

From village squares to city halls: mayors' priorities and the rural–urban dynamics of political trust

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Abstract

Citizen trust in political institutions is often portrayed as being in crisis, yet local governments consistently enjoy higher levels of confidence than national authorities. This pattern is particularly puzzling in rural areas, which are frequently depicted in the literature as strongholds of political discontent and place-based resentment. Why, then, do citizens in these contexts continue to place relatively greater trust in their local governments? This paper argues that understanding this paradox requires considering how territorial grievances and perceptions of local leadership interact across spatial contexts. On the one hand, place-based resentment may reshape citizens' evaluations of different levels of government, directing discontent toward distant national elites while leaving local institutions comparatively insulated. On the other hand, the trust-enhancing effect of local leadership depends on whether mayors are perceived as prioritising the interests of their municipality over partisan goals. I argue that this signal of community-oriented leadership is particularly consequential in rural settings, where politics tends to be more relational and locally embedded than in large urban environments.

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INTRODUCTION

It is often argued that we are currently experiencing a crisis of political trust in public institutions (Valgarðsson et al., 2025; van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017). However, this generalisation entails relevant doubts not only about the extent and geographic scope of this crisis, but also about whether it unfolds uniformly across different levels of governance. One of the most consistent findings in this literature is that local governments constitute a notable exception, as citizens tend to express higher levels of trust in them than in national institutions (Muñoz, 2017). This apparent paradox raises an important question: why do citizens, even in contexts of widespread political disaffection, tend to express greater trust in local authorities than in national ones?

This paper addresses this puzzle by examining how the rural–urban divide shapes the distribution of political trust in multilevel systems. A growing body of research on geographic divides portrays rural areas as centres of political discontent, where citizens tend to exhibit lower levels of external political efficacy, satisfaction with democracy, and political trust (Lang et al., 2025). However, in the face of perceived political underrepresentation, some institutional mechanisms may act as counterbalances. These include, for instance, the overrepresentation of rural areas in national parliaments (García del Horno et al., 2024) or increases in their descriptive representation (Rico et al., 2025).

In a similar vein, Hegewald (2024) shows that local institutions can serve as a counterweight to national ones. The literature has long emphasised the advantages of democracy in small-scale polities (Almond & Verba, 1963; Dahl, 1967), a feature that is often reflected in the local politics of rural areas. In such settings, closer social and political ties can develop. On the one hand, channels for responsiveness, accountability, and participation may appear more direct to citizens. On the other hand, local politics in small municipalities tend to be less embedded in national and partisan dynamics. As a result, particularly in multilevel systems, political trust is likely to be unevenly distributed across institutional levels.

The role of local institutions has become even more salient in recent decades, following waves of decentralisation and the rise of localism, as well as broader reactions to globalisation processes that have left many citizens feeling marginalised and displaced (Fitzgerald, 2018). These dynamics are especially pronounced in rural, peripheral, or economically deprived areas, where feelings of abandonment often crystallise into place-based resentment (Cramer, 2016; Munis, 2022). In turn, such resentment is associated with declining trust in national governments perceived as unresponsive or neglectful (McKay et al., 2021; Mitsch et al.,

2021). At the same time, these citizens may find a relative refuge in local institutions (Hegewald, 2024). Building on this insight, this paper argues that place-based resentment plays a key role in reconfiguring how political trust is distributed across levels of government.

Yet an important question remains: under what conditions can local government effectively function as a meaningful site of representation? This study contributes to the literature by introducing citizens' perceptions of mayors' priorities—whether mayors are seen as prioritising party interests or the well-being of their municipality—as a key factor shaping variation in political trust across rural and urban contexts. The role of mayors is inherently dual, as they act simultaneously as representatives of their political parties in the local arena and as representatives of their communities vis-à-vis other levels of government (Jäntti et al., 2026; Lehmbruch, 1975). This dual loyalty creates an inherent tension, often described as a crisis of representation (Copus, 2004).

This tension brings into focus both the local dimension of political parties—historically understudied (Copus, 2004; Copus & Erlingsson, 2021)—and the importance of proximity and dense social ties between mayors and citizens. Crucially, these features vary across territorial contexts. In rural areas, mayors tend to be less constrained by party structures and more embedded in local social networks, whereas in urban settings local politics is more strongly shaped by partisan competition (Fallend et al., 2006). Accordingly, this paper argues that the extent to which local government can act as a counterbalance in political trust depends on whether citizens perceive mayors as prioritising municipal over partisan interests, particularly in rural contexts. More broadly, the argument advanced here is that place-based resentment creates the conditions under which local government can function as a refuge, while perceptions of mayors' priorities determine the extent to which this potential is realised.

Empirically, the paper draws on original survey data from approximately 1,900 respondents collected in Catalonia prior to the 2023 local elections, combined with contextual information on rurality and mayoral party affiliation. The analysis focuses on the trust differential between local and national government and examines how it varies across territorial contexts and individual attitudes.

The findings show that place-based resentment and perceptions of mayors' priorities jointly shape the rural–urban divide in political trust. While resentment is associated with a widening trust gap in rural areas, it corresponds to a more generalised decline in trust in urban contexts. In addition, perceptions of mayoral priorities have a positive effect on the trust differential, but this effect is significantly stronger among rural respondents. When mayors are perceived

as prioritising partisan interests, levels of local trust remain relatively low across contexts. By contrast, when they are seen as prioritising the municipality, rural citizens exhibit a much stronger increase in trust in local government compared to their urban counterparts. These results suggest that the trust-enhancing effects of community-oriented leadership are amplified in the relational and proximity-based environments of rural politics.

By integrating insights from research on political trust, local governance, and geographic divides, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how trust is distributed across levels of government. It highlights the importance of considering both individual attitudes and perceptions of local representation, as well as the territorial contexts in which they operate, in order to better understand the dynamics of democratic legitimacy in multilevel systems.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the context of the current crisis of democracy, political trust constitutes a fundamental pillar for its resilience (van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017). However, trust in representative institutions has declined in a generalised manner over recent decades (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Political trust can be understood as a citizen's evaluative orientation towards political institutions and actors, reflecting expectations that they will act in the public interest and respond to citizens' needs (Craig, 1979; Easton, 1965; Hetherington, 1998; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Miller, 1974).

To the extent that political trust is a relational and situational concept, it requires a subject who trusts and an object—the political institution in question—in which to place that trust (van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017). Among scholars working on this concept, one of the most important longstanding debates concerns whether political trust can be distinguished across different institutions or levels of government (Angelucci & Vittori, 2023; Valgarðsson et al., 2025). An updated review of the literature leads us to conclude that, in general, there are reasons to treat trust at the national and local levels as two distinct, albeit related, concepts (Angelucci & Vittori, 2023; Muñoz, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2023).

Citizens can form more than one attitude of political trust, although it is true that trust in national institutions—which tend to be the most salient—often functions as a reference point from which judgments about trust at other levels of government, such as local institutions, are derived (Proszowska et al., 2023). However, trust in local government goes

beyond being a mere reflection of trust in national government, and its formation largely follows different criteria (Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2014).

According to this differentiation approach, several mechanisms explain the formation of distinct attitudes of political trust (Angelucci & Vittori, 2023). First, some authors argue that citizens are capable of rational evaluation, that is, they can differentiate the merits of each institutional level, whether in terms of policy outcomes or procedural considerations such as accountability or responsiveness (Muñoz, 2017; Steenvoorden & van der Meer, 2021). Second, proponents of proximity theories argue that closer institutions are perceived as more trustworthy (Hansen, 2013; Proszowska et al., 2023).

Proximity theories are particularly relevant in the current context of the resurgence of local politics in Europe, linked to processes of decentralisation and the growing inequalities between territories (Fitzgerald, 2018; Le Galès, 2021). Thus, local governments have become increasingly relevant and have been the subject of various studies beyond Western democracies (see e.g. Tang & Huhe, 2016; Weitz-Shapiro, 2008). Nevertheless, although many scholars acknowledge that local institutions are now as important as national ones, considerably less academic attention has been devoted to the study of trust in the former (Angelucci & Vittori, 2023). In any case, we know that levels of trust in local institutions tend to be higher than those in national institutions (Muñoz, 2017).

In fact, the debate on the relationship between the size of the polity and the quality of democracy is longstanding (Muñoz, 2017). Local politics are often portrayed as the original form of democracy and community-building characteristic of the Greek polis (McDonnell, 2020). They have also been defended within classical liberalism—by authors such as Alexis de Tocqueville or John Stuart Mill—as the environment in which citizens are trained to resist the centralising impulses of the state (Le Galès, 2021).

The local level thus functions as a “school of democracy”, where citizens become familiar with the political system, develop participatory skills, and build trust in institutions (Almond & Verba, 1963). There is a certain consensus around the idea that citizens display higher levels of political efficacy in relation to local politics than to national politics (see e.g. Almond & Verba, 1963; Dahl & Tufte, 1973). Citizens tend to feel that they can exert greater influence over local decisions due to the proximity, accessibility, and visibility of authorities; by contrast, national government is perceived as more distant, complex, and less permeable to individual influence (Almond & Verba, 1963). In short, it is the setting in which democracy

can be most effective, as the greater proximity between rulers and citizens facilitates both participation and accountability (Dahl, 1967; Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2014).

Moreover, following this same line of reasoning, the literature shows that democracy functions better in smaller municipalities (Denters et al., 2014). This thesis, known as “small-is-beautiful”, is based on the idea that, in smaller municipalities, citizens experience higher levels of political efficacy—they know whom to contact and information costs are lower—their voice and vote carry more weight, and governance is more agile, transparent, and responsive (Allan, 2003; McDonnell, 2020). Accordingly, some studies show that trust in local government is negatively related to population size (see e.g. Hansen, 2013; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005).

These dynamics are particularly relevant in rural contexts, where municipalities tend to be smaller and social relations denser and more personalised. In these environments, social and political proximity intensifies perceptions of accessibility and influence over local authorities, contributing to relatively higher levels of trust in municipal government. At the same time, the literature on the rural–urban divide shows that rural citizens tend to express lower levels of trust in national institutions, often due to a stronger perception of distance, neglect, or lack of representation by political elites (McKay et al., 2021; Mitsch et al., 2021; Stroppe, 2023).

Taken together, these two processes—higher trust at the local level and lower trust at the national level—generate a particularly pronounced divergence between both levels of government in rural contexts (Hegewald, 2024). This suggests that rural residents not only trust their local institutions more, but do so in relative terms compared to national ones, leading to the following hypothesis:

H1: Compared to urban dwellers, rural dwellers will show higher levels of local trust (relative to national trust).

The image of local institutions as a refuge (Hegewald, 2024) is consistent with the rise of localism discussed above. Globalisation has led many citizens to feel disoriented and politically excluded—also in economic and social terms—and they respond with strong rejection of more distant authorities (Fitzgerald, 2018; Hegewald, 2024). This phenomenon is particularly evident in left-behind, peripheral, or rural areas, which are often seen as losers of globalisation and the transition to a service- and knowledge-based economy (see e.g. De Lange et al., 2023; García del Horno et al., 2024; McKay et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2021). This

constitutes one of the foundations of what is known as place-based resentment (Cramer, 2016; Munis, 2022). In short, it is the most resentful citizens who seek institutions that are closer and more representative (Hegewald, 2024): resentment does not increase local trust per se, but weakens trust in national institutions, thereby increasing the relative appeal of local government. Based on this argument, I propose a second hypothesis:

H2: As place-based resentment increases, relative trust in local government increases, especially among rural citizens.

Once local government becomes a key arena of representation, citizens need to evaluate whether local leaders truly represent their community, and thus signals of local leadership become especially important. As Lehmbruch (1975) argued, mayors are characterised as Janus-faced or, in other words, subject to divided loyalties (Fallend et al., 2006).

On the one hand, mayors are elected under a political programme, that is, under a clear positioning regarding the policies they want for the municipality. At the same time, mayors are representatives of the local community and are expected to defend its interests. Thus, mayors embody a double role: the political role—linked to party competition, embedded in broader partisan structures, and connected to national/regional political dynamics—and the executive/local leadership role—responsible for governing the municipality, expected to act in the interest of the local community, and evaluated based on responsiveness and problem-solving (Jäntti et al., 2026; Wollmann, 2004). From the perspective of citizens, this institutional ambiguity requires interpretation: individuals must infer whether local leaders primarily represent party interests or the needs of the local community. These perceptions are likely to play a crucial role in shaping political trust.

This dual condition constitutes a tension that guides all decisions of local political representatives. For instance, “a school closure may for the local councillor be a local issue, but for his or her colleagues in the group it is a matter of the reorganisation of education across the borough and thus a policy matter” (Copus, 2004, 187). Local politics are often portrayed as non-political, following the logic that “a hole in the bridge is not a political issue” (Swianiewicz & Mielczarek, 2005, 18), but there is also a widespread perception that political parties continue to dominate local politics (Jäntti et al., 2026), as well as evidence that local policies align with the liberal–conservative positions of citizens on national policy issues (Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014).

The literature on political parties has traditionally neglected their local dimension (Copus & Erlingsson, 2012; Lundåsen & Erlingsson, 2023). Copus (2004), in his study of the United Kingdom, argues that political parties—described as Leviathan-like organisations—seek to dominate all aspects of local politics and often impose themselves on the decisions of mayors and councillors. However, local branches of supra-municipal parties often struggle to articulate positions on strictly local issues, which facilitates the emergence of localist parties or independent candidates (Lundåsen & Erlingsson, 2023).

In any case, several studies show that in Europe, despite their traditional presence and dominance, political parties have lost both influence and prestige in local politics (Copus & Erlingsson, 2012; Denters, 2002; Fallend et al., 2006). This trend is often associated with the emergence of new forms of local governance, whether market-oriented or participatory (Copus & Erlingsson, 2012).

Thus, mayors attempt to distance themselves from party politics and even adopt a more pragmatic and depoliticised approach (Jäntti et al., 2026), for instance by involving citizens and public managers—alongside politicians—in the design of policies (Sancino et al., 2023). Indeed, this is possible because the local arena is, by definition, smaller and personal relationships play a more prominent role, allowing some mayors to survive and even thrive without, or even against, supra-municipal party structures (Fallend et al., 2006).

In short, it is quite common for the two roles of the mayor to clash, producing what Copus (2004) calls a crisis of representation. Mayors play a central role in conflicts of social acceptance, as they can block, delay, or legitimise social opposition (Karakislak & Schneider, 2023), even creating conflict with higher-level administrations governed by their own party. Conflicts of this kind are not limited to a specific country or ideological family. Similar tensions between local and partisan priorities have emerged across a wide range of contexts, including renewable energy projects in Germany, asylum policies in the Netherlands, large-scale infrastructure projects in France—Nantes airport—and Italy—Turin–Lyon high-speed rail—or water redistribution debates in Spain. These cases illustrate how mayors may prioritise local interests even when this entails deviating from the positions of their own parties at higher levels of government.

In conflicts such as those mentioned, if the mayor prioritises the interests of the municipality over partisan interests, they are interpreted as defenders of the territory or representatives of the local community. This increases their legitimacy—this is not only institutional or partisan in nature, but also rooted in proximity, interaction, and the capacity to embody community

interests (Jäntti et al., 2026). This relational dimension implies that citizens evaluate local leaders through cues that signal commitment to the municipality. In this sense, perceptions of whether mayors prioritise local interests over partisan goals become particularly meaningful. When mayors are seen as community-oriented leaders, they are more likely to be perceived as responsive and representative, thereby strengthening trust in local government (Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2014; Jäntti et al., 2026).

Furthermore, territorial differences in this effect are also to be expected, as relational leadership works differently depending on context (Jäntti et al., 2026). In their study of Central and Eastern Europe, Swianiewicz and Mielczarek (2005) show that the size of the municipality is key to understanding the role of parties in local politics. Thus, this mechanism is expected to be especially relevant in rural contexts, where social proximity, embeddedness, and place-based grievances enhance the salience of relational leadership, making it more visible and consequential. This is also associated with a lower presence and organisational strength of political parties in small municipalities (Denters, 2002). Hence, deviations towards party priorities would be more consequential for trust in rural areas.

By contrast, in large municipalities the degree of party dependence of the mayor is higher: it is more difficult for them to be visible independently from their party, and political debates follow party lines to a greater extent, mirroring national trends (Fallend et al., 2006). Therefore, the party dimension is stronger in such contexts, where politics is more impersonal, institutionalised, and competitive. This leads me to propose a third hypothesis:

H3: Perceiving that the mayor prioritises municipal interests over party interests increases trust in local government relative to national government, and this effect is stronger in rural than in urban contexts.

Taken together, this paper argues that territorial context structures how citizens distribute their political trust across levels of government. In particular, rural contexts—characterised by higher levels of place-based resentment and stronger community embeddedness—are associated with a greater divergence between trust in local and national institutions. Place-based resentment contributes to this pattern by weakening confidence in distant national authorities, thereby increasing the relative relevance of local government as a site of political representation. In this context, citizens become particularly attentive to signals about whom local leaders represent. Specifically, perceptions that mayors prioritise municipal over partisan interests function as key cues of community-oriented leadership, strengthening trust in local government—especially in rural settings.

DATA AND METHODS

Case selection

Catalonia, one of the Spanish Autonomous Communities, is composed of 948 municipalities. As in most European democracies, both the local executive and legislative bodies are elected locally and not appointed by a higher power (Scartascini et al., 2021), which denotes a remarkable electoral control over the local authority by citizens and is interpreted as an indicator of the locality's political salience (Fitzgerald, 2018). Elections to choose local representatives—that is, municipal councillors—are held once every four years in all municipalities on the same day. Citizens vote for closed and blocked lists—except in municipalities with fewer than 250 inhabitants, where lists are open—and seats are allocated using the *d'Hondt* method. The mayor is not directly elected by citizens; instead, the elected councillors subsequently vote to select the mayor.

Compared to other European countries, Spain is characterized by the strongly political profile of its mayors. On the one hand, similar to what occurs in countries such as France, Italy, or Greece, the mayor acts as a political representative of local community interests vis-à-vis higher levels of government (Heinelt & Hlepas, 2006). On the other hand, mayors are typically members of political parties—most often national or regional parties (Fallend et al., 2006). This fact contrasts with the growth of localist parties that is occurring in several European democracies (Lundåsen & Erlingsson, 2023). Taken together, this results in a closer relationship of dependence on political parties, highlighting mayors' dual loyalty—to their political party and to their municipality.

Data

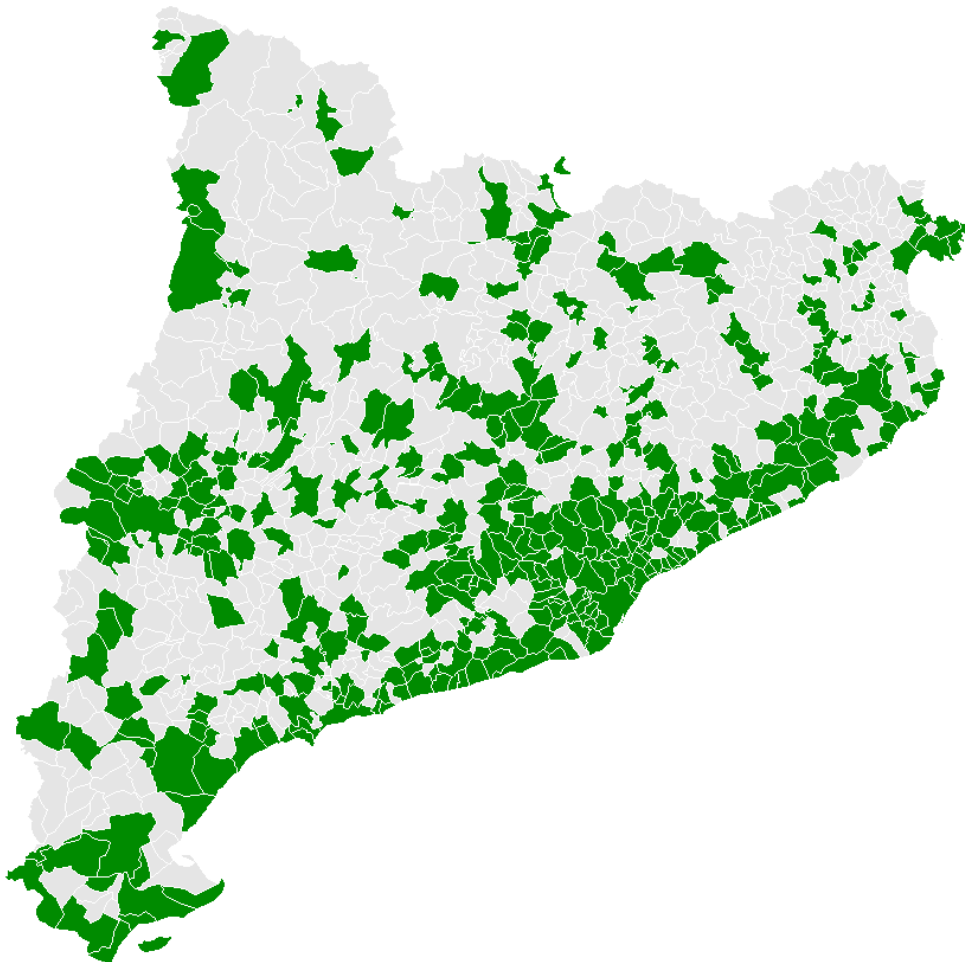
To empirically test my expectations, I rely on a novel survey administered by Bilendi through an opt-in online panel in Catalonia (Spain), in the context of the “The Rural-Urban Political Divide in Catalonia” project³. The data set was collected during May 2023, just before the Spanish local elections held on May 28th, and it encompasses around 2,000 observations from 376 municipalities (see Figure 1). The sample was constructed using quotas for gender, age and education level to ensure representativeness of these characteristics within the Catalan population. However, the rural population was intentionally overrepresented in order to obtain more robust insights into a hard-to-reach segment. To define this quota, the survey

³ “The Rural-Urban Political Divide in Catalonia” project (ref. PRE111/21/000004) was funded by the Catalan Institute for Self-Government Studies (IEA). PI: Guillem Rico.

used the Eurostat DEGURBA indicator, which distinguishes between urban, intermediate, and rural areas at the municipality level.

The survey records each respondent's municipality and ZIP code, enabling linkage to objective data on local government drawn from the *Historial d'alcaldes/esses* dataset, integrated into Muncat—the official registry and database of the Catalan regional government on local entities (Dades Obertes Catalunya, 2026). This database provides information for the 948 municipalities of Catalonia, including the name of the mayor at the time of the survey (2023) and the party or electoral candidacy under which they ran.

Figure 1: Geographical coverage of the survey sample in Catalonia (municipalities with respondents in green)



Note: own elaboration.

In most cases, mayors represent national or regional parties operating beyond the municipal level—that is, they are party members, run under a party label, or receive party support. However, particularly in rural municipalities, it is also common for mayors to run under local labels or umbrella coalitions that are officially associated with these parties—indeed these are key for parties’ distribution of seats in other supra-municipal indirectly-elected institutions. Mayors elected under these labels have therefore been reassigned to their corresponding supra-municipal parties.

Following this recoding, it can be established that in 2023—the year in which the data were collected—the share of independent mayors, defined as those whose candidacies were not linked to any supra-municipal party, did not reach 10%. However, for this research I have excluded those municipalities with a mayor belonging to an independent party, since in that case there would be no potential conflict between loyalty to the municipality and loyalty to the party (in supra-municipal terms).

Operationalisation

Relative local trust, the dependent variable, is measured by the difference between trust in local government and trust in the national government. This approach has already been used by Hegewald (2024) and simultaneously reflects two ideas: that there is a certain degree of overlap between trust in different levels of government in multilevel systems, and that, at the same time, both attitudes are autonomous from each other (Muñoz, 2017; Steenvoorden & van der Meer, 2021). Both trust indicators are measured on a scale from 0 (no trust) to 10 (absolute trust). Thus, higher positive values mean that trust in local government exceeds trust in the national government, and vice versa.

To classify the respondents’ place of residence in rural-urban terms, I use the following self-identification question: “would you say you live in an urban area, a rural area, or somewhere in between?”. Respondents had to rate their place of living on this scale: 1 “Very urban”, 2 “Somewhat urban”, 3 “More urban than rural”, 4 “More rural than urban”, 5 “Somewhat rural”, 6 “Very rural”. This scale has been employed in previous works (see e.g., Claassen et al., 2025; García del Horno, 2026; Jacobs & Munis, 2023; Zumbunn et al., 2025). Respondents in the first three categories were recoded as urban, while those in the remaining three were classified as rural.

This resulting rural-urban dichotomous variable allows me to employ a place-based resentment battery that is formulated in comparative terms between the ingroup and the

outgroup. The different items that make up this battery capture the three dimensions of place-based resentment —distributive, representational and cultural— and are measured in a scale that ranges from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). All of them are imported from or inspired by previous research by Borwein and Lucas (2023), Claassen et al. (2025), and Lunz Trujillo and Crowley (2022). The whole battery can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix. The measure included in the models is an additive index that is the result of the average of all these items. In this sense, higher values indicate higher levels of place-based resentment.

To capture citizens' perceptions of the mayor's priorities in the dual loyalty of their role, I used the following item: "Indicate to what degree you believe that, in a hypothetical conflict between your local council and another public administration governed by the same political party, the mayor of your municipality would prioritise the interests of their party or the interests of the municipality". Respondents were asked to answer this question on a scale from 0 (he/she would align themselves with their political party even if this harmed the municipality) to 10 (they would put the municipality's interests first even if this put them at odds with their political party).

In addition to these main variables, I also use some control variables. Regarding the mayors I control for their supra-municipal political party affiliation, as well as for the years they have been steadily in power until 2023. Regarding the respondents, I include their left-right political ideology (measured on a 0-10 scale) and whether they are a local electoral winner, meaning whether they voted for the mayor's party in the last local elections. On the other hand, I include an item capturing the level of respondents' local attachment, as it can have relevant consequences for politics in general (Fitzgerald, 2018), and particularly for the dependent variable. Along these same lines, I also add a dichotomous variable capturing local media consumption, that is, if they have read, listen to or watched any local media in the last week, what would be a proxy of their level of knowledge about the local political situation.

Finally, the analyses incorporate a set of sociodemographic control variables. In particular, the models account for respondents' age (in years), sex, level of formal education (measured on a scale from 1 "no formal qualification/preschool" to 9 "doctorate"), income level (measured on a 1-10 decile-based scale capturing total monthly household income), and citizenship (dichotomous variable). Social trust, measured in a 0-10 scale, is also added as a control variable.

Methods

Given the hierarchical structure of the data, with individual respondents nested within municipalities, the analysis relies on multilevel linear regression models. This approach is appropriate because both the dependent variable and several key independent variables are measured at the individual level, while some respondents share a common municipal context that may systematically influence their attitudes. Ignoring this nested structure could lead to biased standard errors and incorrect inferences due to the non-independence of observations within municipalities. Multilevel modelling allows me to explicitly account for this clustering by including random intercepts at the municipal level, thereby capturing unobserved contextual heterogeneity across municipalities (Gelman & Hill, 2007). At the same time, this approach preserves variation both within and between municipalities, which is crucial for this study, as the theoretical framework explicitly focuses on how individual-level perceptions—such as place-based resentment and evaluations of mayor’s priorities—interact with territorial context.

RESULTS

Before analysing the role of both place-based resentment and mayor’s priorities, I start by exploring the trust differential in both urban and rural areas. Figure 2 displays two boxplots: one for urban dwellers, and the other for rural dwellers. We find that the latter exhibit higher median values of the trust differential, indicating a stronger relative trust in local over national government. In contrast, urban inhabitants display a distribution more centred around zero, suggesting a smaller divergence between levels of government. Overall, the descriptive evidence points to a more pronounced trust differential in rural contexts, providing initial support for H1.

To further unpack this pattern, Figure 3 compares levels of trust in local and national government across rural and urban respondents. The figure shows that, in both contexts, trust in local government tends to be higher than trust in the national one. However, this gap is more pronounced among rural inhabitants, who display both higher levels of trust in local government and lower levels of trust in national institutions compared to their urban counterparts.

Figure 2: Distribution of the trust differential across rural and urban contexts

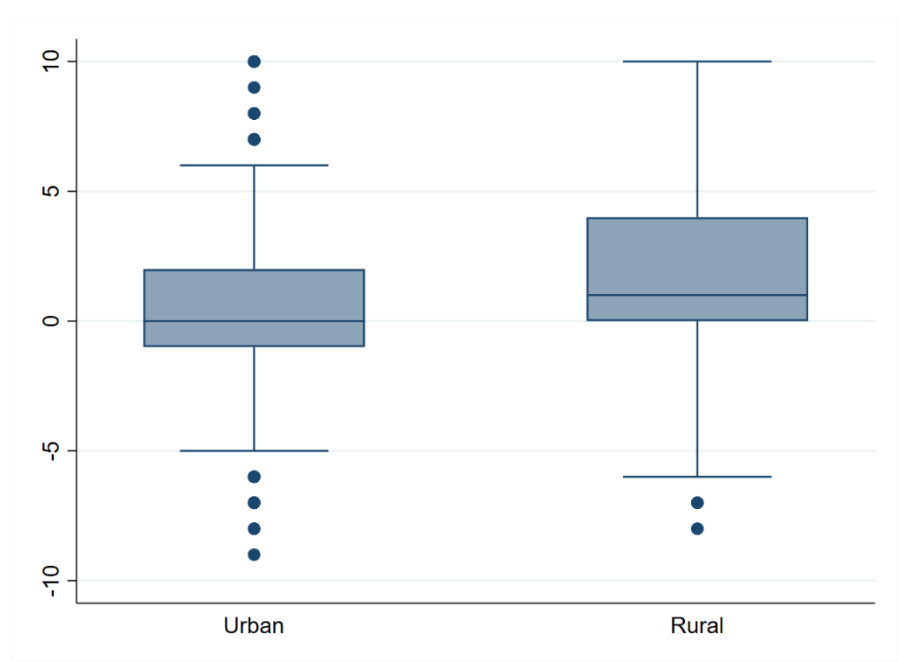
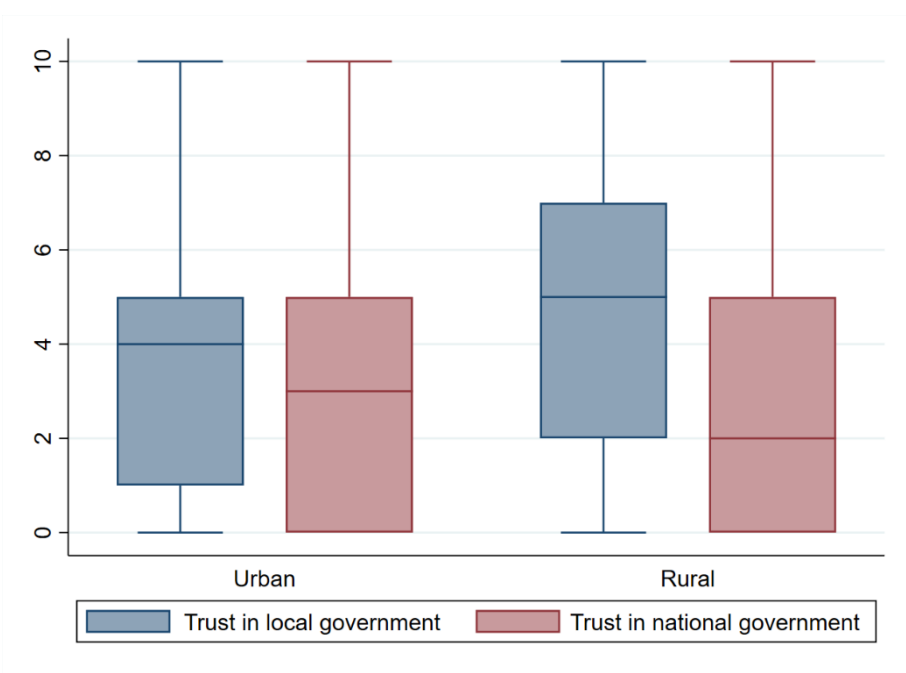


Figure 3: Trust in local and national government across rural and urban contexts



This descriptive picture suggests that the observed trust differential may be driven by distinct dynamics operating at each level of government. To examine this more systematically, the following analysis decomposes the trust gap by estimating separate models for trust in local and national governments.

Table 1: Baseline models of political trust across levels of government

	(1) Trust differential	(2) Trust in local government	(3) Trust in national government
Place of living: Rural	1.058*** (0.181)	0.996*** (0.155)	-0.062 (0.177)
Place-based resentment	-0.359*** (0.098)	-0.743*** (0.084)	-0.384*** (0.096)
Mayor's priority	0.161*** (0.021)	0.329*** (0.018)	0.168*** (0.021)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	-1.103** (0.532)	0.765+*** (0.455)	1.868*** (0.518)
Log SD (municipality random intercept)	-16.333 (1.310)	-18.626*** (1.392)	-18.242 (875.735)
Log SD (residual / error term)	0.920*** (0.016)	0.764*** (0.016)	0.894*** (0.016)
Observations	1860	1860	1860

Standard errors in parentheses. + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 1 presents baseline models for trust in local and national governments, as well as for the trust differential. These decomposition models are estimated without interaction terms to isolate the baseline association of each explanatory variable with trust at different institutional levels. Rural respondents display higher levels of local trust but not national trust, resulting in a larger trust differential. The results show that place-based resentment is associated with lower trust in both levels of government, suggesting a generalised form of political disaffection. However, as shown below, this relationship varies significantly across rural-urban contexts. By contrast, perceiving that mayors prioritise municipal over partisan interests is more strongly associated with trust in local government. So, the evidence shown

so far provides consistent support for H1: rural respondents display higher levels of trust in local government relative to national government.

Having established this baseline pattern, I now turn to the multivariate analysis. Table 2 presents the main regression model explaining the trust differential between local and national government, including interaction terms.

The results show that place-based resentment is negatively associated with the trust gap, while perceiving that the mayor prioritises municipal over partisan interests is positively associated with it. Nevertheless, both effects vary significantly across rural-urban contexts. The interaction between rural place of residence and place-based resentment is positive and statistically significant, indicating that the association between resentment and the trust gap differs between rural and urban inhabitants. Similarly, the interaction between rural place of residence and mayor's priority is positive and significant, suggesting that the effect of perceived mayor's priority is stronger in rural areas. As for the control variables, it is worth noting that both having voted for the mayor's party (i.e. being an electoral winner) and feeling a greater local attachment are positively related to the trust differential, something totally predictable.

To facilitate interpretation of these interaction effects, the following figures present the corresponding marginal predictions. Figure 4 displays the marginal predictions of place-based resentment on the trust differential across rural and urban contexts. The results reveal a striking divergence between the two. Among urban respondents, higher levels of place-based resentment are associated with a decrease in the trust differential, indicating that resentment reduces the relative advantage of local over national government. This pattern points to the idea of general disaffection among resentful urban respondents or, in other words, that in their case the local government does not appear to function as a refuge.

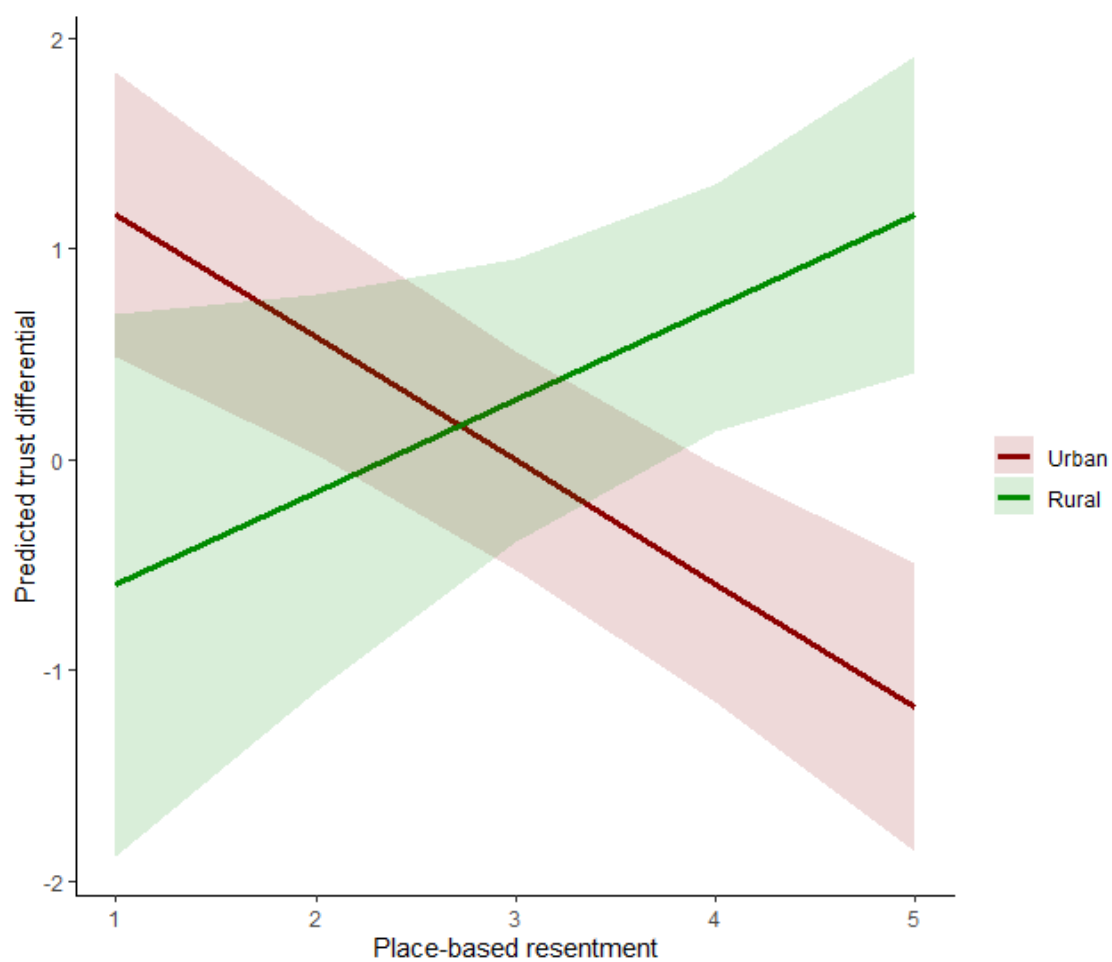
Table 2: Multilevel model of the trust differential

	Trust differential
Place of residence: Rural	-3.789*** (0.917)
Place-based resentment	-0.597*** (0.111)
Place of residence ## Place-based resentment	1.038*** (0.233)
Mayor's priority	0.108*** (0.025)
Place of residence ## Mayor's priority	0.198*** (0.045)
Years in office	0.028+ (0.014)
Local media consumption: Yes	0.021 (0.134)
Electoral winner: Yes	0.575*** (0.155)
Age	-0.010* (0.004)
Sex: Female	-0.023 (0.122)
Education level	-0.001 (0.024)
Citizenship: No	0.172 (0.294)
L-R ideology	0.023 (0.026)
Income level	0.015 (0.021)
Local attachment	0.371*** (0.061)
Social trust	-0.007 (0.030)

Political party FE	Yes
Constant	-0.109 (0.558)
Log SD (municipality random intercept)	-17.348 (534.959)
Log SD (residual / error term)	0.911*** (0.016)
Observations	1860

Standard errors in parentheses. + p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Figure 4: Predicted trust differential across levels of place-based resentment



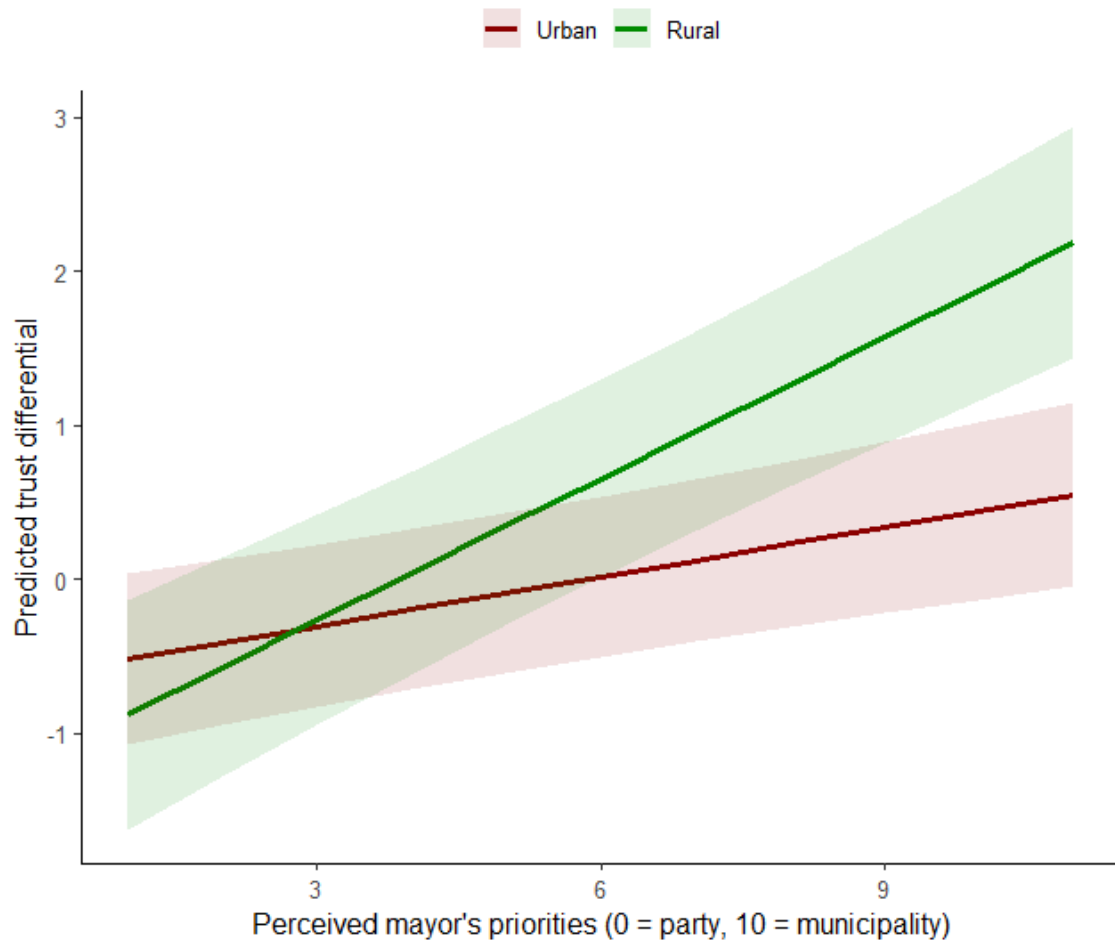
By contrast, among rural respondents, the relationship is reversed: higher levels of resentment are associated with an increase in the trust differential. This suggests that, in rural contexts, resentment primarily erodes trust in national government while leaving local trust comparatively less affected, thereby widening the gap between levels of government. In this case, therefore, the local government can indeed be interpreted as a “safe haven” for resentful rural inhabitants, in line with Hegewald (2024). Overall, these findings provide support for H2 and indicate that the effects of place-based resentment on political trust are highly contingent on rural and urban contexts.

However, they also raise an important question: under what conditions does local government effectively function as a site of representation? I argue that this depends, in part, on how citizens perceive the priorities of mayors. Accordingly, I now turn to examine whether and to what extent perceptions of mayor’s priorities shape the trust differential, and whether this effect varies across rural and urban contexts.

Figure 5 shows the marginal predictions of perceived mayor’s priorities on the trust differential across rural and urban contexts. The results show a positive association in both settings: as mayors are increasingly perceived to prioritise municipal over partisan interests, the trust differential between local and national government widens.

However, this relationship is markedly stronger among rural respondents. In these areas, the trust differential increases steeply as mayors are perceived as more community-oriented. By contrast, in urban areas, the effect is more modest, with a flatter slope indicating a weaker association between mayor’s priorities and the trust differential. This pattern fits with the image of a greater influence of party structures on local politics in urban areas, so that individual leadership may stand out less.

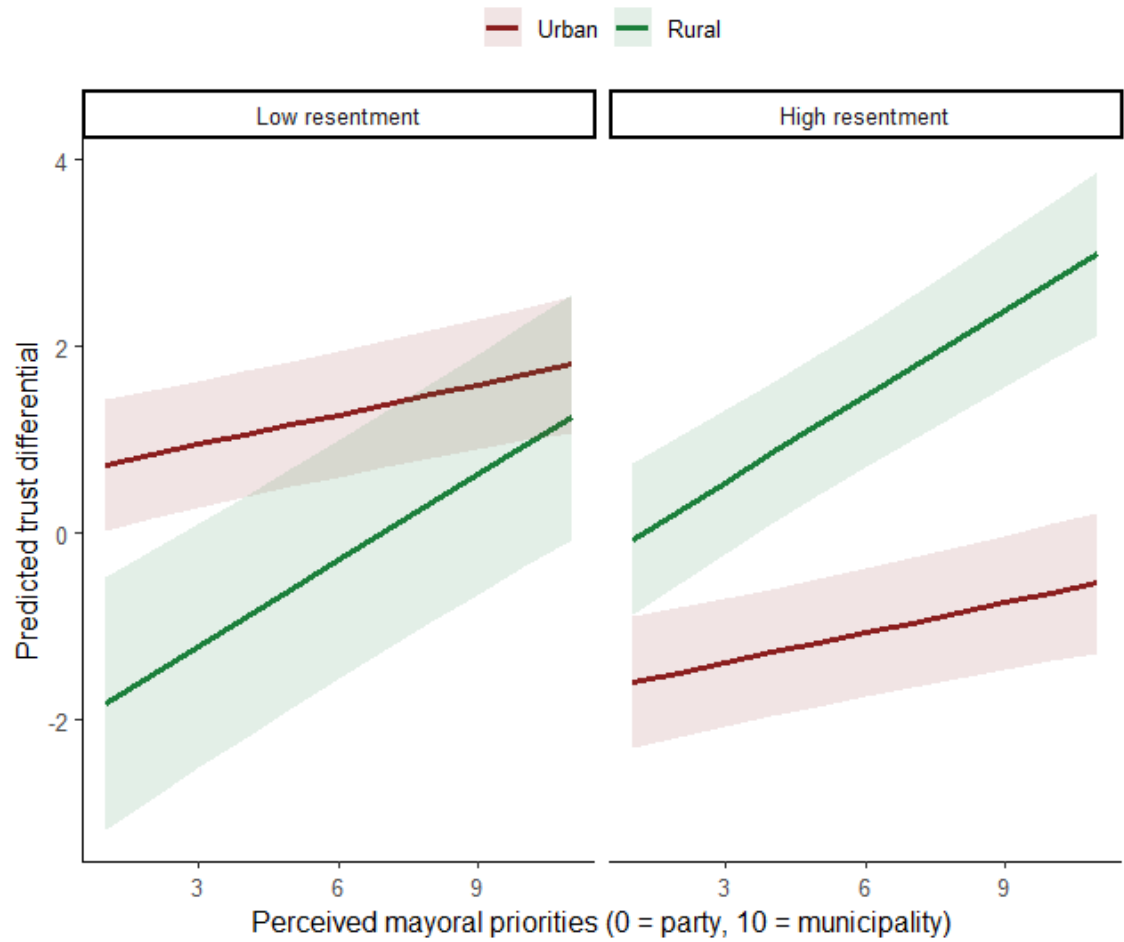
Figure 5: Predicted trust differential across levels of mayor's priorities



These findings provide support for H3 and suggest that perceptions of local leadership play a more consequential role in shaping political trust in rural settings, where citizens rely more heavily on personalised and proximity-based evaluations of political representation and politics is less mediated by party structures.

To further explore the relationship between place-based resentment and mayor's priorities, Figure 6 presents the marginal predictions of mayor's priorities across different levels of resentment. Among respondents with low levels of place-based resentment, the relationship between mayor's priorities and the trust differential is relatively similar across rural and urban contexts. By contrast, among those with high levels of resentment, the effect becomes substantially stronger in rural areas, with a steeper increase in the trust gap as mayors are perceived to prioritise municipal over partisan interests. This pattern suggests that place-based resentment not only affects political trust directly but also conditions the extent to which citizens rely on local leadership cues when evaluating local government.

Figure 6: Predicted trust differential by mayor’s priorities and place-based resentment



Additional results

As an additional robustness check, I account for citizens’ general evaluations of the mayor by including a measure of perceived personality traits—an additive index of perceptions on their competence, honesty, leadership skills, and proximity to people—. This allows me to assess whether the effects identified above are driven by broader mayor evaluations rather than by specific perceptions of their priorities.

The results, reported in Table B1 in the Appendix, show that evaluations of the mayor’s personality are positively and strongly associated with the trust differential. However, the interaction between rural place of residence and mayor’s priorities remains positive and

statistically significant, while the main effect of mayor's priorities becomes statistically insignificant.

This pattern suggests that perceptions of mayor's priorities are not simply a proxy for general mayor evaluations. Rather, their effect appears to be context-dependent, operating primarily in rural areas. In other words, while general evaluations of the mayor increase trust in local government overall, the extent to which citizens distinguish between municipal and partisan priorities remains particularly consequential in rural contexts. This reinforces the interpretation of mayor's priorities as a substantively distinct evaluative dimension, rather than a mere reflection of overall leader favourability.

Importantly, the interaction between place-based resentment and rural place of residence remains stable, reinforcing the robustness of the findings related to H2. Overall, these results provide further support for the argument that political trust is shaped by the interplay between territorial context, individual attitudes, and perceptions of local representation, rather than by generalised leader evaluations alone.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, these findings highlight that the rural–urban divide in political trust cannot be understood by considering place-based resentment and local leadership as separate mechanisms. While place-based resentment shapes how citizens evaluate political institutions, its effects are not uniform across contexts. In rural areas, resentment contributes to widening the trust differential by undermining trust in the national government, thereby increasing the relative relevance of the local level. However, whether local government effectively functions as a “safe haven” of representation depends crucially on how citizens perceive local leadership.

The results show that perceptions of mayor's priorities play a central role in this process, particularly in rural contexts, where political relationships are more personalised and less mediated by party structures. Moreover, the interaction between resentment and mayor's priorities suggests that these mechanisms are interconnected: place-based resentment not only shapes political trust directly but also affects the extent to which citizens rely on mayor's leadership cues. In this sense, place-based resentment appears to create the conditions under which local leadership becomes especially consequential for defining political trust.

Overall, these findings point to a context-dependent and relational understanding of political trust, in which territorial context, individual attitudes, and perceptions of local representation jointly structure how citizens distribute their trust across levels of government.

CONCLUSIONS

[To be completed in the next iteration of the paper.]

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Place-based resentment

Table A1: Battery of items used to measure place-based resentment

Dimensions	Items
Distributive	[Ingroup] areas are usually last in line for government spending on things like roads, schools, and healthcare. The government spends too much money on the development of [outgroup] areas, while the development of [ingroup] areas falls by the wayside. [Ingroup] areas have distinct economic interests that are often ignored by people in [outgroup] areas. The government does not do enough to create job opportunities in [ingroup] areas. In comparison to [outgroup] areas, [ingroup] areas receive less public funding than they should.
Representational	Politicians don't care what people living in [ingroup] areas think. Elites look down on people living in [ingroup] areas. People living in [ingroup] areas have no say in what the government does. There are too many MPs from [outgroup] areas who do not represent the interests of people living in [ingroup] areas. Politicians ignore the issues that really matter in [ingroup] areas. [Ingroup] areas are not represented enough in the media.
Cultural	People in [outgroup] areas do not respect the lifestyle of people in [ingroup] areas. People in [outgroup] areas have a negative view of people living in [ingroup] areas. People in [outgroup] areas have quite different values to me. People in [ingroup] areas work harder than people in [outgroup] areas. People in [outgroup] areas are colder and more uncaring than people in [ingroup] areas.

Appendix B: Robustness check with mayor's personality traits

Table B1: Multilevel model of the trust differential including mayor's (personality traits) evaluation

	Trust differential
Place of residence: Rural	-3.619*** (0.893)
Place-based resentment	-0.428*** (0.109)
Place of residence ## Place-based resentment	0.944*** (0.227)
Mayor's priority	0.001 (0.026)
Place of residence ## Mayor's priority	0.189*** (0.044)
Mayor's personality evaluation	0.678*** (0.067)
Years in office	0.021 (0.014)
Local media consumption: Yes	0.029 (0.131)
Electoral winner: Yes	0.240 (0.154)
Age	-0.011* (0.004)
Sex: Female	-0.016 (0.119)
Education level	-0.002 (0.023)
Citizenship: No	0.024 (0.287)
L-R ideology	0.028 (0.025)
Income level	0.011 (0.020)

Local attachment	0.276*** (0.060)
Social trust	-0.046 (0.030)
Political party FE	Yes
Constant	-1.128* (0.552)
Log SD (municipality random intercept)	-19.599*** (1.053)
Log SD (residual / error term)	0.884*** (0.016)
Observations	1860
Standard errors in parentheses. + p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001	