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The Urban–Rural Gulf in American Political Behavior

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Abstract

Urban–rural differences in partisan political loyalty are as familiar in the United States as they are in other countries. In this paper, we examine Gallup survey data from the early-2000s through 2018 to understand the urban–rural fissure that has been so noticeable in recent elections. We consider the potential mechanisms of an urban–rural political divide. We suggest that urban and rural dwellers oppose each other because they reside in far apart locations without much interaction and support different political parties because population size structures opinion quite differently in small towns compared with large cities. In particular, we consider the extent to which the compositional characteristics (i.e., race, income, education, etc.) of the individuals living in these locales drives the divide. We find that sizable urban–rural differences persist even after accounting for an array of individual-level characteristics that typically distinguish them.

Keywords Political geography · Urban/rural divide · Public opinion · Partisanship

Several developments over the past decade have directed attention toward non-metropolitan, rural, and small town, populations as objects of scholarly and journalistic

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interest. First, non-metro populations are increasing sources of political contrast with big cities. Differences in political preference across size-of-place have increased over recent decades (Graham 2017; Badger et al. 2016; Gamio 2016; Brownstein 2016; Davidson 2017; Cramer 2016; Scala et al. 2015; Kron 2012; McKee 2008; Gimpel and Karnes 2006; McKee and Teigen 2009). Second, the vote cast in small towns and unincorporated areas is large enough and sufficiently Republican-leaning to be decisive in close electoral contests (Trende and Byler 2017; McArdle 2017; Summers and Gustafson 2017; Cadava 2016; Evich 2016).[1] In any state, rural voters may be a small minority of the population. Still, a candidate who alienates these voters also risks losing a significant swath of the culturally-aligned electorate in small cities. Third, the concentration and density of urban Democrats have reinforced their party loyalty and progressive-leaning over time with a similar development occurring among geographically dispersed Republicans, thereby heightening the divergence in political preference by location (Perez-Truglia 2018; Goedert 2014; Huckfeldt 2007; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995).[2] The largest core cities are increasingly loyal to the Democratic Party in local, state, and national elections (Jacobson 2013; Wilkinson 2019). Mid-sized and smaller cities are more politically-mixed, contingent upon their racial and economic composition. More remote towns and suburban fringe locations have grown appreciably more Republican, especially since the election of Barack Obama in 2008 (Bishop 2008; McKee 2008; Scala and Johnson 2017; Morrill and Combs 2018). This geographic difference in party loyalty may be most acute in presidential contests, but the gap is also present in non-election years, indicating that party divisions are not solely a response to high stimulus electioneering (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008).

In this paper, we examine the extent and origins of the urban–rural gap in political party support. Can we reduce urban–rural differences to the compositional differences in the populations that reside in the two locations? In an analysis of individual-level party identification from 2003 to 2018, we find that the answer to this question is 'no.' There is something more in remoteness and population density as the distinguishing characteristics that contribute to the geographic gap in political party loyalty. The urban–rural cleavage is not an artifact of the background characteristics of the people who happen to reside in each area. Among some groups, the urban–rural divide is wider (e.g., whites) than among other groups (e.g., blacks). But across groups, Republicans tend to live in locales that are less dense and farther away from population centers than their Democratic counterparts. The urban–rural divide persists (to varying degrees) across racial and ethnic groups, income brackets,

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[1] While non-metropolitan locales may cast a far lower percentage of total statewide votes than found in metropolitan areas, these votes are often sufficiently one-sided in political preference to be decisive. The precise numbers depend on geographic definitions of "rural" or "non-metro." The nation has become more metropolitan, but there remains a substantial population (19%) in rural areas the U.S. Census defines as "places" containing less than 2500 people. If one includes populations in towns of less than 25,000 but greater than 2500, there is about 26% of the total population in rural areas. (https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/cph-2-1.pdf, see Table 6.)

[2] The proportion of voters living in electoral landslide counties (i.e., a margin equal to or greater than 20% or the two-party vote in presidential elections) has steadily increased. In 2016, 60% of the electorate resided in a landslide county, up from 38% in 1992. The increase in landslide counties came primarily from Republicans in rural areas and small towns (Aisch et al. 2016).
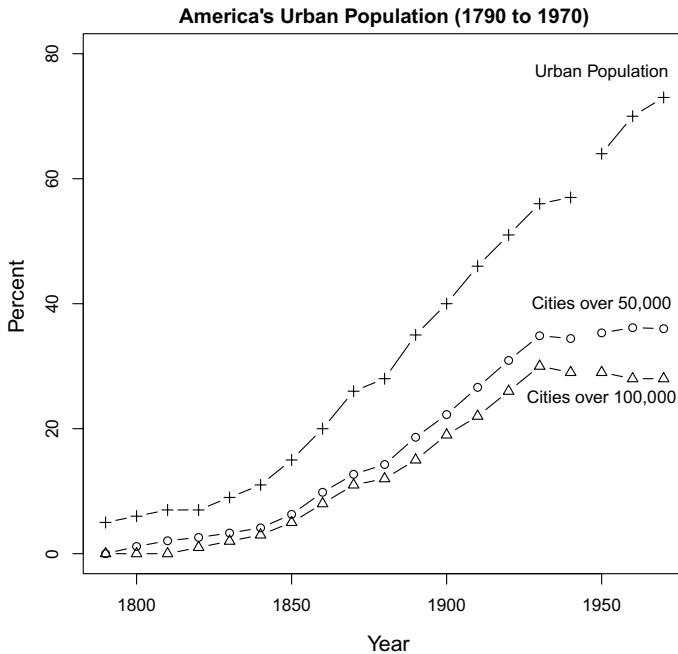
America's Urban Population (1790 to 1970)

Fig. 1 Percent of U.S. Population living in Cities, 1790 to 1970. We include the percent of Americans living in Census-defined urban areas, living in cities of over 100,000 and over 50,000 inhabitants. Figures are calculated from *Bicentennial Edition: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* with minor corrections made from *Statistical Abstracts*. U.S. Census adopts altered urban/rural definitions in 1950 and so time series is disjointed at that point

educational attainment, religion, religious devotion, and family structure. We consider and find evidence of the urban–rural divide in two contexts: first, the geographic distance between small towns and major central cities, and second, differences in population concentration.

Locating survey data that can adequately represent rural populations is the first step. Urban and suburban populations are readily represented in surveys through probability sampling, rural populations less so. To conduct our analyses, we rely on archived Gallup polls conducted almost monthly from 2003 through 2018, including both election and non-election years. Our analyses include nearly 125,000 observations, including almost 25,000 small town and rural respondents.

The Urban–Rural Divide: An Overview

Through the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States was primarily a rural and agrarian nation. Figure 1 presents the percentage of the U.S. population living in urban areas from 1790 through 1970 based on three different designations. The top line indicates the percent of Americans who lived in U.S. Census-defined urban populations, which includes settlements of over 2500 inhabitants.

By this expansive measure, the U.S. Census classified a majority of Americans as urbanites by 1920. If we consider cities with populations of fifty thousand—about the size of modern day Saginaw, Michigan or Galveston, Texas—or more, then the rise of urbanization is slower. By 1970, less than four out of ten Americans lived in a city of this relatively modest size. If we consider cities with populations of one hundred thousand—about the current size of Kenosha, Wisconsin or Roanoke, Virginia—or more, then less than three out of ten Americans lived in a city of at least this size. What is clear from any of these measures is that prior to the early twentieth century, there was not a sufficient urban population to animate an urban–rural divide.

Prior to the rise of a sizable urban population, American politics was distinctly "rustic" (Holcombe 1933, p. 11) and dominated by sectional interests defined by the "great crop regions, founded on climate and geography" (Key 1964, p. 168). By the 1950s, there was an academic consensus, "that the urbanization of American society has tended to produce class differences in our politics" (Fuchs 1955, p. 385). As the urban population grew, differences between cities and rural regions subsumed differences between rural sections of the country. Studies identify the early twentieth century as a pivotal time when the urban and rural divide emerges (e.g., Key 1959; Holcombe 1933).

What explains the origin of the urban–rural political divide? One set of arguments focuses on the economic consequences of urban life as a driving influence of political division. With the rise of the city came the rise of manufacturing and the decline of agriculture. Accordingly, an activation and awareness of class consciousness became a political force. Differences between manufacturing and agriculture divided citizens more than the different types of crops they may have harvested. As Key (1964, p. 169) notes, "the great solvent of agrarian sectionalism is urbanism." And as Campbell et al. (1960, p. 369) argues, "Contact with modern urban life increases the likelihood of class awareness." This observation was a driving feature in Marx (1992[1867], p. 593), which notes that, "The foundation of every division of labour which has attained a certain degree of development, and has been brought about by the exchange of commodities, is the separation of town from country." In this perspective, as more individuals moved to cities, their common economic interests drove class consciousness and created political unity within urban and rural populations respectively.

Other studies have argued that urban and rural habitats directly influence beliefs and behaviors of their residents through deep-seated cultural mechanisms. For example,"urban alienation theory" posits that living in urban settlements undermines mental health, isolates individuals socially, and "encourages deviation from traditional social morality" (Fischer 1982, p. 46). Likewise, other scholarly and popular commentators argue that rural communities possess a distinct character (Buttel and Flinn 1975; Hanson 2015).[3] As we describe below, the characteristics associated with rural areas often relate to self-reliance and traditionalism.

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[3] Buttel and Flinn (1975, p. 135) comments that, "Agriculture was not viewed merely as the source of wealth, but as a fount of those human virtues and traits most congenial to self-government—a sociological rather than economic value."

The mechanisms of transmission of urban and rural values may be contemporary or historical. One historical mechanism is "behavioral path dependence," which occurs when "ideas, norms, and behaviors [are] passed down...[and] interact with institutions, reinforcing each other over time" (Acharya et al. 2017, [10]; see also Berelson et al. 1954). Though a once agrarian community may now be decidedly suburban, the values and traditions of that bygone life may still influence contemporary beliefs and behaviors. The mechanisms may also be less historic and more a function of contemporary social networks. For example, one study suggests that the"self-reinforcing dynamics of homophily and influence [may] dramatically amplify even very small elective affinities" (DellaPosta et al. 2015, p. 1473; see also McPherson 2004).

In what follows, we describe how an individual's distance from a major metropolitan settlement and the density of their community may contribute to the urban–rural divide. We then turn to examine the extent to which the divide persists after accounting for a range of individual characteristics.

The Importance of Distance

In addition to compositional differences, we consider the extent to which the urban–rural divide is a consequence of divergent trajectories of cultural adaptations of populations living apart from one another. In biology, when two populations of the same species are isolated from one another thereby lacking interaction, they evolve and adapt in distinctive ways. Geographic distance often explains genetic divergence (Dillon 1984; Wang et al. 2013). Distance captures the degree of isolation of two populations and figures prominently in explaining species differentiation across the landscape.[4] Distance limits human reproductive interaction resulting in genetic consequences, but it also determines social interaction, which influences information, beliefs, and opinions. Urban–rural differences in opinion may exist as a consequence of the separation of two populations from each other. As distance increases, so will the divergence in viewpoint.

Interpersonal information exchange, i.e., face-to-face, is more powerful than less personal forms (DellaPosta et al. 2015; McPherson 2004). Distance between two groups diminishes social interaction between them, thus limiting the means by which knowledge and information are most persuasively disseminated. When the duration of contact is short and episodic, because travel to and from rival locations is uncommon, information transmission is inhibited. This is one reason why locations lying beyond commuter-sheds, outside metropolitan areas, are more socially distinctive from core cities than those more proximate (Fischer 2010). The physical distance between the two locations is itself influential in the observed difference in political values.

Metropolitan areas serve as hubs for local and national media. As centers of market power and innovation, large cities attract more attention than smaller and more

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[4] This is known as allopatric speciation.

remote locations (Shearmur 2012; Florida 2009; Duranton and Pug 2001; George and Waldfogel 2006). Mass media are financed by advertising, and their incentive is to provide information of interest to large numbers of people (Spence and Owen 1977). News coverage tends to focus on big-cities and the interests of urbanites (Cramer 2016). Rural populations are of less interest to advertisers, which is why culture-creating industries are predominantly located in a few major metropolitan areas.

Novel ideas are propagated from urban to rural areas through, among other things, mass media, which may challenge conventional views. The more a location is exposed to external forces and ideas, the greater the pressures will be for change. In addition to information about the latest consumer products and technological innovations, new ideas are introduced about modes of life including child rearing, religious beliefs, health, diet, and how best to spend leisure time. Goods and services that were once considered luxuries become necessities as more people come to desire what is advertised. Viewpoints that were once considered outlandish, exotic, or literally "unheard of" are propagated outward to a mixed reception of resistance and measured acceptance.[5]

The notion that cities are centers of innovation accords with their being founts of novelty and protective of eccentricity. Studies document the unconventionality of urban life, running contrary to tradition in multiple domains (Wirth 1938; Fischer 1982, 1984, 2010, 1974, 1975; Wilson 1995; Silver 2001). Cities are favorable to greater psychological liberalism and are more progressive and accommodating of unconventional behaviors and beliefs (Simmel 1903). The modern city is regarded as an oasis of freedom for blacks, feminists, LGBTQ people, and other subjugated or nonconformist populations (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente 2017). Urban norms of noninvolvement signal tolerance but are more practically the result of the need to limit exposure to the affairs of a large number of people (Milgram 1970; Simmel 1903). This same noninvolvement responsible for generating tolerance is also associated with the mistrust and incivility of big cities compared to smaller towns (Milgram 1970, p. 1464).

The hypothesized expectation is that an idea emerging in a large city that is a market hub is unlikely to be contemporaneously held in a non-hub settlement that is a long distance away. With sufficient time there may be a convergence of ideas across distant locations. Patterns of social interaction between two distant populations might increase as the cost associated with geographic distance is overcome. Even distant populations may eventually come to mingle. Peripheral areas may maintain physical or non-physical boundaries against outside influence to limit incursions from outsiders. Some ideas may be rejected because they are judged incompatible with local values and interests. From this standpoint, the urban–rural partisan gap has more than a simple source rooted in racial composition, economic conditions, age differences, or religious background.

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[5] Though Ripley et al. (2019) finds urban residents are less politically tolerant than rural ones.

The Importance of Density

A related explanation for the urban–rural partisan gap is rooted in the impact of scale. Scale is measured directly by population density, the number of people packed into the habitable space. These measures gauge the place-based differences in the number of people an individual might meet within a routine workday. The variation across settlements in the United States ranges from midtown Manhattan where one might conceivably encounter half a million people within a couple of miles; to a moderate sized city such as Flagstaff, Arizona, where one might meet ten thousand; to a small town where a generous estimate of meetings would number in the low hundreds.

The density of 'acquaintanceship' matters in substantive ways. The attitudinal effects of anonymity and impersonality in the city include both the development of respect for people's privacy and a tolerance for deviance and eccentricity. In this manner, big cities may offer protection to those who have been stigmatized and bullied (Milgram 1970). New subcultures can develop and thrive, including counter-cultural ideologies that would never emerge in a small town (Nicholls and Uitermark 2016; Berreman 1978). Left leaning, or "progressive" ideologies are typically those more accommodating of new modes of thought and behavior in social and political life.

Although cities present the opportunity to interact with a larger and more diverse number of people, the relationships developed are thought to be more superficial. Small settlements, on the other hand, are associated with direct contact with a more homogeneous group of people and positions. Urban sociologists have consistently observed that group life is uniquely robust at the smaller scales found in rural settings. In a small town, one may encounter the entirety of the population in her daily routine. This is unlikely in a large city of hundreds of thousands of people. Business enterprises, schools, neighborhood groups, churches and other institutions of collective life are considerably smaller in less populous places.

Institutions within less dense communities are small in size, sustaining a higher frequency of interaction. Consequently, values in these places are more interdependent and distinct (Greenfield 2009, 2013; Knoke and Henry 1977; Bosworth and Snower 2019). Habitual ways of thought and behavior are upheld and perpetuated over long periods of time. These viewpoints are typically associated with social and political conservatism. Small scale settlement is also associated with the preservation of traditional morality. "Traditional" values refer to norms dominant in a society, or if undergoing change, previously dominant in a society (Fischer 1974). Traditionalism is associated with the propensity to uphold conventional behavior as a standard for judgment and prudent action. These traditions may include regular church attendance and charitable support for religious organizations (McCarthy et al. 2016; Inglehart and Baker 2000; Chalfant and Heller 1991). Small scale settlement encourages religious adherence and traditional views of morality because it accentuates group life among those with common beliefs over acting as an individual (Stark 1996). In this way, rural life may be associated with religiosity, which may predispose those people to favor conservative social outcomes.
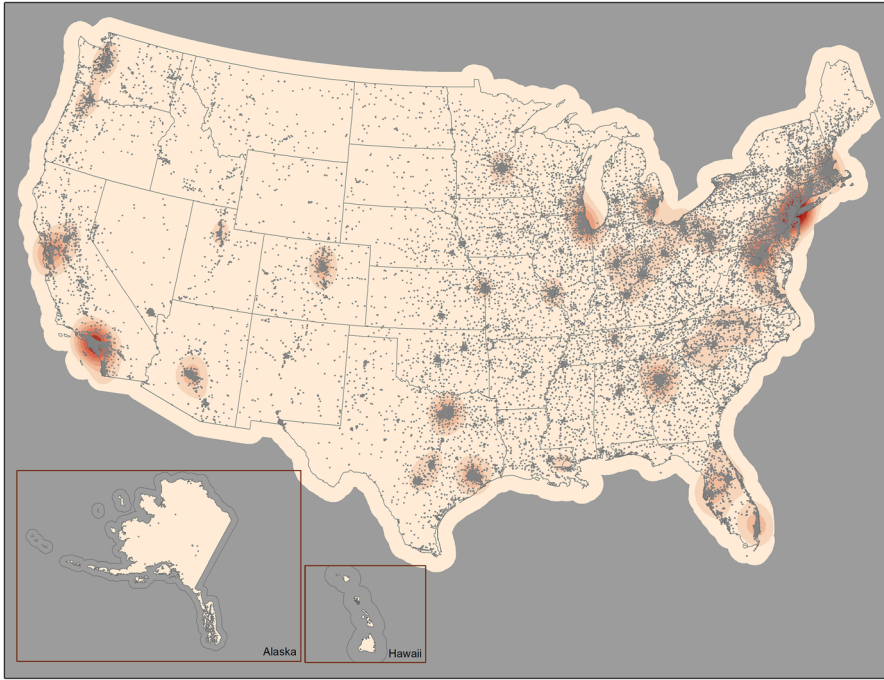
Fig. 2 Distribution of Gallup survey respondents

The expectation, then, is that distance from metropolitan concentrations is not the only factor that will differentiate urban and rural areas by political party. Measurements of scale are hypothesized to have their own, independent, impact on variability in outlook and judgment. Lower density areas are expected to adhere to morally traditionalist positions, controlling for compositional characteristics of the population and also accounting for distance to the nearest city.

Data and Methods

Our data come from Gallup Poll Social Series (GPSS) surveys from 2003 through 2018.[6] Each month, a GPSS survey focuses on a different aspect of public opinion, capturing topics from moral values, to economic habits and evaluations, to views of the state of the world. Every survey includes standard demographic and political background questions. Additionally, respondents are asked for their five-digit ZIP Code.[7] This provides us with nearly 125,000 Gallup respondents hailing from all

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[6] See Gallup (n.d.). GPSS surveys started asking for ZIP Codes in 2003.

[7] We choose to use ZIP Codes instead of counties or media markets because they are nearly always smaller in size and therefore a more precise measure of residence.

fifty states and the District of Columbia.[8] Figure 2 presents the geographic distribution of those surveyed. There is thorough coverage of urban and rural locales with approximately 11% of the sample consisting of respondents from rural areas and an additional 4% from small towns of non-metropolitan areas.[9] In Fig. 2 and in the empirical measures we describe below, we situate each respondent at or near the centroid of their ZIP Code of residence.

Our primary focus is on the association between geography and party identification. Party identification is measured along a typical five-point scale.[10] The five-point scale runs from strong Democrat (1) to strong Republican (5). In some analyses, we collapse party identification so that leaners are included with their respective party.

We conceptualize our measure of urbanization in two ways related to the discussion in the previous section. First, to capture the scale aspect of the social environment we use the population density of the locale in which the respondent resides. We calculate the population density based on a ten-mile radius around the centroid of the respondent's ZIP Code. We extend the measure beyond the immediate ZIP Code of residence because a person's field of routine activity is rarely confined to the area immediately surrounding their house. On the other hand, daily activities do not typically cover an entire metropolitan area, state, or region (Kwan 1999, Moore and Reeves, Forthcoming, Moore and Reeves 2017). A ten-mile radius seems adequate to encompass the terrain familiar to most people based on commuting patterns, though other measures are plausible and would not induce an argument. This indicator is straightforward in meaning: when there are few people within one's radius of everyday life, the measure for density is low and the area is considered more rural than one thronging with more people in the same sized space.[11]

Second, we measure the respondent's distance in miles to the nearest city of population 100,000 or greater. A respondent who lives in close proximity to a city this size is considered less rural than one living farther away. Distance is estimated in straight-line Euclidean terms from the centroid of the ZIP Code in which the respondent resides.

For population density, the median value for the sample is approximately eight hundred residents per square mile. Communities of this size include, for example, Littleton, Colorado (80129)[12] and other outlying suburbs of Denver. Similarly dense locales are found across the country from Baldwinsville, New York (13027), which

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[8] Our analysis includes 124,381 geocoded respondents, which may vary across analysis because of other missingness.

[9] This is based on residential classification categories drawn from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's urban–rural continuum codes (US Department of Agriculture 2016).

[10] Respondents were first asked, "In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an independent?" If they identified as independents, they were then asked, "As of today, do you lean more to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party?"

[11] Population density is highly correlated with average employer size in the respondent's ZIP Code. This indicates that our measure captures and tracks the size of local intermediary institutions as one moves from rural to urban environments.

[12] Our geographic measures are at the ZIP Code level. When referencing a locale, we are referencing a ZIP Code within that location. We include the ZIP Code to which we refer in parentheses.

is about sixteen miles northwest of Syracuse, New York, to Woodland, California (95776), which is about sixteen miles northwest of Sacramento. The places of greatest population mass in the United States are found in the New York City area. All of the respondents living in communities with densities over ten thousand people per square mile live in either New York City or the adjacent suburbs of New Jersey. On the opposite end of the distribution, Gallup respondents are also scattered across areas with densities of less than 50 people per square mile. Such communities include Aberdeen, South Dakota (57401), the county seat of Brown County, and Clovis, New Mexico (88101), in eastern New Mexico along the Texas border.

While population density increases exposure to diversity and progressive values, respondents' distance from a major city with a population of 100,000 or greater is a measure of proximity to an urban settlement and the cultural and social influences associated with it. Falling within the busy socioeconomic orbit of a big city is a sign of regular exposure to the viewpoints of the population that resides there. For our sample, the median distance from a large city of this size is fifteen miles. Locales at approximately this distance include Woodbridge, Virginia, and Bowie, Maryland, both suburbs of Washington, DC; and Chesterfield, Missouri, a western suburb of St. Louis. These are middle-range suburbs, not bordering the core city but not lying at the fringe of the metropolitan area, either.

Seventy-five percent of the respondents live within 45 miles of a city of 100,000 and 95% of the sample lives within one-hundred five miles of such a place. Generally, less rural respondents include those living proximate to large metropolitan centers on both coasts and in the Great Lakes region. At the extreme, some respondents are from outlying parts of Alaska between six and eight hundred miles away from Anchorage, whose present population is nearly three-hundred thousand.[13] While distance and population density are negatively correlated,[14] there are plenty of exceptions. Consider Casper, Wyoming (82601) along I-25 in eastern Wyoming. Though it is two hundred miles from Denver, the community measures nearly 1,700 persons per square mile, which is more than double the median in the sample. There are also locations that are close to major cities but are lightly populated, including neighborhoods near Phoenix, Arizona, and in Anchorage, Alaska. Taken together, our sample represents a broad geographic cross section of Americans surveyed from 2003 to 2018.

Partisanship, Urbanization and Within Group Urban–Rural Divides

Before we turn to a model based approach, we present some visualizations of how urbanization varies by partisanship. First, we present the geographic distribution of Republicans, Democrats, and independents for each of our measures of urbanization in Fig. 3. In the left panel is distance from a city and on the right is density.

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[13] It is a credit to Gallup that respondents are sampled from such faraway places as the Aleutian Islands.

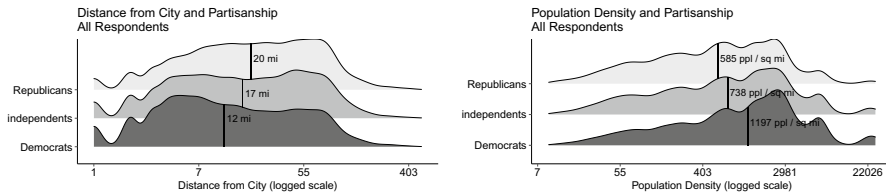[14] The correlation between the logged variables is -.72.

Fig. 3 Distribution of measures of urbanization by partisanship. Left panel shows distance from a city of at least 100,000 people (logged scale) and right panel shows population per square mile in 10-mile radius of centroid of respondent's ZIP Code. Densities are plotted for Democrats (including leaners) in dark gray, Republicans (including leaners) in light gray, and independents in medium gray. Median values are indicated with vertical lines

Both x-axes are on a logged scale with exponentiated values labeled.[15] We remind the reader that higher values of density reflect higher levels of urbanization, while higher values of distance reflect less urbanization. In light gray, we plot the distributions for survey subjects who identify as strong or leaning Republicans, dark gray identifies the strong or leaning Democrats, and medium gray displays the independents. A solid vertical line indicates the median for each group. The median, like any summary measure, is helpful in summarizing the relationships between partisanship and urbanization but also limited. By providing a picture of the full distribution, we can observe a more complete picture of the relationships.

In examining differences in settlement by partisanship in Fig. 3 (left panel), Democrats tend to live nearer large cities than independents and Republicans. The median distance from a city (of at least one hundred thousand) is 20 miles for a Republican, 17 miles for an independent, and 12 miles for a Democrat. Residences of respondents from localities about 20 miles away from a city include places like Waverly, Illinois (62692), southwest of Springfield Illinois, or Dumfries, Virginia (22026), located along the Potomac River well-beyond the DC beltway. For Democrats, the median is a little over half the distance for Republicans at 12 miles. In Missouri, this would include locales like Florissant (63033) just outside of Interstate 270, the outer belt freeway that partially encircles the metropolitan area of St. Louis. In the Mid-Atlantic region, Garrison, Maryland (21117) approximates this distance and is found just northwest beyond Interstate 695, the Baltimore Beltway. We also note that there are modes of individuals living nearby to cities and that Democrats are more concentrated than Republicans or independents in these areas. Ignoring these modes, we see that Republicans skew in a way that is more distant from cities while Democrats skew towards urban centers with independents distributed more evenly.

Democrats also tend to live in more densely populated places than independents and Republicans (Fig. 3, right panel). While the median population density for Democratic respondents is 1,197 people per square mile, the median population

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[15] For the distance variable, we add one to values of zero in order to avoid undefined values. When we present the exponentiated scale in the figures, the lowest value is 1 since log(1)=0 and exp(0)=1.
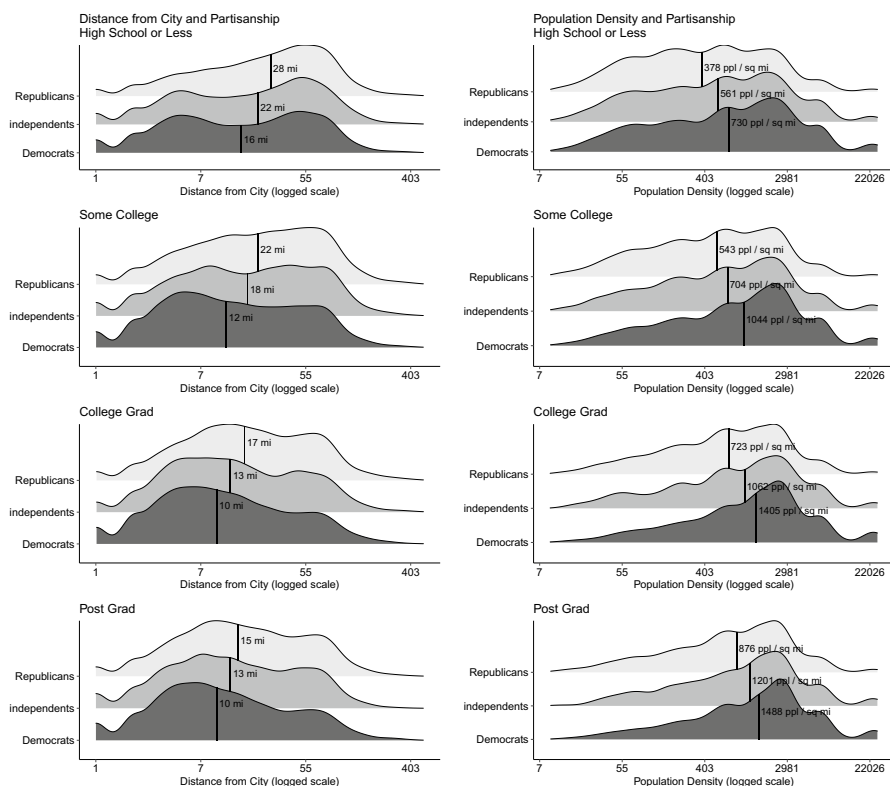
Fig. 4 Distribution of measures of urbanization by partisanship by education

density is less than half that for Republicans at about 585 people per square mile. Meanwhile, independents fall between the two at 738 people per square mile.[16] For Democrats, the median community in terms of density looks like an inner suburb of Tucson, Arizona (e.g., 85715). For Republicans, this looks like Noblesville, Indiana (46060), a peripheral suburb that is twenty-five miles northeast of Indianapolis. Figure 3 (right panel) also reveals multiple modes. The rightmost mode reflects respondents packed into New York City and the surrounding area. The next mode represents somewhat less crowded locations in San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles. In these major U.S. cities, Democrats dominate while Republicans are distributed in smaller clusters throughout the rest of the country.

Figures 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 depict the urban and rural gap in party identification similar to Fig. 3 but do so by examining the geographic distribution of key demographic and economic subgroups. The idea behind these graphs is to evaluate whether urban and rural distinctions in party concentration disappear when significantly sized groups are studied because the geographic difference is simply

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[16] Based on comparisons using t-tests, each of these values are significantly different from each other.
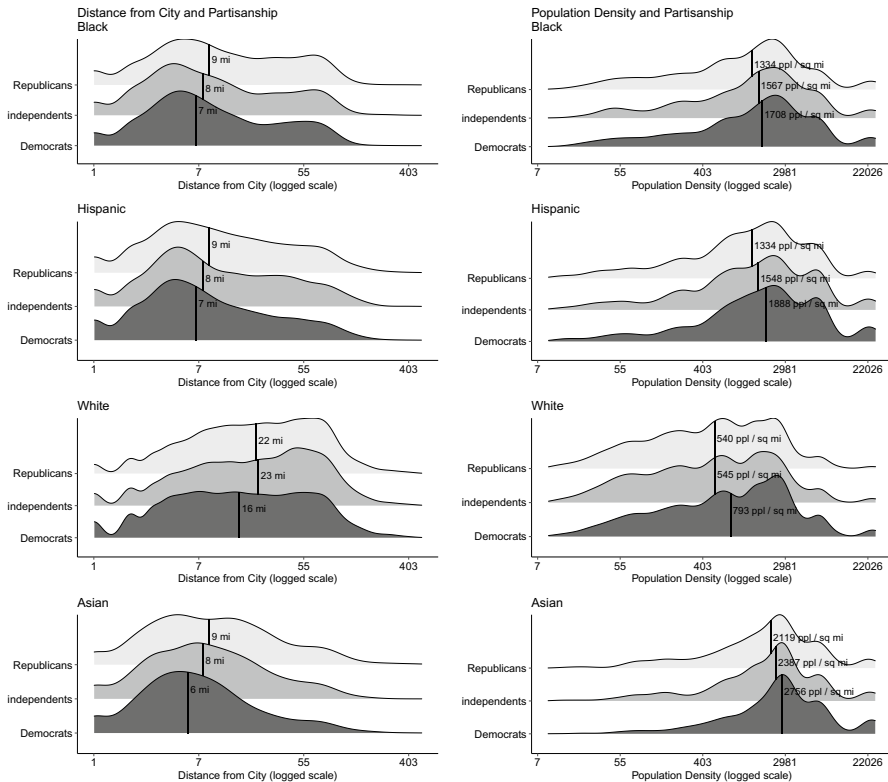
Fig. 5 Distribution of measures of urbanization by partisanship by race

an artifact of where electoral subgroups reside and continue to settle. If urban and rural distinctions in the distribution of partisan identifiers are explained by group settlement, then the respective groups would be clustered or clumped near one end of the horizontal axis (for distance or density) regardless of political party affiliation. Some may be concentrated on the rural end, some on the more urban end, but there would not be a platykurtic distribution or wide spread of cases across the range of values of distance and density corresponding to where Democratic members of the group reside as opposed to Republican members. Nor would we expect to find bimodality in the distribution, as appears in Fig. 3, but Republican and Democratic adherents of the group would reside mostly in the same place. On the other hand, if the urban and rural division by political party is not reducible to group settlement, we would expect bimodality in the distribution of the group similar to what is observable in Fig. 3 for the population as a whole.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of educational attainment by political party by distance on the left hand panel, and by density on the right hand panel. The distributions vary considerably across the four education levels. Compared to Republicans and independents, Democrats with high school or less (see Fig. 4, top row) are concentrated closer to large cities in more dense communities. Comparing
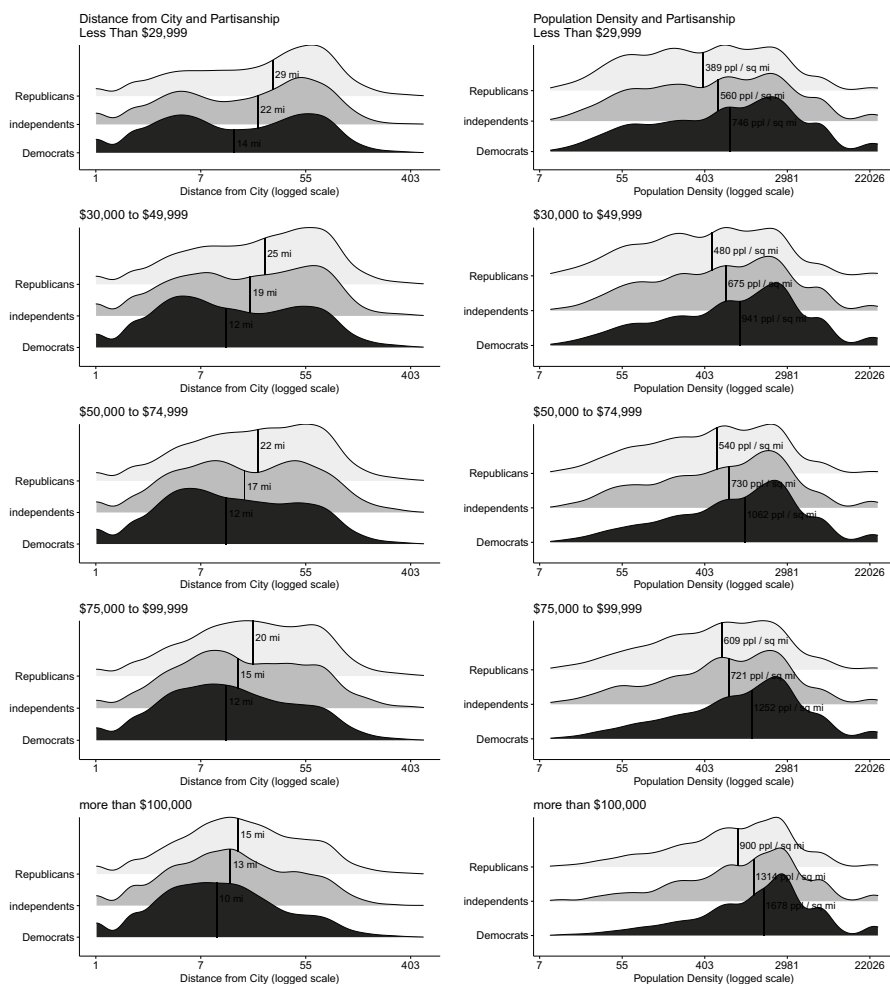
Fig. 6 Distribution of measures of urbanization by partisanship by income

medians, we see that Democrats have a more urban existence than independents, and independents have a more urban existence than Republicans. This is a pattern that repeats itself in Fig. 4 and throughout the analyses in this paper. At all education levels, the center of the Republican party is more rural than for Democrats or independents. For example, among those with some college, the median Republican lives 22 miles from a large city in a community with a population density of 543 people per square mile. For Democrats with some college, the median lives 12 miles away from a large city in a community with a population density of 1,044 people per square mile. Independents, meanwhile, fall in the middle of Democrats and Republican living 18 miles from a city with a population density of 704 people per square mile. We likewise see the substantive differences in the modality of the partisan groups. While the urban–rural gap persists even
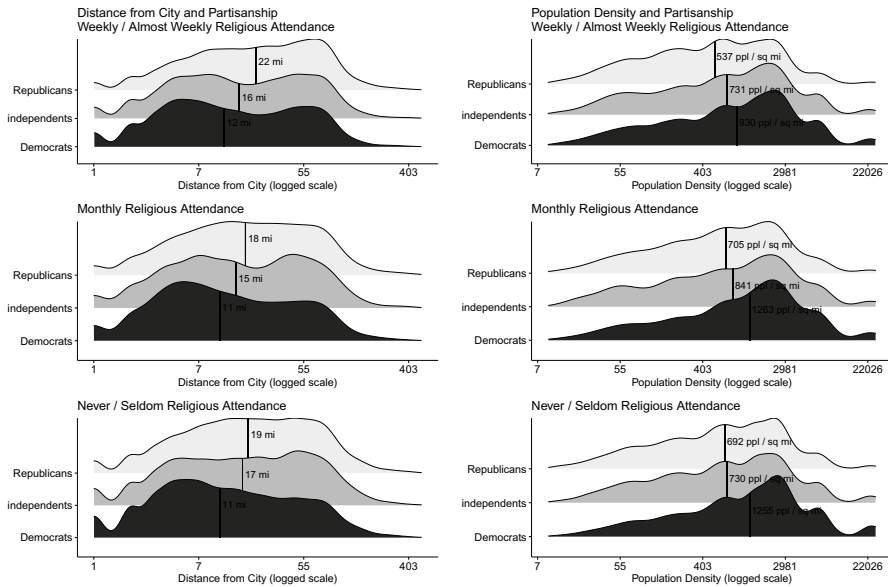
Fig. 7 Distribution of measures of urbanization by partisanship by religious attendance
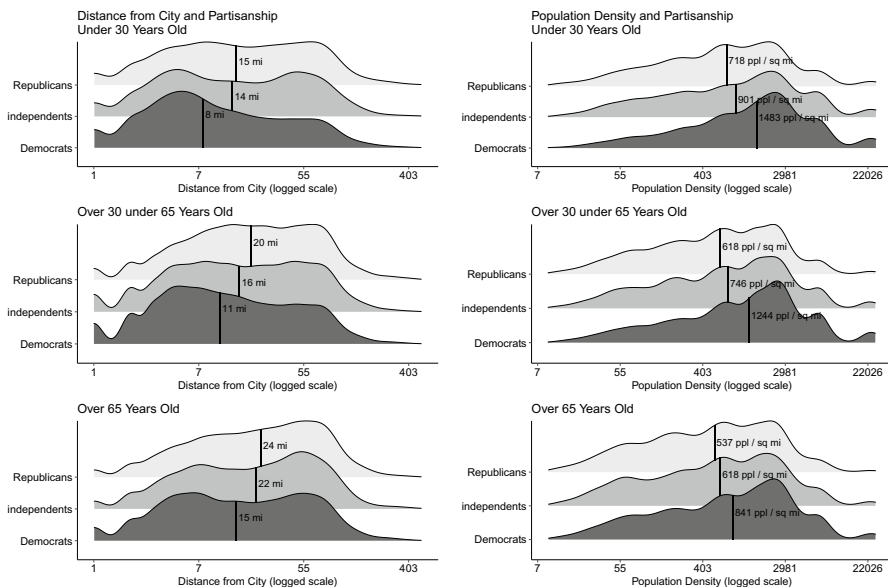
Fig. 8 Distribution of measures of urbanization by partisanship by age

among individuals with college and post graduate degrees, it is less pronounced as education levels increase. This appears to be in large part because Republican

respondents become less rural as levels of education increase. Relatedly, we note that comparing down rows, as education increases, Republicans, Democrats, and independents all become more urban. While the median Republican with a high school degree or less lives 29 miles away from a city and in a locale with 367 people per square mile, the median Republican with a college degree is living 12 miles closer to a city and an in a community that is nearly twice as dense. For Democrats and independents, this pattern holds with respect to population density; however, it appears that higher levels of education are associated with living closer to a city for Republicans in particular.

Figure 5 shows the urban–rural distribution by party and race or ethnic group. When compared to Fig. 3, the most similar of the distributions is for whites. This is in part because of the highly urban settlement of African Americans and Latinos, and the suburban concentration of Asians. Even so, it is notable that the central tendency for Republicans from all four subgroups is to the right on the distance axis, showing a slightly more suburban and rural pattern of settlement. Certainly it is clear from the graphs in Fig. 5 that a substantial part of the urban–rural divide can be attributed to the density of settlement and metropolitan residence of the minority population.

Fig. 6 presents a series of comparisons by income groups. Like educational attainment, those in the highest income bracket (>$100,000) are located primarily in cities and suburbs, not outlying areas, regardless of party identification. The distributions for Republicans, Democrats and independents are probably most similar for this high income group. For those in the lowest income bracket (<$29,999), however the urban–rural gap remains wide, showing a bimodal pattern that shifts the Republican group to the right on the distance scale compared to Fig. 3. There are two concentrations of lower income respondents, one that is Republican in the most remote rural areas, and the other that's Democratic in dense central city neighborhoods.

Figure 7 presents the urban–rural gap by party by religious attendance. As we discussed earlier, adherence to religious tradition may be a trait that drives the urban–rural divide. Nonetheless, we consider the extent to which it exists across the regularity of church attendance. Highly regular church attendance is a measure of devotion, no matter the particular denomination or religious tradition. Here again this distribution also shows an urban–rural gap by party identification not so different from Fig. 3. While those who attend church almost weekly or more are more likely to reside in rural locales, Democrats are generally located closer to cities and in more dense places. The difference between urban and rural voters cannot be explained by the religious devotion of the rural folk and the irreligion of those in cities.

Likewise Fig. 8, which presents urbanization and partisanship by age group, shows that the urban–rural gap persists across the age distribution. Though there is a general tendency for older respondents to live in more remote and less dense locales, the partisan gap within age groups remains. Is it the case that rural areas are distinct because of their concentration of older residents? No, the familiar bimodality from Fig. 3 is also present in Fig. 8 when we look at Republican and Democratic seniors. The partisan division by geographic location is mostly unchanged when we look at older voters.

What we learn from this visualization of the locational distribution of major demographic and economic subgroups is that there are a few compositional variables that will contribute to explaining the urban–rural divide in party loyalty. Among them are high income and high education. These voters are unmistakably metropolitan and urban in residential concentration. Any multivariate analysis has to account for the highly specific geographic concentration of these groups. Also black and Latino voters occupy a distinctive place in large metropolitan areas. In fact, the settlement patterns of blacks and Latinos are not very distinguishable from each other, at least when gauged nationally. But aside from these indicators, we do not find many other candidates that would lead us to conclude that the urban–rural divide is wholly or even primarily a function of where particular groups live. Inspection of results from multivariate analysis will offer a more complete assessment of how much the urban–rural divide is reducible to geographic differences in group settlement.

Multivariate Analyses

As described above, our measure of party identification is a five-point scale ranging from strong Democrat (1), lean Democrat (2), independent (3), lean Republican (4), and strong Republican (5). We analyze our respondents' partisan identification as a function of population density and distance from a major city and include all of the additional control variables described above. We conduct an analysis using an ordered logistic model, and present those tabular results in the appendix. As hypothesized earlier, as respondents live farther and farther from a city, they are more likely to identify as Republicans. Meanwhile, the more concentrated the population, the more likely an individual identifies as Democratic. The compositional covariates are expected to exert the effects frequently found in related research. Specifically, Republican identity and more traditional moral views are hypothesized to be the expressions of older, white, religious, more affluent, married, religiously devout respondents, and men. Democratic and progressive political viewpoints are more likely to be expressed by racial minorities, younger respondents, the unmarried, those who are secular or less devout, among lower income respondents, and women. Our focus, however, is less on confirming the relationships between these compositional variables and the dependent measures than it is on assessing the impact of place location net of whatever influences these controls exert.

We include a number of essential controls including indicators of gender, race, income, age, education, religious preference, religious observance, and whether the respondent was married. These can be considered common compositional variables salient to group identities that shape partisan makeup and vote choice (Holbrook 2016; Gimpel and Schuknecht 2004). They represent demographic and socioeconomic traits of individual voters that are known to influence partisan identity and political behavior, and also happen to be unevenly distributed across the nation's landscape. One location votes Democratic because many lower income and black voters live there, another less so because there are fewer of these voters and more of others. These characteristics are usually treated in conventional public opinion

research as originating in the individuals themselves, and are not derived from social processes (McPherson 2004, p. 269).

Our distance and population density measures, on the other hand, capture contextual factors, attributes of the respondent's social ecology hypothesized to have an impact on political predispositions above and beyond the summation of individual traits. Political viewpoints can easily be influenced by one's regular associates and exposure to the prevailing local climate of opinion (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Although it is true that some people may select into urban or rural environments because of their political composition, recent tests of these selection effects suggest that a small share of movers consider political factors directly with a slightly larger share considering factors closely associated with party identification (Cho et al. 2013; Gimpel and Hui 2017, 2015). These findings suggest that recursive estimation strategies such as ours may well upwardly bias the estimates for urban–rural influence on opinion. On the other hand, one might just as persuasively argue that the impact of urban–rural residence will be greatly understated because there are place effects on a number of the compositional variables, including race, religious preference, religious devotion, age and income. Older people, for example, are known to be more prevalent in rural areas and small towns. Rural dwellers are also known to earn less money and accrue fewer years of education, than otherwise similar urban residents. Since these effects are not captured then the impact of context is underestimated. Whatever the case may be, we are not able to resolve this issue given the substantive aims of this paper. Finding any statistically significant association at all, net of compositional characteristics, is the more practical ambition of this research. Any significant and sizable estimates can arguably be considered a total effect of the processes of socialization and selection even if these two are not parceled out separately by an additional model of residential choice.

To account for systematic relationships between geography and party identification (above and beyond those we measure), we include state-level fixed effects in all of our models. We also cluster our standard errors on the ZIP Code. We present substantive interpretations from an ordered logistic model and we include those tabular results in the appendix. We also include tabular results from multinomial logistic and linear models in the appendix.

Figure 9 illustrates the substantive magnitude of the relationship between urban–rural residence and party identification. We generate simulated predicted probabilities by holding all variables in the model at their mean but we vary the distance from the city (Fig. 9, top panel) and the population density of the respondent's locale (Fig. 9, bottom panel). We simulate predicted probabilities for the full range of values observed for distance from the city and population density (presented along the x axis in each panel).

The top panel presents the substantive relationship between distance and party identification. Our results show that as distance increases, the likelihood of identifying as a strong or leaning Democrat declines while the likelihood of identifying as a strong or leaning Republican increases. Comparing the changes in probability over the range of observed values, we see that the probability of being a strong Democrat decreases from .36 to .24 while the probability of being a strong Republican
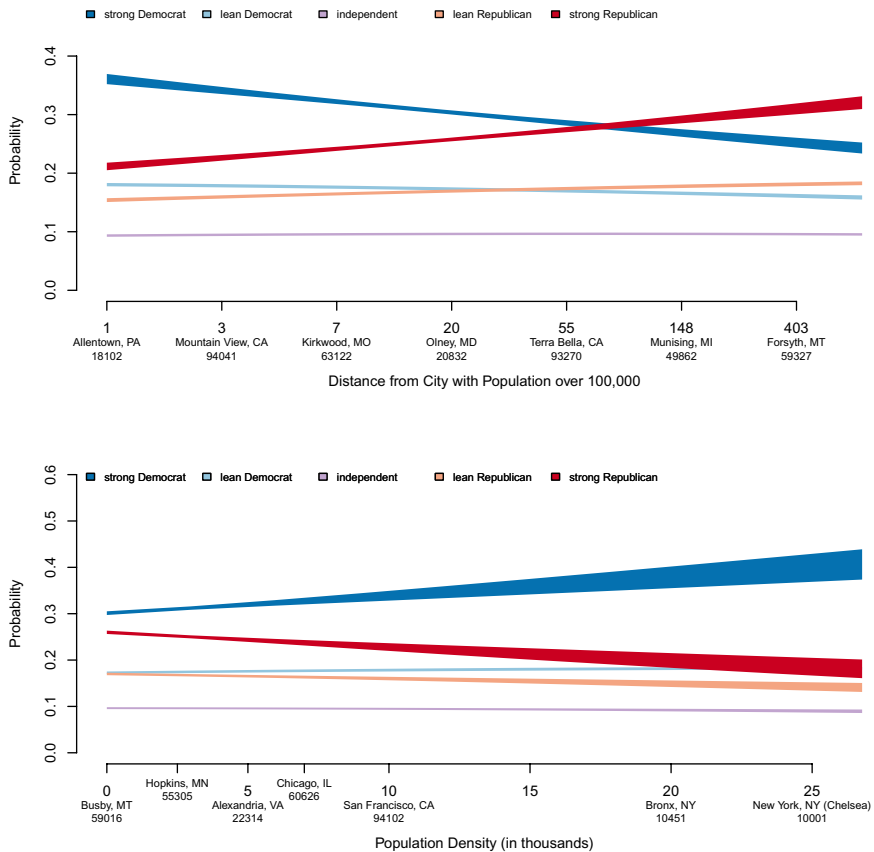
Fig. 9 Urbanization and party identification. Bands are 95% confidence intervals of predicted probabilities of identifying as a strong Democrat (dark blue), a leaning Democrat (light blue), an independent (purple), a leaning Republican (light red), or strong Republican (dark red). Probabilities are simulated from an ordered logit model. Probabilities are generated for the range of observed values for distance and population density. As respondents live in less urban environments, their probability of identifying as a Strong Democrat decreases and their probability of identifying as a strong Republican increases. The effects are similar though less pronounced among leaners. Representative ZIP Codes are presented along the x-axis (Color figure online)

increases from .21 to .32.[17] Similarly, the probability of identifying as a leaning Democrat declines from .18 to .16 and the probability of identifying as a leaning Republican increases from .15 to .18. The probability of being an independent rises modestly from .09 to .10. Given a typical individual, it is a safe bet that they are a strong Democrat if they live in or close to a big city, but, given the exact same

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[17] The 95% confidence interval for the estimate of strong Democrat is .35 to .37 for the minimum value and .23 to .25 for the maximum value. The 95% confidence interval for the estimate of strong Republican is .21 to .22 for the minimum value and is .31 to .33 for the maximum value.

individual-level characteristics, odds are about even that they are a strong Republican or strong Democrat moving to a locale several hundred miles from a city.[18]

The results are similar when examining population density. As the population concentration increases, so too does the probability that a respondent identifies as a Democrat even while accounting for all of the ordinary individual level covariates related to partisanship. The bottom panel of Fig. 9 again shows simulated predicted probabilities for party identification. These probabilities are generated based on the observed range of values for population density. As population density increases, the probability of identifying as a strong Democrat increases from .30 to .41, while the probability of identifying as a strong Republican decreases from .26 to .18. The probability of identifying as a leaning Republican falls from .17 to .14. The relationship for leaning Democrats is much weaker as the probability rises from .17 to .18 and there is small change for independents from .10 to .09.

This analysis suggests that there is a striking and significant association between geography of residence and party identification. Whether taken individually as separate components of what is meant by urban–rural, or considered in combination, the two indicators capturing aspects of location seem to exert a socializing impact on partisan identification while perhaps also serving as a draw for movers seeking a fitting and compatible destination (Carlson and Gimpel 2019). From either standpoint there is still a contextual influence, and the results in Fig. 9 suggest that both components of our measures of urbanization are related to party support even while controlling for a comprehensive array of individual level covariates.[19]

Additionally, we consider whether there is spatial autocorrelation present in the data (Anselin 2002; Anselin and Bera 1998; Loftin and Ward 1983; Darmofal 2015). There is a possibility that "some unobserved feature not included in the systematic part of regression model may lead to a spatially correlated pattern in the errors of the model" (Ward and Gleditsch 2008, p. 75). In a separate analysis, we utilize a spatial error model and estimate a spatial error coefficient for the relationship we describe above following procedures described in Bivand et al. (2013b, 2013a); Bivand and Piras (2015). Because of the large size of the Gallup sample, we randomly sample two thousand respondents at a time and estimate a linear model using the variables described above. We then repeat that process one thousand times. The median spatial error coefficient is -0.0046 with a standard error of 0.0177 ($z = -0.0046/0.0177 = -0.26$). The 95% confidence interval of z scores spans from -2.16 to 1.77. The distribution of the z-scores for our one thousand spatial error coefficients (λ) suggests that spatial autocorrelation does not compromise our estimates (see, e.g., Ward and Gleditsch 2008, p.66). The full distribution is presented in the appendix.

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[18] We explore whether the relationship between partisanship and density and distance change over time, but find no systematic evidence of this in our sample.

[19] Though we did not develop hypotheses based on the strength of partisanship, we note that the relationships appear strongest for strong identifiers. We speculate that this could be related to strong partisans being more likely to sort as a function of characteristics related to geography (Bishop 2008).

Discussion and Conclusions

Geographic location may be relevant as an explanation for political attitudes and behavior only when researchers have failed to include the full inventory of individual level attributes. This is a dubious conclusion, however, given that compositional characteristics are themselves distributed unevenly in space, likely the result of features associated with disparate settlement and socialization patterns. The effects for urban and rural location shown in this research are not epiphenomenal but of substantive contextual importance. They result from some mixture of selection and socialization processes that produce politically relevant opinions such as political party adherence. Models that attempt to explain political attitudes and behavior only in terms of individual covariates suggest that those respondents are the same in every other respect except for those particular characteristics. Our results suggest otherwise. If we take two voters who are of the same race, religion, age, education level, income, sex, marital status, and reporting the same level of religious commitment, and one is living in the central city, and another lying well outside a metro area, there will be a difference in political party affiliation.

For the difference between Democrats and Republicans, the urban–rural gap is as high as 8 to 11% for distance, and 10 to 16% for population density. These magnitudes are smaller than ones commonly estimated for racial and ethnic identity and for income, but they can still be decisive. When elections are closely contested, the presence of even a 3 or 4% difference in partisan commitment will easily determine the outcome assuming similar levels of turnout. At the same time, party identification is not equivalent to vote choice. Further work might examine the impact of place on votes cast in 2016 for Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton. Such a test may well show an even greater impact of place given the robust level of support that flowed to Trump from rural areas. In other cases of public opinion or in other countries, urban and rural differences could be reducible to compositional characteristics (e.g., Maxwell 2019), though one should be mindful of the urban–rural patterns in the distribution of the compositional variables themselves.

The ubiquity of the urban–rural gap raises questions about whether political cleavages have been nationalized, suppressing state and local variations in partisan differentiation (Hopkins 2018). Unfortunately our data and hypothesis tests do not measure the variation across states in the extent of urban–rural division in sub-national voting. Future work would do well to examine the extent to which the urban–rural divide is as wide in voting for governors and other state office holders as it is for party identification and the presidential vote. Additional work might also seek to identify variations in the issue content of urban–rural conflict. In some places the conflict may be primarily economic—revolving around the way rural property is overvalued and taxed, for example, while in others the separation is more cultural and moral. In still other locations there may not be any specific issues at all that divide the populations, only an acrid sense that they are not like us.

A substantial body of theory and nearly one-hundred years of social science research suggests that big cities promote progressive values and innovation in

ways that small towns do not. We consider that the mechanisms are primarily through their size and distance from one another. People who occupy the same geographic spaces tend to be similar in their viewpoints, beliefs, and understandings. This is not explained away by virtue of the inherent properties of compositional indicators such as education, income, age or race. Rather, we find evidence that these divisions are driven by something else and hypothesize that it is likely the social context in which people share their likes and dislikes, values, and beliefs. These opinions become localized in space where they are revealed and reinforced as people grow more similar with contact (McPherson 2004).

Many people with traditionalist views might choose to live in more rural areas or be reluctant to leave them. Some conservatives and Republicans are present in rural areas and small towns not because of a socialization "effect" of living in these areas on values and opinions, but because those holding traditionalist views are more likely to select themselves into such places. Here we have controlled for a large number of compositional factors that are likely related to why people choose urban or rural residence and still found a considerable association between place and politics. Additional research should address the question of why people with certain attributes related to traditionalist (or progressive) political views choose to live in rural (or urban) locations. Some recent work on neighborhood selection suggests that when people choose where to live they do so on the basis of contextual characteristics, including socioeconomic status, homophily and even direct consideration of political composition (Bishop 2008; Gimpel and Hui 2015, 2017). Pinning down the precise causal relationship, however, is less relevant to our more practical goal of showing that urban and rural voters differ in ways not traceable to the more obvious traits social scientists typically use to explain party identification and public opinion. The principal goal of this article has been to direct further attention to the meaning of place effects, not by endlessly searching for more individual-level covariates that are the "true" causes but by investigating how location in space structures the propagation of opinion, while factors such as size and density shape its diversity.

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Supplemental Information for "The Urban-Rural Gulf in American Political Behavior"

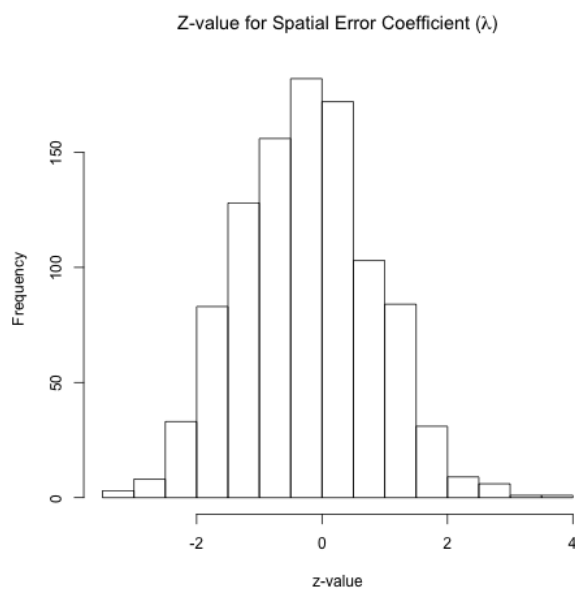## Contents

1 Distribution of Spatial Error Coefficient

Figure 1: Distribution of spatial error coefficient for least squares models of party identification. Coefficient is estimated from one thousand random draws of two thousand respondents at a time.

2   A Model of Party ID, Ordered Logistic Model

Race	
African American	−1.902***
	(0.025)
Hispanic	−0.647***
	(0.024)
Income	
Less than $20,000	−0.340***
	(0.026)
$20,000 to $29,999	−0.276***
	(0.025)
$30,000 to $49,999	−0.191***
	(0.021)
$50,000 to $74,999	−0.098***
	(0.021)
$100,000 to $149,999	0.063***
	(0.023)
More than $150,000	0.169***
	(0.026)
Age	
Over 65	−0.063***
	(0.015)
Under 30	0.124***
	(0.018)
Education	
High School or Less	−0.029*
	(0.016)
College Grade	−0.081***
	(0.017)
Post Grad	−0.502***
	(0.018)
Religiousity	
Once a week	0.565***
	(0.017)
Every week	0.354***
	(0.022)
Once a month	0.141***
	(0.021)
Never	−0.243***
	(0.018)
Religion	
Catholic	−0.116***
	(0.020)
Jewish	−0.833***
	(0.046)
None	−0.441***
	(0.022)
Protestant	0.171***
	(0.017)
Married	0.173***
	(0.014)
Male	0.394***
	(0.012)
Distance from city (logged)	0.086***
	(0.006)
Population (density in thousands)	−0.017***
	(0.003)
Constant cut1	−0.886***
	(0.139)
Constant cut2	−0.149
	(0.139)
Constant cut3	0.238*
	(0.139)
Constant cut4	1.002***
	(0.139)
Observations	97, 853

Robust standard errors in parentheses
***p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 1: A Model of Party Identification. Results are from an ordered logistic model where dependent variable is party identification. Indicator variables are included in the model for state and year but omitted from the tabular results. Standard errors are clustered by ZIP code. Party identification is measured as a five-point scale ranging from strong Democrat (1), lean Democrat (2), independent (3), lean Republican (4), and strong Republican (5).

4

3 A Model of Party ID, Multinomial Logistic Model

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Race					
African American		−0.698***	−1.089***	−2.439***	−2.996***
		(0.033)	(0.047)	(0.055)	(0.050)
Hispanic		−0.208***	−0.175***	−0.682***	−1.003***
		(0.038)	(0.045)	(0.043)	(0.040)
Income					
Less than $20,000		0.081*	0.512***	−0.330***	−0.549***
		(0.044)	(0.055)	(0.048)	(0.041)
$20,000 to $29,999		0.103**	0.392***	−0.247***	−0.427***
		(0.044)	(0.055)	(0.045)	(0.039)
$30,000 to $49,999		0.046	0.173***	−0.148***	−0.283***
		(0.037)	(0.048)	(0.036)	(0.032)
$50,000 to $74,999		0.019	0.094*	−0.101***	−0.136***
		(0.037)	(0.050)	(0.037)	(0.032)
$100,000 to $149,999		0.047	0.012	0.012	0.111***
		(0.041)	(0.056)	(0.040)	(0.034)
More than $150,000		0.004	−0.034	0.075*	0.258***
		(0.045)	(0.062)	(0.044)	(0.038)
Age					
Over 65		−0.304***	−0.517***	−0.228***	−0.095***
		(0.026)	(0.034)	(0.026)	(0.021)
Under 30		0.442***	0.106***	0.210***	0.155***
		(0.030)	(0.039)	(0.036)	(0.032)
Education					
High School or Less		−0.071**	0.110***	−0.076***	−0.054**
		(0.028)	(0.033)	(0.029)	(0.025)
College Grade		0.057*	−0.203***	−0.171***	−0.109***
		(0.030)	(0.039)	(0.031)	(0.026)
Post Grad		−0.013	−0.441***	−0.570***	−0.704***
		(0.030)	(0.041)	(0.032)	(0.027)
Religiousity					
Once a week		−0.172***	0.282***	0.398***	0.749***
		(0.030)	(0.036)	(0.029)	(0.025)
Every week		−0.076**	−0.011	0.313***	0.476***
		(0.038)	(0.051)	(0.038)	(0.032)
Once a month		−0.072**	0.016	0.111***	0.190***
		(0.034)	(0.045)	(0.036)	(0.031)
Never		−0.011	0.025	−0.287***	−0.401***
		(0.029)	(0.039)	(0.034)	(0.030)
Religion					
Catholic		−0.259***	−0.559***	−0.184***	−0.160***
		(0.035)	(0.042)	(0.036)	(0.031)
Jewish		−0.734***	−1.223***	−0.933***	−1.040***
		(0.071)	(0.107)	(0.077)	(0.068)
None		−0.024	−0.286***	−0.522***	−0.958***
		(0.037)	(0.047)	(0.044)	(0.042)
Protestant		−0.268***	−0.486***	−0.020	0.229***
		(0.031)	(0.037)	(0.032)	(0.028)
Married		0.004	0.090***	0.162***	0.232***
		(0.023)	(0.030)	(0.024)	(0.021)
Male		0.424***	0.538***	0.881***	0.531***
		(0.021)	(0.026)	(0.022)	(0.018)
Distance from city (logged)		0.032***	0.106***	0.108***	0.120***
		(0.010)	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.010)
Population (density in thousands)		−0.009**	−0.012**	−0.029***	−0.030***
		(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Constant		−0.184	−0.787**	−0.061	0.191
		(0.288)	(0.362)	(0.285)	(0.300)
Observations	97,853	97,853	97,853	97,853	97,853
Robust standard errors in parentheses					

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 2: A Model of Party Identification. Results are from a multinomial logistic model where dependent variable is party identification. Indicator variables are included in the model for state and year but omitted from the tabular results. Standard errors are clustered by ZIP code. Party identification is measured as a five-point scale ranging from strong Democrat (1), lean Democrat (2), independent (3), lean Republican (4), and strong Republican (5).

4 A Model of Party ID, Linear Model

Race	
African American	−1.496***
	(0.016)
Hispanic	−0.569***
	(0.020)
Income	
Less than $20,000	−0.295***
	(0.021)
$20,000 to $29,999	−0.244***
	(0.021)
$30,000 to $49,999	−0.164***
	(0.017)
$50,000 to $74,999	−0.084***
	(0.017)
$100,000 to $149,999	0.047**
	(0.019)
More than $150,000	0.134***
	(0.021)
Age	
Over 65	−0.045***
	(0.012)
Under 30	0.068***
	(0.015)
Education	
High School or Less	−0.029 **
	(0.013)
College Grade	−0.080***
	(0.014)
Post Grad	−0.427***
	(0.015)
Religiousity	
Once a week	0.462***
	(0.014)
Every week	0.297***
	(0.018)
Once a month	0.124***
	(0.017)
Never	−0.228***
	(0.015)
Religion	
Catholic	−0.091***
	(0.017)
Jewish	−0.657***
	(0.035)
None	−0.432***
	(0.018)
Protestant	0.150***
	(0.014)
Married	0.145***
	(0.011)
Male	0.335***
	(0.010)
Distance from city (logged)	0.072***
	(0.005)
Population (density in thousands)	−0.012***
	(0.002)
Constant	3.038***
	(0.125)
Observations	97,853
R-squared	0.188

Robust standard errors in parentheses
***p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3: A Model of Party Identification. Results are from a linear model where dependent variable is party identification. Indicator variables are included in the model for state and year but omitted from the tabular results. Standard errors are clustered by ZIP code. Party identification is measured as a five-point scale ranging from strong Democrat (1), lean Democrat (2), independent (3), lean Republican (4), and strong Republican (5).