate to competing territorial lines of conflict*, in a comprehensive manner.

Empirically, we do this by analysing data from Germany, which presents a particularly apt and interesting case for several reasons. First, while most Germans live in urban or suburban areas, Germany features vast rural tracts whose populations are shrinking and ageing. Although constitutionally enshrined distributional mechanisms and a well-developed transport system mitigate the economic consequences for rural populations, this has led to a widespread sense of rural decline, just as in many other large European countries.

Second, German politics is *also* shaped by an additional, largely orthogonal, territorial division between residents of the former Federal Republic of Germany and those of the post-communist East. While Germany’s postwar history of partition and eventual reunification is almost unique, such centre-periphery cleavages (Lipset et al., 1967) are

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common in Europe. We thus believe that Germany is a typical case, and that our findings may generalise to other European countries.

Our data were collected during a period when the country was governed by a centre-left coalition with a distinct urban slant, and while the radical right, which had always been stronger in East Germany, was also making inroads in the countryside. These factors should activate the cleavages if they are still politically meaningful for ordinary citizens, increasing our chances to uncover their psychological basis.

We study the psychological underpinnings of the urban-rural divide in two ways: first, we analyse how residence shapes place-based identities and how those identities relate to party choices. Second, we investigate whether our respondents perceive conflicts between rural and urban areas. In addition, we repeat these analyses for identification with East and West Germany, respectively.

We find a strong asymmetry in both urban/rural identity and perceived urban-rural conflict: people living in rural areas display higher levels of place-based identification and conflict perception than their urban counterparts. Similarly, regional identities are much more prevalent in the eastern states than in the West. Our findings also suggest that the two territorial conflicts do not interact but operate independently of each other at the psychological level.

Our results thus contribute to the literature in three ways: First, and most importantly, in countries that are shaped by several geographic cleavage lines, a joint analysis of them is necessary to ascertain whether they cross-cut or reinforce each other. Second, the psychological bases of the urban-rural divide remain understudied even today. Apart from the vast literature on rural resentment, relatively little is known about how rural and urban dwellers perceive the divide. Our paper represents a first step toward closing this gap. Third, we provide further evidence for the association between the urban-rural divide and party vote.

2. Theory and case selection

2.1. The meaning and political relevance of the urban-rural divide

The urban-rural divide is most often discussed in the context of electoral behaviour, where the majority of studies find that rural areas are more right-leaning than urban areas (Huijsmans and Rodden, 2025; Haffert and Mitteregger, 2023; Hartevelde et al., 2025; Johnson and Scala, 2021; Johnston et al., 2020; Förtner et al., 2021). There is a plethora of potential explanations for this phenomenon that can be roughly divided into two broad classes (see also Arzheimer and Bernemann, 2024). *Compositional* accounts point out that socio-demographic groups which tend to hold more right-wing views, e.g., male, older, less educated and working class voters, are often over-represented in the rural populace (Arzheimer and Bernemann, 2024, 171-172). At least a portion of the urban-rural divide may therefore simply result from the unequal spatial distribution of these socio-demographic characteristics, which in turn can be thought of as proxies for differences in socialisation, life experiences, and interests. Importantly, such distributional differences are by no means random, but result from demographic and cultural (self-)sorting (Maxwell, 2019).

Contextual effects, on the other hand, refer to differences in living conditions that may become politically relevant. Prominent factors discussed in the literature include economic deprivation (Bourdin and Taii, 2022; Bowyer, 2008; Dorn et al., 2020; Faggian et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), low GDP growth (Di Matteo and Mariotti, 2021; Dijkstra et al., 2020), the share of foreigners (Fitzgerald and Lawrence, 2011), but also the demographic composition of the populace itself and here specifically its age and gender structure (Dancygier et al., 2024; Faggian et al., 2021; Di Matteo and Mariotti, 2021; Franz et al., 2018).

Either way, these processes result in characteristic differences in both place-related and more general political attitudes between urban and rural areas. These include feelings of relative deprivation and place resentment (Borwein and Lucas, 2023; Cramer, 2016; Munis, 2021), populist attitudes (Hartevelde et al., 2022; Huijsmans, 2023) and cosmopolitan attitudes (Huijsmans et al., 2021; Kaufman, 2021; Johnson

and Scala, 2021, 2022; Brown et al., 2024; Fitzgerald and Lawrence, 2011), as well as perceptions of political efficacy (García Del Horno et al., 2024; Carreras and Bowler, 2019).

Research into urban-rural differences has flourished over the last decade or so, but more recently, doubts have grown about their political relevance. For example, Kaufman (2021) does not find evidence of a growing ideological divide between rural and urban areas in the US over the 2010–2014 period. Similarly, Hartevelde et al. (2025, 11) conclude that there is “no evidence for a growing urban rural gap in vote preferences” in the Netherlands (see also Huijsmans and Rodden, 2025). In line with this, Hesstvedt and Saglie (2025) point out that there is no general urban-rural divide in Norway, but that divides emerge depending on the issue at hand.

Most importantly, Vigna (2024) finds that the differences in satisfaction with democracy, one of the main factors attributed to the divide, are substantively small in 19 European countries that she studies over a span of nearly two decades. Conversely, socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents themselves and cross-country differences exert much stronger influences on individual satisfaction with democracy than urban-rural differences *within* countries.

Besides these concerns about the substantive implications of the urban-rural split, there are also more fundamental doubts about how the social groups at the heart of the divide perceive the conflict and themselves. Even in Spain, a country where the divide has recently been politicised, Breitenstein et al. (2025) find only scarce evidence for the existence of a fully formed rural (or urban) “consciousness” (Cramer, 2016).

Such widely held social identities, however, have been central to all modern analyses of cleavage politics ever since Bartolini and Mair’s (1990) seminal reformulation of Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) original concept (see e.g., Bartolini et al., 2011; Ford and Jennings, 2020; Bornschieer et al., 2021). As Bartolini and Mair (1990, 215) argue, the joint presence of three elements sets genuine cleavages apart from ordinary political conflicts or even long-term divisions: a structural inequality that creates distinct social groups; a set of “interactions, institutions, and organisations, such as political parties” grouped around that conflict; and, fundamentally, a “set of values and beliefs which provides a sense of identity ... the self-consciousness of the social group(s) involved”.

That the groups involved in a socio-structural conflict develop such identities cannot be taken for granted: recent work (Bornschieer et al., 2021; Westheuser and Zollinger, 2025) has rightfully focused on bottom-up and top-down processes of *identity construction* through which social divisions become ripe for politicisation. Moreover, group identities need not develop on both sides of the divide, or if they do, not to the same degree or salience.

Recent research suggests that identities associated with the urban-rural divide, if they exist at all, are indeed structured in such a lopsided fashion. In a highly influential contribution, which is based on large-scale Canadian surveys, Borwein and Lucas (2023) develop a nuanced understanding of urban-rural relationships. They find that the notion of a stark, symmetric, identity-based conflict between citizens from rural and urban areas does not hold in real life: while it is true that rural citizens do regard urban dwellers as their social outgroup, urban citizens do not reciprocate this perception of rural people.

This account appears quite plausible, especially considering that urban citizens often perceive rural areas as disadvantaged (Dawkins et al., 2024), compared to towns and cities. They may even empathise with country dwellers, though they do not accept the blame for rural grievances. These findings are echoed in subsequent work by Hegewald and Schraff (2025) and Zumbrunn (2025), who show that affective polarisation between rural and urban dwellers is highly asymmetric, with the rural group being much more polarised toward their urban compatriots than vice versa.

In our view, such asymmetry is an important feature of the urban-rural divide but does not preclude the conflict from being classified as a

proper cleavage. On the contrary: it was already implied by Bartolini and Mair (note the parenthetical use of plural “s” in the quote above) and chimes with the more general observation that the respective collective identity may be much less relevant and salient for the dominant group in a given conflict (Westheuser and Zollinger, 2025, 118–119), up to the point where members of the privileged group deny the existence of the conflict (Haffert et al., 2024).

In sum, rural and urban identities exist in several (West European) countries, but the content and salience of these identities remain unclear, and little is known about whether and how citizens perceive conflicts between the two spheres.

We do, however, know that social identities and perceptions are not just a cultural reflection of economic and social conditions. They also are, at least in part, the result of politicisation and framing by partisan actors (see e.g., Ferrari, 2022; Zollinger, 2024; Westheuser and Zollinger, 2025). For example, Auerbach et al. (2024) argue that an association of rural identities with the far right is entirely dependent on how parties frame rural issues: parties that champion rural concerns *without* adopting far-right stances can succeed electorally, too. We therefore expect that the strength and salience of urban/rural identities will be affected by allegiances to political parties.

Much of the recent debate about such party-cue effects has been informed by research into how party identification shapes other identities and policy preferences within the context of a highly polarised US two-party system (see e.g., Barber and Pope, 2019). European party systems, on the other hand, although recently polarising (Emanuele and Marino, 2024), have witnessed a secular dealignment (Garzia et al., 2022) and an accompanying increase in volatility (Chiaramonte and Emanuele, 2017) over the past four or five decades.

In the empirical analysis we will therefore include current voting intentions as a predictor of territorial identities and their salience. While we would like to contrast and compare our findings with alternative models that instead include party identification, no suitable measures were collected for our dataset.

Either way, we are well aware that the respective coefficients will reflect not just the effects of voters’ political leanings on their identities, but also, conversely, the attraction that different parties exert on people who identify in a certain way. Both effects cannot be separated in a cross-sectional design, while a valid randomisation of territorial identities is next to impossible.

A final complication arises because, as we already alluded to above, the urban-rural divide does not fully exhaust the potential for territorial conflict. In their landmark contribution, Lipset et al. (1967, 14) famously distinguish between *two* prototypical territorial cleavages: the urban-rural one, which they associate with the industrial revolution and the diverging interests of the primary and secondary economy, and the centre-periphery one, which they link to the national revolutions and the conflict between the dominant political cultural forces and their counterparts in the “ethnically, linguistically, or religiously distinct ... provinces”. Even if some culturally peripheral areas (in countries where such a conflict is salient) may *also* be rural, this does not have to be the case, as the importance of urban centres for regionalist movements in the Basque Country, Catalonia, or Scotland illustrates.

As with the urban-rural divide, the rise of the radical right has led to renewed scholarly interest in centre-periphery conflicts. While radical right mobilisation in the 1980s and 1990s was sometimes directly linked to the historical struggles that Lipset and Rokkan had in mind (e.g., in the case of the early Lega movement in Italy or the Vlaams Blok/Belang in Flanders; see Ziblatt et al. (2024) for an application to contemporary mobilisation), current research has shifted its focus to cultural-territorial conflicts at large—conflicts that are nonetheless often entwined with disputes over the distribution of material resources (see e.g., Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Although the recent interest in the spatial patterns of radical right mobilisation has turned “rural and peripheral” into a convenient shorthand for those areas where these parties are particularly successful, the

two territorial dimensions of political conflict are analytically distinct and not the exclusive domain of the radical right. Moreover, whether and in what ways they interact is an empirical question. As a corollary, we argue that any analysis of urban/rural identities must account for other salient territorial identities, a point that we take up in the next section.

2.2. Case selection and hypotheses

We have chosen to study the psychological dimension of the urban-rural divide in Germany, which presents a particularly interesting example of a large European state but also constitutes a “hard case” for studying the urban-rural divide. On the one hand, the country has ample potential for regional disparities due to its size. On the other, its strong redistributive mechanisms and a constitutional mandate to harmonise living conditions across the nation should curb demand for territorial politics and make supply-side rhetoric aimed at politicising urban/rural identities somewhat implausible (Arzheimer and Bernemann, 2024, 168).

Accordingly, an authoritative treatise on the politicisation of social structure in post-war Germany (Pappi et al., 2002) does not even mention the urban-rural cleavage (which was highly politicised before the Second World War) and instead focuses entirely on the labour-capital and the state-church cleavages, which dominated (West) German post-war politics.

After unification, these two have been partly eclipsed by a centre-periphery conflict between the territory of the former GDR and the old West that appeared to be mostly orthogonal to the urban-rural divide. At first glance, this may seem like yet another reason to expect relatively weak and asymmetric urban/rural identifications and conflict perceptions. However, against the backdrop of the renewed interest in rural politics and rural populism, some authors have argued that the urban-rural divide could be reinforced by the conflict between easterners and westerners (see e.g., Deppisch et al., 2022).

This second territorial divide is apparent in both voting behaviour and political attitudes. The left-wing party Die Linke (The Left) and its predecessors PDS and WASG have been much more successful in elections in the eastern parts of the country (Hough et al., 2007). In addition, electoral turnout has always been substantially lower and electoral volatility has been much higher in these parts as well (Mannewitz, 2017). Voters in East Germany are also more disenchanting with politics and are less satisfied with the way democracy works in Germany (Pickel and Pickel, 2022).

The East-West divide is often linked to differing processes of political socialisation and thus, differing political cultures (Pickel and Pickel, 2022). Together with the post-unification experiences of comparatively worse economic conditions and extreme levels of out-migration (Höhne et al., 2025), it has given rise to a distinct social identity (Pickel and Pickel, 2022, 25). Following social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979), we expect that the social identification with the East is more salient than an identification for West Germans with the West, as West Germans likely do not perceive themselves to be a disadvantaged group and so lack a salient social outgroup. This would be akin to the asymmetry in urban/rural identities described by Borwein and Lucas (2023).

The East-West divide is also associated with the rise of the radical right-wing populist “Alternative for Germany” (AfD). While not an eastern party *per se*, the AfD regularly adapts their regional campaigns to capitalise from eastern resentment and eastern identities and has received substantially higher levels of support in the eastern states from the beginning (Arzheimer and Weiskircher, 2023). This echoes previous successes of right-wing extremist parties in the 1990s in the East and points to the emergence of an eastern far-right sub-culture after unification (Schulte-Cloos, 2022).

Since 2017, the AfD has *also* claimed that they represent “rural people and farmers, mentioned several times throughout the manifesto” (Heinisch and Werner, 2019, 483). Chiming with the concept of a

right-wing populist “heartland” (Taggart, 1995, 37), they have linked this claim to a number of substantive policies, which in turn align with their opposition to renewable energies and electric cars, the green transition, vegetarianism and veganism and a host of other issues that they frame as “ideology”. More recently, the AfD has also embraced and even infiltrated the radical farmer protests that flared up in the winter of 2023/24 (Nagel et al., 2025). These developments represent a considerable change on the supply side of German politics.

However, even if the party is often more successful in rural areas than in cities, the AfD cannot afford to neglect its urban constituencies. Moreover, the traditional centre-right parties, particularly the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), have a better and much older claim to represent rural communities, as they are closely intertwined with farmers’ and other rural associations and have controlled the federal department of agriculture for most of the post-war period (see also Auerbach et al. 2024).

To conclude, our hypotheses can be summarised as follows:

- H1 We expect that place-based identifications are more salient, and that perceptions of conflicts between the two spheres are more pronounced among citizens from rural areas than among those from urban areas.
- H2 We expect that identifications and perceptions linked to the East-West divide are generally more important than those relating to the urban-rural divide.
- H3 Analogously to H1, we expect that these attitudes are more salient for Easterners.
- H4 We expect that identifications and conflict perceptions are linked to vote choice.

3. Method

3.1. Dataset and sample

We use data from an online survey of German respondents conducted between November 18 and December 5 2022. The study was specifically designed to investigate the urban-rural divide in politics, and thus oversampled respondents from rural areas. In addition to the quota for rural and urban locations, quotas for age, gender, and education were used in the sampling process. The dataset consists of 4198 respondents. We weight our analyses to correct for possible imbalances in the data.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Independent variables

Measuring place

We follow Munis’s (2022) approach in measuring rural/urban location with a question about subjective perceptions. Respondents were asked to rate their place of living on a six-point scale ranging from “Very urban” (1) to “Very rural” (6). For the purpose of the analysis, answers were dichotomised. This subjective measure is better suited to our research question than objective indicators such as population density, as we are interested in how our respondents *perceive* the urban-rural divide and their relationship to it. Doing so results in a balanced sample, with 51 percent of respondents saying that they live in a rural area (see Table 2).

To ascertain whether the urban-rural and the East-West divides reinforce each other, we also include respondents’ location within Germany’s macro-regions in our models. This variable (1 = East Germany, 0 = West Germany) is unambiguous for 15 states. In the formerly divided city-state of Berlin, we use respondents’ postcodes for a spatially fine-grained operationalisation. One should, however, note that respondents interviewed in the West may well have grown up in the East, and vice versa.

Vote choice

Because we are interested in how perceptions of territorial divides are structured along party lines, we also control for vote choice. This

Table 1

Place-based identity.

Item	Question wording
1	The term [ingroup] resident is a good description of how I see myself.
2	Being a/an [ingroup] resident is very important to me.
3	When I meet people who live in [ingroup] areas, I feel connected.
4	I have similar values to other people living in [ingroup] areas.
5	I have a lot in common with other people living in [ingroup] areas.

Note: Ingroup refers to “rural” or “urban”, respectively.

was operationalised using the standard question in German electoral research, which asks respondents which party they would vote for if an election were held next Sunday. Options included the six parties represented in parliament at the time of the survey, “other” parties, and “don’t know”. In the analyses, a decision for the left-wing Green party serves as the baseline category, because the Greens have been particularly successful in urban areas (Haffert and Mitteregger, 2023).

3.2.2. Dependent variables

We operationalise the psychological component of the urban-rural cleavage via two dependent variables: strength of place-based identities and perception of conflict between rural and urban areas. For measuring the former, we use a battery of five items. Because most of the literature suggests that *social* identities underpin the urban-rural divide, these items were designed to capture respondents’ level of identification with and connection to other people from their type of area. Because the wording of the items was adapted to the type of area the respective respondent lives in (based on the variable measuring place described above), the same variable captures the intensity of place-based identities for both urban and rural respondents (see Table 1). We did not ask respondents to indicate their level of identification with the other type of place.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of the five items demonstrates that they do indeed form a single scale (Claassen et al., 2025). This scale’s reliability is good (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.78$). All factor loadings are high, and the overall model fits reasonably well (RMSEA: 0.082, CFI: 0.926, TLI: 0.910; see the appendix for details). In the analyses, we use the factor scores from the CFA as our measure of identification.

The second dependent variable, perceived urban-rural conflict, is operationalised by a single item: “In Germany, are there very strong (1), strong (2), not very strong (3) or no conflicts (4) at all between people who live in cities and people who live in rural areas?”. We recoded the original four-point scale into a binary indicator of those who perceive strong or very strong conflicts (1) and those who perceive either not very strong conflicts or no conflicts at all (0).

To capture subnational identities developed after reunification, we asked respondents how close they feel to East Germany and to West Germany on a sliding scale (1 = very close, 2 = close, 3 = neither close nor not close, 4 = not very close, 5 = not close at all). Respondents who felt close to the macro-region in which they live (see below for details) but not close to the other were classified as (exclusive) eastern/western identifiers.¹

3.2.3. Control variables

We also include a set of standard controls. For the purpose of our analyses, we treat gender as binary (0 = identifies as female, 1 = identifies as male).² Age was recoded into four broad groups (1 = 18-29, 2 = 30-44, 3 = 45-64, 4 = 65 and older). Because Germany’s system of (vocational) education and further formal training is rather complex and

¹ Unfortunately, we have no information on respondents’ perception of a possible conflict between East and West.

² For the eight respondents who identify as other genders, we set the variable to missing.

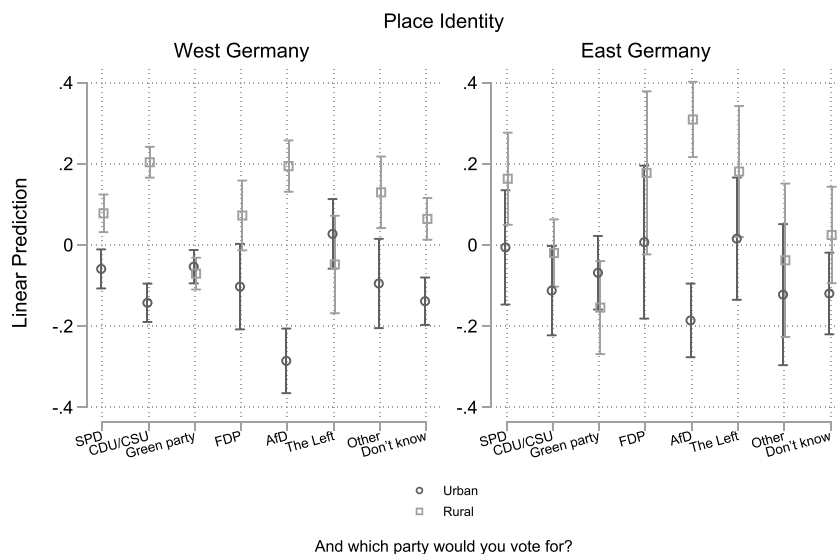


Fig. 1. Interaction of party choice, urban/rural and East/West on dependent variable identification. Note: Labels refer to rural/urban residence.

produces a bewildering array of qualifications, we recoded this information into three broad categories. Levels of formal education were set to “low” (1) for respondents who had fewer than ten years of schooling and no further qualifications. Respondents with at least ten years of schooling, or who completed an apprenticeship or further vocational training, were coded as having attained “medium” (2) levels of education. For respondents with “Abitur” or comparable diplomas required for university admission, educational attainment was coded as “high” (3). Finally, we control for religious observance, as it may affect the perception of the urban/rural cleavage: it may act as an indicator of local embeddedness and is also associated with traditional values. We coded attendance at religious services on a seven-point scale ranging from “never” (1) to “daily” (7).

3.3. Analytical strategy

We start by modelling identification as urban/rural and perception of urban-rural conflicts purely as a function of vote choice, location in a rural or urban area, and residence in the East/West (Models (1) and (3)). As these variables are at the core of our arguments, using them in a joint model serves as a first step to understand how they are related. In a second step, we include gender, age, education, and church attendance as additional control variables (Models 2 and 4). Finally, to assess how the territorial cleavages are intertwined, we add interaction terms between vote choice, location, and macro-region. Because such interactions are best interpreted by means of plots (Brambor et al., 2006), we focus on Fig. 1 in the main text and relegate the full regression table to the appendix.

In a last step, we replicate the models with exclusive territorial identification as the dependent variable. Again, we focus on the interaction plots and present the full regression table in the appendix.

4. Results

4.1. A psychological basis for an urban-rural cleavage?

Identifications based on the characteristics of one’s locality are generally quite common in Germany, but not overwhelmingly so: between 36 percent (feeling connected to fellow urban/rural dwellers) and 64 percent (urban/rural resident as a good description of self-image) of the respondents agree with the statements in Table 1.

Table 2

Summary statistics of main variables.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Place identity	4196	-.026	.43	-1.26	.87
Conflict perception	3863	.245	.43	0	1
Rural/Urban Ingroup	4198	.512	.499	0	1
East/West	4198	.156	.36	0	1
Age	4198	2.601	.978	1	4
Gender	4190	.514	.499	0	1
Education	4198	2.285	.68	1	3
Attendance	4177	1.89	1.16	1	7
Exclusive identification	4190	.228	.420	0	1

Perceptions of urban-rural conflicts are even rarer. Only 24% of the sample believe that there are strong or very strong conflicts between people living in urban/rural areas (see Table 2).

We first turn to analyses of place-based identity and perceptions of urban-rural conflicts. Living in a rural area has a significant and substantial positive effect on both identity and conflict perceptions. This confirms our hypothesis H1 of a fundamental asymmetry between urban and rural citizens in the psychological basis of the putative cleavage (see Table 3). Holding everything else constant, residents of rural areas are expected to score about 0.2 points higher on the latent identity scale than citizens living in urban areas, equivalent to roughly 0.5 standard deviations. They are also about five percentage points more likely to perceive a conflict between urban and rural citizens. Conversely, living in the territory of the former GDR does not affect the psychological importance of the urban-rural cleavage, relative to residents of the western states.

The results are mixed for the partisan aspects of the divide. Our model shows results for the full sample and thus might over- or underestimate results in some rural and urban subgroups. Voters of all other parties identify more strongly with their respective place of living than voters of the Green Party. This implies that Green voters are generally unlikely to identify with places, even with urban ones, which is an interesting finding in itself.

For conflict perception, the electorates of three parties stand out: voters of the liberal FDP, right-wing populist AfD and left-wing The Left are more likely than voters of the Greens to perceive a conflict between rural and urban areas. With an average marginal effect of seven to

Table 3
Regression results on place-based identity and perceived conflicts.

	(1) Place-based identity	(2) Place-based identity	(3) Conflict perception	(4) Conflict perception
Rural	0.196*** (0.0134)	0.178*** (0.0135)	0.249* (0.108)	0.302** (0.112)
East Germany	-0.0328 (0.0173)	-0.00709 (0.0178)	0.0597 (0.146)	0.0973 (0.145)
Reference: Green party				
SPD	0.120*** (0.0212)	0.0891*** (0.0218)	-0.107 (0.177)	0.159 (0.181)
CDU/CSU	0.134*** (0.0196)	0.0993*** (0.0201)	0.00701 (0.149)	0.202 (0.154)
FDP	0.0806* (0.0342)	0.0723* (0.0341)	0.444* (0.205)	0.418* (0.204)
AfD	0.126*** (0.0249)	0.0869*** (0.0256)	0.673*** (0.204)	0.754*** (0.207)
The Left	0.127*** (0.0338)	0.120*** (0.0337)	0.636** (0.246)	0.667** (0.255)
Other	0.0822* (0.0346)	0.0690* (0.0345)	0.184 (0.221)	0.166 (0.231)
Don't know	0.0580* (0.0226)	0.0322 (0.0229)	0.182 (0.191)	0.233 (0.190)
Reference: 18–29				
30–44		0.0251 (0.0221)		-0.219 (0.168)
45–64		0.0280 (0.0203)		-0.628*** (0.164)
65 and over		-0.000290 (0.0227)		-1.053*** (0.220)
Male		0.0307* (0.0133)		-0.0373 (0.108)
Reference: Low education				
Mid		-0.0467** (0.0164)		0.0314 (0.161)
High		-0.102*** (0.0189)		0.129 (0.169)
Church attendance		0.0377*** (0.00584)		-0.00393 (0.0520)
Constant	-0.184*** (0.0154)	-0.214*** (0.0271)	-1.478*** (0.115)	-1.125*** (0.254)
Observations	4007	4007	3709	3709
R^2	0.069	0.086		
Pseudo R^2			0.014	0.036
BIC	4466.6	4451.5	3970.8	3942.0

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

14 percentage points, these differences are politically relevant and thus provide evidence in support of hypothesis H4.

More specifically, these findings align with the notion that Green/left-libertarian parties represent a constituency that is somewhat stereotypically portrayed as “urban cosmopolitan elites” (see e.g., Zollinger, 2024, 4). It is also plausible that far-left and particularly far-right voters are especially sensitive to societal conflicts. However, there is no obvious explanation for the smaller but still sizable difference between voters of the Liberals and the Greens.³

Turning to the socio-demographic control variables (Models (2) and (4)), we find that formal education has a moderate negative effect on identification, whereas religious attendance has a moderate positive effect. Age reduces conflict perceptions substantially. Including the socio-demographics improves the model fit appreciably, and the reduction of the BIC suggests that the accompanying loss in the degrees of freedom is justified.

Including these controls also weakens most partisan effects, with some becoming insignificant. However, the overall urban-rural asymmetry and the stark differences on the conflict dimension between voters

³ Historically, the Liberals represented not just business owners and members of the free professions but also large farmers. However, today the number of independent farmers is far too small to explain the magnitude of the effect.

of the Greens on the one hand and AfD, FDP, and The Left voters on the other, remain.

As outlined in the theory section, Germany’s post-war partition and its lasting consequences make for a second territorial division that is arguably more important than the urban-rural divide. To get an even clearer picture of how these two territorial cleavages intersect, we include a three-way interaction between party choice, urban-rural and East/West in a final series of models (Tables 2 and 4 in the appendix).⁴

For self-identification as urban/rural, this further improves the fit from $R^2 = 0.086$ to $R^2 = 0.127$. However, the BIC is virtually identical to that of Model (2), which suggests that the additional complexity is not necessarily warranted.

Fig. 1 illustrates the combined impact of vote choice, location in a rural or urban area, and residence in the East/West on the strength of identification. First, it is easy to see that even in the extended model, residence in East/West Germany has no effect on this specific identity. Most of the estimates in the right panel are, within their margins of error, essentially identical to their equivalents in the left one.

Second, almost all estimates are higher for rural than for urban residents, even if some of these differences are not statistically significant,

⁴ Because vote choice has eight categories, we are actually including a whole host of three-way interactions.

particularly in the East, where the relatively small sample sizes result in very wide confidence intervals. The average marginal effect of living in a rural area amounts to 0.18 scale points, which is virtually identical to the result from Model (2). Once more, this shows the urban-rural asymmetry in the importance of the urban-rural cleavage. H1 holds even in this more complex setup.

Third, and still in line with H4, the extent of this asymmetry varies across partisan groups. In the West, rural respondents voting for CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP,⁵ and AfD display significantly higher levels of place-based identity than their urban counterparts. For voters of the two leftist parties, the Greens and the Left, this is not the case, as their rural voters do not differ from their urban ones.

But it is the AfD's electorate that really stands out: while their voters in the countryside strongly identify with the rural populace, their urban voters display levels of identification with other urban citizens that are significantly *lower* than that of any other party, suggesting that they reject the modern and cosmopolitan aspects of city life. For AfD voters in the East, we observe much the same pattern while all other differences between rural and urban respondents in the East are not statistically significant. Even if the research design does not allow us to make claims about the direction of causality, we cannot fail to notice that this particular pattern fits very well with the AfD's recent claims to represent a rural way of life and the notion of a rustic heartland where common sense prevails over the "leftist-Green ideology" of (some) urban constituencies.

Next, we turn to conflict perceptions (see Table 2 in the appendix). Here, including the interaction terms also slightly improves the fit, raising the Pseudo R^2 from 0.036 to 0.048. However, the increase in the BIC from 3942 to 4075 suggests that this small difference cannot justify the large (22) number of additional parameters in the model.

In line with this, the average marginal effects are virtually identical to those from the simpler Model (4). We therefore refrain from plotting the results as the core findings remain the same: there is no significant difference between residents of the eastern and the western states, rural citizens are somewhat (five percentage points) more likely to perceive a conflict between them and urban citizens than vice versa, and voters of the AfD and The Left are considerably more likely (between twelve and fourteen percentage points when compared to Green voters) to perceive such a conflict than those of most other parties.

4.2. East vs west?

So far, we have demonstrated that urban/rural identities and conflict perceptions are of a moderate intensity overall, but vary systematically across the urban-rural divide itself and across party-political divisions. Conversely, respondents' residence in one of Germany's two macro-regions has no effect on the psychological underpinnings of the urban-rural cleavage.

To complement this picture, we conclude with a parallel series of models in which we analyse our respondents' exclusive territorial identification as eastern/western. Analogously to the previous section, we start with two very simple logistic models that regress exclusive identifications on rurality, residence in the two macro-regions, vote intention, and, in a second step, also on the standard controls (see Model (5) and (6) in Table 4).

Upfront, we see that exclusive identifications with one's own region are rather common in Germany at 43 percent. While this number is comparable to the rates of agreement with the items that tap into identification with one's urban/rural in-group analysed in the previous section, unlike these statements the construction of the regional variable did not involve a forced choice: respondents could express closeness to both East and West (or neither). We therefore take this relatively

⁵ While the 95% confidence intervals overlap, a *t*-test shows that the two estimates differ ($t = 2.54$, $p = 0.01$, see Table 3 in the appendix).

Table 4
Exclusive identification with East or West Germany.

	(5) Exclusive identification	(6) Exclusive identification
Rural	-0.192 (0.107)	-0.200 (0.108)
East Germany	0.920*** (0.131)	0.917*** (0.126)
Reference: Green party		
SPD	0.0493 (0.162)	0.141 (0.168)
CDU/CSU	-0.0408 (0.152)	0.0160 (0.155)
FDP	0.288 (0.210)	0.269 (0.215)
AfD	0.0520 (0.218)	0.151 (0.224)
The Left	0.168 (0.250)	0.238 (0.253)
Other	-0.308 (0.225)	-0.298 (0.228)
Don't know	-0.183 (0.174)	-0.152 (0.175)
Reference: 18-29		
30-44		0.0480 (0.169)
45-64		0.0697 (0.154)
65 and over		-0.122 (0.195)
Male		-0.113 (0.106)
Reference: low education		
Mid		0.178 (0.155)
High		0.318 (0.163)
Church attendance		0.0976 (0.0526)
Constant	-1.325*** (0.110)	-1.661*** (0.218)
Observations	4007	4007
Pseudo R^2	0.029	0.035
BIC	4186.8	4218.3

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

high number as evidence in support of H2 (the East-West divide is more important than the urban-rural one).

In both models, we find a very strong effect of residence in the East. Even when controlling for urban/rural residence, political leanings and socio-demographics, Easterners are on average much (i.e., 17 percentage points) more likely to hold an exclusive eastern identity than Westerners are to hold an exclusive western identity, thus confirming H3 of a strong asymmetry of eastern/western identities.

Conversely, neither rurality nor any of the control variables have significant effects on a person's likelihood to exclusively identify with their macro-region. This mirrors our finding that residence in the East/West does not influence rural or urban identities and conflict perceptions. More specifically, and contrary to our expectations, this form of territorial identity does not seem to vary with vote choice so that we have to reject H4.

To complete the analysis and in analogy to the analyses in the previous section, we finally include a series of three-way interactions between party choice, urban-rural and East/West in the model (Table 4 in the appendix). This slightly improves the fit of the model, with an increase of the Pseudo R^2 from 0.035 to 0.050, but also results in an increase in the BIC, which once more suggests that the additional complexity of the model is not warranted. In line with this, the marginal effects are virtually identical (see Fig. 1 in the appendix). Collectively, these findings again suggest that the two geographical lines of conflict operate independently of each other.

5. Discussion

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in a political urban-rural divide that affects the politics of many Western countries. While some authors (see e.g., Gallego et al., 2016; Maxwell, 2019) argue that urban-rural differences merely reflect residential (self-)sorting along the lines of a broader universalism-particularism (or, equivalently, cosmopolitan-communitarian) cleavage, others (see e.g., Ford and Jennings, 2020) claim that in a throwback to 19th-century politics, the differences between urban and rural areas constitute a cleavage in their own right. This paper's aim is to better understand the psychological underpinnings of the urban-rural divide and to analyse how it relates to other geographical divides.

We contribute to this debate both analytically and empirically. Analytically, we point out that most definitions of socio-political cleavages imply an identity component, and that recent research (Borwein and Lucas, 2023; Hegewald and Schraff, 2025; Zumbunn, 2025) suggests that urban/rural identities may have developed in an asymmetric fashion. Moreover, we note that many larger states feature additional territorial conflicts often orthogonal to and sometimes more important than the urban-rural divide. These can be conceptualised as centre-periphery cleavages in Lipset and Rokkan's terminology. In Western Europe alone, France, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom provide ample evidence of this type of conflict.

Empirically, we analyse data from a large-scale German survey that was specifically commissioned to study the urban-rural divide. While Germany's history of post-war division and eventual unification is certainly unusual, it provides a convenient example of a second salient territorial conflict that competes with the urban-rural divide.

We find that identification as urban/rural as well as perceptions of an urban-rural conflict are common, but not overwhelmingly so. Both attitudes align with party-political leanings in a way that is largely expected: green/left-libertarian parties represent voters unlikely to perceive urban-rural conflicts or to use place as a point of identification, while the far right represents those who do. More importantly, identification as urban/rural and perceptions of urban-rural conflicts are distributed asymmetrically, as they matter much more to people on the rural side of the divide. Our research thus adds to the growing strand of literature indicating an uneven formation of the urban-rural divide.

Turning to the second territorial divide, we find that exclusively eastern/western identities are also common, arguably more important than urban/rural identifications and even more asymmetric than these. Remarkably, we find no differences across party lines or socio-demographic groups in this respect. Unfortunately, our data lack an indicator for the perception of conflicts between East and West, and so we cannot replicate the analysis for this additional dimension.

Taken together, our results show that urban-rural differences exist. However, their importance should not be overstated, because they compete with other territorial conflicts and because their attitudinal base is not fully developed and is asymmetric at best—something that to our knowledge has not been shown outside Canada. Our research contributes to the expanding body of scholarship on the rural-urban divide in Europe and calls for a nuanced analysis of this line of conflict.

More generally, the two asymmetries we found in Germany reflect societal imbalances: in these conflicts, urbanites and Westerners constitute the larger—and arguably dominant—groups. Whether these patterns hold in other Western countries, and what this means for the theoretical refinement of the cleavage concept are important questions that should be addressed in future research.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Antonia Lang: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.
Kai Arzheimer: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2026.103103.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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