

Rural representation in Europe: The presence of place in national parliaments

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ABSTRACT

Recent research shows a growing rural-urban divide in political attitudes and behavior, which has given currency to expressions like “places that don’t matter” and “rural resentment”. Although these accounts point to a crisis of political representation, the topic has hardly been approached from the theories and methods of the unequal representation literature. Against this backdrop, this paper provides a systematic assessment of biases in place-related descriptive representation in 28 European countries. Using data on legislator biographies and geographic and demographic statistics, we first examine the relative presence of legislators with urban and rural backgrounds in national parliaments, and then assess the extent to which parliamentary composition, in terms of members’ birthplaces, reflects the broader demographic makeup of country populations. Next, we explore how variation in the territorial background of legislators relates to country, party, and individual-level factors. Results show that rural areas tend to be underrepresented in national parliaments when compared to urban ones. Differences in the descriptive representation of rural areas vary in consistent ways with urbanization levels, electoral system features, parties’ characteristic constituencies, territorial embeddedness and ideological orientation, and legislator sociodemographics. The study’s results underscore the need for greater scholarly attention to the representation of place—particularly rural areas—to better understand its potential consequences on symbolic marginalization, feelings of exclusion, and a lack of policies addressing their needs, all of which may fuel political polarization and distrust in democratic institutions.

1. Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a growing interest in the rural-urban political divide. Studies based on the US and Europe reveal significant and growing geographical disparities in the political attitudes and behavior of the residents of big cities and that of voters living in sparsely populated areas (Huijsmans and Rodden, 2025; Kenny and Luca, 2021; Taylor et al., 2024). These are often interpreted as an indication of a crisis of political representation affecting certain territories, particularly rural areas. Newly coined expressions such as “rural resentment” (Cramer, 2016), “places that don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), “left-behind places” (McKay, 2019) or “geography of discontent” (Dijkstra et al., 2020) have gained currency to describe rural citizens’ perception that political elites are letting them down by prioritizing urban interests in terms of resources, power, and values.

While these arguments and concepts clearly point to issues of representation and responsiveness, research has largely failed to integrate the methods and insights provided by the representation literature into

the study of the rural-urban political divide. There is a consolidated body of scholarship that examines the numerical presence of different social groups among elected officials—that is, the *descriptive* representation of political institutions in terms of characteristics such as gender (Wängnerud, 2009), class (Carnes and Lupu, 2015), ethnicity (Ruedin, 2009), or age (Stockemer and Sundström, 2025). However, little is known about the relative presence of people from urban or rural areas among political representatives.

This paper aims to fill this gap by approaching the rural-urban divide in Europe from a *political representation* perspective. Specifically, we seek to assess whether feelings of place-based resentment and being left behind commonly discussed in this literature strand have a descriptive representational basis. In other words, we examine if people from rural areas are less present in national parliaments than people from urban areas. For this purpose, we first provide a systematic assessment of the geographical roots (categorized as being born in urban, rural or intermediate areas) of the legislators of the national parliaments of the 28 (pre-Brexit) European Union member states between 2010 and 2013.

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Second, we explore variation in such place-based descriptive representation across country, party, and legislator-level characteristics. Our analyses draw on a vast array of sources, including secondary data on legislator biographies, party characteristics, and geographic and demographic statistics.

We find a disproportionately higher presence of legislators with urban backgrounds and a disproportionately lower presence of legislators with rural backgrounds compared to the composition of resident populations in most European countries, although there is substantial variation in the extent of unequal representation across national parliaments and party groups. Differences in representatives' place origins are systematically associated with the degree of urbanization of country populations, the type of electoral system, the parties' constituencies, territorial organizational strength and ideological positions, and legislators' gender and age. These findings raise important questions about the symbolic marginalization of rural communities, the diminished responsiveness to their concerns, and the potential erosion of trust and social cohesion.

2. The rural-urban political divide and place-based descriptive representation

The political divide between urban and rural areas has regained prominence in academic debates in recent times. Along with evidence of rural-urban voting disparities in various contexts (see, e.g., [Huijsmans and Rodden, 2025](#); [Lago and Lago-Peñas, 2025](#); [Rodríguez-Pose, 2018](#); [Sánchez-García et al., 2025](#)), research has found substantial place-based gaps in political attitudes. A number of studies suggest that rural dwellers in Western democracies show higher levels of political discontent than urban inhabitants: they have less trust in the political system ([Mitsch et al., 2021](#)) and lower levels of political efficacy ([García del Horno et al., 2024](#); [Rowland et al., 2024](#)), are less satisfied with the functioning of democracy ([Kenny and Luca, 2021](#)), and are more likely to support undemocratic alternatives ([Ballard-Rosa et al., 2023](#); [Zumbrunn and Freitag, 2023](#)).

A recurrent concept in studies on the rural-urban cleavage is that of resentment, in particular rural resentment. Place-based resentment can be defined as the feeling of grievance triggered by one's place of residence, more specifically people's perception of being geographically disadvantaged in terms of the distribution of resources, political influence, and respect to their values and way of life ([Cramer, 2016](#); [Munis, 2022](#)). Recent work has found that levels of place-based resentment are higher among rural inhabitants compared to their urban counterparts ([Borwein and Lucas, 2023](#); [Munis, 2022](#)), which might help explain greater political discontent in rural areas ([Hegewald, 2023](#); [Jacobs and Munis, 2023](#); [Zumbrunn, 2024](#)).

The notion of place-based resentment points to a perceived lack of representation, mainly among rural dwellers. Indeed, a key expression of place-based resentment is the feeling that politicians are dismissive of rural concerns because decisions are made in urban centers, by urban people, for urban interests ([Cramer, 2016](#)). As with higher-income groups ([Gilens, 2012](#)), there is a perception that policies always favor urban dwellers. Survey instruments designed to measure place-based resentment and the related construct of rural consciousness consistently capture perceptions of overt political underrepresentation, as well as distributive and cultural grievances that generate these perceptions of government unresponsiveness toward one's place ([Claassen et al., 2025](#); [Lunz Trujillo and Crowley, 2022](#); [Munis, 2022](#)).

Despite the close link between the concept of place-based resentment and the idea of representation, research on the rural-urban political divide has rarely approached the issue from the perspective, theories, and practices of the political representation literature. A crucial element of political representation is the extent to which political representatives mirror the sociodemographic characteristics of the represented—i.e., descriptive representation. Indeed, one of the key dimensions of descriptive representation is the representation of territories. Most

democracies consider this dimension, which is reflected through a design of electoral constituencies that generally follows geographical criteria ([Rehfeld, 2005](#)). However, this is an issue that has been largely overlooked in the expanding literature on the rural-urban cleavage.

In the analysis of territorial representation, electoral research has primarily focused on the allocation of seats across constituencies and the biases generated by the imbalance between the share of seats elected by each constituency and the share of the population residing in each of them. This bias, known as malapportionment, is frequently justified precisely on the basis of improving the representation of rural territories, as it serves to ensure the voice of less populated areas is heard ([Samuels and Snyder, 2001](#)). This often translates into a representation penalty of urban districts in favor of rural districts ([Simón, 2009](#)). Hence, research on malapportionment indirectly speaks to the rural-urban composition of districts and their relative under/over-representation in parliaments, but not to the rural-urban background of legislators themselves—the fact that more rural districts tend to receive a disproportionate share of seats does not mean that these seats are held by politicians with rural backgrounds.

Another research strand related to geographical representation examines what [Childs and Cowley \(2011\)](#) call the “descriptive representation of the local”, that is, the representation of a territory by someone originating from that territory. This gives rise to the distinction between two types of representatives: the so-called “native sons” (*sic*), those with strong links with the constituency; and “parachutists”, who are sent to represent a district with which they have no ties ([Pedersen et al., 2007](#)). Yet again, that a candidate has roots in a given district does not provide information about her rural-urban origins, since electoral districts frequently include a mix of more and less densely populated areas rather than being uniformly urban or rural.

In contrast to studies on the votes-seats relationship and the “native” candidates research, our paper explores the geographical background of legislators with a special focus on the rural-urban cleavage. This allows us to test some common claims made in the growing literature on geographical resentment and its causes, which are often attributed to the under- and misrepresentation of rural areas. If that is the case, place-based descriptive representation may play a relevant role, and may help us understand place-based resentment among rural dwellers. In fact, the literature on the “politics of presence” ([Phillips, 1995](#)) has frequently considered descriptive representation as a mechanism to integrate traditionally excluded groups into the decision-making process. Descriptive representation may be important in and of itself, but also because it contributes to a better understanding and communication of the needs and demands of social groups ([Mansbridge, 1999](#); [Phillips, 1995](#)). Following this rationale, legislators with rural (or urban, or suburban) roots would share similar life experiences to rural (urban, suburban) residents, and would therefore be in a better position to grasp, convey, and advance their distinctive interests. This could in turn lead to lower place-based resentment.

Our aim is thus to provide a systematic empirical assessment of variations in the rural-urban background of the members of national parliaments across European countries and to explore the factors that might account for such variation. Given the paucity of evidence in this specific domain, our approach is descriptive and our expectations tentative.

3. Place-based descriptive representation

Our starting point is the role that political recruitment may play in the descriptive underrepresentation of rural residents. Political recruitment—the “secret garden of politics” ([Gallagher and Marsh, 1988](#))—is a complex process that goes through separate stages and involves a variety of actors, but it essentially responds to these questions: who selects individuals that have access to positions of power and influence, and how, as well as who gets selected and why ([Norris and Lovenduski, 1994](#)). Although this is a classic issue in political science, it has gained

prominence in recent decades due to the interest in knowing what barriers hinder the access of women and members of certain minorities to high political leadership positions (e.g., [Celis et al., 2015](#); [Kenny, 2013](#); [Mügge, 2016](#)).

Ultimately, recruitment can be explained by supply (the pool of available people willing to run for office) and demand (the choices made by the party selectors and ultimately by the electoral body) factors ([Norris and Lovenduski, 1994](#)). These supply and demand factors, in turn, can operate at three distinct but interrelated levels of analysis: the macro level (political institutions and the social and economic context), the meso level (mainly political parties), and the micro level (including voters and candidates themselves) ([Wängnerud, 2009](#)).

The first and most obvious macro level factor that may influence the descriptive representation of rural areas is precisely related to the proportion of rural dwellers in a country. Generally, one might expect members of national parliaments to come disproportionately from urban areas. National politics happens in big cities, particularly capital cities. This is where most national institutions and political organizations have their headquarters. Likewise, one might expect a larger pool of available and suitable candidates to be found in urban centers, with their higher density of resources, experience, networks, and, probably, political ambition. Most European universities are located in cities and their surroundings, and it is well established that the highly educated are clearly overrepresented in national parliaments ([Best, 2007](#); [Bovens and Wille, 2009](#)). In short, cities offer resources and opportunities that facilitate the development of political careers. Indeed, research in the US finds that candidates for state-wide office originate disproportionately from urban counties and “virtually never emerge directly out of rural areas or small towns” ([Gimpel et al., 2011](#), p. 26). Moreover, this urban bias may become more pronounced for offices that, like national legislatures, confer more power and influence.

Given this premise, the makeup of parliaments will be likely related to the rural-urban composition of the country’s population. We thus expect that the share of rural legislators will be larger in more ruralized countries, not only because there will be a larger pool of candidates from rural areas but because their appeal too will be higher. Research shows that, all else equal, individuals tend to have a preference for people who mirror their characteristics ([McDermott, 2009](#))—a homophily mechanism. Not only will voters prefer candidates who are similar to themselves, but the prevalence of place-based identity should encourage candidates with distinct geographic profiles to run and this, in turn, may also influence party selectors’ preferences. Indeed, several studies suggest that candidates’ geographical origins can shape voters’ attitudes and behaviors. [Key \(1949\)](#) referred to “friends and neighbors” voting—that is, the tendency for politicians with local roots to get higher support in elections. This pattern has been observed across different contexts ([Arzheimer and Evans, 2012](#); [Campbell et al., 2019](#); [Gimpel et al., 2008](#); [Munis, 2021](#)), although more decisively in rural areas, where community ties are stronger ([Blais et al., 2003](#)). We also know that support for local candidates is driven by place-based identity, which happens to be higher and more politicized in rural places ([Bornschier et al., 2021](#); [Collignon and Sajuria, 2018](#); [Fudge and Armaly, 2021](#); [Munis, 2021](#)). In fact, recent experimental evidence shows that place-based appeals have an effect on assessments of candidate likeability and ability to understand their constituents among rural (if not urban) voters ([Jacobs and Munis, 2019](#)). Hence, the greater availability and appeal of rural politicians in more ruralized countries should lead to an increased descriptive representation of this group.

H1. The higher the share of rural population in a country, the higher the share of rural legislators in parliament.

The characteristics of a country’s electoral system provide another set of possible macro-level explanations. An aspect to consider is the size of the legislative chamber, i.e. the number of seats. Due to a compositional mechanism, larger representative bodies just allow more space for the representation of a diversity of traits. Research finds that larger bodies tend to reflect more closely the sociodemographic composition of the population ([Gerring et al., 2024](#)) and offer more chances for the representation of minority groups ([Kjaer and Elklit, 2014](#)). Accordingly, we expect that larger assemblies will favor the descriptive representation of rural areas.

H2. The larger the size of parliament, the higher the share of rural legislators.

Still focusing on the electoral system, conventional wisdom suggests that majoritarian systems are more likely to produce balanced territorial representation. This expectation is largely based on the idea that single-member districts encourage a focus on the personal vote, which may favor the selection and election of local candidates ([Carey and Shugart, 1995](#)). However, it is important to note that balanced geographical representation does not necessarily guarantee equal representation of different types of places, understood as the presence of rural and urban legislators proportional to their population share: a rural MP from a specific territory is also representative of rural voters in other territories. From this perspective, research on the impact of electoral systems on minority representation may offer more valuable insights. The prevailing consensus is that proportional systems are better at reflecting social diversity (e.g., [Lijphart, 2004](#); [Norris, 2004](#)). Single-member districts push parties to nominate the most electable candidate in every constituency, which often disadvantages traditionally underrepresented groups. By contrast, multimember districts allow for a more diverse pool of candidates, with lists appealing to a broader range of voters. While the available empirical evidence is only tangentially related to the rural-urban cleavage, it generally aligns with this reasoning. [Latner and McGann \(2005\)](#) show that even the single-district PR systems of Israel and the Netherlands yield high levels of geographical representation, although slightly overrepresenting the main metropolitan and the most peripheral areas at the expense of midsize regions adjacent to capital cities. [Carella and Eggers \(2024\)](#) find that territorial representation is maximized in mixed electoral systems, although [Haffert \(2024\)](#) finds that urban districts are systematically overrepresented under the German mixed-member system. Overall, we anticipate that systems using multi or mixed-member districts will better support the representation of rural areas.

H3. The share of rural legislators will be higher in PR and mixed electoral systems than in majoritarian systems.

Turning to meso-level factors, rural-urban representation should be affected by the party’s territorial organizational strength and the influence of local party branches on candidate selection at the national level. We expect that parties with stronger local grassroots networks will provide a more balanced territorial representation of legislators. This should be more apparent when parties formally assign local selectorates a prominent role in the nomination of candidates to national legislative elections. Indeed, the territorial decentralization of candidate selection has been shown to benefit geographic representation ([Hazan and Rahat, 2010](#)). However, the influence of a party’s territorial embeddedness should extend beyond the mere presence of formal provisions granting local branches control over national candidate selection. The local party is often the most accessible entry point to a political career, the classical springboard to higher political office ([Schlesinger, 1966](#)). A widespread network of active local sections enables parties to build a large and

geographically diverse pool of members who can be later selected for higher positions, hence facilitating the selection of candidates from more marginal, rural backgrounds (Geser, 1999). Conversely, parties with limited organizational reach across the territory are more likely to recruit primarily from (urban) national power centers. Overall, we anticipate that strong local party organizations will favor the representation of rural areas.

H4. The share of rural legislators will increase with the party's territorial organizational strength.

In a broader sense, rural representation might also depend on parties' political culture and ideological stances (Gauja and Cross, 2015). Parties seek to ensure the representation of specific groups when they perceive it to be electorally beneficial (Hazan and Rahat, 2010). This can lead to differences between party families in their patterns of urban-rural descriptive representation. In most European democracies, mainstream center-right and center-left parties show more widespread geographical support than radical and niche parties (Huijsmans and Rodden, 2025). The latter tend to emerge in urban areas and have greater difficulty penetrating rural areas (Fernández-Gracia and Lacasa, 2018; Vampa, 2024). Due to their larger size, density, diversity, and infrastructure, big cities typically serve as incubators for political protest and radical activism that lead to the emergence of new social movements and parties that tend to be less moderate (Harvey, 2012; Schoene, 2018). In contrast, ideologically moderate, catch-all parties, which appeal to broader electorates, tend to display less extreme positions on all issues, especially on those most divisive across different parts of the territory (Huijsmans and Rodden, 2025). This allows them to permeate and spread throughout the country and deploy a well-developed party infrastructure and apparatus, which enables them to take root in both urban and rural areas.

H5. The more extreme a party's ideology, the lower its share of rural legislators.

On the other hand, there are some parties whose origin and identities are clearly rooted in rural-urban conflicts. This is the case of agrarian parties. These parties, as traditional defenders of farmers' interests and often linked to primary-sector organizations, have enjoyed greater support in rural areas (Rokkan, 1968). When forced to renew themselves in the mid-20th century, they gravitated towards catch-all center positions, but inherited loyalties led them to remain strong in rural areas (Christensen, 1997; Strijker et al., 2015). It is reasonable to expect that parties featuring a strong, distinctive territorial appeal (whether rural or urban) will be more likely to select candidates who align with that identity. Hence, we expect the rural composition of party bases to be related to patterns of rural-urban representation.

H6. The more distinctly rural a party's base, the higher its share of rural legislators.

Lastly, at the individual level, homophily is likely to be a relevant factor to understand the place-based composition of parliaments. Since voters prefer representatives that mirror their characteristics, the sociodemographic characteristics of the individual candidates could play a role in the place-based composition of parliaments. This is relevant when it comes to the rural-urban cleavage because rural communities typically feature larger proportions of elderly and (working-age) male population than cities and suburbs (Edlund, 2005; European Commission, 2024). Hence, older and male candidates may be more likely to originate from rural areas and could ultimately lead to a better descriptive representation of those areas. Even beyond compositional factors, there are reasons to expect that age and gender will be

differently related to the political ambition and the electoral success of candidates in urban and rural areas. There is abundant research showing that stereotypical gender roles are more deeply ingrained in rural settings, hindering women's development of leadership skills, self-identification as leaders, and attainment of leadership positions (McVay, 2016). Accordingly, studies indicate that women in urban areas are more likely to run for office than women in the countryside (Palmer and Simon, 2008). These arguments lead us to our final expectations.

H7. Male legislators will be more likely to have a rural background.

H8. Older legislators will be more likely to have a rural background.

In sum, we expect that descriptive representation of rural and urban dwellers will be related to: macro-level factors such as the distribution of population across habitats or the characteristics of country's electoral systems; meso-level factors related to party characteristics, such as their selection procedures or party cultures; and factors operating at the individual level of candidates and their interplay with voters' homophilic preferences.

4. Data and methods

The measurement of descriptive representation on the rural-urban dimension presents several challenges. Leaving aside the theoretical and epistemological controversies raised around the elusive notion of rurality and its current significance (Cloke, 2006), an extraordinarily diverse range of operational indices and classifications have been proposed, based on a myriad of sociodemographic indicators such as population size, topography, land use, or accessibility to services, alone or in combination (Nelson et al., 2021). An additional difficulty lies in the choice of the geographic units employed to assess rurality, which not only is critically constrained by the readiness of relevant data but may also produce rather disparate results even when the same criteria are applied (Nemerever and Rogers, 2021). Driven by practical and comparability considerations, we rely on level 1 of the Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA) scheme jointly developed by the European Commission and other international organizations (Eurostat, 2021; see also Dijkstra et al., 2021). The DEGURBA methodology classifies small spatial units in a two-stage procedure. First, using a combination of population size and population density thresholds and contiguity rules, each of the cells of a 1 square km population grid overlaid across the EU territory is classified into high, moderate, and low-density cells.¹ Next, based on the proportion of the population living in each class of grid cell, small spatial units are classified into three mutually exclusive classes.

- Cities: spatial units with at least 50 per cent of their population in high-density grid cells.
- Towns and suburbs: spatial units with less than 50 per cent of their population in high-density clusters and no more than 50 per cent of their population in rural grid cells.
- Rural areas: spatial units with more than 50 per cent of their population in rural grid cells.

Henceforth, we refer to these groupings as urban, intermediate, and rural areas, respectively. We apply this classification to local administrative units, or municipalities, that is, the lower-level administrative divisions of countries (such as French *communes*, German *gemeinden*, or Spanish *municipios*).

To assess levels of descriptive representation, the citizens' distribution across rural-urban classes may be compared to the distribution of MPs in the national parliaments (the lower chambers in case of bicameral legislatures). The citizens' distribution is established based on the

¹ The grid cell classification methodology is detailed in Eurostat (2021).

type of area where they reside. For this, we use Eurostat data of the DEURBA classification of municipalities and their population sizes.² Place of birth is used to proxy the parliamentarians' rural-urban adscription.³ We draw on data from the first wave of the Global Leadership Project (GLP), which provides biographical information of individual political leaders in 145 countries between 2010 and 2013, including the birthplaces of members of the national parliaments (Gerring et al., 2019).⁴ We also take advantage of Carella and Eggers' (2024) effort to check, complement and, most important for our purposes, geocode the birthplaces of the legislators in the GLP database. To cover all the member states of the EU, we added data for the members of the Swedish parliament in 2010, checked both databases and, whenever possible, supplemented the missing information or introduced more precise geolocations of birthplaces, to enable the identification of the corresponding municipalities.⁵ We then classified every legislator into an *urban*, *intermediate* or *rural* category, according to the DEURBA classification of local administrative units. The resulting dataset comprises 6,800 legislators across the 28 EU member states (approximately 94 per cent of the total population), with information on their *gender*, *age*, and *partisan affiliation*, along with birth locality.⁶

The legislators' data was complemented with country- and party-level data. To measure the country's *territorial composition*, we include the proportion of the population residing in rural and intermediate areas. The *size of the parliament* is given by the number of seats. We use Carella and Eggers' (2024) classification of *electoral systems* combining constituency structure and the existence of preferential voting, which produces a four-category variable: single-member systems, mixed-member systems, multi-member systems with preferential voting, and multi-member systems without preferential voting. To assess the importance of *local party organizational strength*, we use the V-Party expert-coded assessment of local organizational strength, i.e., the degree

² Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/local-administrative-units>.

³ Obviously, being born in one place does not necessarily imply any special bond to that place. Although alternative criteria may be employed to define the rural-urban background of politicians (including residence, schooling, employment or local service), the benefit of birthplace is that it is a fixed and relatively publicized characteristic, thus providing a clear-cut and comparable rule to define representatives' local roots (Cowley et al., 2024). Note that, while citizens' place is measured based on residence at the time of the election, legislators' is based on birth and hence at different previous time points *before* the election. To the extent that European population has continued experiencing increasing urbanization over the last decades (European Commission, 2024), this will result in an increased (decreased) share of rural (urban) legislators in parliament compared to current population proportions. The implication is that the results presented below are probably underestimating the degree of urban overrepresentation in parliaments. On the other hand, note that our approach does not account for changes in the degree of urbanization of administrative units potentially occurring between the birth of legislators and the time of measurement, due to the lack of information on changes in municipal boundaries over time and urbanization estimates for the corresponding units. Representational similarity is thus assessed against the classification of locales at the time parliaments were elected.

⁴ Available at <https://globalleadershipproject.net>.

⁵ We employed a variety of sources, including the Comparative Legislators Database (Göbel and Munzert, 2022), the EveryPolitician database (<https://everypolitician.org>), the national parliaments' websites, Wikipedia pages, and Wikidata.

⁶ The countries with lowest coverage are Ireland (75 %), Cyprus (75 %), and Sweden (84 %) (see Carella and Eggers, 2024, pp. 48–49). Among MPs with valid birthplace information, rates of missing data are relatively low for gender (1 %), and age (6 %). Legislators born outside of the country ($n = 55$) are excluded from the analyses.

to which party activists and personnel are permanently active in local communities, coded on a scale originally ranging from 0 (negligible) to 4 (widespread) (Lindberg et al., 2022).⁷ This measure enables us to capture territorial variation in the potential influence and power of local party branches, as stronger local party organizations are not only more likely to affect nominations but are also better positioned to advance the careers of their local members. Parties' *left-right placement*, measured on a 0–10 scale using the 2010 CHES (Bakker et al., 2015) and other expert survey data compiled by the ParlGov database (Döring et al., 2022), is introduced along with its square value to account for the potential nonlinear relationship.⁸ We rely on the V-Party data to capture parties' distinct appeal to rural and urban voters (Lindberg et al., 2022). Specifically, parties' rural support is measured by combining two items indicating if experts selected rural working classes (e.g., peasants) and rural middle classes (e.g., family farmers) as groups to which a party's core membership and supporters typically belong to. Similarly, to measure parties' urban support we use two items referring to urban working classes (including labor unions) and urban middle classes.⁹ We also include a dummy identifying *agrarian parties*, following Döring et al.'s (2022) classification.

The empirical analysis is structured into two sections. In the first part, we document the rural-urban distribution of legislators at the country and party levels. In the second part, we estimate a series of models with data at the individual legislator level to test our expectations. Because the dependent variable is whether a legislator has rural, intermediate, or urban roots, we use multinomial logistic regression. To account for the hierarchical nature of the data (i.e., legislators nested within countries), we use multilevel estimation with country random intercepts. Since the availability of information on party and individual legislator characteristics varies considerably, their inclusion affects the number of observations used for estimations. To establish how reduced sample sizes due to missing data might be affecting the results while also making use of all the available information, we use a sequential modeling approach. The first, baseline model includes only country-level variables: the proportion of population residing in rural and intermediate areas (urban areas omitted to avoid perfect collinearity), the four-fold classification of electoral systems, and the size of the parliament. The second model incorporates party-specific characteristics: the agrarian party dummy, ideological position, local organizational strength, and support from rural and urban constituencies. The third model instead adds individual legislator traits: gender and age. The fourth model includes all variables. Tables A1 and A2 of the online appendix show the descriptive statistics and correlations for all the variables used in the analyses.

5. Results

5.1. The territorial makeup of national parliaments

Before examining the models, we first explore the place-based distribution of legislators across countries and political parties. Fig. 1a shows the proportion of legislators with rural, intermediate or urban backgrounds by country (the exact numbers are provided in Table A3 of

⁷ We use the “model estimates” version of V-Party variable v2paactcom, i.e., the point estimates from the V-Dem measurement model, with a scale similar to a Z score (Pemstein et al., 2024).

⁸ While ParlGov left-right placement is available for all parties except for a few rare cases and the independent representatives (97 per cent of the sample with a valid birthplace), V-Party data on local party strength and rural/urban support is a bit less comprehensive (but still covering 90 per cent of the valid sample).

⁹ Specifically, we take the mean of V-Party variables v2pagroup_8 and v2pagroup_9 to measure urban support and the mean of variables v2pagroup_10 and v2pagroup_11 to measure rural support.

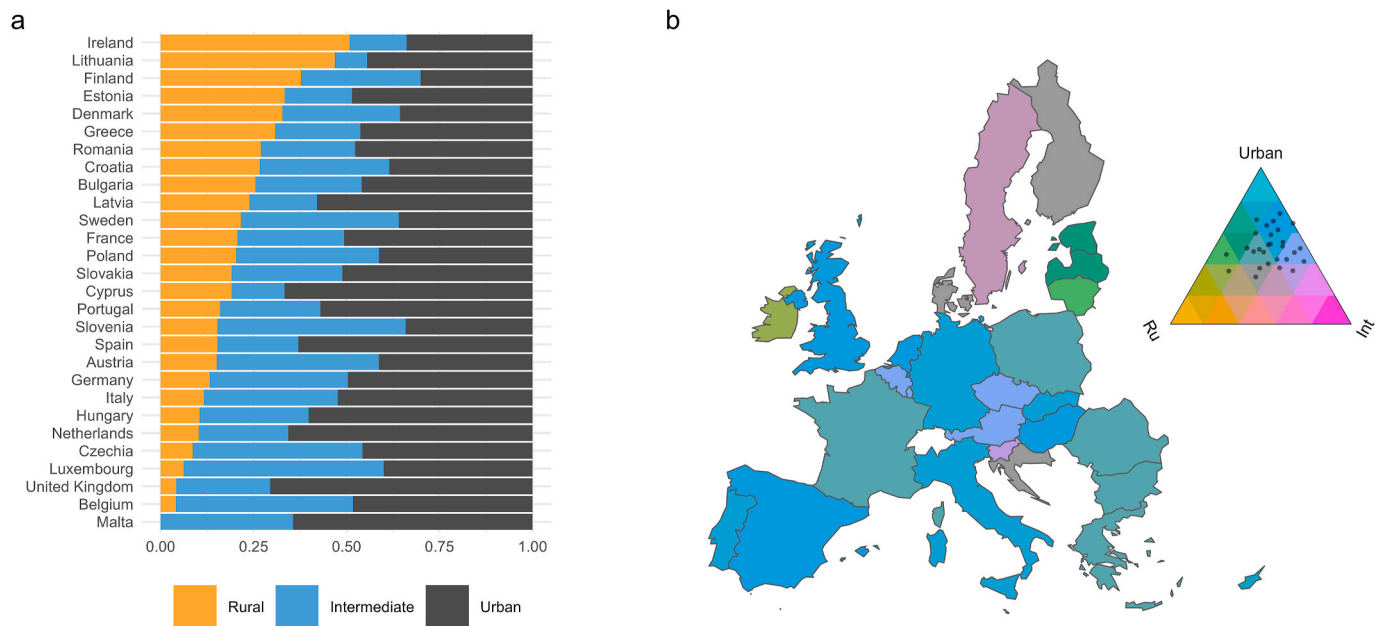


Fig. 1. Rural-urban background of legislators in national parliaments.

(For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

the online appendix). The first thing to note is the considerable degree of cross-national variation in the territorial makeup of parliaments. While urban legislators obtain the highest share in most countries (with 49 per cent on average), their presence varies from 30 per cent in Finland to 71 per cent in the UK. Likewise, legislators with roots in intermediate areas (31 per cent on average), range from 9 per cent in Lithuania to 54 per cent in Luxembourg. But it is the share of rural legislators (20 per cent on average) which varies the most, from none in Malta to four per cent in Belgium to 51 per cent in Ireland.

Fig. 1b maps the distribution of place backgrounds by country using a ternary color scheme—a particularly useful way of displaying differences in three-part compositions (Schöley, 2021). Each place category is mapped to a different primary color, such that each composition is represented by a mixture resulting from the relative shares among the three types of territorial backgrounds. The more pronounced the corresponding color, the higher the share of rural (yellow), urban (cyan), or intermediate (magenta) legislators in the country. By contrast, the more the color tends to grey, the more balanced the composition among the three backgrounds. The latter is most clearly the case of Denmark, Finland, and Croatia. The parliaments of countries such as the UK, the Netherlands, Spain, or Hungary display large majorities of urban MPs with relatively low shares from intermediate and, particularly, rural areas. Legislators from towns and suburbs are distinctly present in Sweden, Slovenia, Austria, Czechia or Belgium, whereas rural legislators stand out in Ireland and Lithuania.

As we expected, a substantial part of this variation can be explained by differences in the countries' demographic composition. Fig. 2 compares legislators' distributions with the population shares residing in the three types of areas in the corresponding countries (see exact numbers in Table A3 of the online appendix). While there exists a clear correlation, the overall pattern is such that rural populations tend to be underrepresented in parliament (a good number of observations fall below the diagonal equality line), whereas urban populations tend to be overrepresented (above the equality line). However, we observe substantial variation in the size of these gaps. The rural gap, for example, is highest in Czechia (−38), Slovenia (−32) and Slovakia (−31) but positive in Cyprus (+14) or Lithuania (+5). If anything, disproportionalities appear to be higher in Eastern Europe and lower in Northern Europe, though it is hard to find a consistent geographic pattern. Nevertheless, the analysis

underscores a prevalent trend of rural underrepresentation across the majority of European parliaments.

To assess the extent to which the territorial background of national parliamentarians reflects the distribution of the population in each country, we calculated a measure of place-based representation in line with the Rose index of proportionality.¹⁰ Levels of place representation vary considerably across our sample. While nearly perfect proportionality is obtained in countries such as Sweden (0.99), Greece (0.98), and Finland (0.97), several countries' scores reveal a remarkable misalignment between population and parliamentary shares, with Czechia (0.62), Slovakia (0.66), and Slovenia (0.68) exhibiting the largest gaps. The average index of place representation is 0.85 (all individual country scores are shown in Table A3 of the online appendix).

Variation is also considerable across parties and party families. Fig. 3 shows the proportion of rural legislators for all parties with at least ten legislators in our sample, with parties grouped by ideological family. It is hardly surprising that agrarian parties, such as the Finnish Center Party (KESK), tend to fare better in this domain. More noteworthy is the low figures generally attained by green parties, such as the German Greens, and radical right parties, such as the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), on average on par with liberal parties. Apart from this, the bigger, more traditional or mainstream party families exhibit a great deal of internal variation and negligible systematic differences between them.¹¹

¹⁰ This index of place representation (IPR) is obtained with the following formula:

$$IPR = 1 - \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^n |r_i - p_i|$$

where r_i and p_i are, respectively, the share of legislators and the share of the population in category i of the DEGURBA classification. The index may vary from 0 to 1, with higher values denoting more proportional representation (for equivalent measures of representation, see Gerring et al., 2024; Ruedin, 2009).

¹¹ Section B of the online appendix includes the equivalent figures for legislators coming from intermediate and urban areas, respectively. Average differences in the presence of MPs with roots in intermediate areas across party families are relatively small, with Christian-democratic and radical-right parties showing a slight edge and communist parties occupying the last position. Urban legislators are most common within communist and green parties and, unsurprisingly, least common within agrarian parties.

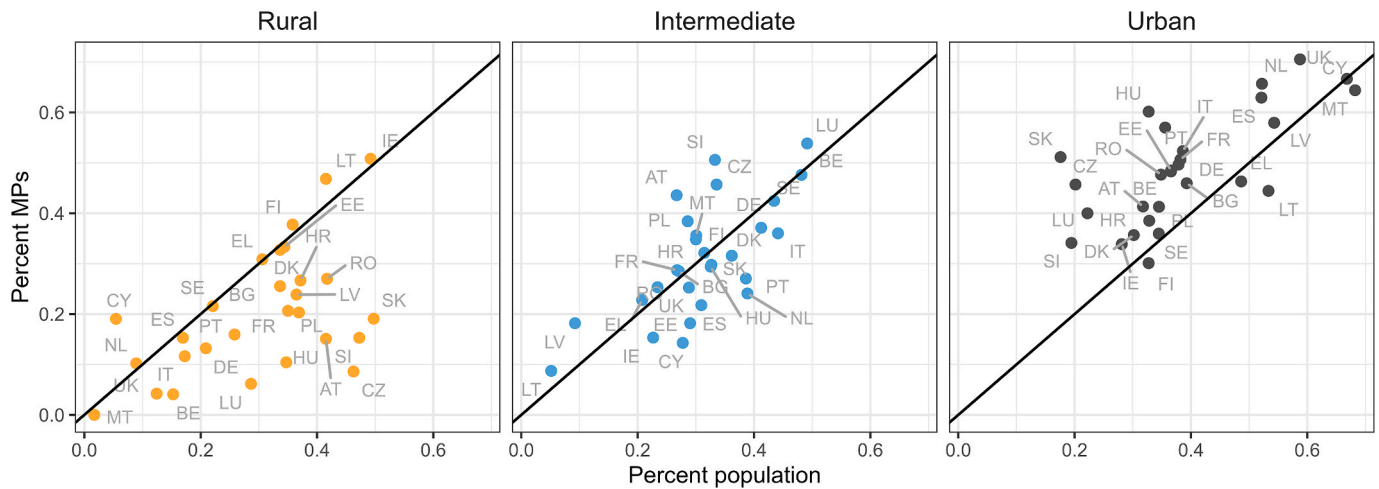


Fig. 2. Rural-urban background of legislators compared to population shares.

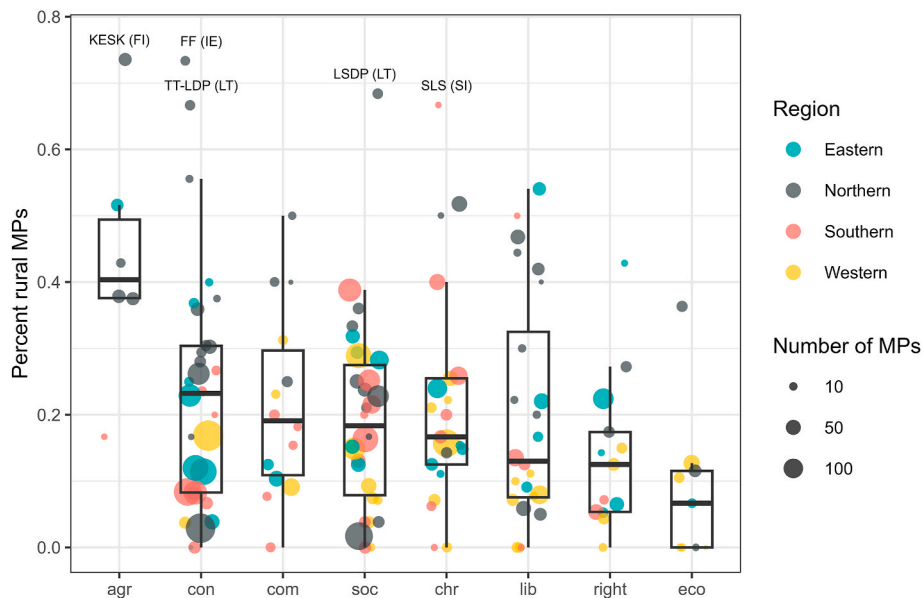


Fig. 3. Percent of rural legislators by party.

Note: Party families as defined by Döring et al. (2022): agr = Agrarian; con = Conservative; com = Communist/Socialist; soc = Social democracy; chr = Christian democracy; lib = Liberal; right = Radical right; eco = Green/Ecologist. Only parties with at least five observations in our sample are included. Regions: Eastern = BG, CZ, HU, PL, RO, SK; Northern = DK, EE, FI, IE, LV, LT, SE, GB; Southern = CY, ES, GR, HR, IT, MT, PT, SI; Western = AT, BE, DE, FR, LU, NL. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

5.2. Correlates of legislators' origin

We next turn to the results of our multivariate models. Table 1 presents the estimates of four models where the background of legislators is regressed on different combinations of country, party, and legislator-level characteristics, with urban background as the baseline category. Focusing first on country predictors, results across all models confirm the link between the rural-urban distribution of the population and the composition of parliaments, in line with H1. Based on the estimates of the fully specified Model 4, Fig. 4 shows the predicted share of legislators from each place category over different values of rural and intermediate population, holding other variables at their observed values. For example, results indicate that the difference between a country with 10 per cent of rural population (approximately the 10th percentile in our country sample) and one with 40 per cent (90th percentile) would represent an 11-point increase in the share of rural legislators and a 9-point increase in the share of legislators with intermediate roots—and

consequently a 19-point decrease in the share of urban legislators. On the other hand, an equivalent shift in people residing in intermediate areas would result in a 25-point increase in the share of intermediate legislators but a 17-point decrease in rural legislators.

Counter to H2, the size of legislative chambers does not appear to be associated with MPs' backgrounds. On the other hand, the estimates suggest that legislative composition does seem to vary across electoral systems, even though the estimated differences are subject to considerable statistical uncertainty. As shown in Fig. 4, the proportion of urban legislators is higher in single-member systems, particularly compared to systems using multimember districts and preferential voting (14 percentage points higher according to Model 4). Conversely, systems using multimember districts show an increased proportion of rural legislators. The presence of legislators from intermediate areas remains relatively stable across different electoral systems. On the other hand, results point to largely indiscernible differences between mixed and multimember systems with or without preferential voting. Overall, the estimates lend

Table 1

Country, party, and individual correlates of legislators' birthplace.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Rural				
Rural population	3.570*** (1.026)	3.840*** (1.095)	3.502*** (1.049)	3.779*** (1.111)
Intermediate population	-2.628+ (1.423)	-2.533+ (1.517)	-2.353 (1.461)	-2.427 (1.545)
Seats	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Electoral system (ref. Single member)				
- Multimember+ PV	1.137+ (0.582)	1.160+ (0.622)	1.282* (0.597)	1.337* (0.631)
- Multimember no PV	1.050+ (0.580)	1.022+ (0.617)	1.136+ (0.594)	1.144+ (0.625)
- Mixed member	0.821 (0.526)	0.809 (0.561)	0.947+ (0.540)	0.930 (0.569)
Agrarian		0.817** (0.288)		0.851** (0.304)
Left-right		0.291* (0.120)		0.187 (0.126)
Left-right squared		-0.032** (0.011)		-0.022+ (0.012)
Local party strength		0.150** (0.048)		0.155** (0.050)
Rural support		1.110*** (0.275)		1.181*** (0.283)
Urban support		-0.256 (0.248)		-0.315 (0.262)
Male			0.223* (0.088)	0.239* (0.094)
Age			0.037*** (0.004)	0.036*** (0.004)
Constant	-2.538** (0.797)	-3.548*** (0.914)	-4.668*** (0.844)	-5.395*** (0.961)
Intermediate				
Rural population	2.346*** (0.485)	2.395*** (0.427)	2.323*** (0.497)	2.339*** (0.443)
Intermediate population	3.953*** (0.696)	3.959*** (0.619)	3.962*** (0.722)	3.912*** (0.658)
Seats	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Electoral system (ref.: Single member)				
- Multimember+ PV	0.231 (0.244)	0.279 (0.202)	0.243 (0.250)	0.298 (0.212)
- Multimember no PV	0.031 (0.238)	-0.017 (0.188)	0.029 (0.242)	-0.015 (0.196)
- Mixed member	-0.037 (0.217)	-0.057 (0.173)	-0.026 (0.222)	-0.041 (0.182)
Agrarian		0.611* (0.271)		0.684* (0.285)
Left-right		0.227* (0.090)		0.180+ (0.092)
Left-right sq.		-0.020* (0.008)		-0.015+ (0.009)
Local party strength		0.091** (0.032)		0.096** (0.033)
Rural support		0.203 (0.208)		0.214 (0.214)
Urban support		0.089 (0.176)		0.092 (0.183)
Male			0.136* (0.068)	0.121+ (0.072)
Age			0.006* (0.003)	0.007* (0.003)
Constant	-2.632*** (0.365)	-3.399*** (0.405)	-3.004*** (0.404)	-3.674*** (0.450)
Variance components				
Rural	0.289** (0.096)	0.324** (0.112)	0.303** (0.102)	0.332** (0.116)
Intermediate	0.040+ (0.022)	0.018 (0.016)	0.041+ (0.022)	0.021 (0.017)
Observations	6800	6125	6354	5723
Countries	28	28	28	28

Note: Multilevel multinomial logit models with country random intercepts. The dependent variable is the degree of urbanization of the MP birthplace (reference category: Urban).

+ $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

support to H3, though caution is warranted due to the limited country sample, especially the small number of countries with majoritarian systems.

Turning now to party-level predictors, the results of Models 2 and 4 indicate that local party organizational strength correlates positively with the proportion of legislators from rural and intermediate areas, in accordance with H4. As shown in Fig. 5, the likelihood of having urban origins is up to 15 points lower for the MPs of parties with stronger organization at the local level. Consistent with H5, Models 2 and 4 confirm that parties at both extremes of the ideological continuum are more likely to favor urban legislators, whereas politicians with rural and intermediate backgrounds are more frequent among parties holding moderate positions (see Fig. 5). Although this pattern is somewhat weaker in Model 4, the results of the differences remain statistically significant according to the joint test. As predicted in H6, parliamentarians' background is strongly and consistently associated with the nature of parties' group support. Parties identified by experts as having rural dwellers among their typical members and supporters are more likely to select rural candidates, at the expense of urban candidates. As shown in Fig. 5, the predicted likelihood that a legislator has rural roots increases from 16 per cent, when the party does not have a distinct rural appeal, to 32 per cent, when it does. By contrast, expert-coded urban appeal bears no relationship with legislators' provenance. In line with what we observed in Fig. 3, the results also corroborate that agrarian parties are more likely to select candidates with rural—and intermediate—backgrounds at the expense of urban candidates. As Fig. 5 illustrates, agrarian parties display a more balanced presence of legislators with different backgrounds, while urban backgrounds clearly dominate over intermediate backgrounds, and these over rural backgrounds, among other party families.

As for the individual characteristics of legislators, we find that male legislators are slightly more likely than women to have roots in rural and intermediate areas, in line with H7, while age is strongly positively associated with rural backgrounds and negatively with urban backgrounds, in line with H8 (see Fig. 6). Based again on the estimates of Model 4, the probability that an 80-year-old legislator comes from a rural community is 25 percentage points higher than that of a 20-year-old legislator.

We estimated additional models to assess the robustness of these findings. First, because countries have experienced substantial urbanization over the last decades, the territorial distribution of the population at the time of measurement will likely differ from the distribution when legislators were born. To account for these compositional changes, we replicated Model 4 of Table 1 including an additional variable that captures the percentage of urban population in the country at the time when each MP was born.¹² The results, reported in Model 1 of Table C1 of the online appendix, show a moderate correlation between the MPs' origin and legislator-specific historical figures of urban population, such that MPs are less likely to have a rural background the higher the level of urbanization of the country at their birth year. Importantly, accounting for this variable does not substantially alter our main findings.

Second, we included the level of instruction of legislators as an additional individual predictor. As previously noted, highly educated elites dominate national legislative bodies, and educational opportunities are concentrated in urban areas. We would thus expect that legislators with higher levels of education are less likely to have a rural background. Unfortunately, the information available on this trait in the GLP dataset is much sparser, leading to a substantial reduction in sample size.¹³ With this caveat in mind, we replicated Model 4 of Table 1 with the addition of MPs' educational level (see Model 2 of Table C1 of the

¹² Yearly estimates of country urban populations were obtained from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019).

¹³ Specifically, including this variable reduces our sample by approximately 900 observations and forces us to exclude three countries entirely (Cyprus, Portugal, and Sweden) due to missing data.

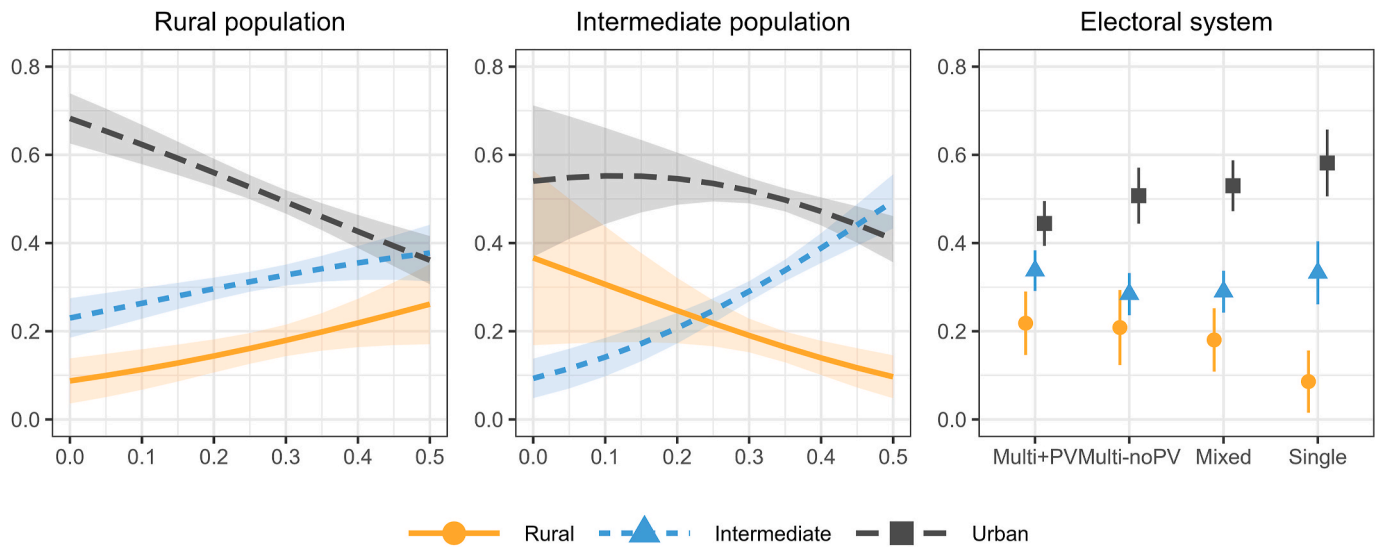


Fig. 4. Country characteristics and legislators' background
Note: predicted probabilities based on the estimates of Model 4 in Table 1.

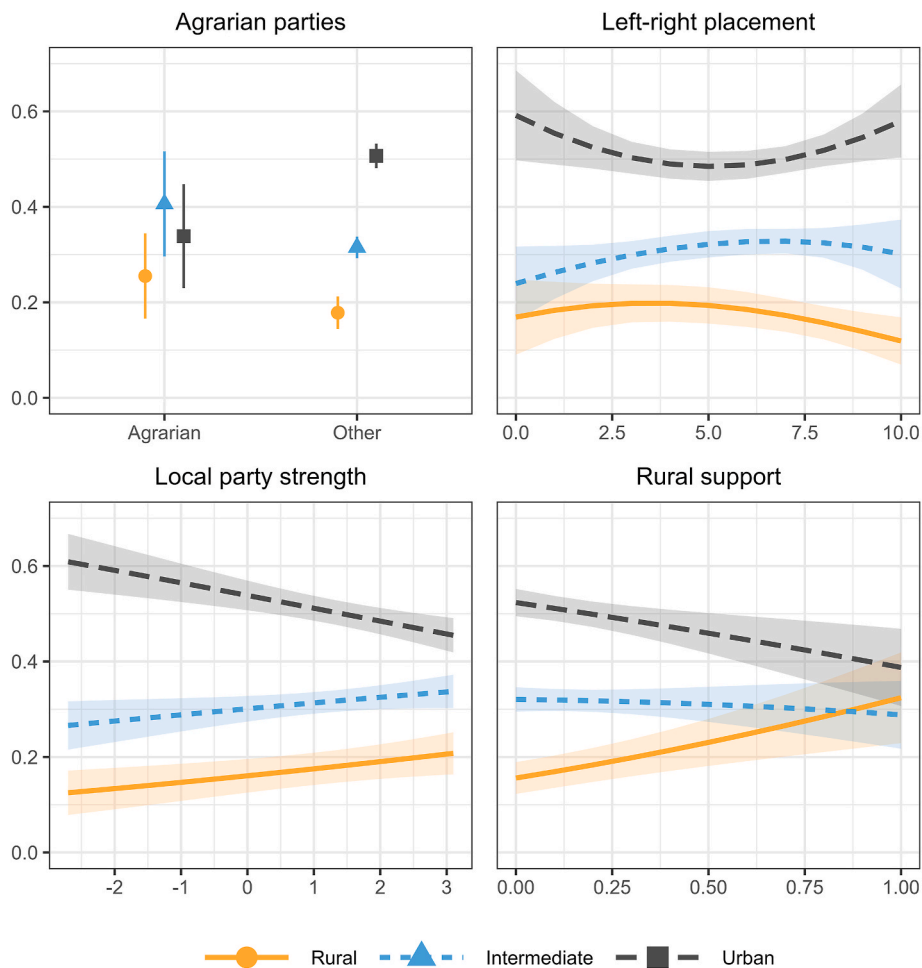


Fig. 5. Party characteristics and legislators' background
Note: predicted probabilities based on the estimates of Model 4 in Table 1.

online appendix). The estimates indicate that, compared to the less educated, legislators with a university or postgraduate degree are significantly more likely to have an urban background. This model yields similar results for the remaining variables except for the

coefficient of agrarian parties, which is substantially reduced in size and becomes nonsignificant. To explore whether this difference is due to the inclusion of the education variable or the loss in sample size, Model 3 of Table C1 replicates the analysis *without* the education variable but

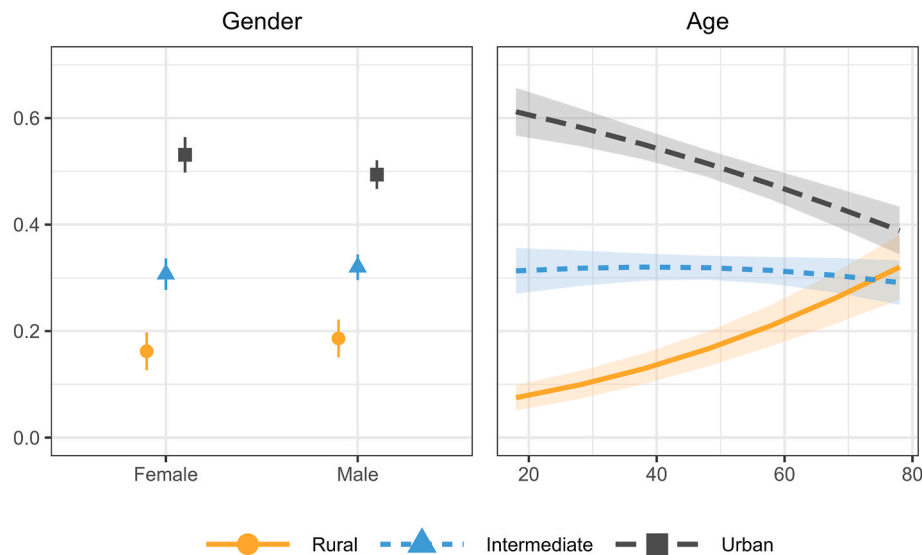


Fig. 6. Individual characteristics and legislators' background
 Note: predicted probabilities based on the estimates of Model 4 in Table 1.

holding the same analytic sample as Model 2. The estimates suggest that the latter might likely be the case, as the coefficient for agrarian parties remains substantially smaller and nonsignificant with this limited sample, even if education is not controlled for.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This paper sought to bring together the emerging scholarship on the rural-urban political divide and the established literature on political representation. To this end, we examined patterns of descriptive representation along the rural-urban dimension in European countries using data between 2010 and 2013. Our analysis revealed a clear place bias in the composition of national legislatures. While urban populations tend to be overrepresented, rural populations are disproportionately underrepresented in most instances (as assessed by legislators' birthplace). We also found that the extent of place bias among legislators varies in ways consistent with some, if not all, of the expectations stemming from neighboring research strands. The share of rural legislators increases with the size of the rural population and is also higher in PR and mixed systems than in those using single-member districts. Apart from agrarian parties and others with a distinct appeal in rural areas, ideologically moderate parties and those with stronger local party organizations appear to be more likely to promote rural representatives. Male and older legislators are more likely to have rural origins. Hence, there is significant variation in the descriptive representation of rural and urban areas across Europe, and this variation is consistently related to demographic and political factors.

Our paper draws on multiple datasets that we combine and extend to explore rural-urban variation in descriptive representation. The results of the empirical analysis, which align with most of our theoretical expectations, attest to the validity of our measurement and indicators. However, this study has only scratched the surface of geographical representation. Its limitations may thus serve as a base for further theoretical and empirical developments. For example, future research should revise the critical elements of the proposed methodological approach, particularly in terms of both the geographic classification and the individual identification criteria we used to classify legislators. Firstly, while the DEGURBA scheme seeks to effectively and reliably distinguish between areas with fundamentally different population concentrations and characteristics, the classification of municipalities into three broad categories potentially masks a considerable degree of internal heterogeneity (e.g., a municipality with just over 50 per cent of

its population in urban centers is classified as a city, as is one with nearly 100 per cent). In our case, we prioritized the use of a recognized, internationally comparable, policy-relevant measure. Yet future research should explore the sensitivity of our results to the application of alternative thresholds and more granular classifications, while bearing in mind the statistical constraints imposed by the limited sample of legislators in national parliaments. It should also be noted that our operationalization of rural and urban backgrounds is limited by the absence of consistent historical data on urbanization at the local level. Specifically, the reclassification of nonurban areas into urban areas over time means that some legislators categorized as having urban backgrounds may, in fact, have been born in areas that were nonurban at the time of their birth. Addressing this limitation in future research could refine our understanding of how geographical origins shape representation. Another significant shortcoming, common in the expanding literature on the rural-urban divide, is the insufficient theorization of intermediate areas, i.e., towns and suburbs. Rather than merely existing as transitional spaces between rural and urban poles, these communities have developed a distinct identity and status, often with significant political implications (see, e.g., [Brookes and Cappellina, 2023](#)). This calls for more thorough research and theoretical development focused on the particularities of these increasingly relevant intermediate areas.

Secondly, our study ultimately builds on the assumption that legislators born in certain types of places descriptively represent voters living in those places. This choice is driven not only by data availability but also by extensive evidence of the lasting influence of personal experiences during formative years (e.g., [Gimpel et al., 2003](#); [Glenn and Hill, 1977](#); [Jennings et al., 2009](#); [Krosnick and Alwin, 1989](#); [Levin, 1961](#)) and, more specifically, the relevance of place of birth on the behavior of elected officials (e.g., [Carozzi and Repetto, 2016](#); [Emrich et al., 2025](#); [Mattos et al., 2021](#)). It has been shown that rather than being restricted to political decisions affecting specific birth localities, the effects of "birthplace favoritism" extend to areas sharing similar geographic characteristics—as evinced by the recent finding that legislators' support for agricultural protection is informed by the agricultural composition of their place of birth ([Emrich et al., 2025](#)). Nevertheless, birthplace remains an imperfect proxy for local roots and experiences, highlighting the need to develop and test more precise and reliable operationalizations. Archival and survey data about the geographical trajectories and place-based attachments of candidates and legislators should be collected to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of politicians' place-based representativeness.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present study contributes to both the literature on the rural-urban political divide, by pointing to new ways to explore the factual bases of rural resentment, and the literature on political representation, by exposing a largely overlooked dimension of representational gaps. Methodologically, we provided a preliminary approach for the conceptualization, operationalization, and analysis of political representation from a place-based perspective, which will hopefully encourage and guide further research in this area. Substantively, our findings indicate that people from rural areas may have a basis to feel that their rural peers are underrepresented in national chambers.

These findings have relevant implications for our understanding of the rural-urban divide and its potential impact on modern democracies. First, the underrepresentation of rural citizens in descriptive terms may contribute to their symbolic marginalization, fostering a perception of invisibility and disregard of their needs and lifestyles. This dynamic could further deepen feelings of exclusion and alienation among rural communities, challenging the idea of equality in processes of policy-making and representation.

Second, while descriptive representation in itself may be normatively and empirically relevant, a critical concern underlying the issue of unequal presence of social groups among the political elite is the extent to which representatives are being responsive to the represented. Generally, one could assume that descriptive representation promotes substantive representation, by improving the quality of deliberation and enhancing communication, especially in contexts of intergroup mistrust (Mansbridge, 1999). When rural citizens are underrepresented, public policies may exhibit a bias favoring urban perspectives, making it easier to overlook the views and needs of rural inhabitants in decision-making processes. This imbalance could result not only in a lack of policies tailored to address rural challenges but also in the dominance of urban viewpoints when politicians discuss or address complex issues. For example, debates over environmental policies—from energy transitions to wildlife protection—often prioritize perspectives associated with urban constituencies, while failing to adequately consider the concerns of rural communities where such policies have a more direct impact and impose significant local costs (Arndt et al., 2023; Diamond, 2023; Firle, 2018). Future work should analyze if the lack of descriptive representation of rural areas may also lead to a failure to advance their interests. Is biased descriptive representation along the rural-urban dimension associated with rural-urban gaps in substantive representation? That is, are political institutions less responsive to rural residents if politicians come disproportionately from urban areas?

Third, all these dynamics could contribute to the growth of resentment among rural citizens. Feelings of exclusion and symbolic marginalization, coupled with a lack of policies addressing rural concerns, can erode trust in political institutions and fuel a sense of political inefficacy (García del Horno et al., 2024). This sense of alienation can further erode social cohesion and increase political polarization along the rural-urban divide. However, our results point to several mechanisms that may mitigate rural underrepresentation and, ultimately, prevent the development of such resentment. For example, strengthening the territorial presence of political parties in rural areas or adopting electoral systems that better reflect the diversity of constituencies could provide viable solutions to reduce the gap. These measures could help ensure that rural citizens feel more directly connected to the political process, which may improve their engagement and trust in democratic institutions.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Guillem Rico: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rubén García del Horno:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Investigation, Data curation. **Enrique Hernández:** Writing – review &

editing, Validation, Resources, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.102962>.

Data availability

The data and code are available at <https://doi.org/10.34810/data2417>.

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