Don't Look Back In Anger. Place-based resentment and electoral behaviour in Spain

Álvaro Sánchez-García

University of Salamanca

asanchezgarcia@usal.es

Toni Rodon

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

toni.rodon@upf.edu

June 19, 2024

Abstract

This first draft is a very preliminary version of this exploratory study on place-based resentment in Spain.

1   Introduction

2   Avengers: Infinity War (Rural vs. Urban)

In recent years we have witnessed the emergence of "place-based resentment", a new concept in social science that gives its name to the long-standing conflict between rural and urban areas. Developed from Cramer (2016)'s interesting ethnography, she shows how inhabitants, in this case, rural ones, perceive their values and lifestyles as different from urban ones. The perception of these differences and the sense of deprivation in rural areas gave rise to the concept she defined as "rural consciousness". For the explanation of the identity formation of this phenomenon, she draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT). This theory suggests that social identification with one's group –'we', the 'in-group'– is based on positive self-esteem with the group, the adoption of its values and norms, as well as the feeling of a positive connection with group members (quote). Nevertheless, this self-esteem towards the in-group not only leads to a positive bias towards the in-group but also implies the development of certain negative attributions towards the out-group, particularly when it is inferred that they have a status of superiority (Huddy, 2003; Branscombe et al., 1999).

Cramer's essential contribution has been to find that a sense of identity linked to place influences the development of the political psychology of certain inhabitants. In this sense, this finding has been essential to develop the concept of place-based resentment. As Munis (2020) suggests, in order to develop a place-based attitude it is necessary, as supported by different authors, to have an attachment to the place where you live (Agnew, 1987). Therefore place attachment is a necessary prerequisite for the construction of this social groups on which place-based resentment is built has two fundamental pillars. First, the positive construction of identity through a sense of belonging in the in-group. Following the definition of Munis (2020) we can refer to this place identity as "a sense

of belonging to a group whose membership is defined by living in a particular place and having a psychological attachment of group-based perception with other group members" (2020, p .3). Second, the construction of this social group (in-group) in antagonism to the out-group is also important. As Lyons and Utych (2021) shows, there is an affective polarization between rural and urban dwellers. In many cases, these perceptions end up generating hostility between the groups and can even condition support for a candidate if he/she is considered a member of the out-group (Jacobs and Munis, 2019). All of this ends up generating in the inhabitants of one place certain cognitive and narrative perceptions that denounce the (usually comparative) grievance against the inhabitants of the other place. This is what we can understand as place-based resentment and according to Huijsmans (2023) it consists of the perception that area residents are ignored by policymakers; the feeling that their area is not getting its fair share of resources; and the perception that there is a gap between values and lifestyles and that these are disrespected by others.

Place-based resentment is an expression of increasing affective polarisation from a geographical perspective (Trujillo and Crowley, 2022). But how can we explain the rise of this sentiment in recent years? We find two main ways to explain the increase in polarisation between rural and urban areas in recent years. First, the Great Recession as well as the immersion in the process of globalisation has brought a series of consequences such as the relocation of much manufacturing that has led to the deindustrialisation of certain municipalities with the implications for the loss of wealth, employment and services. It is not in vain that concepts such as 'left-behind' or 'geography of discontent' have flourished, giving their name to all these areas that have suffered this deterioration and which, for the most part, are rural areas. In this line, Huijsmans (2023) shows that place-based resentment is greater in spatial inequality. Second, and linked to this idea, the decline in many rural areas has meant that young and highly skilled people have had to move to cities. These movements have not only been a demographic shift, but also a political one. On the one hand, we find cities more cosmopolitan and have a clear

progressive tendency (Rodden, 2019; Maxwell, 2019). On the other hand, rural areas are older and with values more aligned with the moral tradition (traditionalism) (Trujillo, 2022; Gimpel et al., 2020).

Among the literature that has studied resentment based on place of origin we can find two distinct bodies. On the one hand, some studies have focused on the geographical factors that contribute to its development, concluding that this resentment is greater in rural and peripheral areas of the country (De Lange et al., 2023). These results serve to show that it is precisely the most punished and forgotten areas where the greatest resentment is generated against the places that monopolise all the resources and attention (in this case the cities). On the other hand, some studies have shown that resentment based on place of origin has a positive effect on the development of certain populist and anti-immigration policies, but it also conditions the vote. In this vein, both Jacobs and Munis (2023) and (Trujillo and Crowley, 2022) show the effect of place-based resentment on support for Donald Trump.

3 Place-based resentment in Spain

Place-based resentment is a nascent topic in the political science literature that has attracted the attention of numerous studies, such as the ones mentioned above, but which nevertheless has a very limited geographical scope (so far, there are only studies analysing place-based resentment for the United States, the Netherlands, and Canada). In this article, we use Spain as a case study. Therefore, the first contribution of this article is to shed light on a new country as a field of study of this phenomenon. We believe that Spain is a particularly interesting country for this line of research for several reasons. Firstly, there are specific factors that condition the quality of life of inhabitants (and their electoral behaviour) in both cities and towns. In the case of the former, these problems are more linked to the difficult situation of access to housing, agglomeration, touristification, or competition for public services. Particularly in Spain, we find that the phenomenon

of tourist housing increased the vote for the radical left (Rodon et al., ur), while urban agglomeration improves the electoral performance of the far-right (Sánchez-García and Llamazares, ur). On the contrary, in the case of rural areas, the problems tend to be more linked to the loss of population, public services and the risk of the disappearance of the municipalities themselves. In Spain, we find studies that show how depopulation has an effect on electoral behaviour (Sánchez-García and Rodon, 2023). In fact, in extreme cases in which municipalities are at risk of depopulation, there is greater support for the far right (Sánchez-García et al., 2024). Therefore, we find that there are sufficiently important problems in both types of municipalities and that there is an awareness of them that, as we have seen, conditions the behaviour of their inhabitants. Secondly, demographically, Spain has a totally asymmetrical distribution (Banco de España, 2021). So much so that in 2021, 78% of the municipalities in Spain were rural (84% of the total surface area) in which only 9.4% of the population resided.[1] Moreover, Spain is a country with notable levels of emigration, especially from rural to urban areas (González-Leonardo et al., 2023), but during COVID-19 and in subsequent years also had a reverse direction (González-Leonardo et al., 2022). In fact, if we take into account the baseline survey data in this research, 53% of the respondents have migrated at some point in their lives, of which 34% migrated from urban to rural areas and 19% in the reverse direction.[2] For this reason, these high levels of mobility increase interest in a study in which place-based identities are so important.

In order to carry out this analysis, we use a novel individual-level database from the POLGEO project ("Geography, polarisation and the rural-urban divide in the XXI century", PID 2020-119465GB-C22). This survey has a nationally representative sample (N = 6,059) conducted through online questionnaires between 12-15 May 2023. To address the place-based resentment, we use the four statements previously raised by Munis (2020) in his four-item index. This index, which has been used to test this phenomenon in the United States and Canada (Borwein and Lucas, 2023), has so far not been extrapolated to European studies. The calculation of this index is the arithmetic mean of the degree

of agreement (0 not agreeing at all and 10 strongly agreeing) of the respondents to the statements set out in Table 1.[3] As can be seen, the wording of each of these statements is conditioned by the previous coding of its ingroup and outgroup. For this, we use the subjective perception of the respondent, asking "If you had to evaluate the environment in which you currently live, would you say that it is an urban or rural area?" Being 0 very urban and 10 very rural, for all those who answered [0, 4] we considered "cities" their ingroup and "rural municipalities" their out-group. On the other hand, those who answered [5, 10] were coded "rural areas" as their ingroup and "cities" as their outgroup.

Table 1: **Place-based resentment items**

Item	Name	Statment
1	*favours*	When [ingroup_noun] are hit by bad times, people living there solve problems on their own. The national an regional government shouldn't give [outgroup_noun] special favours
2	*redistributive*	We wouldn't have to waste taxpayers' money bailing out [outgroup_noun] if people just moved away
3	*technology*	Decades of technological and economic changes have made it difficult for some [ingroup_adj] communities to improve on their own
4	*salience*	[outgroup_adj] places have too much say in national politics

Note: In the case of cities, we have used cities as 'ingroup_noun', urban as 'ingroup_adj', rural municipalities as 'outgroup_noun' and rural as 'outgroup_adj'. In contrast, for rural areas, we use the label rural municipalities as 'ingroup_noun', rural as 'ingroup_adj', cities as 'outgroup_noun' and urban as 'outgroup_adj'. Some language inconsistencies may result from translations from Spanish to English.

In Figure 1, we show the distribution of the resentment indicator based on place of origin for each of the habitat types. As we can see, the distribution is clearly bimodal showing a higher frequency of high resentment values for rural dwellers. Figure X shows the disaggregated histograms for each of the four items that make up this index. In this sense, to corroborate the statistical reliability of this indicator we calculated Cronbach's Alpha. With a value of 0.8 we can assume that the indicator shows a strong congruence.

Figure 1: **Distribution of place-based resentment index**
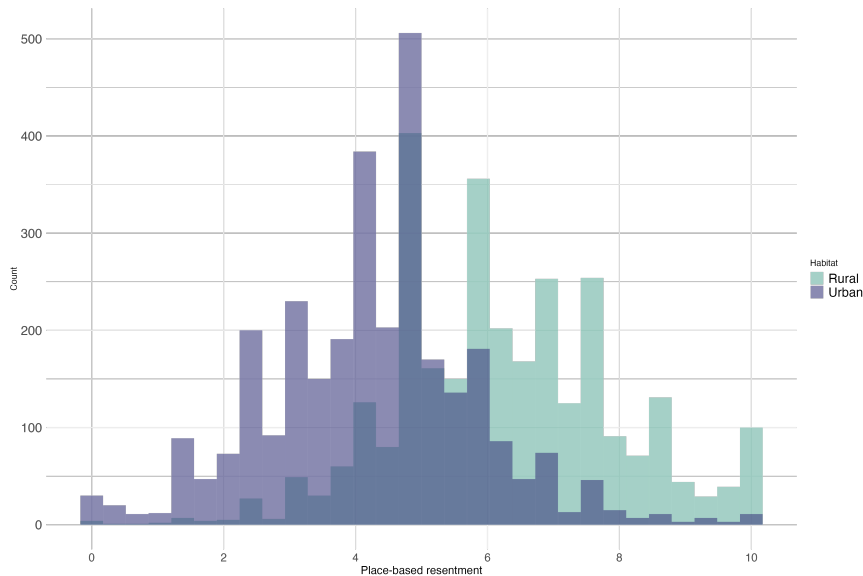
## 3.1 Who is resentful?

To carry out this descriptive analysis, we first run a model with the main socio-demographic variables included in the questionnaire. Figure 6 shows the coefficients of this OLS regression model. As we can see, the most important characteristic is residing in a rural environment, in fact, if we calculate the means of resentment (see Figure B.1) we can see that it is 2 points higher in rural inhabitants. In this line, we can highlight that this result is in line with the findings of Borwein and Lucas (2023) who show that place-based resentment is not symmetrical, but is comparatively stronger in rural areas. For this reason, in addition to offering a general model of resentment, we offer two others disaggregated by type of inhabitant.

On the one hand, the profile of the rural resentful in Spain is an older, working man who is ideologically more right-wing. On the other hand, the urban resentful are younger, less educated people who are even more right-wing ideologically. We can observe that ideological self-placement on the right is a factor that in both cases increases the probability of feeling resentful. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the opposite effect of age on each of these resentments. We can explain this from a compositional point of view. In cities, where there is a greater presence of young people, age correlates negatively with resent-

7

Figure 2: **Ordinary least squares regression results (standardised coefficients) for the place-based resentment scale**
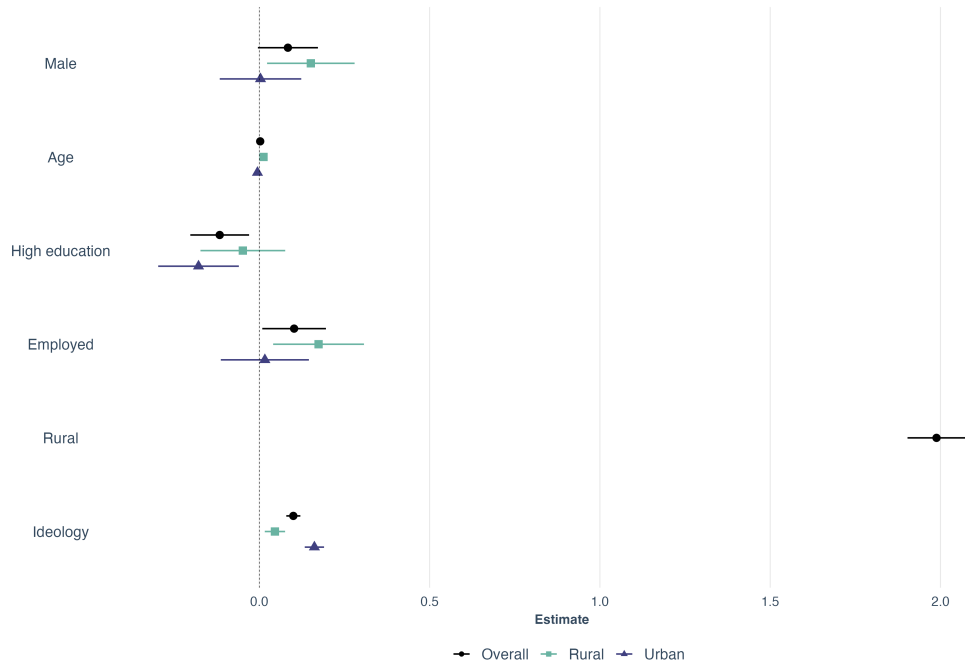
ment. On the contrary, in rural areas, we observe precisely the opposite. Furthermore, in the case of villages, following the argument put forward by (Goodwin and Heath, 2016) on the profile of the left-behind, older people are a group with lower levels of mobility, which may increase the perception of "locked in" in villages that are losing quality of life (as a result of depopulation or the loss of public services) (van Leeuwen et al., 2021).

3.2 Where are the people resentment?

After explaining the socio-demographic factors that can develop place-based resentment, we delve into the contextual factors that can contribute to the development of place-based resentment. However, before exploring these factors, we consider it of great interest to know the regional differences in the distribution of place-based resentment. To this end, in Figure 3, we show the mean values of respondents from the 17 Autonomous Communities (regions) that make up Spain.

Figure 3 shows an interesting distribution of resentment values based on place of origin. We can observe that the most ruralised regions (Castilla y León, Galicia or Cantabria)

8

Figure 3: **Map with average resentment based on place of origin by region**
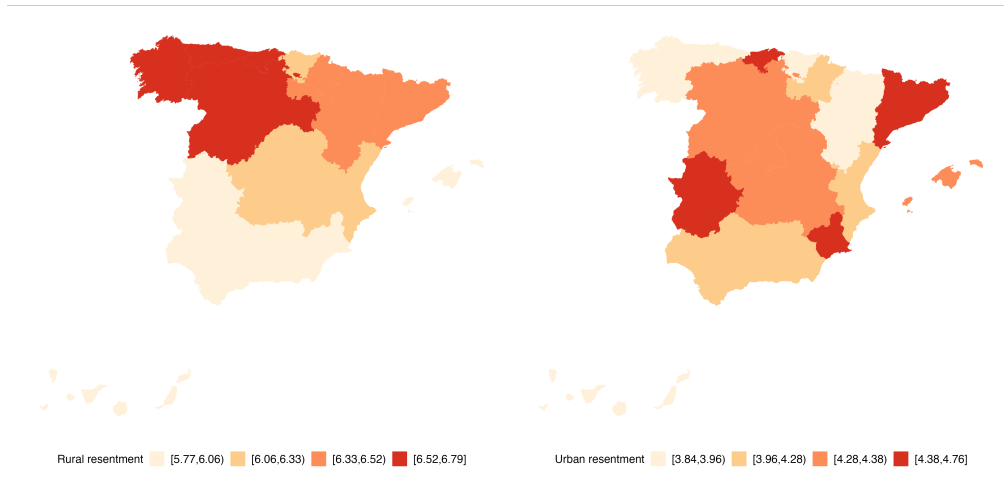
Note: The categories of the map have been developed from the quartiles of the corresponding place-based resentment.

show the highest levels of resentment among urban dwellers. However, it is interesting to note that, of those regions that make up the 'Empty Spain' (i.e. regions where there are higher rates of population loss, a lack of infrastructure that limits demographic recovery and new parties that have adopted narratives against territorial inequality and policies to alleviate depopulation (Sánchez-García and Rodon, 2023)), only Castilla y León is in Q1 for rural resentment. Other regions that were included under the label of 'Empty Spain' such as Aragón or La Rioja are located in Q2. In contrast, we find high levels of urban resentment in Catalonia, Región de Murcia, Catanbria and Extremadura. Particularly interesting is the case of Cantabria which is in Q1 for both rural and urban resentment. Having explored the regional distribution of place-based resentment, we

explore the contextual factors that contribute to the development of this sentiment.

<mark>The Spanish public administrations have not yet uploaded updated data for many variables for 2023, so this part is still under development.</mark>

3.3   What factors can deepen this resentment?

Finally, we shed light on the different factors that can help explain the development of place-based resentment. To this end, we consider it essential to take into account the asymmetry in place-based resentment between rural and urban people shown above. In this regard, we investigate the factors that may mediate the effect of place-based resentment by inhabitant type. Specifically, we explore the effect of three of the variables included in the questionnaire: place-based identity, ideological differences, and concern about depopulation.

First, we run an interaction between place-based identity and the type of municipality on place-based resentment. To measure identity, the survey asked "How important is it for you to define yourself as a member of an 'ingroup_adj'? As we can see in Figure 4, the trends show some parallelism. Nevertheless, in the case of rural dwellers, feeling more identified with the group has a greater effect on place-based resentment than in the case of urban dwellers. Although the gap is not very wide, what is most interesting is to corroborate that in both cases identity with the in-group contributes to the development of resentful attitudes against the out-group. Notable articles such as Munis (2020), Cramer (2016) or Trujillo (2022) ground place-based resentment, as we have seen above, based on SIT. In this sense, we can observe that in the case of Spain, identity contributes to place-based resentment regardless of whether it is rural or urban, but specially in the first ones.

Second, we explore the effect that self-perceived ideological differences by type of inhabitant may have on place-based resentment. To do so, we calculated the differences (in absolute value) between the ideological location the respondent gave to the out-group people and the respondent's own ideological location. For example, in the case of

10

Figure 4: **Interaction plot: Place-based identity X Habitat**
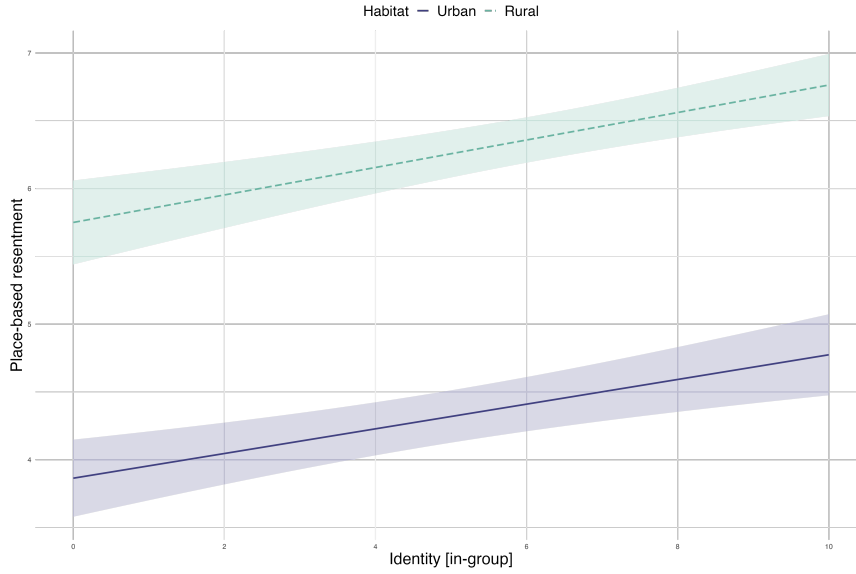
Note: This model uses the same socio-demographic controls as shown in Figure 6.

a rural inhabitant, we calculated this ideological difference as the difference between the ideological location given to the rural inhabitants and his or her own ideological location. So the calculation would be as follows:

$$dif_i = |out\_group\ ideological\ placement - personal\ ideological\ placement| \quad (1)$$

In Figure 5, we show the result of the interaction between ideological differences with out-group and type of inhabitant on place-based resentment. While for rural people, the greater the self-perceived ideological difference with urban people, the higher the place-based resentment, the opposite is true for urban people. We can understand that, in line with Linz's findings, rural dwellers tend to have lower levels of tolerance towards the out-group in an ideological sense and, for this reason, this conditions resentment towards urban areas.

Thirdly, we explore whether concern regarding the issue of depopulation has any differential effect between rural and urban dwellers. As previously mentioned, this is a

Figure 5: **Interaction plot: Ideological differences X Habitat**
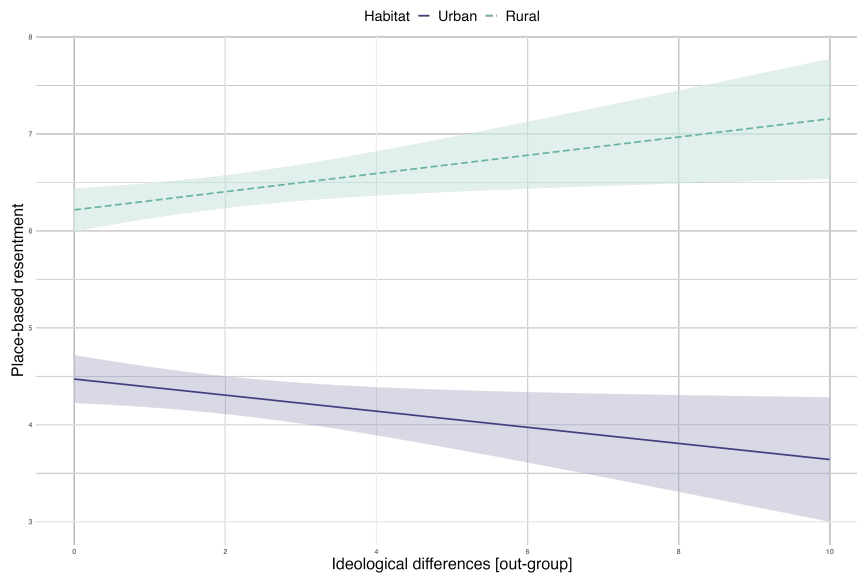
salient issue in the Spanish political debate and, as previous studies have shown, it has an effect on electoral behaviour (Sánchez-García et al., 2024), especially strong in the rural areas most affected by this phenomenon (Sánchez-García and Rodon, 2023). Figure 6 shows the result of this interaction. As can be seen, the trends are clearly divergent. On the one hand, for rural dwellers resentment (against urban areas) is stronger the greater the perceived seriousness of the depopulation issue. On the other hand, for urban dwellers, their resentment towards villages decreases the greater the concern about depopulation. In this sense, we can observe that greater sensitivity to the issue reduces resentment among urban dwellers.

4   Conclusions

Forthcoming

Figure 6: **Interaction plot: Salience depopulation X Habitat**

Habitat — Urban — Rural
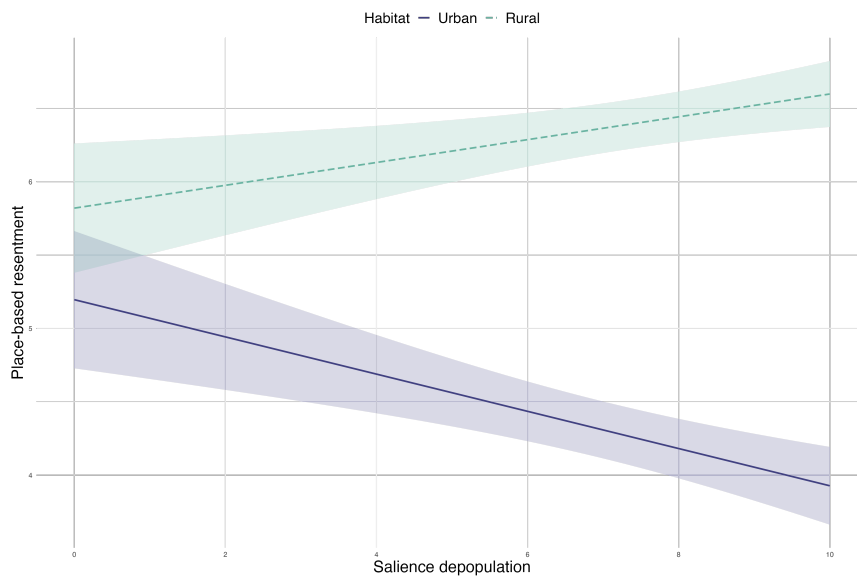
Note: This model uses the same socio-demographic controls as shown in Figure 6.

Notes

¹ La población de las áreas rurales en España supera los 7,5 millones de personas.

²The remaining 46% migrated to municipalities of the same type.

³We use the same statements as Munis (2020) with slight variations concerning the differences between the territorial organisation of the United States and Spain.

References

Agnew, John (1987). *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society.* Routledge.

Banco de España (2021). La distribución espacial de la población en España y sus implicaciones económicas. In *Informe Anual 2020* (Madrid ed.)., pp. 271–318. Banco de España.

Borwein, Sophie and Jack Lucas (2023). Asymmetries in urban, suburban, and rural place-based resentment. *Political Geography 105*, 102904.

Branscombe, N. , N. Ellemers, R. Spears, and B. Doosje (1999). The context and content of social identity threat. In N. Ellemers, R. Spears, and B. Doosje (Eds.), *Social identity: Context, commitment, content*, pp. 35–58. Blackwell Science.

Cramer, Katherine J. (2016). *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker.* London: University of Chicago Press.

De Lange, Sarah , Wouter Van Der Brug, and Eelco Harteveld (2023). Regional resentment in the Netherlands: A rural or peripheral phenomenon? *Regional Studies 57*(3), 403–415.

Gimpel, James G. , Nathan Lovin, Bryant Moy, and Andrew Reeves (2020). The Urban–Rural Gulf in American Political Behavior. *Political Behavior 42*(4), 1343–1368.

González-Leonardo, Miguel , Francisco Rowe, and Alberto Fresolone-Caparrós (2022). Rural revival? The rise in internal migration to rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Who moved and Where? *Journal of Rural Studies 96*, 332–342.

González-Leonardo, Miguel , Niall Newsham, and Francisco Rowe (2023). Understanding Population Decline Trajectories in Spain using Sequence Analysis. *Geographical Analysis*, gean.12357.

Goodwin, Matthew J. and Oliver Heath (2016). The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result. *The Political Quarterly 87*(3), 323–332.

Huddy, L. (2003). Group identity and political cohesion. In D. Sears, L. Huddy, and R. Jervis (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of political psychology*, pp. 511–558. Oxford University Press.

Huijsmans, Twan (2023). Why some places don't seem to matter: Socioeconomic, cultural and political determinants of place resentment. *Electoral Studies 83*, 102622.

Jacobs, Nicholas and B. Kal Munis (2023). Place-Based Resentment in Contemporary U.S. Elections: The Individual Sources of America's Urban-Rural Divide. *Political Research Quarterly 76*(3), 1102–1118. Publisher: SAGE Publications Inc.

Jacobs, Nicholas F. and B. Kal Munis (2019). Place-Based Imagery and Voter Evaluations: Experimental Evidence on the Politics of Place. *Political Research Quarterly 72*(2), 263–277.

Lyons, Jeffrey and Stephen M. Utych (2021). You're Not From Here!: The Consequences of Urban and Rural Identities. *Political Behavior 45*(1), 75–101.

Maxwell, Rahsaan (2019). Cosmopolitan Immigration Attitudes in Large European Cities: Contextual or Compositional Effects? *American Political Science Review 113*(2), 456–474.

Munis, B. Kal (2020). Us Over Here Versus Them Over There...Literally: Measuring Place Resentment in American Politics. *Political Behavior 44*(3), 1057–1078.

Rodden, Jonathan A (2019). *Why cities lose: The deep roots of the urban-rural political divide.* Basic Books.

Rodon, Toni , Josep Maria Raya, and Catalina Llaneza (ur). UnfAirbnb! The effect of short-term letting on electoral behaviour. *Working Paper*.

Sánchez-García, Álvaro and Iván Llamazares (ur). The Crowd Jewel: Rural-urban divide, demographic change, economic decline and the success of the PRR in Spain. *Working Paper*.

Sánchez-García, Álvaro and Toni Rodon (2023). A río revuelto, ganancia de conservadores: un análisis de la despoblación y comportamiento electoral en el corazón de la España vacía. *Revista de Estudios Políticos* (199), 197–224.

Sánchez-García, Álvaro , Toni Rodon, and Maria Delgado-García (2024). Where has everyone gone? The relationship between depopulation and electoral behaviour. *European Journal of Political Research*.

Trujillo, Kristin Lunz (2022). Rural Identity as a Contributing Factor to Anti-Intellectualism in the U.S. *Political Behavior 44*(3), 1509–1532.

Trujillo, Kristin Lunz and Zack Crowley (2022). Symbolic versus material concerns of rural consciousness in the United States. *Political Geography 96*, 102658.

van Leeuwen, Eveline S. , Solmaria Halleck Vega, and Vera Hogenboom (2021). Does population decline lead to a "populist voting mark-up"? A case study of the Netherlands. *Regional Science Policy & Practice 13*(2), 279–301.

A   Data information

B   Complementary materials

Figure B.1: **OLS**