

# **The Urban-Rural Divide and Residential Contentment as Antecedents of Political Ideology**

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We explore the foundations of the well-documented urban-rural political gulf in the United States and other western democracies, theorizing that it is anchored in the variable extent of residents' satisfaction and place attachment. Consistent with a long tradition of sociological findings, we first demonstrate that attachment to one's neighborhood of residence is much higher among rural populations than in big cities. This variation in place attachment is ultimately an important font of political and policy attitudes, accounting for the gaping ideological differences between urban and rural areas. Politically relevant grievances arise most acutely when they are shared, as prevailing conditions in specific social environments. The more dissatisfied one is with the place they live, the more attractive they find the policy goals and political agenda of liberal progressivism in US politics. Greater contentment with place, on the other hand, is predictive of politically conservative viewpoints.

Aesop's fable of the city mouse and the country mouse has been told for centuries with slight variations across many cultures. The gist of the story is that the country mouse visits the city mouse and dines on an opulent dinner. But that dinner is interrupted by extreme danger. In some versions, the feast is interpreted by a pair of mastiffs, and in other versions, it is a cat. The country mouse regards the opulence of the feast as unworthy of the constant violence and fear that the city mouse must endure. The lavish lifestyle is not worth a life in constant fear, and so the country mouse retires home. His parting words to the city mouse are, "Good-bye, my friend, I have no love / For pleasure when it's mixed with fear."<sup>1</sup> In a version of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the country mouse says that "I'd rather gnaw a bean than be gnawed by continual fear." This age-old fable rings true today. With the trappings of urban life come disadvantages in security.

Here we puzzle over whether the empirical evidence supports the social science logic in this fable. Likewise, we explore whether different levels of place attachment influence individuals' orientations towards governments and the actions they take. Classical sociological theory has regularly accentuated the problematic aspects of city life (Park 1915; Wirth 1938; Shaw and McKay 1942), with recent studies underscoring the disorder and unhappiness found in cities (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente 2021; 2020; Okulicz-Kozaryn and Mezelis 2018; Jargowosky and Park 2009; Cullen and Levitt 1999; Sampson and Wilson 1995). Even so, certain economic advantages of dense population settlements are also well known, including the sharing of knowledge and the attraction of a diverse talent pool (Florida 2005). Many people are drawn to living in dense urban environments. They report finding cities exciting, resource-abundant, and offering opportunities and choices not found in sparsely populated locales (Glaeser 2012). The findings across several social science fields suggest that urban discontent

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/type0112.html>

may be widespread but not universal (Carlsen and Leknes 2022; Glaeser 2020). Perhaps big cities offer advantages to select populations. At the same time, there remains a current of discontent that has a longstanding impact on differentiating the political demands of urban populations from that of citizens living elsewhere (Florida 2017).

We explore the contrast between urban, less urban, and rural areas by examining the extent to which populations express varying degrees of attachment to the places where they live. Place attachment is a major component of life satisfaction (Scannell and Gifford 2017a; 2017b; Fried 1984, 82). Our argument, anchored in decades of social scientific observation and research, is that variability in how policy demands arise across the geography of the national political party system is related to the degree of place attachment residents express for the locations they reside. Discontent with where one lives fuels demands for political change. In contrast, locations with largely contented populations press a less demanding policy agenda, centering more on preserving present conditions. Suspicion is inevitably directed by the contented toward the discontented, producing political competition around which political partisanship is formed and reinforced. Discontent may lead to progressivism in public policy, embraced in the US context in contemporary times by the Democratic Party, while contentment may promote conservatism, embraced by Republicans.

We begin by setting forth the concept of place attachment. We use survey instrumentation to measure it in a national population and then examine the variation in place attachment across locations of variable population concentration. Then we test the impact of place attachment on self-reported liberal-conservative ideology. Even after controlling for other familiar covariates of political ideology, if people are unhappy with where they live, they are more likely to be a policy progressive than a conservative.

First, though, the evidence reveals that residents' sense of place attachment is lower in big cities than in smaller towns and rural areas. More people express dissatisfaction when they live in large cities, and many more express the desire to leave if they could. In rural areas and small towns, there is greater contentment with and commitment to place. Rural inhabitants more regularly report not wanting to leave and missing it when they are away. Residents consistently express a liking for their communities, their neighbors, and greater satisfaction with their lives than those living elsewhere. We first contrast place attachment between urban and rural residents before turning to how that attachment shapes political ideology.

### **Place Attachment and its Importance**

Place attachment, as measured by contentment, satisfaction, and identification with where one lives, is studied because of its relevance to a broad range of outcomes considered important to social stability and individual well-being (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974). Place attachment is an affective bond people develop to a location where they would like to remain. It is associated with fitting into a community and possessing a sense of belonging. Importantly, place attachment is a bond with a particular physical geographic space or territory. This attachment involves regular social interaction with the co-residents of that territory and a familiarity with them that they will not have with people living elsewhere. A sense of membership and allegiance is also stamped by shared values and norms that form a community consensus, sometimes labeled *culture*. People attached to the places they reside are acquainted with this consensus and largely live in accord with it, reflecting a commitment (Pollini 2005).

Across a variety of measures of place attachment implemented in several fields of social science, empirical findings have been mostly consistent. Though individual studies vary

somewhat, stronger senses of place attachment have been found in populations that are less dense, more homogeneous, containing more families with children, with residents of higher socioeconomic status, longer residential tenure, and older age (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974; Riger and Lavrakas 1981; Sampson 1988; Lewicka 2011).

Not surprisingly, living close to friends and family usually yields a greater sense of place attachment (Morse and Mudgett 2018). Place attachment can be disrupted by an individual's voluntary or forced relocation, high levels of mobility within the community, and events such as floods and fires that destroy communities and property (Brown and Perkins 1992). Criminal activity, a sense of insecurity and disorder from living in a neighborhood, undermines place attachment (Wirth 1938; Sampson 1988; Taylor 1996; Brown, Perkins and Brown 2004; Swaroop & Morenoff, 2006). The social environment of a place has a more significant impact on sense of attachment than the physical attributes of the locale. No one develops a high attachment to an unsafe and disorderly area just because it is walkable with many open spaces.

Low levels of place attachment, one might describe as place *dis-attachment*, are also associated with the classical sociological phenomenon of *alienation* (Seeman 1959). This term has a well-developed sociological history (Marx 1971; Marx and Engels 1978; Simmel 1990) and is meant to capture several unattractive but common facets of life in modern societies: powerlessness and a low sense of efficacy, normlessness, meaninglessness, self-estrangement, and isolation (Finifter 1972; Seeman 1959; 1975; Silver 2019). A sense of uncertainty about where one fits in the world and habitual doubts about one's future may accompany a sense of powerlessness and monotony. Employment is alienating, lacking opportunity for advancement and reward (Blauner 1964; Seeman 1971; Lewicka 2011).

After establishing the link between urbanness and place attachment, we investigate the relationship between place attachment and political behavior, as gauged by measures of ideology, which reflects public policy demands. More specifically, we expect the variability in contentment with place to mirror the political and policy demands of populations. For instance, the kind of social disquiet and unhappiness found in locations with persistently low place satisfaction may translate into calls for aggressive government action to ameliorate the sources of discontent. The party of government intervention in the social and economic sphere has typically been the party of the left.<sup>2</sup> We hypothesize that those expressing the most discontent with their locations are more likely to express support for policy positions supported by liberals and progressives. Because discontent about place is not simply a reflection on one's own, possibly unique, circumstances, it calls out for changes that a more assertive government can bring about. These findings elucidate the causes of the urban and rural political divide in American politics (Gimpel et al. 2020; Gimpel and Reeves 2022).

### **Contemporary Urban-Rural Differences in Place Attachment**

Given previous findings about the negative relationship between population concentration and place satisfaction (McKnight et al. 2019; Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente 2020), we turn to examine differences along the contemporary urban-rural continuum. How much difference do we see in the level of place attachment from the largest densely developed cities to the most sparsely settled fields and pastures? A well-developed sociological literature predicts very high levels of discontent and alienation in large cities and far higher levels of contentment and satisfaction in rural areas, even controlling for obvious covariates such as income. Once we

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<sup>2</sup> There are exceptions as left-right labeling does not always reliably map policy differences.

understand the sources of satisfaction with one's geographic locale, we evaluate how place attachment can help explain political outcomes such as policy preferences.

From the perspective of political science, variation in place attachment is relevant to explanations of the patterning of political partisanship and political ideology across regions, cities, communities, and neighborhoods. This is because place attachment is a measure of contentment with the current situation at the location of residence. Policy demands for change are anchored in discontent, but grievance can have its roots in many sources. Not all discontents emerge as policy demands. One may attribute unhappy circumstances to something that has no policy remedy, such as a personal choice made entirely under one's control. Not every individual choice leading to an unpleasant outcome has a policy remedy.

The grievances that surface in policy demands are likely to originate well outside one's control, for example, in the broader society or economy, where individual agency is limited. One of these is the sense that the place one is living is unsatisfying along some basic dimension, not living up to expectations, not providing the opportunity to fulfill needs, and not where one would prefer to live if she had a choice. Myriad reasons may lie behind why one might conclude that the place she lives should be different than it is, leading to demands for government action. These might include better security through more policing and other strategies for crime reduction; government action to provide a cleaner and healthier environment; demands for less costly but resilient housing; government action to provide greater income security, employment, or educational opportunity; policies aimed at mediating conflicts that arise between competing status groups or subcultures sharing a space; and/or demands that authorities adjudicate circumstances of unequal treatment. All such interventions aim to address the complaint-generating deficiencies anchored in the lived experience of particular locales. These are

conditions, often linked to widespread public discord, that do not typically lie within one's own capacity to remedy. Hence, the outcry for the government to step in and do something.

Notably, however, the undercurrent of disharmony and restlessness about one's place is not uniformly present across every location, nor will it be expressed by every person within the same place. Exposure to grievance-inducing circumstances will vary, as will the propensity to complain. Our view is that exposure to the risk of grievance rises chiefly with the volume of human interaction, which is why discontent runs so much higher in urban areas than it does outside them. Cities are also breeding grounds for societal grievances arising from intergroup competition for status, yielding greater conflict in settings with a diversity of identity groups. As these conflicts are given voice through their politicization, they are transformed into policy demands by groups, parties and candidates, generating an ideology of government activism and intervention in the most urbanized areas of the country (Valente et al. 2020; Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente 2020). Urban agitation for more government will stand in contrast to the fewer grievances voiced in more sparsely populated, less diverse locales. Not coincidentally, greater place attachment is associated with a conservative posture toward government involvement and stoicism when it comes to expressions of complaint (Sniderman and Brody 1977). Help-seeking is less likely to turn in the government's direction as fewer problems are translated into policy demands. This does not necessarily mean that rural areas and small towns have no problems, only that these are less likely than in other places to be viewed as a government responsibility.

### **Measuring Place Attachment**

In seven CCES surveys between 2006 and 2020, we included a battery of six questions aimed at gauging attachment to place (Stedman 2002). Respondents were prompted first to think



of the area within about a mile of their location of residence. The order of the questions was randomly displayed to the respondents:

- This area is a reflection of me
- I would move somewhere else if I could
- This is my favorite place to be
- I really miss it when I am away too long
- I feel happiest when I am here
- I don't really fit in with the people who live here

Respondents were asked to rate, on a five-point Likert scale, whether they 'strongly disagree,' 'disagree,' 'neither agree nor disagree,' 'agree' and 'strongly agree' with each statement. The items that showed the most positive scores in agreement, indicating greater place attachment, were those for "I feel happiest when I am here," and "I really miss it when I am away too long." The item with the lowest score, indicating disagreement is "I don't really fit in with the people who live here" suggesting that, on average, most people agree that they do fit in with the people where they live. To be sure, many respondents apparently do not have especially strong feelings of place attachment and indicated "neither agree nor disagree" in response to these questions. Even so, the mean response to the questions tipped slightly toward agreement or disagreement in all but one case, "I would move somewhere else if I could," where the distribution was centered in the middle of the five-point scale ( $sd=1.30$ ).

Table 1 presents the mean values for each survey instrument. Additionally, we divide the respondents into quartiles based on the population density of their ZIP code (Panel A) and quartiles based on distance from a city with a population of at least 100,000 (Panel B) and report the mean value of place attachment for each group. Some respondents hail from extremely sparse

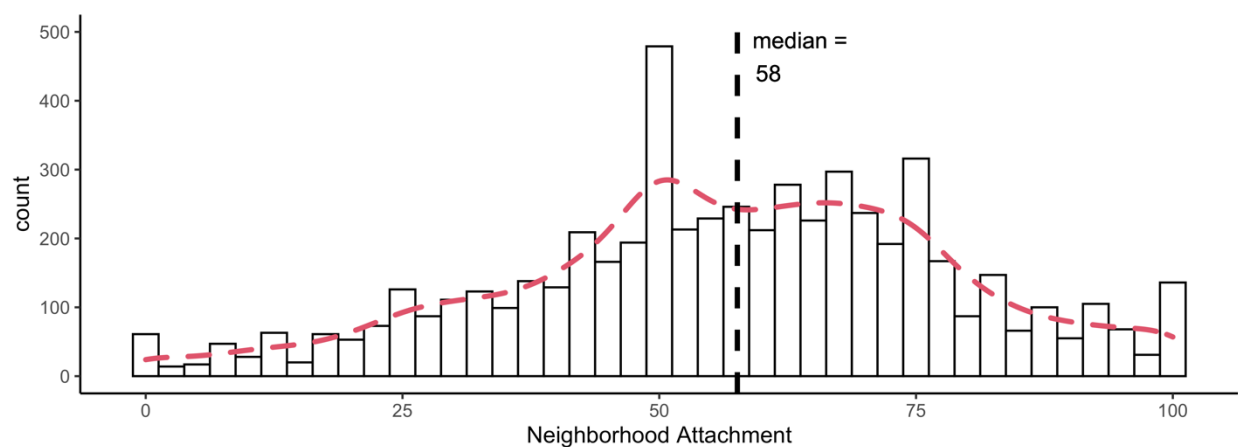
locations, such as a heavily forested ZIP code lying outside Idaho Falls, ID (83449) or a lightly populated location lying eighty miles east of Flagstaff, Arizona (86032). By contrast, respondents also come from some of the densest locales in the US, including Mid-town Manhattan (10016) and the Washington Heights neighborhood in Manhattan (10032).

Across each survey instrument, residents from the least dense quartiles have significantly more positive views of their neighborhood compared to the rest of the sample, while residents from the most densely packed locales show lower levels of attachment.

Table 1 Mean Levels of Place Satisfaction for Each Survey Instrument.						
A. By Quartile of Population Density.						
	Don't Fit In	Would Move	Reflects Me	Favorite Place	Miss It	Happy Here
1st Quartile (least dense)	2.40*	2.76*	3.21*	3.41*	3.57*	3.56*
2nd Quartile	2.44	2.98	3.11	3.26	3.40	3.45
3rd Quartile	2.54	3.14*	3.00*	3.08*	3.27*	3.30*
4th Quartile (most dense)	2.58*	3.25*	2.98*	3.11*	3.24*	3.29*
B. By Quartile of Distance to City						
1st Quartile (farthest from city)	2.38*	2.80*	3.24*	3.40*	3.52*	3.54*
2nd Quartile	2.49	2.99	3.02	3.19	3.39	3.41
3rd Quartile	2.53	3.12*	3.03	3.16	3.33	3.36
4th Quartile (closest to city)	2.53	3.17*	3.04	3.14*	3.27*	3.31*
<b>Overall</b>	<b>2.48</b>	<b>3.01</b>	<b>3.08</b>	<b>3.22</b>	<b>3.38</b>	<b>3.41</b>
Note: Asterisk indicates that the mean value for that density quartile is significantly distinct from the mean values for the other density quartiles based on a two-tailed t-test at $p < 0.01$ .						

Correlations among these six questions were high, and we implemented principal components analysis to produce a factor score from the first component capturing the maximum amount of variance across the six individual items (Jolliffe and Morgan 1992; Jolliffe and Cadima 2016). The resulting score, a measure of place attachment, was subsequently rescaled to

run from 0 to 100 to facilitate interpretation. A histogram showing the distribution of the score for the combined responses appears in Figure 1; higher scores toward the right side of the graph indicate greater place satisfaction. The mean score is 56.7, indicating that most respondents have at least some positive attachment to the places they live. The standard deviation, 21.7, indicates considerable variation around the mean, with two-thirds of respondents falling between 35.2 and 76.6. Some people are more satisfied with the place they live, and others are less enthusiastic.

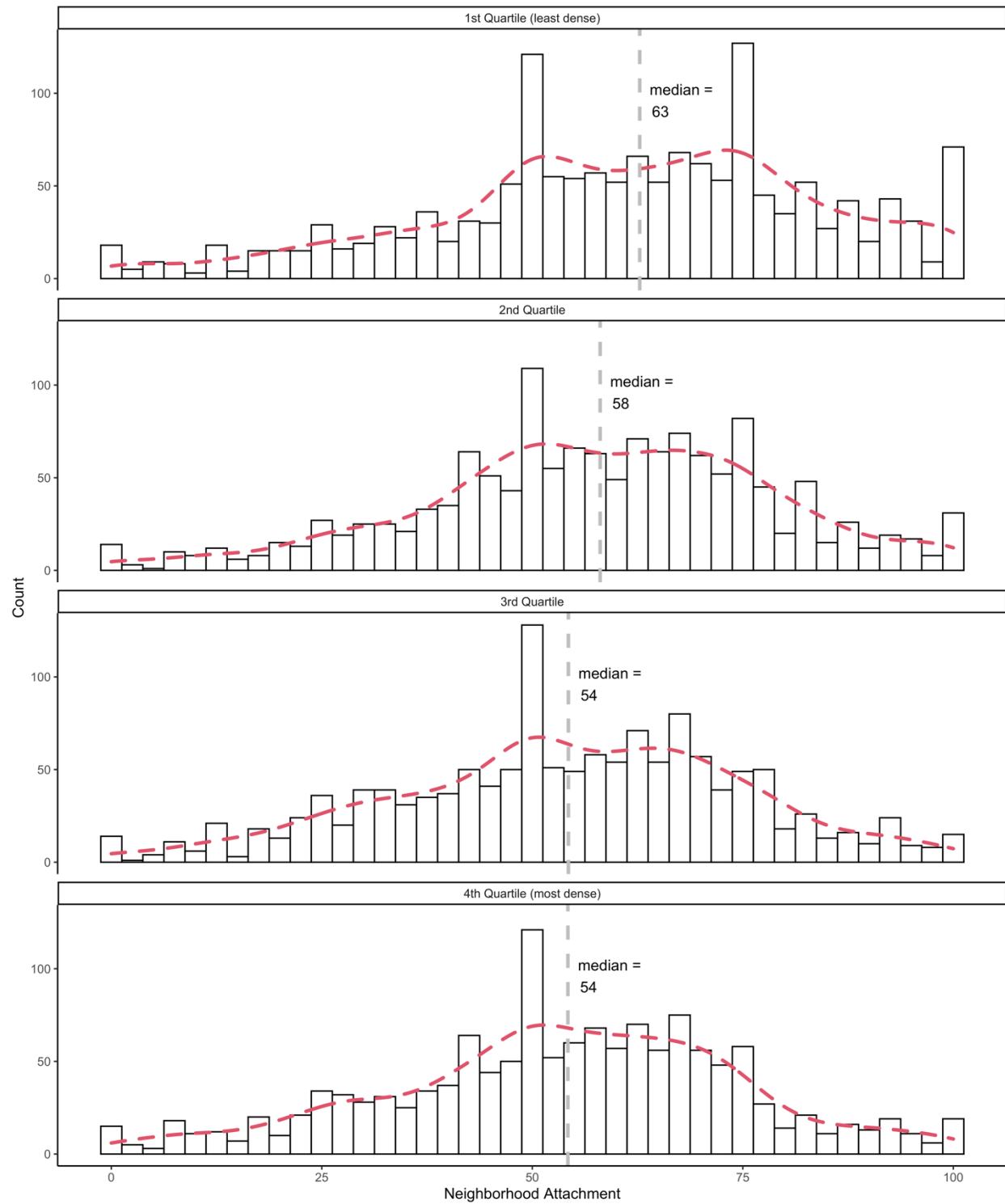


**Figure 1. Distribution of Place Attachment Score from Principal Components Analysis of Place Attachment Items**

To examine urban-rural differences in the place attachment of residents, we again consider respondents by quartiles for both population density as well as distance from a city. Figure 2 shows the distributions for the population density quartiles, with the most rural and least dense locations in the top graph and the urban and highly dense locations at the bottom. The shift downward in place attachment moving from top-to-bottom is visible. Divided in fourths, the mean score for the most rural residents on the scale (top graph Figure 2) is 60.8 (sd=22.9), and the most urban (bottom graph) is 53.5 (sd=21.0), and the difference is statistically significant ( $p \leq .001$ ).

Examining the alternative urban-rural measure, quartiles of distance from cities of 100,000 or more, the results are not quite as distinctive as for variation in population density. For the locations that are furthest away from a large city, the mean attachment score is 55 (sd=21), and for the most urban locations mean place attachment is 60 (sd=22) (Figures not shown). There is a tendency for place attachment to jump 2-3 points higher at extreme distances from large cities, suggesting that a more refined division of the distribution, by tenths, for example, would show more significant variability in place attachment scores, more closely approximating the results for population density.

The gaps shown by location of residence for place attachment generally show that populations in more sparsely settled areas are more satisfied with where they live than those residing in dense, urban areas. However, there can still be doubts about how significant these differences are. Perhaps the difference in a place attachment score of 54 rather than 61 is trivial, not even an entire letter grade, some might complain. Our next step is to evaluate how the



**Figure 2. Place Attachment Scores by Quartiles of Residential Population Density**

urban-rural difference compares to other conventional indicators of place attachment found in sociological literature, specifically income, education level, race/ethnicity, and age. After all, it is possible that these variables' impact on place attachment is far greater than any urban-rural difference gauged by density or distance. It is also possible that these covariates weaken the impact of the urban-rural residential location or erase it altogether. This would happen, for example, if residential location was measuring something like socioeconomic differences between populations or the settlement patterns of racial and ethnic groups. Once direct measures of these socioeconomic differences are included for individual respondents, there may be nothing for urban-rural residence to explain.

To assess this possibility, we carried out standard ordinary least squares regression on the place attachment score – our dependent variable – as shown in Figure 1. Education, income, home ownership, marital status, race/ethnicity, and age are measured by standard survey instrumentation and detailed in the appendix. Because the distributions for density and distance measures are very highly skewed, we take the natural log transformation of these distributions.

## **Results for Place Attachment**

Results of estimating the impact of distance and density on the strength of place attachment are found in Table 2. Consistent with the large body of previous research, population density and proximity to a large city diminish the extent of satisfaction with place. A one percent increase in population density (in 1000s) is associated with a .012 drop in place satisfaction. For a twenty percent increase in the natural log of population density, place attachment drops about .23 points. In linear terms, this means that for every twenty percent increase in population density, there is a quarter-point drop in place attachment, controlling for race, age, income,

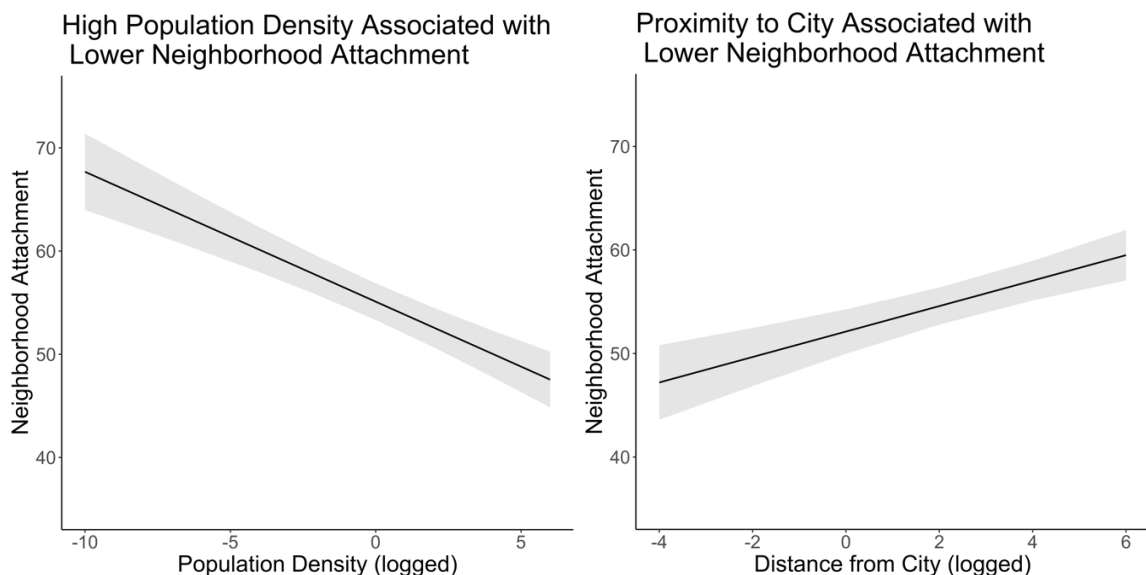
education, homeownership, religious observance, and the remaining covariates. As population density doubles (e.g., 200 to 400 per sq mile, 400 to 800, 800 to 1,600, 1,600 to 3,200, etc.), residents' place attachment (in natural log form) drops by a substantial 1.26 points each time. The left panel of Figure 3 presents the expected place attachment score based on the range of observed residential ZIP code density. In the extreme, an inhabitant of a sparsely located town like Eagle, Alaska (99738), which is along the Yukon River and on the eastern border of Alaska and Canada, or Luning, Nevada (89420), a town about 150 miles southeast of Carson City, is expected to have a place attachment score of between 64.0 and 71.4. However, in the densest locals, represented by places like New York City or Washington, DC, neighborhood attachment plummets with predicted scores ranging between 44.9 and 50.3, holding constant a wide array of individual-level covariates.

<b>Table 2. Impact of Distance and Density on Place Attachment, Controlling for Population Characteristics</b>		
Variable	Density	Distance
(Constant)	55.040** (2.228)	52.722** (2.330)
Black	1.116 (1.025)	0.563 (1.015)
Asian	2.414 (2.383)	1.620 (2.384)
Hispanic	1.148 (1.110)	0.669 (1.100)
Married	-.375 (.788)	-0.226 (.787)
Single (Never Married)	-3.965** (.972)	-4.132** (0.972)
Homeowner	5.726** (.750)	6.200** (.746)
Attend Church Weekly	1.311 (.874)	1.440 (.869)
Never Attend Church	-2.781** (.787)	-2.801** (.784)
HS Diploma	4.667** (1.854)	4.321** (1.857)
Some College	2.789 (1.879)	2.514 (1.882)
2 Year Degree	1.933 (2.004)	1.650 (2.004)
4 Year Degree	.805 (1.907)	0.454 (1.909)
Advanced Degree	.469 (2.015)	-0.054 (2.016)
Age 18-29	-3.308** (.968)	-3.124** (.980)
Age 65 and Older	6.112** (.755)	6.106** (.753)
Less than \$30,000	-3.136** (0.982)	-2.966** (0.980)
\$30-\$50,000	-1.234 (0.940)	-1.237 (.938)
\$70-\$100,000	0.418 (0.982)	0.102 (.978)
\$100-\$150,000	2.449* (1.090)	2.085* (1.085)
\$150,000 or More	4.087** (1.324)	3.611** (1.320)
Ln Density in 1000s	-1.259** (.168)	
Ln Distance from City > 100,000		1.230** (.245)
N	5,070	5,109
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.10	.10
SEE	20.63	20.64

As for distance, the results in the second panel of Table 2 similarly show that for every one percent rise in the natural log of distance from a city larger than 100,000, place attachment increases by 1.23 points. When untransformed, this means that for every twenty percent increase



in distance, place attachment increases by 0.22, controlling for the included population characteristics. For every 100 percent jump in distance (e.g., 2 miles to 4, 4 to 8, 8 to 16, 16 to 32, etc.), the score for place attachment increases by 0.85 points. Examples of locations in great isolation from a major metro area but with reportedly high place attachment include Glasgow, Montana (59230), and Lamoine, Maine (04605). In the right panel of Figure 3, we again see a graphical presentation of our results. As individuals live further from a city, they like their community more. Those closest to a city with a population of at least 100,000 have place attachment scores between 43.6 and 50.8. As individuals get farther from a city, attachment rises significantly. Those individuals living the greatest distance from a large city, for example, residents of Bangor, Maine, see very high levels of attachment. The model in Table 2 predicts scores of between 57.1 and 61.9.



**Figure 3. Relationship between Living in a City and Neighborhood Attachment.** The figure is generated from Table 1 and shows the expected change in neighborhood attachment as density (left) or nearness to a city increases (right).

As anticipated, individual population characteristics also matter to place attachment in some interesting ways. A higher income unquestionably increases place attachment. Those earning \$100,000 or more are considerably more attached to the places where they live than those in the middle-income reference bracket of \$50,000-\$70,000. Those earning less than \$30,000 reported the least satisfaction, ranking about points lower than the middle-income respondents. Income is empowering and enhances residential satisfaction through the power of residential choice in a way that education alone does not.

Age turns out to be very important in predicting how content respondents are with where they live, with the oldest showing far higher satisfaction than those in middle age brackets, by about 6 points, even as those under age 30 are the least happy with where they live (3 points less). Undoubtedly, this reflects that older residents have lived longer in their locations of residence, reaching a point where they are settled in places they have selected after years of consideration, and typically, multiple moves (Long 1988). Interestingly, race and ethnicity do not turn out to be very important to place attachment once holding income, age, education, marital status, homeownership, and density/distance constant.

Homeownership, a sign of stakeholding in a community, greatly enhances place attachment, even after we account for the effects of high income and age. Place attachment might precede homeownership rather than follow it; if you are serious enough to settle down and invest in a property, you are more attached to that location than to a place where you might be a renter. Homeowners also become more attached to their locations as long-term property owners. A dwelling is a consumption good, to be sure, providing shelter, warmth, space, and access, but it is also a store of value as an asset and potential capital gain (Ronald 2005, 128-129).

Those who are single and were never married show markedly less place attachment than others, and to a considerable extent in the results reported in Table 2. Attending religious services weekly, one sign of organizational involvement in a community, is positively associated with place attachment but not to a statistically significant extent over attending less frequently. On the other hand, *never* attending church significantly diminishes place attachment by nearly 3 points or half as much as being older promotes it. This finding is consistent with the idea that religious affiliation is associated with pro-social activities such as volunteering and charitable giving, behaviors that also promote life satisfaction and contentment (Lim and Putnam 2010; Smidt 2003; Putnam 2000). Interestingly, having no church involvement is most akin to being in the lowest income bracket (less than \$30,000) – as if low economic and low social capital have an independent but substantially similar alienating effect (see Table 1).

## **Implications of Results**

Regardless of which measure of urban-rural residence one uses, there is a pronounced association of place of residence with place attachment. Residents in more densely populated areas, lying in or close to Central Cities, are the least content with where they reside. Their discontent will be greatly augmented if they are in a lower income bracket and younger, single, renting, and with a college education. Those in sparsely settled areas, situated well away from larger cities, live a life much more satisfied with their place of residence. If they are also older and wealthier, living with a partner, and own property, they will be even more satisfied with where they live. Religion seems to matter as an important sign of social capital and community connection. If one never attends church, they are markedly lower in their contentment with where they reside. Age and homeownership are probably the single greatest contributors to place

satisfaction, with income and urban-rural residence following, then education, religious involvement, and finally, race/ethnicity.

There is also a sizable component of error in the results reported in Table 2, showing that there are many sources of attitudes about attachment to a place that are not captured here. Moreover, as the distribution shows in Figure 1, many respondents are neutral with respect to their place satisfaction, neither strongly positive nor especially down on where they live. These middling responses to the survey questions suggest that people may not have very well-formed opinions about the place they live; they simply endure life the best they can at the place they happen to be. Their geographic location is a complicated balance of considerations of affordability and convenience, and it is neither optimal nor miserable.

One's level of place attachment may depend upon a myriad of local conditions and circumstances that we have not measured: the level of local amenities and recreational resources; the pleasantness of the physical environment; and the social and economic circumstances of the surrounding population. If others in our neighborhood express satisfaction and happiness, we will likely express contentment too. None of these contextual variables have been captured in the analysis presented here, though future research should consider them. Establishing clear causality – what causes contentment with place of residence to rise and fall – is not something we can identify with these observational data. For instance, choice is important to where one lives, which helps to explain why income influences place attachment. Likewise, local politics and the compositional characteristics of a community may influence the provision of amenities (Trounstine 2018), thereby influencing attachment. We argue that the explanations we offer impact one's contentment with place of residence but cannot rule out reciprocal causation. Nor can we rule out all competing explanations. Even so, we identify a vigorous

persistence of a relationship between two social science phenomena: rural populations are more satisfied with where they live than urban ones, even after controlling for social and economic characteristics.

### **Place Satisfaction and Support for Progressive Policies and Parties**

The next step is to evaluate whether place satisfaction influences specific political identities associated with the policy demands individuals make on government. The hypothesis advanced earlier in the chapter was that place dissatisfaction serves as a foundational rationale for greater government involvement to ameliorate present conditions. Psychologists have pointed to a link between general life satisfaction and liberal-conservative ideology – contentment is found more at the conservative pole than at the liberal one (Schlenker et al. 2012; Bixter 2015; Clarkson et al. 2015; Newman et al. 2019). Exactly why life satisfaction and conservatism are found together is not entirely clear; perhaps there is something palliative about conservative ideology, i.e., conservatives easily rationalize away bad things (Sengupta et al. 2017). We suggest that the direction of influence runs the other way, from being satisfied to adopting conservative viewpoints about what government should be and do. Ideological policy demands issue forth from what we think should be changed in our present situation. Our effort here is to push this insight in a geographic direction, testing the hypothesis that the more dissatisfied with place or residence, the more one is likely to favor the party of the left, certainly in the US, and perhaps also elsewhere.

A common measure of ideological identification is a survey question asking people to classify themselves on a scale ranging from very conservative to very liberal. Although the issue content of liberal-conservative ideology is likely to vary across locations, most survey

respondents readily place themselves. Across multiple years of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), about seven percent of the respondents reported being unsure of their political ideology, compared with only three percent who were unsure about their appropriate placement on a 7-point scale of political party identification. In recent decades, political party placement has become more congruent with left-right ideological positioning: there are very few liberal or very liberal Republicans and only slightly more conservative or very conservative Democrats (Halliez and Thornton 2020; Barber and Pope 2019; Levendusky 2009; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008).

Though there are voters who remain innocent of ideology (Converse 1964), more people find their views on political issues and candidates to be congruent with, even informed by, ideological labels (Carmines and D'Amico 2015; Popp and Rudolph 2011; Jacoby 1991; 2014; Jost et al. 2013; Federico and Hunt 2013). Conflicting worldviews are found in public opinion, anchored in moral and religious commitments (Haidt 2012; Day et al. 2014; Silver and Silver 2017). These commitments can shift but exhibit a strong correlation with viewpoints on public policy, though the precise direction of causal influence is often ambiguous (Goggin et al. 2020; Freeder et al. 2019). Ideology is sometimes condensed from survey questions on multiple policy issues, which are then scaled on a single dimension, or sometimes two (Ellis and Stimson 2012; Feldman and Johnston 2014; Jacoby 2014; Jost et al. 2009; 2013). The liberal pole of political ideology, associated with left-of-center, or progressive, policy positions on a wide variety of issues that Democrats typically favor, from policing reform; racial justice and abortion rights; to more permissive views about sexuality; concern about reversing climate change; a more lenient immigration policy, and reduced military spending. Conservatives favor right-of-center policies, supporting viewpoints Republicans tend to favor; including more punitive criminal

justice policies; immigration restrictions; increased military spending; restrictions on access to abortion services; doubts about whether climate change is controllable through public policy, and traditionalist views of marriage and the family.

Not everyone shows the same degree of ideological constraint, with the politically knowledgeable showing the most consistency across issue domains. Evidence is regularly uncovered for the mixed nature of opinion and the existence of cross-pressures. Higher levels of education promote political coherence and ideological consistency, interest in politics, higher socioeconomic status, and living in more politicized environments; ideologically consistent individuals are sometimes described as opinion leaders or as possessing social influence (Zaller 1992). Political ideology is also associated with a surprisingly large number of seemingly non-political consumption and lifestyle choices frequently observed in close conjunction (DellaPosta et al. 2015; Jost 2017). For example, liberals and conservatives watch different non-political television programs, pointing to a kind of cultural sorting that separates partisan groups in venues of life with no overt political content (Rogers 2018, 4-6).

The instrument that bundles these preferences together is apparently social influence, the inclination for individuals to affiliate regularly with like-minded others where they live. In these settings, they communicate their values and viewpoints and develop shared understandings and judgments on various subjects, politics included. Through this localized interaction, meanings develop, and habits of thought and action become socially accepted, forming a consensus. Acceptance of a shared preference is not necessarily communicated verbally. Instead, it can be signaled through consumption symbolism – purchasing a hybrid car, adopting a fashion ensemble, or purchasing (or avoiding) particular food products (Smaldino et al. 2017). The fact that networks of routine association are geographically constrained explains why opinion

homophily can show up on maps that depict variation in the dominant viewpoint of communities dotted across the landscape. Our most influential associates are those we see often and who live closest to us (Onnela et al. 2011). Places are relevant to individual preference because they are the domicile for groups that offer social support for specific opinions, providing stability of viewpoint and insulation from pressure to change (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954). By this reasoning, it is plausible to suggest that political ideology and issue attitudes not only have origins captured by the measurement of individual characteristics but also in the locations where individuals dwell and their distance from other locations of contrary belief and practice.

### **Results for Ideological Liberalism**

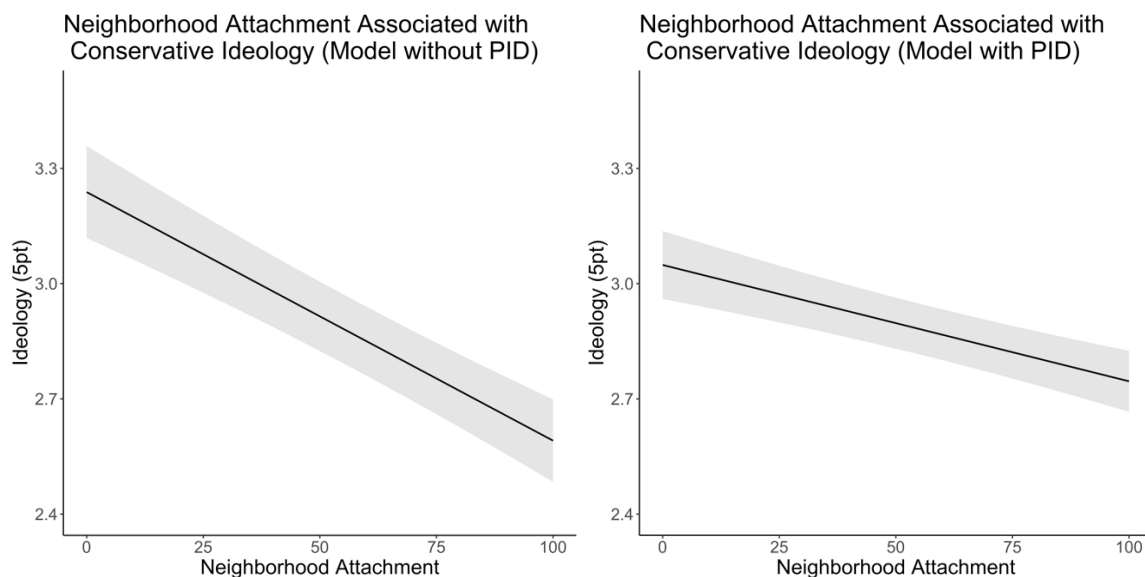
First, we find that place attachment has an impact on liberal-conservative political ideology such that those with lower attachment express the most progressive political values. The association between place attachment and ideology persists when confounds are included, such as political party identification, race and ethnicity, and level of education. The results are shown in Table 3 based on an ordinary least squares regression, placing political ideology on a five-point scale, ranging from very conservative to very liberal. The dependent variable is distributed with a mean of 2.9 ( $sd=1.16$ ), exhibiting a slight right skew. This means that the respondents to these surveys were slightly more likely to say they were “conservative” or “very conservative” (36.5%) than “liberal” or “very liberal” (29.8%); with the balance of 33.7% describing their ideological views as “moderate.” Two sets of estimates appear in Table 3, one that excludes party identification as an explanatory variable and a second that includes it.



The first column of estimates shows that place attachment is inversely associated with politically liberal policy views. As place attachment rises 10 points, liberalism drops by .06; or about 1.5 percent. A 50-point increase in place attachment diminishes liberalism by 7.5 percent, and an 80-point increase, about 12 percent. Though this level of influence may not seem very impressive, it shows that contentment with where one lives is not much less important than being African American, which increases liberalism by 10 percent; or Latino/Hispanic, which increases liberalism by 5.6 percent, when not controlling for party identification (see column 1 of Table 3).

<b>Table 3. Impact of Place Attachment on Political Liberalism, Controlling for Party Identification and Population Characteristics</b>		
Variable	No Party ID	With Party ID
(Constant)	3.038** (.116)	4.253** (.086)
Place Attachment	-0.006** (.001)	-0.003** (.001)
Party Identification (7-point scale)	---,---	-0.362** (.005)
Black	0.400** (.054)	-0.303** (.044)
Asian	0.334** (.126)	0.178* (.090)
Hispanic	0.226** (.059)	-0.013 (.042)
High School Diploma	-.005 (.105)	0.038 (0.076)
Some College	0.125 (.105)	0.150** (.076)
2 Year Degree	0.033 (.111)	0.096 (.080)
4 Year Degree	0.237** (.106)	0.195** (.077)
Advanced Degree	0.535** (.110)	0.296** (.079)
N	5,374	5,352
<i>Adj. R<sup>2</sup></i>	.06	.52
SEE	1.12	.80
OLS regression; cell entries are regression coefficients (standard errors); Categorical (0,1) variables capturing year of survey are not included in the table Dependent Variable=Political Ideology 1 (conservatism)-5 (liberalism) scale; Excluded reference categories for Education= Less than High School *p≤.05; **p≤.01		

As for the specific impact of place attachment on self-reported ideology when party identification is included, the estimates indicate that for every 50-point increase in place attachment, there is a -.15 point move in a conservative direction on the ideology scale – equivalent to about a 3.8 percent drop in liberalism. Moving from 0 to 80 on the place attachment score would diminish liberalism by -.24, or about 6 percent. To contextualize the strength of this relationship, consider that the impact of having obtained an advanced degree drops conservatism by about 7.4 percent (see column 2 of Table 3). Figure 4 presents this relationship graphically, with the figure on the left presenting the results from the model without controlling for partisanship, and the figure on the right includes partisanship as a control. The impact of place attachment on ideology is less important when party identification is present.



**Figure 4. Relationship Neighborhood Attachment and Political Ideology.** Figures are generated from the results in Table 2 and shows the expected change in ideology associated with neighborhood attachment. Results from model without (left panel) and with (right panel) controlling for party identification.

## **Implications of Results**

Investigating the antecedents and consequences of political ideology is challenging because of the complex relationship among policy views, life situations, and political learning experiences. High cost of living, limited housing stock, fear of crime, and lengthy commutes are but a few of the stressors of an urban life that may engender insecurity and unhappiness.

We have shown that some are attached to the places they reside – and those places are less likely to be densely populated or close to cities. Cities are places where grievance is found in greater abundance and is accompanied by geographic pockets of support for left-leaning policies and political candidates. This reality is abundantly clear on precinct maps depicting the political geography of the nation, with their deep shades of blue coloring inner city neighborhoods fading to pink and ultimately to dark red at the most rural extents. Underlying the expression of those political identities is a complex array of settlement patterns of people who find themselves and their offspring sorted into communities reflecting various degrees of racial, socioeconomic and political homophily, with attendant habits of interest and endeavor. Cross-sectional surveys can not possibly do justice to the complex causal story that makes a place what it is. But we can make observations about the places people report liking and the ones they dislike. Rural and small-town residents are happier with the places they live, consistently more so than those living in densely packed cities. We should not be surprised that they want to keep things the way they are rather than demand change.

For the reasons we describe above, disentangling the forces that drive the political gulf in the urban-rural divide is a challenging task. Evidence suggests that this political divide is something more than the differences in the demographic, social, and economic characteristics coinciding with the people who decide to reside in these places. This paper identifies an

additional potential mechanism by which place attachment drives this divide. Conforming to a wealth of existing research, we show that ruralites are, on average, more strongly attached to their communities than urbanites. We then show that place attachment is related to political ideology. The magnitudes of the relationships are modest but robust and suggest a possibility aside from geographic sorting that could drive one of the most prominent divides in politics today.

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## Appendix Tables: Principal Components Factor Score for Place Attachment

**Table A.1. Place Attachment Survey Items: Descriptive Statistics**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Analysis N
I don't fit in here	2.49	1.136	6406
I'm happiest when I'm here	3.40	1.012	6406
I miss it when I'm away	3.38	1.057	6406
This is my favorite place	3.22	1.096	6406
I would move if I could	3.02	1.296	6406
This place is a reflection of me	3.08	1.070	6406

**Table A.2. Factor Analysis Total Variance Explained**

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.698	61.642	61.642	3.698	61.642	61.642
2	.730	12.168	73.810			
3	.516	8.608	82.418			
4	.446	7.436	89.854			
5	.380	6.333	96.187			
6	.229	3.813	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation

### Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>

	Component 1
I don't fit in here	-.653
I'm happiest when I'm here	.861
I miss it when I'm away	.761
This is my favorite place	.867
I would move if I could	-.755
This place is a reflection of me	.793

Extraction Method: Principal Component

Analysis, with Varimax Rotation

a. 1 components extracted.