

Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal of Research and Creative Activity

Volume 8
Number 1 *Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal*

Article 12

October 2022

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Recommended Citation

Steyermark, J. (2022). Interpreting Global Urban-Rural Political Divides: A Literature Review. *Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal of Research and Creative Activity*, 8(1). Retrieved from <https://orb.binghamton.edu/alpenglowjournal/vol8/iss1/12>

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Interpreting Global Urban-Rural Political Divides: A Literature Review

Introduction

The notion of an urban-rural political divide is no strange concept to observers of contemporary American politics. Every November, the partisan rift between America's progressive metropolises and their conservative hinterlands is placed into sharp relief as news anchors manipulate brightly colored electoral maps, pivoting between isolated, deeply Democratic urban centers and the Republican rural expanse that comprises most of the country's land area. This phenomenon—the “urban left, rural right” dichotomy—is not universal, however: in Spain, for instance, the urban-rural divide is far less clear cut, and in some Scandinavian countries, the situation is effectively reversed, with left-wing (and centrist) parties overperforming in rural areas. What factors, then, condition urban-rural political divides across different institutional, cultural, and historical contexts? Moreover, how do contemporary political realities and enduring historical legacies interact to shape these divides? By examining the scholarly insights of political scientists, sociologists, and geographers through the lens of several instructive national case studies, this literature review highlights the longevity of political cleavages and suggests a partial explanation for cross-national variation in the character of the urban-rural divide that elevates the role of agrarian politics.

The Socioeconomic & Cultural Demographics of the Urban-Rural Divide

Before looking to historical legacies for an explanation of contemporary partisan geographies, it is necessary to investigate the degree to which present-day socioeconomic or cultural cleavages account for geographic disparities in support for political factions or parties. The scholarship paints a complex picture on this point, although the overall impression across a variety of national contexts is that present-day demographics do not fully explain current partisan

geographies, including, where it exists, the urban-rural divide. In their examination of the social bases of the urban-rural divide in the United States, Kelly and Lobao (2019) find that the urbanness of a voter's community is highly predictive of his or her partisan loyalties, even after controlling for socioeconomic characteristics such as educational attainment, income, and employment sector. On the other hand, they find that the relationship between urbanness and political persuasion disappears after accounting for *cultural* attributes such as race (Black, Hispanic, or White) and religiosity (church affiliation and frequency of attendance); unsurprisingly, Christian fundamentalism is associated with Republican Party support, and minority racial status predicts support for the Democratic Party.¹ In other words, Kelly and Lobao find that the partisan divide between urban and rural areas represents little more than a reflection of the geographic stratification of various cultural attributes. According to this model, to the extent that modern demographics do matter, cultural factors—namely race, religion, and “cosmopolitanism”—offer greater explanatory power than economic factors.

These findings, however, differ from those of Scala and Johnson (2017), who define the urban-rural continuum with higher specificity and subject its association with partisanship to a similar battery of controls. In their analysis of presidential election results from 2000 to 2016, an American county's placement along the urban-rural continuum continues to explain a significant component of its partisan makeup, even after accounting for an array of socioeconomic and cultural factors, including income, race, and religion.² Looking beyond the US national context, Van Hamme et al. (2017) show that measures of current wealth, economic development, and other socioeconomic characteristics fail to explain recent spatial distributions of leftist support

¹ Paige Kelly and Linda Lobao, “The Social Bases of Rural-Urban Political Divides: Social Status, Work, and Sociocultural Beliefs,” *Rural Sociology* 84, no. 4 (2019): 690.

² Dante Scala and Kenneth Johnson, “Political Polarization along the Rural-Urban Continuum? The Geography of the Presidential Vote, 2000-2016,” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 672, no. 1 (2017): 179.

across Western Europe. Although the latter study notes the strong correlation between religious denomination and party support (Catholics are, in general, less likely to support left parties), the authors underscore the decreasing importance of religious practice throughout most of Western Europe.³ Taken together, these results raise the possibility that some mechanism associated with place—and with the urban-rural dimension in particular—shapes contemporary partisan geographies independently of current socioeconomic and cultural trends.

Historical Legacies and Geographic Partisanship

As Scala and Johnson briefly insinuate, there may be an “invisible” cultural component to the urban-rural divide—perhaps a civic-minded cosmopolitanism versus a traditional, individualistic rusticism—that fails to reveal itself in terms of readily measurable social attributes.⁴ This might help explain the transmutation of urban political movements to include an emphasis on progressive social issues as the political discourse has taken on an increasingly postmaterialist tenor, but the question remains why old left-wing parties typically overperform in cities when socioeconomic demographics no longer appear to justify such an outcome. To answer this question, Rodden (2019) and Van Hamme et al. (2017) examine the historical partisan geographies that arose at the height of industrialization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They find similar, unmistakable patterns in both the United States and Western Europe: contemporary leftist geographies closely track the spatial distribution of salient economic and cultural cleavages during the period between the start of the Second Industrial Revolution until the around Great Depression.⁵ Van Hamme et al. explain this “geographic

³ Gilles van Hamme et al., “The Electoral Geography of the Left in Western Europe Since 1945: Permanencies and Changes,” *Journal of Economic and Human Geography* 109, no. 2 (2017): 284.

⁴ Scala and Johnson, “Political Polarization along the Rural-Urban Continuum?” 163.

⁵ Van Hamme et al., “The Electoral Geography of the Left in Western Europe,” 282.

crystallization” of party support using the concept of *hysteresis*, which refers to the persistence of a social phenomenon long after the disappearance of its initial causes.⁶

Rodden adduces a number of interrelated mechanisms to explain the left’s contemporary dominance in urban America. At the most fundamental level, early labor mobilization was especially prevalent in those places that had been heavily industrialized by the turn of the twentieth century—mostly urban areas in the Northeast. Labor socialists, realizing that their movement could not compete as a viable third party even in these locations, ultimately coalesced with the Democratic Party; their inability to go it alone resulted from America’s rigid bipartite model of political competition.⁷ This process established a Democratic foothold in America’s cities as the party of the working poor, although rural interests—especially Southern segregationists—remained an important component of the Democratic coalition. Then, the Democratic party’s popularity in urban manufacturing centers continued to surge during the Great Depression as FDR’s New Deal solidified the party’s dominance among the working-class electorate. Transformed by industrialization, America’s cities now contained an abundance of low-income housing stock that continued to attract poor migrants (both domestic and international) even after the decentralization of heavy industry. At the same time, familial political identification, established party institutions, incumbency, and the tendency for strategic politicians to choose the party of traditional local dominance have all helped maintain the Democratic Party’s strength in cities.

Critically, Rodden claims that the increasing importance of *Gesellschaft*-oriented values (i.e., cosmopolitanism) in cities due to the shift towards postmaterialist politics encouraged the Democratic Party to emphasize social progressivism in conjunction with its redistributive

⁶ Van Hamme et al., “The Electoral Geography of the Left in Western Europe,” 282.

⁷ Jonathan Rodden, *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 56-59.

economic policies. Together with the Northern Democrats' strategic pivot in favor of Civil Rights, this paradigm shift allowed a resurgent Republican Party to capture the Southern rural electorate that had once formed part of the core of the Democratic coalition. In today's post-industrial economy, highly educated liberals located in metropolitan "centers of innovation" coalesce with the working poor in those cities to support a Democratic Party that espouses their cosmopolitan cultural perspective.⁸ In this way, the legacy of the industrial revolution continues to define American leftist geographies despite the transformation of the cleavage structures that produced those geographies.

While their argument is less complex, Van Hamme et al. propose a similar narrative linking the geography of left-wing support in Western Europe to industrial-era cleavages. Specifically, they show that old, densely populated manufacturing areas lend greater support to left-wing parties than locations without an industrial legacy. They note that this relationship is complicated by the influence of Catholicism on working-class sentiments in countries and regions where the nation-building process pitted a traditionalist Catholic Church against a modernizing state apparatus; in Germany, for example, manufacturing centers in the Catholic south became conservative strongholds, whereas those in the Protestant north followed the usual trend of socialist labor activism.⁹ In aggregate, though, the presence of early industrial manufacturing is more predictive of current left-wing partisanship than are modern socioeconomic factors. Van Hamme et al. ascribe this striking continuity to essentially the same set of factors as Rodden: familial partisan loyalty across generations and local political institutions such as labor unions, youth movements, campaign apparatuses, and uninterrupted

⁸ Rodden, *Why Cities Lose*, 78.

⁹ Van Hamme et al., "The Electoral Geography of the Left in Western Europe," 284.

local incumbency.¹⁰ Much like in the United States, these transmission mechanisms translate into continued left-wing dominance in urban areas despite changing demographics.

There is, however, a significant difference between the American political context and that of most Western European countries: the electoral system. For legislative elections, most European countries use some form of proportional representation (PR) rather than single-member district plurality (SMDP; also known as “first-past-the-post”), which is the system used in the United States. The relevance of this distinction to interpreting urban-rural political divides lies in the fact that PR systems are widely understood foster the emergence of a greater number of electorally viable parties than SMDP. Under proportional representation, the distribution of legislative seats to political parties roughly mirrors the proportion of individual votes earned by each party, whereas under SMDP, a given political unit is divided into constituencies that each elect a single representative, and parties can only gain seats in constituencies where they are able to earn a plurality of votes. The result is that SMDP incentivizes political movements to assimilate into two large, opposing political coalitions, as supporters of would-be third parties flock to the “next-best option” that can reasonably be expected to earn a plurality of the vote share.¹¹

As Rodden points out, the United States’ presidential system amplifies and nationalizes the inclination for political groups to coalesce into two opposing parties, as the political discourse centers itself around the highly salient presidential contests. One consequence of America’s SMDP/presidential electoral framework is that educated, cosmopolitan liberals and the urban working poor are institutionally wedded together under the Democratic Party banner,

¹⁰ Van Hamme et al., “The Electoral Geography of the Left in Western Europe,” 283.

¹¹ William Riker, “Duverger’s Law Revisited,” in *Electoral Laws and Their Political Consequences*, ed. Bernard Grofman and Arend Lijphart (New York: Algora Publishing, 2003), 19-42.

even though it is far from clear that the two groups' economic interests are aligned.¹² In most European countries, on the other hand, these two demographics are not locked into a seemingly paradoxical electoral coalition. In a segment on the Niskan Center's *The Science of Politics* podcast, Rodden discusses the importance of electoral rules in either reinforcing or subverting the urban-rural political divide.¹³ Nordic countries, he posits, may not exhibit such a strong relationship between urbanness and leftism because of the proportional representation systems used in those countries, which allow for the expression of more granular political preferences within geographic communities. Although many highly educated European liberals do support traditional social democratic parties—which, as stated, have generally transformed into proponents of more cosmopolitan, less materialist notions of social justice—others vote for distinctly postmaterialist left parties (namely, the Greens), or they instead support classical liberal parties, which are typically categorized as centrist. Indeed, some of the national cases mentioned below provide support for the notion that the prevalence of liberal and green parties in PR systems serves to dampen the observed intensity of the urban-rural divide.

The Agrarian Connection

If bygone industrial-era cleavages continue to shape the contours of partisan electoral geography, the often-overlooked realm of agrarian politics offers important insights when comparing different manifestations of rural versus urban partisanship. To that end, Kane and Mann (1992) develop a “theory of agrarian politics” that aims to capture the nuanced cleavages that defined agrarian political orientations during the early twentieth century. Their theory includes a conceptual framework of agrarian class that distinguishes between wealthy estate farmers, small- and dwarf-holders, and landless laborers, with each group possessing a distinct

¹² Rodden, *Why Cities Lose*, 56-59.

¹³ “Explaining the Urban-Rural Political Divide,” *The Science of Politics Podcast*, Niskanen Center, <https://www.niskanencenter.org/explaining-the-urban-rural-political-divide/>.

set of class-based interests. The politics of estate farmers and landless laborers were fairly clear-cut: wealthy landowners lent their support to conservative parties that protected status quo property rights, while the “agricultural proletariat,” typically resistant to the mobilization efforts of radical factions, remained politically dormant except in areas characterized by landlord absenteeism, where they were inclined to support the radical left.¹⁴ The orientation of landed peasants was far more complex, and it is through them that some significant geographic variation in rural politics came about. On the one hand, they derived their livelihood from their landed holdings and therefore sought to preserve traditional property rights. However, they also faced credit exploitation from bourgeois financiers as well as monopolistic pricing from equipment manufacturers and transportation companies, which put them into conflict with the capitalist class.¹⁵ To complicate matters further, sectoral economic concerns often arrayed agrarian interests of all shapes and sizes against the industrial sector, especially when food price controls or international agricultural competition threatened to squeeze the agricultural sector, broadly defined.¹⁶

Given the complex spate of factors underlying early agrarian politics, Kane and Mann identify several historical pathways for peasant partisanship depending on the relative balance of these competing considerations within a given region. As far as leftist electoral geography is concerned, peasant politics were more likely to take on a “class populist” flavor in areas where there was a comparatively large concentration of dwarf-holders, where traditionalist or anti-centralist factions (e.g., the Catholic Church) did not reinforce sectoral divides between agriculture and industry, and where market conditions did not create an intense conflict of

¹⁴ Anne Kane and Michael Mann, “A Theory of Early Twentieth-Century Agrarian Politics,” *Social Science History* 16, no. 3 (1992): 425-428.

¹⁵ Kane and Mann, “A Theory of Early Twentieth-Century Agrarian Politics,” 427-430.

¹⁶ Kane and Mann, “A Theory of Early Twentieth-Century Agrarian Politics,” 430.

interest between the agricultural and industrial proletariats. Under such circumstances, peasant smallholders became “potential allies” of industrial socialists against politically weak *ancien regimes*. In Germany, most peasant movements trended rightwards by forming a sectoral alliance with large landowners to bring about agricultural protectionism; on the contrary, in Scandinavia—where dwarf-holders constituted a sizable portion of the rural electorate, religious and ethnic divisions did not reinforce sectoral divisions, peasants’ products remained competitive on the global marketplace, and heavy industry itself was less concentrated in urban areas—successful peasants’ parties emerged and formed cautious alliances with the social democratic/labor parties of the working class.¹⁷

The different political paths taken by German and Scandinavian peasants in the early 1900s continue to make an imprint on the electoral geographies of the two countries. Although the relationship between urbanness and left-wing vote share is not quite as stark in Germany as in the United States (thanks in large part to the pervasive influence of Catholicism in southern Germany), Laux and Simms (1973) show that in 1972, the Social Democrats won virtually all of the single-member constituencies in the urban areas of the heavily industrialized Ruhr Valley, whereas the Christian Democrats performed significantly better in rural areas with an agrarian legacy.¹⁸ Conversely, the Nordic Centre Parties (formerly known as agrarian parties) and the Social Democrats tend to overperform in rural areas, reflecting the institutionalization of agrarian class populism and rural leftism in these countries. This pattern holds throughout most of Scandinavia and Finland, and Michaud et al. (2021) provide a particularly illuminating analysis of the Swedish case. Drawing from the “cultural field hypothesis,” which, like the concept of hysteresis, states that geographic voting patterns are closely linked to “politico-cultural history,”

¹⁷ Kane and Mann, “A Theory of Early Twentieth-Century Agrarian Politics,” 443.

¹⁸ H. D. Laux and A. Simms, “Parliamentary Elections in West Germany: The Geography of Political Choice,” *Area* 5, no. 3 (1973): 168.

they identify four primary geographic voting profiles in Sweden: the (rural) North community, the Urban community, the Rural South community, and the Far South community. In the Sweden's northern rural community—which, according to Kane and Mann, contained a larger number of dwarf-holders during the critical period of cleavage formation¹⁹—the Social Democrats and the Left Party perform extremely well. Figure 1 shows the combined electoral performance of the left-wing parties in Sweden's 2006 general election; their strong performance in rural districts, particularly in the north, is striking. Meanwhile, the Centre Party remains highly successful in the rural areas of the south; this is where fewer peasants historically supported the Social Democrats, although their political movement did form important coalitions with the left.²⁰ As is the case elsewhere, these partisan geographies persist even though the underlying socioeconomic character of the landscape has undergone profound changes. Thus, while the German case approximates the global norm of an urban left versus a rural right, the Nordic case illustrates the historical circumstances under which this norm can be broken.

Spain serves as another valuable example of a country that contravenes the “typical” urban-rural divide, as its unique political history offers clarity into the processes that sustain partisan geographies over extended time periods. In their study on the legacy of agrarian politics in Spain, Domenech and Sanchez-Cuenca (2021) demonstrate that early agrarian support for socialist and communist parties was particularly strong in rural areas characterized by a high degree of inequality in land ownership as measured by the number of landless laborers in the 1860 census.²¹ In similar fashion to the argument laid out by Hamme et al., they show that present-day levels of economic inequality in the same regions do not fully explain the continued

¹⁹ Kane and Mann, “A Theory of Early Twentieth-Century Agrarian Politics,” 424.

²⁰ Jérôme Michaud et al., “A Spatial Analysis of Parliamentary Elections in Sweden 1985-2018,” *Applied Network Science* 6 (2021): 17-18; Kane and Mann, “A Theory of Early Twentieth-Century Agrarian Politics,” 424.

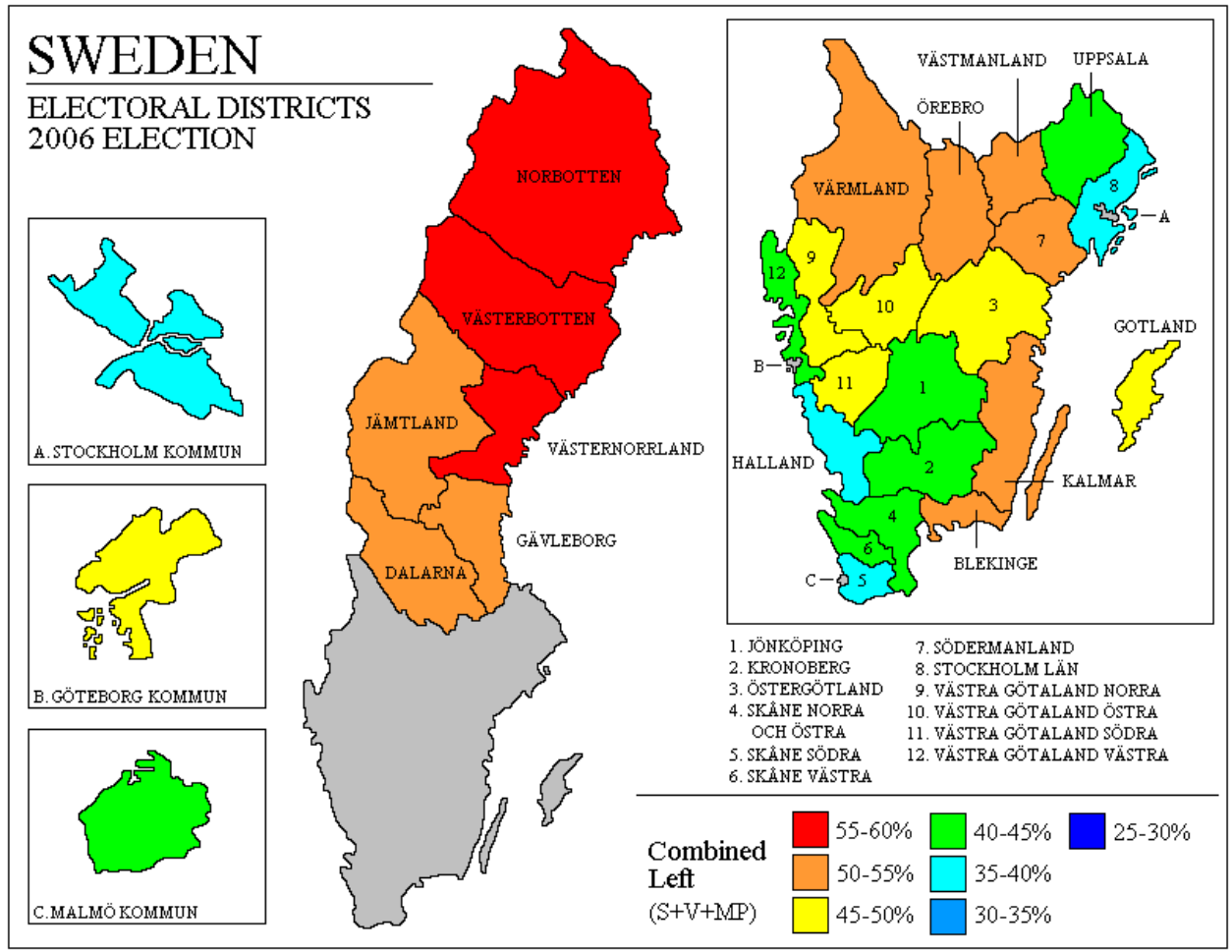
²¹ Jordi Domènech and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, “The Long Shadow of Agrarian Conflict: Agrarian Inequality and Voting in Spain,” *British Journal of Political Science* (2021): 8.

popularity of the left in those areas.²² Finally, they present survey data showing that, in areas with legacies of agrarian inequality, respondents' parents were more likely to support the communist government during the Spanish Civil War, and that there is a strong correlation between an individual's political leanings and the side taken by his or her parents during the war.²³ The fact that such a robust relationship exists after four decades of fascism—a period during which the government systematically uprooted existing left-wing institutions such as labor unions—suggests that the familial pathway is especially critical in maintaining historical partisan geographies across generations. As Figure 2 shows, this manifests itself in the form of continued support for the left in largely rural districts, particularly in the south and parts of Catalonia.

²² Domènech and Sánchez-Cuenca, “The Long Shadow of Agrarian Conflict,” 12.

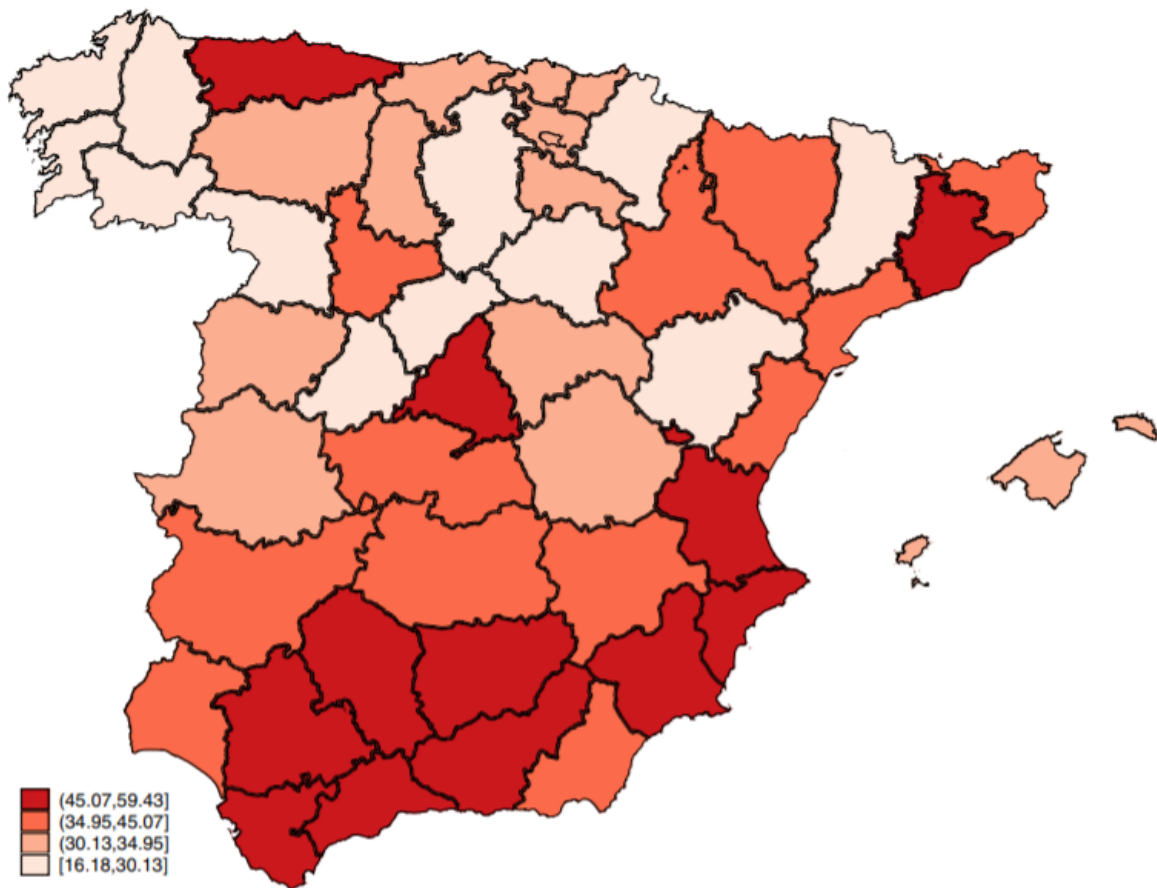
²³ Domènech and Sánchez-Cuenca, “The Long Shadow of Agrarian Conflict,” 15.

Figure 1. Electoral Performance of the Combined Left in the 2006 Swedish General Election.



Source: Adam Carr, *Psephos: Adam Carr's Electoral Archive*, <http://psephos.adam-carr.net/countries/s/sweden/sweden2006maps.shtml>

Figure 2. Electoral Performance of Socialist and Communist Parties in the 1977 Spanish General Election.



Source: Jordi Domènech and Ignacio Sánchez -Cuenca, “The Long Shadow of Agrarian Conflict: Agrarian Inequality and Voting in Spain,” *The British Journal of Political Science* (2021).

Conclusion

The urban-rural political continuum takes on a constellation of shapes and flavors according to variations in both institutional and historical circumstances. While the partisan geographies of today partially reflect extant socioeconomic and cultural disparities between the city and the countryside, the literature on historical and political geography reveals that they also largely track the cleavage structures that emerged during the advent of “mass politics” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, while electoral rules can certainly influence the character and intensity of the urban-rural divide, cases like Germany show that the association between urbanness and support for left-wing parties can be quite intense even in a country with a parliamentary system and proportional representation. Where applicable, Rodden offers a partial explanation for the crystallization of leftist party support by focusing on the political evolution of cities, but a more expansive review of the literature leads to the conclusion that the realm of early agrarian politics also goes a long way towards explaining the interaction between the left-right and urban-rural dimensions. The Nordic countries and Spain offer a glimpse into the role played by the intersection of early agrarian and industrial class cleavages: in countries where the expansion of suffrage empowered peasant smallholders who had not been co-opted by anti-statist or traditionalist factions, leftist (or at least class-conscious) agrarian movements paved the way for marked rural support for left-wing and centrist parties in the modern era. Finally, there appear to be several mechanisms that perpetuate geographical partisan loyalties past the point when such divides can be “organically” sustained by concrete demographic characteristics. The Spanish case highlights the importance of cross-generational familial partisanship, and it is probable that localized partisan loyalties are often embedded in other ways, such as sustained campaign apparatuses and the sheer power of uninterrupted incumbency. The future application

of Domènech and Sánchez-Cuenca's investigatory approach to other national contexts may shed light on the relative influence of the various mechanisms that help crystallize geographical partisan divides, whether they be along the urban-rural axis or any other regional dimension.

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