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Place resentment in ‘the places that don’t matter’: explaining the geographic divide in populist and anti-immigration attitudes

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Abstract

This study tests a novel explanation for geographic divides in populist and anti-immigration attitudes. This explanation centres around *place resentment*: the feeling that one’s area is ignored by policy makers and that members of one’s local community are misunderstood and disrespected by inhabitants of other areas. I argue that place resentment mediates the relationship between the type of area one inhabits and political attitudes. With representative survey data and contextual data from The Netherlands, I show that place resentment is an important mediator explaining how geographic divides translate into anti-immigration and populist attitudes. Place resentment is a stronger explanation for geographic variation in political attitudes than alternative explanations I explored. The results suggest that place resentment plays a central role in explaining geographic polarization in Western democracies.

Keywords Place resentment · Urban–rural · Centre–periphery · Anti-immigration · Populism

Introduction

Political attitudes vary substantially between inhabitants of different areas. Existing studies in Western democracies found an increasing urban–rural divide in anti-immigration attitudes (Huijismans et al. 2021; Maxwell 2020), and a centre–periphery divide in political discontent (e.g. Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Stein et al. 2019). An emerging literature states that local economic or demographic decline affects inhabitants’ political attitudes so that voting for populist parties has been heavily concentrated in areas that are often labelled as ‘the places that don’t matter’ (Monnat and Brown 2017; Rodríguez-Pose 2018). However, these studies

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do not explicitly analyse whether inhabitants themselves also perceive that their places don't matter, and how this relates to other political attitudes. Therefore, it remains an empirical question whether these feelings of *place resentment* mediate between residential context and political attitudes and behaviours. This study analyses the mediating role of place resentment in explaining associations between residential context and political attitudes.

Residential context affects people's perceptions of their own relative position (egotropic concerns), the position of their local community (*local* sociotropic concerns) and the general state of society (*general* sociotropic concerns), which are in turn related to political attitudes (e.g. Bisgaard et al. 2016; Gidron and Hall 2020; McKay et al. 2021). Although some studies show that resentment or status anxiety partly mediates residential context effects on political attitudes (e.g. Díaz-Lanchas et al. 2021; Salomo 2019), these studies do not measure *local* sociotropic concerns but instead egotropic or *general* sociotropic concerns. I argue that particularly *local* sociotropic concerns explain geographic variation in political attitudes. Namely, they invoke similar feelings of uncertainty and threat, but vary more strongly across geographic areas than egotropic and general sociotropic concerns, and are especially felt by inhabitants of rural and peripheral areas (Munis 2020; Harteveld et al. 2019).

Cramer (2016) suggests that *place-based* resentment makes individuals more likely to see adverse circumstances as the fault of political elites and less-deserving outgroups. Individuals who strongly feel these local sociotropic concerns may therefore form negative attitudes towards these outgroups (e.g. immigrants) and political elites. Following Cramer (2016) and Munis (2020), I operationalise local sociotropic concerns as *place resentment*, which is a perception of unjust socioeconomic, cultural and political inequality between the own area and other areas.

In this study, I analyse place resentment in the Netherlands and test whether it mediates the relationship between rurality and peripherality on the one hand, and populist and anti-immigrant attitudes on the other hand. I use survey data that were gathered among a large stratified representative sample of the Dutch population. To overcome problems associated with relying on respondents' own perceptions of the type of area they inhabit (Nemerever and Rogers 2021), I linked these to objective neighbourhood and municipality level data from Statistics Netherlands. I show that place resentment is a particularly strong explanation for geographic variation in anti-immigration and populist attitudes. It explains geographic variation in these attitudes better than egotropic or general sociotropic concerns.

The findings from the Netherlands indicate that place resentment could play a central role in explaining geographic political divides in other Western democracies as well. Because of its geography and the political system, the Netherlands can be regarded as a least-likely case to find high levels of place resentment. I will further elaborate on the Dutch case below. Since these attitudes are important motivations for populist radical right (PRR) voting, this study's findings might also help explain why support for PRR parties in West-European countries is increasingly located in rural peripheries (Evans et al. 2019; Schmalz et al. 2021).



Geographic divides in political attitudes

Figure 1 shows the relationships that are analysed in this study. In the following sections, I first outline existing studies on geographic divides in anti-immigration and populist attitudes (Arrows A, B). Second, I discuss place resentment and how it varies across areas (Arrow C). Third, I argue how place resentment is related to populist and anti-immigration attitudes (Arrows D, E).

Political attitudes differ between inhabitants of various types of areas, which can be partly explained by two types of mechanisms. On the one hand, individuals sort themselves into areas, partially based on socioeconomic resources and lifestyle preferences which are in turn related to political attitudes (Carlson and Gimpel 2019). Since younger, higher-educated professionals are more likely to live in central urban areas, the geographies of discontent and cosmopolitanism may be reflections of a social divide among classes who live in different areas (Maxwell 2019; Rodden 2019).

On the other hand, sociodemographic backgrounds of inhabitants do not fully explain variation in political attitudes across types of areas (Huijsmans et al. 2021; Gimpel et al. 2020), which suggests that residential contexts could shape individuals' political attitudes. An emerging literature assumes that people living in areas with limited economic opportunities and decline of local public services experience unhappiness and uncertainty (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). These feelings can spur anti-immigration attitudes (Salomo 2019), and may explain why Europeans living in more rural and peripheral areas have lower trust in politicians (Mitsch et al. 2021; Stein et al. 2019).

These studies assume that individuals take cues of their residential environment when they form political attitudes, but these studies do either not analyse individual-level data or they mainly focus on the role of egotropic or *general* sociotropic concerns. However, especially *local* sociotropic concerns vary across geographic areas. They are especially felt by inhabitants of rural and peripheral areas (Munis 2020;

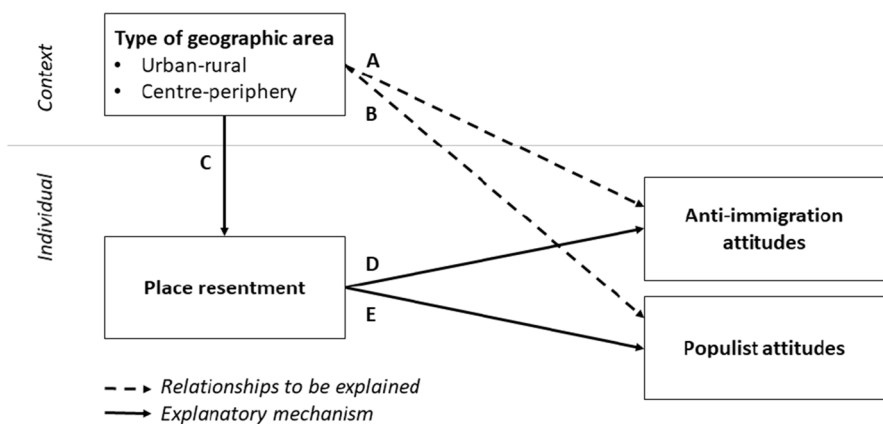


Fig. 1 Visual representation of the relationships analysed in this study



Harteveld et al. 2019), and should thus be best suited to explain geographic divides in political attitudes. Therefore, explicitly analysing how place resentment explains urban–rural divides in anti-immigration attitudes and centre–periphery divides in populism helps us to better understand how place “functions as a lens through which people interpret politics” (Cramer 2016, p. 12).

Place resentment

How individuals view their geographic communities is important for political outcomes, like the support for PRR politicians in Western democracies (Fitzgerald 2018; Ziblatt et al. 2021). People identify with their place and their fellow inhabitants, and make sense of the world by categorizing themselves and others into social groups. Identification with the local community facilitates comparisons between in-group and out-group members. This provides a basis for pride and efficacy and helps individuals figure out what social norms to follow and which values to uphold (Cramer 2016; Fitzgerald 2018).

In her ethnographic study of inhabitants of Wisconsin (US), Cramer (2016) develops the term *rural consciousness*, which is more than merely identification with a place. It includes perceptions of spatial distributive injustice that lead to the emotion of resentment. In combination with reliance on social identities, this can explain why individuals view politics in terms of opposition to other social groups (Cramer 2016). Place resentment is distinct from more general sociotropic concerns—like social marginalization (Gidron and Hall 2020) and societal pessimism (Steenvoorden and Harteveld 2018)—in the sense that the perceptions are rooted in an individual’s identification with the local community and perceptions of *spatial* injustice. Therefore, place resentment should vary across areas and should be better able to explain *geographic* variation in political attitudes than other sociotropic concerns. Place resentment postulates a certain level of identification with the residential area, which on its own can contribute to political attitudes (Lunz Trujillo 2022). Therefore, it is important to recognize that place resentment itself consists of the following three elements: (1) a belief that one’s residential area is ignored by policy makers (*political element*), (2) a perception that one’s area does not get its fair share of available resources (*socioeconomic element*) and (3) a sense that the members of one’s residential community have fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles, which are misunderstood and disrespected by others (*cultural element*) (Cramer 2016; Munis 2020).

Geographic variation in place resentment

Place resentment is relatively high in areas where feelings of socioeconomic, cultural and political spatial injustice come together. People who perceive poor economic conditions in their own local area feel that their local community is not well represented in national politics (McKay 2019). These often tend to be rural areas as these offer relatively few economic opportunities, so that especially younger,



higher-skilled individuals are likely to move (closer) to cities (Storper 2018). This threatens the socioeconomic and political power of the local area and is often accompanied by a deterioration of public services and facilities for the remaining inhabitants (Bock 2016). Individuals in economically deprived areas, with stronger population decline and higher average distances to services and facilities, hold higher levels of place resentment (Harteveld et al. 2019; McKay et al. 2021). From a socioeconomic perspective, one would thus expect strong urban–rural differences in place resentment. However, old industrialised cities and towns are also left behind by globalization and economic transformation and suffer from demographic decline, while this does not apply to villages close to booming cities (Bijker and Haartsen 2012; Kühn 2015; Lang 2012). This indicates the importance of taking into account the centre–periphery dimension as well. Place resentment may also be rooted in long-term cultural and political inequalities that exist between urban and rural areas. In line with this, existing studies showed that socioeconomic explanations do not explain all variation in political trust between urban and rural areas (see Mitsch et al. 2021). Moreover, Stein et al. (2019) argue that economic, political and cultural inequalities lead people in peripheral areas in Norway to develop regional identities based on antipathy towards elites in centre, which could explain why they have lower trust in politicians. Also in Germany, a region's history of economic, cultural and political interaction with the perceived centre of the country affects inhabitants' political attitudes and behaviours (Ziblatt et al. 2021). Altogether, place resentment varies along both the urban–rural and the centre–periphery dimension (Harteveld et al. 2019; Munis 2020).

Place resentment and political attitudes

Resentment makes individuals more likely to see adverse circumstances as the fault of political elites and less-deserving outgroups (Cramer 2016), yet no large-scale quantitative studies have explicitly analysed the link between place resentment on the one hand and anti-immigration and populist attitudes on the other hand. Next, I discuss why individuals who hold higher levels of place resentment are likely to adopt more negative attitudes towards immigrants and political elites.

Populist attitudes

The first two elements of place resentment—that one's area does not get its fair share and is ignored by policy makers—lead to the straightforward expectation that place resentment fuels negative attitudes towards political elites. The idea that members of one's residential community have fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles, which are disrespected by others is likely to fuel populist attitudes as well (Gidron and Hall 2020). This third element captures a form of perceived cultural distance to the rest of the country. It is likely that individuals infer the cultural distance to the rest of the country for a large part from how culturally distant they feel from political and cultural elites, and perceived cultural distance to politicians inspires political discontent



(Noordzij et al. 2020). Similarly, Americans who strongly identify as rural residents hold higher levels of anti-intellectualism, which in turn inspires populist attitudes (Lunz Trujillo 2022). To the extent that this relationship is explained by perceived cultural distance to elites and intellectuals in other places, this is another indication that place resentment fuels populist attitudes.

Anti-immigration attitudes

Many studies show the importance of individuals' perceptions of their relative position in society—like social marginalisation or exclusion—for explaining anti-immigration attitudes (Gidron and Hall 2020, Pellegini et al. 2021; Salomo 2019). Besides these *egotropic* concerns, individuals who hold higher levels of societal pessimism hold stronger anti-immigration attitudes (Steenvoorden and Harteveld 2018). What these egotropic and sociotropic concerns have in common is that they both invoke feelings of threat or uncertainty. Individuals who feel 'socially marginal' compare their position against their past and future and are susceptible to the fear of falling even further down the social ladder (Gidron and Hall 2020). The perception that society is in decline is likely to invoke uncertainty about the future and threat to their way of life. To cope with uncertainty, people draw sharper social boundaries between their own group and other groups to which a lower social standing can be ascribed. This is often applied to ethnic minority or immigrant groups and facilitates negative attitudes towards these groups (Gidron and Hall 2020; Jarness and Flemmen 2019).

Place resentment can be viewed as a localized form of sociotropic concerns and relates to *the local community's* relative position in society. This may invoke uncertainty and threat, similar to egotropic and general sociotropic concerns, and therefore inspires anti-immigration attitudes. This could explain why a sense of deprivation plus the perception that immigrants get ahead through preferential treatment inspires anti-immigrant attitudes in some places that actually have a very low number of immigrants and ethnic minorities themselves (Alba and Foner 2017). In line with this, Americans with higher levels of rural resentment hold more negative attitudes towards black Americans (Nelsen and Petko 2021).

Hypotheses

Altogether, I expect individuals with higher levels of place resentment to hold stronger anti-immigration and populist attitudes (*Hypothesis 1*). Its specific geographical distribution makes place resentment a better explanation for geographic divides in anti-immigration attitudes than egotropic or general sociotropic grievances. Therefore, I expect place resentment to explain geographic variation in anti-immigration attitudes (*Hypothesis 2*) and populism (*Hypothesis 3*).

Alternatively, place resentment and political attitudes may be correlated for other reasons. First, place resentment might actually capture the same generalized anti-elite sentiments that are central to populist attitudes and may therefore be merely



another operationalization of a similar concept. However, the theoretical difference is that place resentment specifically relates to a *geographic* conflict line, and it captures also economic and cultural elements next to a political element. That is, place resentment refers to a conflict between 'the people *in my region*' and the political, economic and/or cultural elites *somewhere else*. Munis (2020) and Hartevelde et al (2019) convincingly demonstrated that place resentment is also empirically distinct from populist attitudes. Second, the question is whether place resentment can be measured without capturing this anti-elite sentiment that is central to populist attitudes, and if so, whether this would still explain geographic variation in political attitudes. Third, place resentment may be a particular expression of underlying racial or populist attitudes. If so, anti-immigration and populist attitudes would explain the geographic variation in place resentment instead of the other way around. I will take up the second and third issue—within limitations of the data—in additional analyses that I discuss under 'robustness checks' at the end of the results section.

The case of The Netherlands

The Netherlands is a least-likely case to find high levels of place resentment and large geographic variation in political attitudes. First, every rural area in the country is relatively close to the nearest city, and less than a 3-h drive away from the parliament in The Hague or the capital city of Amsterdam. Second, even the largest city has less than 900,000 inhabitants, and is relatively small compared to large cities in other countries. So, cities are small, rural peripheries are not that remote, and the differences between them are smaller than in other countries. Moreover, the Dutch electoral system is one of the proportional representation, whereas previous studies suggest that strong geographic political divides are most likely to occur in electoral systems with single-member districts (Rodden 2019).

Nonetheless, there are still meaningful regional inequalities in the Netherlands. The 'Randstad' area is a heavily urbanized area in the West of the Netherlands, containing the country's four largest cities (Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) and the areas in between. It is regarded as the economic, cultural and political centre of the country. This already dates back to at least the seventeenth century, with the dominance of Holland in the United Provinces of the Netherlands, and is still reflected in the Dutch standard national language being most similar to the dialects spoken in this area (Hoppenbrouwers and Hoppenbrouwers 2001). The Port of Rotterdam, Schiphol Airport and the financial centre in Amsterdam represent the Randstad's economically central function in the country (see also Lambregts et al. 2009). Dutch regions also differ in various aspects of their local cultures (Brons 2005), with Amsterdam being regarded as the cultural centre of the country (e.g. Pellenbarg and van Steen 2015). Similar to the UK, France and the US, these regional differences are also politicized, as reflected in the increasing emphasis that rural protest groups put on the defence of rural identities (Strijker and Terluijn 2015), which became increasingly visible when an explicitly rural-oriented party (*BoerBurgerBeweging (Farmer Citizens Movement)*) entered the national parliament in 2021.



Data and methods

Data

Individual-level survey data from the Subnational Context and Radical Right Support in Europe (SCoRE) project¹ were merged with data from Statistics Netherlands about the urbanisation degree and geographic location of neighbourhoods and municipalities. The SCoRE dataset was gathered in May 2017 from a sample of 8013 respondents. The sample was stratified by age, education, ethnicity, urbanity and province. It is therefore not only representative for the Dutch population in terms of their sociodemographic background, but also representative in geographic terms, meaning that the dataset includes respondents from more- and less-urbanized areas across all Dutch provinces. This makes the SCoRE data uniquely suitable for analysing geographic variation in political attitudes in the Netherlands. Since one of the dependent variables is anti-immigration attitudes, I exclude respondents with a migration background. Descriptive statistics for all relevant variables are found in Table 1. See Online Appendix 3 in supplementary materials for descriptive statistics of all separate items used to construct those variables.

Main variables

Geographic categories

Existing studies have often relied on respondents' own perceptions of the type of area they inhabit. However, Nemerever and Rogers (2021) showed that a striking number of respondents who indicated they live in a rural area do actually live in a city. To circumvent these problems, I used the residential location of respondents at the neighbourhood level to construct a geographic categorisation that combines the urban–rural and centre–periphery dimensions. Regarding the centre–periphery dimension, I distinguished between neighbourhoods inside and outside the ‘Randstad’ area. The Randstad is not an official statistical area with recognized boundaries. To determine who lives in and outside the Randstad, I determined the geographical midpoint between the four cities and drew a 45 km wide circle that includes all four large cities, all areas in between and a small band around the four cities (Fig. 2). Areas outside the Randstad area were categorized as peripheral. Within these groups, I divided neighbourhoods in categories according to their degree of urbanization. I also estimated all models with continuous urbanisation and peripheralization variables, and with an alternative geographical categorization, for which I discuss the results in the section on robustness checks.

Urbanisation degree was operationalized in five categories by Statistics Netherlands, based on ‘surrounding address density’: the number of addresses within 1 km surrounding a particular address. The address density at the neighbourhood

¹ A public version is available via <https://easy.dans.knaw.nl/ui/datasets/id/easy-dataset:161510/tab/2>.



Table 1 Descriptive statistics ($N=4441$)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Place resentment	4.482	1.517	1	7
Anti-immigration attitudes	4.092	1.479	1	7
Populist attitudes	3.604	0.922	1	5
Place identification	4.991	1.370	1	7
Social pessimism	0.366		0	1
Political sophistication	4.434	1.228	1	7
Political efficacy	3.265	1.287	1	7
Female	0.521		0	1
Age	54.705	13.885	18	90
Share of non-Western inhabitants (municipality)	0.114	0.092	0.014	0.379
Share of non-Western inhabitants (neighbourhood)	0.106	0.111	0	0.885
Employed	0.527		0	1
<i>Education</i>				
Low	0.250		0	1
Middle	0.445		0	1
High	0.305		0	1
<i>Occupation</i>				
Modern professional	0.153		0	1
Administrative	0.176		0	1
Senior management	0.097		0	1
Technical professionals	0.137		0	1
Semi-routine manual/service	0.108		0	1
Routine manual/service	0.103		0	1
Middle-/lower management	0.124		0	1
Traditional professional	0.101		0	1
<i>Geographic categories</i>				
Inner city, Centre	0.119		0	1
Suburb, Centre	0.101		0	1
Non-urban, Centre	0.099		0	1
Inner city, periphery	0.056		0	1
Suburb, periphery	0.137		0	1
Town, periphery	0.171		0	1
Village, periphery	0.151		0	1
Rural, periphery	0.166		0	1

(or municipality) level is the average surrounding address density for all addresses within the neighbourhood (or municipality). Statistics Netherlands divided neighbourhoods (or municipalities) into five categories based on this address density: very strongly urban, strongly urban, mildly urban, hardly urban and rural.

Within the *Randstad* area, I distinguished between inner cities, suburban areas and non-urban areas by combining these categorizations at the neighbourhood- and



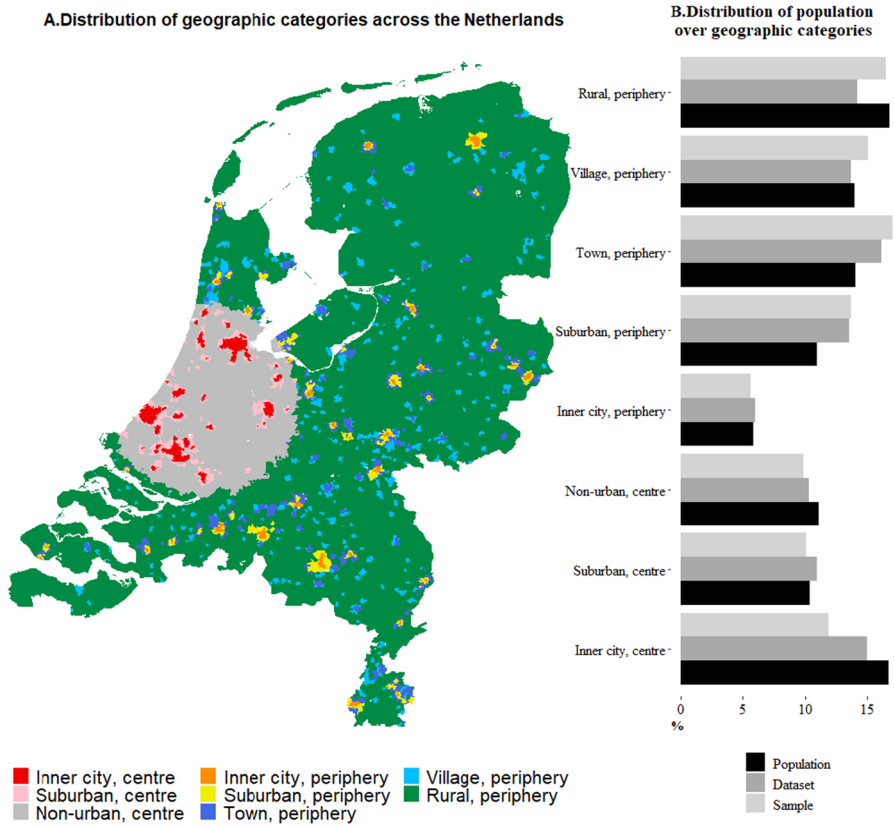


Fig. 2 Map of the Netherlands with neighbourhoods coloured by type of geographic area (A), and overview of the distribution of the Dutch population over geographic categories (B)

municipality level. For example, very strongly urban neighbourhoods in (very) strongly urban municipalities are categorized as inner cities. Neighbourhoods with lower urbanisation degrees in these same municipalities are categorized as suburbs. The non-urban areas are mostly small towns and villages situated in between the four large cities. Within the periphery group, I made a more fine-grained categorization in decreasing order of urbanization degree: inner cities, suburban areas, towns, villages and rural areas. See Online Appendix 2 in supplementary materials for a detailed overview of the categorization of neighbourhoods. See Fig. 2 for the locations of these areas across the Netherlands, and the distribution of the population over these areas. Inner city inhabitants in the central *Randstad* area are slightly underrepresented in the ScoRE dataset, and especially in the sample of analysis, as compared to the Dutch population. The latter is largely explained by restricting the sample to Dutch ethnic majority members. Moreover, inhabitants of towns and suburbs in the periphery are slightly overrepresented as compared to the Dutch population.



Place resentment

Place resentment is measured with three items that correspond to its three elements: (1) "Politicians in The Hague are not interested in my region"; (2) "The government has done too little to improve the economic situation of my region"; (3) "People in the rest of the Netherlands do not have enough appreciation for the people in my region". Respondents answered on a 7-point scale ranging from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (7). The operationalization was previously validated by Hartevelde et al (2019). Together, these items form a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.833$). The place resentment scale is equal to the mean of the three items. The distribution is skewed towards the high end of the scale, which is explained by the high shares of respondents in all periphery categories with high scores. See supplementary materials for a detailed overview of the distribution per geographic category, and separately for each of the 3 place resentment items.

Populist attitudes

Populist attitudes were measured using six survey items with five answer categories ranging from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (5) (Akkerman et al. 2014; see Online Appendix 2). Example items are "Politicians in parliament need to follow the will of the people"; and "Political differences between the elite and the people are larger than differences among the people". The six items form a reliable populism scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.879$).

Anti-immigration attitudes

Respondents indicated on a 7-point scale on two separate items to what extent they thought immigrants have a positive effect on the Dutch economy and on Dutch cultural life. Answers on these items are strongly correlated ($r=0.609$) and analysing them separately yields very comparable results, so I combined them into an anti-immigration attitudes scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.752$).

Controlling for alternative explanations

There are several potential alternative explanations for the mediating role of place resentment in the association between residential areas and political attitudes, that will be taken into account in the analysis.

First, to account for effects of inhabitants' demographic background and socio-economic positions, five control variables were included: age in years, whether a respondent is female (1=yes), whether he/she has a paid job (1=yes), the level of educational attainment and the type of occupation. Education level was measured in three categories. It was coded as low (1) if the respondent's highest level of finished education is the lowest level of secondary vocational training or lower. It was coded as high (3) if the respondent finished at least higher vocational training. All levels in



between were coded as middle (2). Type of occupation was divided in eight categories (see Table 1).

Second, the level of ethnic diversity—and therewith the likelihood of interethnic contact—differs between residential areas, which may explain differences in attitudes towards immigrants (e.g. Laurence et al. 2018). It is unlikely that the effect of ethnic diversity is mediated by place resentment at the individual level, in contrast to other contextual effects like economic hardship or local marginalization. Therefore, the share of inhabitants with a non-Western migration background, both at the neighbourhood and municipality level, was included to test for alternative explanations based on interethnic contact theory. These data were obtained from *Statistics Netherlands*.

Third, the three aspects of place resentment are all to some extent covered by general sociotropic concerns that are not necessarily place-based, like societal pessimism (Steenvoorden and Harteveld 2018). Moreover, the element that politicians do not care about people from your area may be a reflection of more general attitudes towards politics, like political efficacy or political sophistication. Any relationship between place resentment and political attitudes may therefore be a reflection of attitudes that are not specifically based on how inhabitants perceive the position of their local community. I take social pessimism, political sophistication and political efficacy into account to analyse whether variation in place resentment—and its explanatory power—is locally rooted rather than based on more general attitudes towards politics and society. Fourth, I include a measure of identification with the residential region in the analyses to see whether any relationship between place resentment and the outcome variables is based on resentment rather than merely on presumably underlying identification. An overview of the operationalization of these attitudes that are theoretically related to place resentment, and how their average levels vary across geographical areas, can be seen in Online Appendix 4. Fifth, anti-immigration and populist attitudes may be related at the individual level, and geographic variation in populist attitudes may therefore partly be explained by differences in anti-immigration attitudes.

Analytical strategy

To test the hypotheses, I estimated regression models with standard errors clustered within neighbourhoods. I first checked the assumption that inhabitants of peripheral and rural areas hold higher levels of place resentment (see Models 1a–1c in Table A1 in supplementary materials). These results are visualized in Fig. 3. Model 1a includes dummy variables for each of the geographic categories, using central inner cities as reference category. Model 1b additionally includes sociodemographic control variables. Model 1c additionally includes attitudinal correlates.

Then, I tested Hypotheses 1–3 by analysing to what extent place resentment explains geographic variation in populist and anti-immigration attitudes,



by estimating 5 models for both outcomes. The baseline model (Models 2a, 3a) includes sociodemographic controls and geographic categories, with central inner cities as reference category. The second model adds place resentment (Models 2b, 3b). The third (2c/3c) and fourth (2d/3d) models do not include place resentment, but instead include the alternative explanations. The final model includes place resentment together with the alternative explanations (2e, 3e) to see whether the effect of place resentment still remains once these are taken into account. Figures 3 and 4 summarize the results of all models.

Only respondents who have valid scores on all dependent, explanatory and control variables are included in the analyses to facilitate comparison of coefficients across nested models. The complete results of all models can be found in Online Appendix 1. Codes for replicating analyses can be found at Open Science Framework.²

Finally, by performing multilevel regression models, I explicitly checked the assumptions that (1) the variance in political attitudes is partly explained by respondents being nested in the place where they live, and (2) this variation across places is partly explained by its urbanity and peripherality. I discuss this in the section on robustness checks.

Results

Place resentment

Model 1a (Table A1 in supplementary materials) shows that inhabitants of peripheral areas have significantly higher levels of place resentment compared to inhabitants of central *Randstad* areas. In all types of peripheral areas, place resentment is more than 0.8 points higher than in central inner cities. For the rural peripheral areas, the difference with central inner cities is 1.3 points. The predicted levels of place resentment for each type of area are visualized in Fig. 3. The geographic dummies explain 9.8 percent of variation in place resentment.

As Model 1b shows, sociodemographic background variables explain an additional 4.1 percent points, but do not substantially change geographic variation compared to Model 1a (see Fig. 3). Model 1c additionally shows that individuals who feel stronger connected to their region and who are socially pessimistic report higher levels of place resentment. Individuals with higher political sophistication and efficacy report lower levels of place resentment. These attitudes explain an additional 8.1 percent points of the variance in place resentment. However, including them did not substantially change geographic variation compared to Model 1a (see Fig. 3). This suggests that the observed geographic variation in place resentment is not merely a reflection of more general attitudes, but based on perceptions of spatial injustice.

² See https://osf.io/a764w/?view_only=7882d07889b44be3b7b06cdaa70c4a0a.



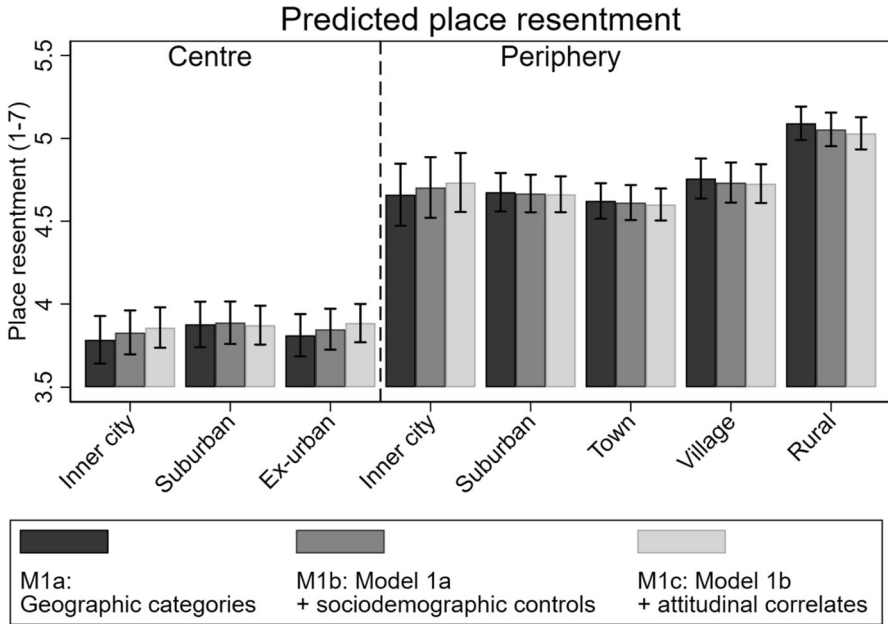


Fig. 3 Predicted levels of regional resentment by geographic category with and without controlling for sociodemographic background variables and attitudinal correlates

Anti-immigration attitudes

Model 2a shows that inhabitants of the central non-urban areas, and inhabitants of peripheral towns, villages and rural areas hold significantly stronger anti-immigration attitudes, as compared to inhabitants of inner cities, even when controlled for their sociodemographic background. This urban–rural divide is visualized in the left part of Fig. 4.

Model 2b adds place resentment to the baseline model. Individuals who experience higher place resentment hold stronger anti-immigration attitudes ($b=0.243$, $se=0.016$), which supports *Hypothesis 1*. The right part of Fig. 4 shows that a large share of the geographic variation in anti-immigration attitudes disappears once place resentment is included. Inhabitants of the peripheral towns, villages and rural areas do no longer significantly differ from inhabitants of the central inner cities. The difference between inhabitants of the inner cities and non-urban areas in the centre remained unaffected. In sum, differences in anti-immigration attitudes between less-urbanized areas in the periphery and the inner cities in the centre are explained by place resentment. This supports *Hypothesis 2* to a large extent.

Model 2c includes attitudinal correlates instead of place resentment. Social pessimism is positively related, and political efficacy and political sophistication are negatively related to anti-immigration attitudes, whereas place identification has no effect. Although these variables together explain a larger share of the total variance



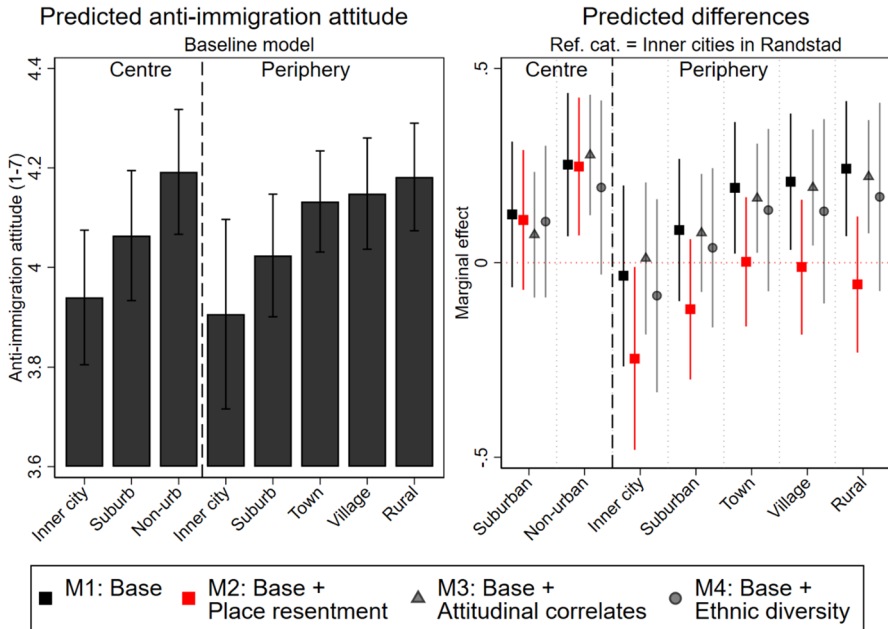


Fig. 4 Anti-immigration attitudes by geographic category as predicted from the baseline model (left-hand graph), and predicted differences between geographic categories, before and after controlling for place resentment, attitudinal correlates and ethnic diversity (right-hand graph)

in anti-immigration attitudes,³ they only slightly reduced the *geographic* variation as compared to the baseline Model 2a (see Fig. 4). Model 2d shows no significant effect of the share of inhabitants with a non-Western migration background at either the municipality or the neighbourhood level. Model 2e shows that the effects of social pessimism, political efficacy and place resentment all remain statistically significant when they are simultaneously included.

Populist attitudes

Model 3a shows that inhabitants of the suburbs, towns, villages and rural areas in the periphery hold significantly higher populist attitudes, as compared to inhabitants of the inner cities in the central *Randstad* area, even when controlled for sociodemographic background variables. Inhabitants of the suburban and non-urban areas in the centre, and inhabitants of the inner cities in the periphery do not significantly differ from inhabitants of the central inner cities. This indicates a centre–periphery divide in populist attitudes, with the exception of the inhabitants of the inner cities in the periphery, which is visualized in the left part of Fig. 5.

Model 3b shows that people who experience higher place resentment hold significantly higher populist attitudes ($b = 0.241$, $se = 0.009$). This supports *Hypothesis*

³ The explained variance in Model 2c ($R^2 = .285$) is higher than in Model 2b ($R^2 = .122$).



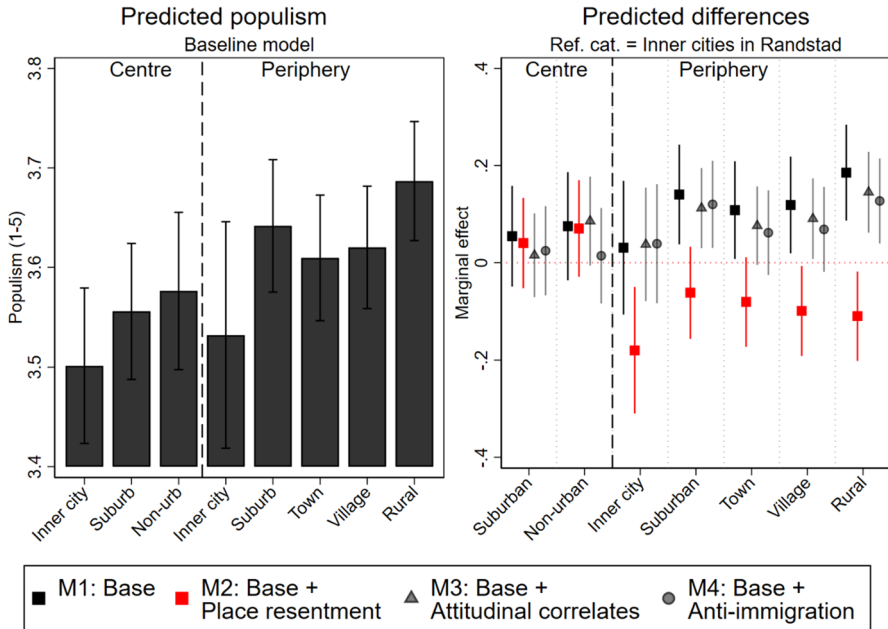


Fig. 5 Populist attitudes by geographic category as predicted from the baseline model (left-hand graph), and predicted differences between geographic categories, before and after controlling for place resentment, attitudinal correlates and anti-immigration attitudes (right-hand graph)

1. The right part of Fig. 5 shows that a large part of the geographic variation in populism substantially changes once place resentment is added. Inhabitants of the peripheral suburbs and towns do no longer significantly differ from central inner-city inhabitants. The effect of the village and rural dummies even turned negative. The same applies to the effect of the inner cities in the periphery. In sum, the geographic variation in populism thus completely disappears or even turns around when place resentment is included in the analysis in Model 3b. This implies that the geographic variation in populism is explained by place resentment, which is in line with *Hypothesis 3*.

Model 3c shows that social pessimism and place identification are positively related, and political efficacy and sophistication are negatively related, to populism. Although these variables together explain a larger share of the variance in populism as compared to place resentment,⁴ they only explain a small portion of *geographic* variation in populism. The differences that were observed in baseline Model 3a remained significant, except for the effect of the peripheral towns dummy (see Fig. 5). Model 3d shows that taking the association between anti-immigration attitudes and populism into account partly explains the geographic variation in populism. The effects of the peripheral towns and villages dummies are no longer

⁴ The explained variance in Model 3d ($R^2 = .414$) is higher than in Model 3b ($R^2 = .325$).



significant in this model. Although anti-immigration attitudes and place resentment explain approximately the same amount of variance in populism,⁵ the right-hand panel of Fig. 5 shows that place resentment explains a larger share of the geographic variation.

Robustness checks

I performed additional analyses to take up the endogeneity issues raised earlier. First, I repeated the main analyses with the separate place resentment items included one-by-one instead of the place resentment scale. If place resentment and populist attitudes would only be related because both operationalizations capture a generalized anti-elite sentiment, then the geographic variation in populist attitudes would not be explained by the place resentment item that does not refer to elites. The geographic variation in the place resentment scale is equally applicable to all three elements (see Figure A1 in supplementary materials). Although the political item explains as much of the geographic variation in anti-immigration and populist attitudes as the scale, the main conclusion holds even when the operationalization does not refer to elites.

Second, I specified a reversed model in which the geographical distribution of place resentment is predicted by anti-immigration and populist attitudes. While these items are obviously correlated on the individual level, anti-immigration and populist attitudes both cannot explain *geographic* variation in place resentment (see Figure A3 in supplementary materials). This suggests that inhabitants of rural peripheries do not hold higher levels of place resentment because they hold stronger anti-immigration and populist attitudes. Instead, all analyses together suggest that they hold stronger anti-immigration and populist attitudes because of their relatively strong feelings of place resentment.

Third, Online Appendix 6 shows that the results are robust to alternative geographic categorizations. In this alternative categorization, I made a more fine-grained distinction on the centre–periphery dimension. These analyses did not substantively change the results and conclusions of this study, but they additionally showed that place resentment—and its power to explain geographic variation in political attitudes—linearly increases with distance to the centre.

Finally, the multilevel regression models in Online Appendix 7 support the two basic assumptions underlying the main argument of this study. First, variance in political attitudes is partly explained by respondents being nested in the places where they live. Second, the geographic categories do explain residual variance at the neighbourhood and municipality levels for all outcome variables. However, they better explain the variance at the municipality level, especially for anti-immigration attitudes. That place resentment does not substantially vary across neighbourhoods within municipalities further stresses that other explanations remain highly important for explaining geographic variation in anti-immigration attitudes.

⁵ The explained variance in Model 3e ($R^2 = .330$) is similar to Model 3b ($R^2 = .325$).



Conclusion and discussion

This study sheds further light on the urban–rural divide in anti-immigration attitudes (Huijsmans et al. 2021; Maxwell 2020), and the centre–periphery divide in populist attitudes (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). It builds on existing studies which conclude that the residential context can affect people’s perceptions of their own relative position (egotropic concerns), the position of their local community (*local* sociotropic concerns), and the general state of society (*general* sociotropic concerns) (Bisgaard et al. 2016; McKay et al. 2021; Salomo 2019), and argued that particularly *local* sociotropic concerns explain geographic political divides. Until now, no large-scale quantitative studies explicitly analyse the mediating role of place resentment at the individual level. This study fills this gap by analysing socio-demographically and geographically representative survey data from the Netherlands. The findings showed that inhabitants of cities, towns, villages and especially the rural areas outside the central *Randstad* area hold relatively high levels of place resentment (see also Hartevelde et al. 2019; McKay et al. 2021; Munis 2020). This place resentment explains why inhabitants of less-urbanized peripheries hold relatively strong anti-immigration and populist attitudes compared to the central inner cities, and explains this substantially better than other explanations.

Although existing studies argue that urban–rural polarization in anti-immigration attitudes is to a large extent explained by differences in socioeconomic background of urban and rural inhabitants (see Maxwell 2019), the current study adds that remaining geographic variation in political attitudes can be understood from a perspective of place-based resentment. Importantly, place resentment cannot explain why inhabitants of non-urban areas in the central *Randstad* area hold relatively strong anti-immigration attitudes, or why inhabitants of inner cities in the periphery do *not* hold anti-immigration and populist attitudes. Place resentment explains variance in political attitudes between some areas better than between others. The additional analyses showed that its explanatory power increases with distance to the centre, but also that that other explanations remain highly important for explaining geographic variation in anti-immigration attitudes at the neighbourhood level. This adds to recent insights that political attitudes and outcomes in different places are explained by different mechanisms (e.g. Hartevelde et al 2021; McKay et al. 2021). Relatedly, a possible explanation for why I found no effect of ethnic diversity in the residential area on anti-immigration attitudes is that I adopted a ‘one size fits all’ approach, whereas ethnic diversity may only be important in urban areas and other contextual factors are important in others (Hartevelde et al. 2021).

Future studies should zoom in further on the relative importance of the three elements of place resentment, since its explanatory power seems mainly driven by the perception that politicians do not care about the region and less by cultural or economic concerns. Individuals in the UK who perceive higher relative economic deprivation and perceive their area to be less central and less important to society are more likely to think politicians do not care about their area (McKay et al. 2021). Economic and cultural concerns may thus partly be *indirectly* related to other political attitudes via the perception that politicians do not care about



the area. Moreover, future studies could explore what it is about residential contexts that explains geographic variation in place resentment. A fruitful direction would be to study to what extent place resentment mediates the effects of specific contextual factors on political attitudes. This would also answer the question to what extent place resentment is related to objective measures of local marginalisation and deprivation, and/or is actively mobilized by political actors, for example, during times of economic downturn or peaks in immigration. Another interesting direction would be to explicitly study the direct and indirect effects of place resentment on voting behaviour. Finally, future studies should use longitudinal designs to disentangle the potential bi-directional relationship between place resentment and populist attitudes, for example, through analysing whether changes in one attitude predict subsequent changes in the other.

To conclude, place resentment is a particularly strong individual-level explanation for geographic variation in political attitudes in the Netherlands. Concerns about recognition and subjective social status are important drivers of political attitudes (e.g. Gidron and Hall 2020), and this study reinforces recent claims that place is an important dimension along which people can perceive this (e.g. Cramer 2016; Fitzgerald 2018). Explaining variation in political attitudes between inhabitants of different areas requires asking how and why their perceptions of their local communities' social positions differ. The findings should inform researchers interested in geographical polarization in other contexts, especially those who study why rural and peripheral areas seem to be an increasingly fertile soil for populist (radical right) parties in Western democracies. Addressing negative attitudes towards immigrants and political elites in certain areas may require place-sensitive policies that invest in "the places that don't matter" (Janmarino et al. 2019) and that show that policy makers do actually care about those areas. However, the heterogeneity between these suburbs, towns, villages and rural areas should be taken into account, and it should be recognized that place resentment is not only rooted in economic but also in political and cultural grievances.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-022-00244-9>.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author hereby declares that he has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter discussed in this manuscript.



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