Politicians and pundits describe America in many ways: there is a red America and a blue America; whites live in one place, none-whites in another; the United States has two liberal coastlines and an expansive conservative heartland in the middle. Yet, while geography is implicit in all these characterizations of contemporary politics, it is almost always relied upon to illustrate one of the more commonly discussed determinants of American political behavior—partisanship, race, ideology. While these three markers of political and social identity have long been used to understand the sources and structure of public opinion (Converse 2006; Fiske and Taylor 1984; Kinder and Sanders 1996), physical places can serve a similar function in shaping political attitudes. As the seminal geographer John Agnew (1987) argues, an individual’s perception, appreciation, and realization of a physical space and the features of that space filter the impressions of political action that take place within it. Place is more than just a picture in one’s head—it is a personal and emotional attachment to the spaces where people work, play, and live, which in turn structures how we interpret political phenomenon that affect those.

In this paper, we present results of a survey experiment designed to measure the independent effects of geography on voters’ evaluations of candidates running for the U.S. Senate. Our evidence confirms a growing consensus developing in the literature that “rural consciousness” is a predominant way in which many Americans recognize and make sense of politics (Cramer 2012, 2016). We also find evidence to suggest that urban residents also rely on a type of place-based identity, but that it is less tied up with feelings of resentment or marginalized status. In our experiment, we randomly showed respondents one of three images for a fictional candidate running for the U.S. Senate and asked them to evaluate how “warmly” they felt about him. Two of the images were “micro-tailored” to the respondents’ state of residence, with one of them showing the candidate in front of the state’s largest city skyline, and
another showing the candidate standing in a rural setting found in the respondent’s state (the third, “control” image devoid of geographic imagery). Respondents who self-identified as living in rural areas consistently rated the “urban candidate” less favorably, while self-identified urban residents did not make any such distinction between urban or rural candidates. Indeed, as respondents became “more rural,” they were increasingly likely to disapprove of the urban candidate. Moreover, when we asked respondents to evaluate the candidate’s ability to serve in office, those from rural places suggested that the urban candidate was less able to understand the needs and issues facing people like them. Urban respondents, however, were much more likely to say that the urban candidate understood people “like me” and that he “knows what needs to be done to help people” in the respondent’s state. Political candidates can, and often do, take advantage of geographic divisions in American politics. The independent effects of geography in this experiment suggest that an individual’s place-based identity structures how she interprets those elite messages.

Our evidence is consistent with this assessment and suggests that, for rural voters, place identity is activated rather easily when exposed to presentations of the urban “other,” and colors respondent’s political evaluations beyond just “red” and “blue.” Likewise, as our treatments exploited state-variation in different types of geographic imagery, we argue that the social identities nurtured by place-based appeals are more expansive than how place mediates more immediate interpersonal, localized relationships, or the “social logic of politics” (Zuckerman 2005). Finally, our findings contribute to the broader call within political science to (re)acknowledge the centrality of group attachments and identities in shaping political cognition and behavior. As convincingly argue, long and widely held assumptions about the rational and socially detached democratic individual are bunk. Rather, individuals’ understanding of politics hinges on the groups with which we identify, and the attitudes and affections that accompany those attachments. Places are groups.

The Politics of Place

While academic political science routinely relies on geographic structures and boundaries to make sense of a variety of political behaviors, the usual suspects of individual attitude and opinion formation are often described in ways that transcend physical space. Gender and race are not contextualized—they exist and manifest themselves in similar ways regardless of where a citizen lives or practices politics (Dawson 1994; Ridgeway 2011; Kinder and Sears 1981). While a Georgia Democrat may be different than a Massachusetts Democrat in the issues they care about, they nevertheless often register as the same when considered in national survey samples (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 2002). Indeed, as the world continued to shrink and as “globalization” supplanted the forces of nationalization, prominent scholars even dismissed the need for thinking about the contextual factors of political behavior (King 1996).

And yet, studies of public opinion and political behavior have continued to make sense of place as a politically relevant concept. Suburbanization and now re-urbanization raise important questions about how different spatial arrangements of communities—especially communities divided by race and class—alter public opinion and shape civic engagement (Black and Black 1989; Bowen, Haynes, and Rosenthal 2006; Oliver 2001). Additionally, since most individuals’ social interactions are limited by how much they travel and with whom they interact, scholars who take a social-network approach to the study of political behavior recognize the constraining and unavoidable influence of place (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Mondak et al. 2010; Sinclair 2012). Scholars have also suggested that when citizens vote and think about politics, they draw on experiences and information somewhere between the very personal (e.g., individual experience) and the very broad (e.g., national unemployment rate), long described by economists as the “mecro-economy” (Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2014; Cutler 2007). As Reeves and Gimpel (2012, 531) have argued, “Far from being an echo chamber of the national media, voters form their attitudes about the economy based on their limited exposure to their localities, variously defined.”

To be sure, place and context have featured prominently in studies of voting behavior dating back to Key’s (1949, 37) claim that residency and proximity were primary determinants of candidate support: a candidate garners support “not primarily for what he stands for or because of his capacities, but because of where he lives”. The idea of “friends-and-neighbors” voting has been widely supported in presidential elections (Lewis-Beck and Rice 1983), state-wide contests (Aspin and Hall 1987; Bowler, Donovan, and Snipp 1993; Gimpel et al. 2008), and local elections (Brunk, Ramesh, and Adams 1988; Johnston 1974). Most recently, Panagopoulos, Leighley, and Hamel (2017) argue that place matters beyond a candidate’s ability to persuade future constituents: when candidates and citizens share a “home county,” individuals are more motivated to actually to turn out to vote.

Place as a Social Identity

Individuals make sense of politics through the groups with which they associate. Individuals participate more when they feel more a part of a collective (Verba,
Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Chong 2000); individuals treat groups as important cognitive “short-cuts” for making sense of an abundance of competing, often conflicting information about candidate quality and policy effects (Lupia 1994; Zaller 1992). Individuals want to maximize the distributive effects of policies to groups they “like” (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991) and priming racial or ethnic-based group identities can change how individuals think about a policy, even when their understanding of the underlying problem remains the same (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Nelson and Kinder 1996).

Studies of contextual variation have yet to incorporate these group-based theories of individual attitudes and motivations. Moreover, while there is overwhelming consensus that almost any conceivable group can be an essential source of political attitudes and behavior (Chen and Li 2009; Huddy 2001; Mason 2015; Swan and Wyer 1997), the extant literature has greatly undertheorized one of the most common ways in which people talk and understand themselves—the place where they live.

Place is a cognitive heuristic that operates similarly to this group-based mentality. Like groups, a sense of place involves both, in Conover’s (1984) formulation, a psychological sense of attachment, and an informational avenue which connects the personal to the political. In a similar way to how “group ties are more easily linked to politics” than individual interests, place-based ties help individuals make sense of politically relevant information and elite appeals (760). And, in a similar way to how individuals relate to one another based on the color of their skin, their profession, or their sexual orientation, individuals also relate to their neighbors and those that live around them, because policy and politics is intricately related to place. Government monies not only go to support disadvantaged minorities, but they also go to organizations that might confine their mission to a specific area. Redistributive tax policies not only target differences between social classes, but they also move wealth from one area to another. Colleges and universities lobby for specific policies, but those organizations are situated in communities dependent on their presence and sustained well-being. Place is political.

Even the semantic difference between “place” and “space” is dependent on these notions of social identity. Place only becomes a symbolically charged concept when individuals perceive them as socially meaningful (Osborne 2006). The occurrence of social events within a geographic area imbues surroundings with personalized meanings and produces psychological attachments, which together form one’s “sense of place” (Hutchins and Stormer 2013; Williams et al. 2010). When government actions and the distributive effects of policy depend on different spatial arrangements, individuals use information related to place in order to make sense of their personal stakes, their thoughts and their justifications for their political beliefs being, “not just anywhere, [but] somewhere in particular” (Carbaugh and Cerulli 2013, 7; also see Moore 2012). As places are shaped and given meaning as a result of human interactions with them, places in turn shape the way that we see ourselves in relation to others, and also color our perceptions of political, economic, and broader social life.3

Drawing upon social-identity theory, Cramer (2012, 2016) is among the first to conceptualize attachment to and identification with a place as a part of one’s social identity. In studying how voters in rural Wisconsin talk about and make sense of economic injustice in their day-to-day lives, Cramer argues that since many of the people she encountered “used identities rooted in place and class … to structure the causal stories they told to each other … about the state of the economy before, during, and after the Great Recession” they possessed a unique place-based, “rural consciousness” (6). In this way, identifying with others’ rural ways of life (intrinsically tied to a specific locale) help individuals classify others as either being “one of us” or “one of them” (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Importantly, as Cramer argues, rural consciousness is key to making sense of otherwise paradoxical behaviors, such as when economically disadvantaged rural citizens routinely vote against candidates who would increase spending for beneficial government programs. That is, rather than being led astray by hot-button social issues (Frank 2004) or remaining ignorant of policy effects (Bartels 2005, 2008), rural voters’ “reluctance to tax the rich is rooted in a complex narrative in which government action is by very definition an injustice to themselves” (Cramer 2012, 529). A perceived sense of injustice is key and, as Cramer argues, “an identity as a rural person that includes much more than an attachment to place. It includes a sense that decision makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources …” (Cramer 2016, 4).

**Place and Candidate Evaluations**

In the following experiment, we conceptualize “place” as a type of social identity—one that provides an important cognitive heuristic for making sense of various political claims and particularly claims of representation and the potential effectiveness of a representative.

We are certainly not the first to make a claim that social identities matter in choosing candidates for political office (Fenno 1978; Stokes and Miller 1962). Gender, race, and ethnic similarities between candidates and voters feature prominently in models estimating vote-choice (Adida, Gottlieb, Kramon, and McClendon 2017; Kramon 2016; Stein, Ulbig, and Post 2005; Winter 2008). And a considerable degree of political theory has explored the
normative justifications for voting in line with one’s social attachments (Carroll 2002; Mansbridge 2003; Swain 1993). Parker (2014) suggests that these types of elite-level claims exist beyond rural Wisconsin and are an essential component of how members of Congress cultivate a “home-style” reputation that capitalizes on the place-based identities of their constituents (see also, Fenno 1978). As far back as Key (1949), scholars point to the importance of place in forming a candidate-voter relationship, and much of Cramer’s (2016) theoretical argument for “rural consciousness” depends on observations of Scott Walker’s (2010) gubernatorial campaign.

Popular accounts abound with references to place-based rhetoric and imagery. For example, in the 2017 Montana Congressional special election, Democratic nominee Rob Quist used a geographically charged “linked fate” argument regarding gun rights (Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016). In the television ad, “Defend,” Quist argues that he “won’t stand by as a millionaire from New Jersey [Greg Gianforte] tries to attack my Montana values,” all while Quist himself is cradling, loading, and firing a long rifle in one of Montana’s characteristically beautiful and rugged landscapes. Not to be outdone, Gianforte signed off in one of his most-run advertisements, “my Montana values,” all while Gianforte himself is cradling, loading, and firing a long rifle in one of Montana’s characteristically beautiful and rugged landscapes. Not to be outdone, Gianforte signed off in one of his most-run advertisements, “War on the West,” by telling viewers that “I’m on Montana’s side,” as a snow capped mountain peak reached into the “big sky” behind him. In both advertisements, political and physical geography (place name and landscapes) were deemed necessary in order to signal membership in a geographically demarcated ingroup (i.e., Montanans). 4 Similarly, once elected, candidates seeking to shed their Washingtonian airs use geography to cultivate a particular home style when presenting themselves to their constituents; the particular style morphing to the particular place-based nature of any geographically rooted constituency in the American system (Fenno 1978, 2003; Parker 2014).

The study that follows is one of the first systematic tests of place-based identities in an experimental setting. And while we are strictly interested in how these identities matter for candidate evaluation, we hope that the findings encourage scholars to understand how these group attachments matter in a variety of contexts.

Theoretical Implications and Experimental Design

So long as place creates a symbolic attachment in the minds of most individuals to the point where it behaves like other social identities, then priming these considerations should alter their responses to different political phenomena. The above literature suggests that place is a symbolically and emotionally charged concept and that individuals are likely to respond to place-laden messages and stimuli as they might respond to other social cues in subtle, almost automatic ways. (Huddy et al. 2015; Iyengar et al. 2012; Lodge and Taber 2013) Respondent affect will vary as the emotional content of political messaging changes. (Brader 2006).

An experimental design provides us with the opportunity to identify causal relations between the emotional, place-based substance of different messages and respondent affect. Moreover, in addition to ruling out confounding factors as causal explanations for change in attitudes, we are well suited to study how respondents’ own sense of place alters the causal effect of a particular place-based message (i.e., treatment heterogeneity). We test the following three hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1): In-Group Affect.** The likelihood of a respondent approving a candidate increases when the candidate’s place-based message corresponds with the respondent’s own sense of place. Respondents, in other words, react positively toward candidates who send a place-based message that mirrors the type of place respondents are from.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2): Out-Group Affect.** The likelihood of a respondent approving a candidate decreases when the candidate’s place-based message diverges from the respondent’s own sense of place. Respondents, in other words, react negatively toward candidates who send a place-based message that differs from the type of place respondents are from.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3): Affect Gradation.** As the correspondence between a respondent’s sense of place and the candidate’s place-based message grows stronger, or, as the respondent becomes “more urban” or “more rural,” the likelihood of approving the candidate increases. Likewise, the more the respondent’s sense of place diverges from the candidate’s place-based message, the less likely it becomes that the respondent will approve of the candidate.

In order to determine whether and to what extent place-based social identity, or a sense of place, affects public opinion, we must isolate the geographic-nature of a political appeal. One of the most common ways in which a sense of place appears to be relevant is through the use of place-based appeals in candidate advertising. After asking respondents to tell us whether they live in an urban location, rural location, or someplace in between, we tell them that they are going to see a campaign advertisement from a candidate running for U.S. Senate in their state.

We then randomly assign respondents in this experiment to one of three groups. In the first group, respondent’s see a candidate advertisement that features the candidate’s name, “Smith,” the position he is running for,
For Senate,” and a slogan, “From Here, For Us—A Real Representative to Fix Washington!” In the control group the candidate is standing in front of a white background with red accents. Candidate “Smith” is an upper-middle age, white male with gray hair, and he is wearing a blue and white plaid shirt (see page 3 in the Appendix for the images).

In the second and third groups, all the written information and the candidate’s position in the ad remain the same, but we change the background image. In the second group, candidate “Smith” is standing in a rural location and in the third group, he is standing in front of an urban location.

It is important to note that as far as experimental manipulations are concerned, this is a relatively subtle priming treatment. The background image comprises just a small subset of information respondents will consider when viewing the advertisement, and the language of the advertisement—“From Here, For Us”—does not change from the control to the image-based treatments. As such, we are only catching a glimpse of how a sense of place might structure individual attitudes across a variety of political and social circumstances. However, this is precisely the point of the design. As affect describes the automatic, unconscious response to various stimuli within a given environment, this subtle treatment actually provides a powerful argument for the psychological mechanism behind a sense of place (Clore, Gasper, and Garvin 2001; Lodge and Taber 2013). Most relevant for our theoretical expectations is a process known as affect transfer—a process by which “current affective states become associated with currently activated objects.” At its most basic level, our expectations about place-based appeals rely on an individual’s affective response. In sum, we believe that respondents will transfer their affect (good or bad feelings) from the image-stimuli (urban or rural image) to the candidate because of their close association. For example, those who experience positive affect toward an image of the Portland, Oregon, skyline should be more likely to rate the candidate standing in front of the image more favorably, and vice versa.

In order to maximize the likelihood that individuals have an affective response to the rural and urban treatment conditions, we tailor these images to the respondent’s state of residence. At the beginning of the survey, respondents provided their ZIP code and using this information, we programmed an application programming interface (API) in the survey so that if respondents were in treatment groups two or three, they would see a rural or urban image from their actual state. For urban images, we identified the largest incorporated municipality in each state and visited the city government’s website. We matched images from an Internet search to an image found on the website that had a “place-based” character (i.e., no people, no slogans, no government officials). For most cities, this was an image of the city skyline, but the city websites offered us a crowd-sourced way of identifying recognizable buildings and perspectives that would resonate with urban respondents—necessary for the valid construction of our treatment. For rural images, we identified the largest state or national park in each state and pulled a similarly resonate image from the park’s official website. There is considerable variation across the states, but importantly, this process produced a set of images that mirrors the geographic diversity of America’s natural landscape. For example, Alaska’s rural advertisement features a snow-capped mountain range at the edge of the state’s Glacier Bay National Park; Nebraska’s mailer features Fort Robinson State Park’s famed Red Cloud Buttes; and Virginia stars the brilliant fall foliage of its Shenandoah Valley. While we do not mean to suggest that urban dwellers do not enjoy these types of locations, we do hypothesize that the affective response for place-based appeals will resonate most favorably among rural residents. As we discuss in the conclusion, utilizing other types of rural imagery is one way future research could adjust the current experiment to more fully explore negative urban responses, or positive rural associations.

Furthermore, we micro-tailor the urban or rural treatment image to the respondent’s state of residence, because, as we theorize above, the place-specific nature of this type of social identity requires attention to the personalized geographic imagery specific to each person. A generic image of a city skyline or general image of a rural location is not sensitive enough to these hypothesized constructs that individuals living in specific locales might have. In other words, not all city skylines are the same; just as importantly, not all rural locations have barns, windmills, and cows. If we consider one’s social identity rooted in place, it must be an actual place, not an ambiguous representation. However, the conditioning of the treatment image to each individual also raises some methodological complications. Simply put, some treatment images might be more powerful. For example, the New York City skyline has a specific connotation for urban and rural residents living in New York State. What is to say that the upstate, rural New Yorker who sees the towering skyscrapers of Manhattan reacts to the same degree as the rural Alaskan who sees the Anchorage skyline, but with the Chugach mountains towering above it?”

Our primary model aggregates responses to the treatment conditions and then fits a linear model to respondents, regardless of their state of residence. However, we can also run the model, conditioning over state of residence, and aggregating upward from these in-state comparisons to ensure that our averaged observation is not
driven by any one large state, or a set of geographically concentrated states. In this analysis, we find that the treatment results are statistically similar across all the states we could fit the model to, and in running the model with state-based fixed effects, suggesting that there is no significant distinction across states in how respondents responded to the micro-tailored urban and rural images (see Appendix, page 12–17). To be sure, we are unable to determine whether any particular state might be driving the results, primarily because of the limited number of observations found within each state. So, while the model estimates suggest that the urban and rural treatment images are operating similarly across the country, as a theoretical point, it still might be the case that residents of some states, or even regions, have a stronger sense of place-based social identity.

Since our theoretical framework suggests that specific place-based identities would moderate treatment effects, we used a block-sampling method that split urban and rural residents into different sampling groups. We asked respondents to consider where they lived, worked, and spent most of their time and had them choose whether they were “very urban,” “somewhat urban,” “more urban than rural,” “more rural than urban,” “somewhat rural,” or “very rural.” When respondents ultimately saw the candidate mailer, they first indicated how “warmly” the candidate made them feel on a sliding thermometer scale ranging from 0 to 100. After answering this general question, and with the mailer still present, we then asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements also micro-tailored to their state of residence. For example, respondents indicated whether the candidate would represent their “state” proudly, or whether he understood their “state’s” problems.

The survey was administered on September 27, 2016, between 10:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. using Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). A total of 879 individuals were solicited and paid $0.40 for a completed survey, which took an average of 3.8 minutes to complete. Given the refined, subtle nature of our treatment condition, we are not concerned with the nature of our respondent pool, even though on many demographic criteria, our sample mirrors some of the better randomized samples in the discipline (see Table A1 in the Appendix). Like many MTurk studies, the sample was younger, more racially diverse, and better educated. However, there were almost even numbers of self-identified “rural” residents as there were “urban” residents. Within the different blocking assignments, sample demographics are more “representative” prima facie than the total sample. The rural sample was whiter, more Republican, and less educated than the urban sub-group (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

**Results**

In the first part of the survey, we are interested in respondents’ immediate, basic responses to variations in the treatment images, as measured on a feeling thermometer. The best way to operationalize this type of response is to measure whether individuals approved or did not approve of the candidate. This accounts for the fact that these advertisements contained very little information about the candidate (omitting even partisan identification) that respondents had no prior opinion on the candidate (as he is not real), and that the instrumentation to measure candidate favorability can lead to highly variable answers (0–100 thermometer scale). Additionally, because we are primarily interested in “favorability” as it relates to election outcomes where the decision to vote is a binary one, a binary measure more appropriately captures the behavior that exists outside this laboratory setting. When respondents saw the image, the sliding thermometer scale was set to “50” degrees. Respondents, therefore, favored the candidate when they did not move the slider or set it above “51” and disapproved of the candidate if they moved the slider below “51” (the mean response was 51.2 on a hundred-point scale).

The dichotomous nature of the dependent variable allows us to estimate treatment effects using a logistic generalized linear model. Average treatment effects (reported in Table A3 in the Appendix) do not need to be modeled, but our theoretical framework suggests that there is not much to make of average treatment effects, since respondent-specific place-based identities condition how they respond to place-based appeals; in fact, if rural individuals behave similarly to urban individuals, their responses are likely to cancel each other when taking the average. As such, we model the heterogeneous effects of the treatment, moderated by a respondent’s own sense of place. We present the marginal treatment effects, moderated by respondent place perception in Table 1 and Figure 1 (Table A4 in the Appendix presents the list of estimated $\beta$ coefficients, uninterpretable given the specified interaction).

This initial measure of respondent affect provides strong confirming evidence for the out-group affect hypothesis (H2), but only limited evidence for the proposition that there would also be strong degrees of in-group affect (H1). Additionally, among those who showed strong out-group affect, the treatment effect became stronger as the respondents’ sense of place became “more rural” (H3). In other words, respondents’ own self-reported perceptions of where they worked, lived, and spent most of their time heavily modified their reactions to the three treatment conditions.

Considering first those respondents who self-identified as urban, somewhat urban, or only slightly more
urban than rural, the majority of urbanites who saw the
urban-based ad or the control condition responded simi-
larly to those urbanites who saw a rural-based political
message. For those respondents who were “somewhat
urban” or “more urban than rural,” there exists no statisti-
cal difference between the urban ad, rural ad, or control
group. The effect of the manipulation was, in effect, nil.
However, when comparing respondents who claimed to
be “very urban” (20.2% of the sample), those who saw
the candidate standing in front of a city skyline from their
state were statistically more likely to approve of that can-
didate than were the “very urban” respondents who saw
the same candidate standing in a rural setting. Substantively speaking, the probability of approving the
candidate increased by about 13 percentage points if the
candidate was standing in an urban setting, compared to a
rural one. There was no statistically significant difference
between the control condition and the rural image. As
such, we conclude that the city skyline mattered for this
sizeable subset of urban respondents; they intuitively
liked the candidate more, but did not necessarily like the
rural candidate less.
Considering those respondents who self-identified as
very rural, somewhat rural, or only slightly more rural
than urban, the majority of rural residents reacted quite
negatively to the urban advertisement, but did not, how-
ever, act favorably toward the candidate who made a
rural-based appeal. Those who claimed to be “more rural
than urban” evaluated the candidate similarly regardless
of whether they saw the urban image, rural image, or

### Table 1. Marginal Effect of Treatment on Approving Candidate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place perception</th>
<th>Saw urban image</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Saw control image</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\frac{\delta y}{\delta x}$</td>
<td>$p &gt;</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
<td></td>
<td>$\frac{\delta y}{\delta x}$</td>
<td>$p &gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Very urban”</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>[0.01, 0.25]</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>[-0.05, 0.16]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Somewhat urban”</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>[-0.03, 0.15]</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>[-0.03, 0.14]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“More urban than rural”</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>[-0.08, 0.07]</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>[-0.02, 0.14]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“More rural than urban”</td>
<td>-0.075</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>[-0.18, 0.03]</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>[-0.03, 0.16]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Somewhat rural”</td>
<td>-0.142</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>[-0.28, -0.01]</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>[-0.07, 0.20]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Very rural”</td>
<td>-0.209</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>[-0.39, -0.02]</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>[-0.11, 0.25]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CI = confidence interval.

### Figure 1. Marginal treatment effect by place perception.
The figure plots the marginal effects of the treatment condition on the probability that the respondent approves of the candidate, specific to respondents’ place perception. Seeing the control (gray diamond) or urban (black circle) advertisement changes the probability of favoring the candidate by the marginal effect (with those who saw the rural image serving as the baseline).
control image. However, “somewhat rural” and “very rural” respondents were statistically less likely to approve of the candidate standing in front of an urban locale, when compared to “somewhat rural” and “very rural” respondents who viewed the rural-based image. Moreover, this out-group, negative affect grows as respondents become more rural. A very rural respondent was nearly 21 percentage points less likely to approve of the urban candidate as compared to the rural candidate, while the somewhat rural respondent was about 14 points less likely to approve of the urban candidate. As there is no statistically discernable difference between rural respondents who saw the control condition and rural respondents who saw the rural condition, there is no evidence for a positive, in-group affect among rural respondents.

Feeling thermometer scores are just one way to measure respondent affective response to the treatment condition. We further investigate the causal effect of the treatment by asking individuals to more carefully consider the candidate’s perceived qualities for serving in office. As an initial inquiry into this question, we asked respondents a series of five questions after they submitted their general thermometer evaluations of the candidate: whether the candidate knows what needs to be done, whether the candidate has certain values, whether he understands people like me, whether he looks trustworthy, and whether he would represent the area proudly. Importantly, four of these five questions made a specific place-based reference, conditional to the respondent. For example, an individual from Utah would have seen the statements, “this candidate has ‘Utah’ values” and “this candidate understands people like me in Utah.” Given the artificial nature of the candidate, and the limited amount of information in the advertisement, almost any difference between treatment groups is substantively interesting.

For three of the five candidate-trait questions, rural respondents and urban respondents evaluated the urban, rural, and control conditions similarly. In other words, the treatment did not alter whether respondents thought the candidate was more likely to have the respondent’s state “values,” whether the candidate would represent the state proudly, or whether the candidate was trustworthy. However, variation in the place-based nature of the advertisement did produce differences in respondent opinions for two candidate traits: whether the candidate “knows what needs to be done to help people” in the respondent’s state, and whether the “candidate understands people like me” in the respondent’s state. Table 2 presents the marginal effects of a ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regression that measures the moderating effect of place perception on the treatment condition, and their joint effect on the degree to which respondents felt that the

### Table 2. Marginal Effects of Treatment on Candidate Qualities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreements: “This Candidate Knows What Needs to Be Done to Help People in [Respondent State.]”</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place perception</td>
<td>Saw urban image</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Saw control image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\frac{\delta y}{\delta x}$</td>
<td>$p &gt;</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Very urban”</td>
<td>0.399</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>[0.14, 0.66]</td>
<td>0.359</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Somewhat urban”</td>
<td>0.334</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>[0.15, 0.52]</td>
<td>0.269</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“More urban than rural”</td>
<td>0.270</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>[0.11, 0.43]</td>
<td>0.180</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“More rural than urban”</td>
<td>0.206</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>[0.00, 0.41]</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Somewhat rural”</td>
<td>0.141</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>[-0.15, 0.43]</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>.99</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Very rural”</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>[-0.31, 0.47]</td>
<td>-0.087</td>
<td>.63</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreements: “This Candidate Understands People Like Me in [Respondent State.]”</th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place perception</td>
<td>Saw urban image</td>
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<td>Saw control image</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\frac{\delta y}{\delta x}$</td>
<td>$p &gt;</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Very urban”</td>
<td>0.436</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>[0.15, 0.72]</td>
<td>0.165</td>
<td>.20</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.347</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>[0.15, 0.55]</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>“More urban than rural”</td>
<td>0.257</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>[0.09, 0.43]</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>.26</td>
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<td>“More rural than urban”</td>
<td>0.168</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>[-0.52, 0.39]</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Somewhat rural”</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>[-0.68, 0.39]</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Very rural”</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>[-0.85, 0.41]</td>
<td>-0.018</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CI = confidence interval.
candidate understood people like them, and the candidate’s knowledge of what “what needs to be done.”

Considering first those respondents who self-identified as urban, somewhat urban, or only slightly more urban than rural: urbanites who saw both the urban ad and the control condition were statistically more likely to say that the candidate knew more about what needed to be done, when compared to urbanites who saw the rural-based advertisement. The treatment differences between the urban ad and control condition are statistically indistinguishable. As such, we conclude that urbanites penalized the rural candidate and were less likely to think him capable of knowing what needs to be done than the urban or control candidate. The treatment is not only statistically significant, but substantively large. Urbanites who saw the rural candidate agreed with the statement about 0.38 points lower on a 5-point scale, on average, than those who saw the urban or control candidate.

Additionally, urbanites who saw the urban image were statistically more likely to agree with the statement that “this candidate understands people like me,” when compared to urbanites who saw the rural treatment. Urbanites who saw the control condition were statistically indistinguishable from those who saw the rural treatment. As such, urbanites appear to be rewarding the urban candidate—up to nearly half a point of agreement on a 5-point scale—merely for standing in front of a city skyline. Taking these two candidate qualities into consideration, there is further evidence to confirm in-group affect among urbanites (H1) that increases as respondents become more urban (H2). There is also slight evidence to suggest that, in terms of evaluating candidates’ potential knowledge of issues, urbanites view rural candidates less favorably (H3).

Among rural respondents, the candidate quality measures provided very little evidence for whether individuals held strong in-group or out-group affect in response to the treatment manipulation. Regardless of whether they saw the urban ad, rural ad, or control image, rural respondents consistently evaluated the candidate’s knowledge of issues and understanding of people at similar levels.

Taken as a whole, these two sets of outcome measures partially confirm our three hypotheses, suggesting that place operates much like any other number of social identities. A subtle manipulation of an image was enough to alter the probability that an individual would support a candidate.

Discussion and Limitations of the Research Design

Some individuals think about place and respond to place-specific imagery in political advertisements. The results of our experiment—specifically the heterogeneous nature of the treatment effect—comports with a nascent, largely ethnographic literature on rural identities and rural resentment. In this sample, self-identified rural residents automatically reacted more negatively to political candidates who were simply standing in front of a city skyline, or on a city street. These results suggest that successfully branding political opponents as urban outsiders, a strategy commonplace in rural western and midwestern states, could pay dividends at rural ballot boxes. To be sure, the underlying causes of this negative affect could be widespread. Cramer (2016) has argued that perceptions of class and power inequalities primarily drive these suspicions and dislikes. Our findings, which show that rural people react negatively toward urban-based appeals, while urban participants do not react aversely to rural-based appeals is consistent with these accounts and offer a direct confirmation of the rural resentment hypothesis. In other words, while urban-based appeals activate rural consciousness, rural-based appeals appear to elicit no response among urban participants. Moving forward, however, we might expect urban voters to be more responsive to place-based appeals, owing to the vast amount of media attention structured along these urban-rural divides in explaining Donald Trump’s 2016 Presidential Election triumph—a reality, demonstrably disliked by many urbanites.

Given the emergent state of this perspective, there is no prior reason to suspect that urban residents would not develop a similar place-based consciousness. However, there is an explanation for why our strongest out-group effects were confined to rural respondents. Most scholars of social identity construction emphasize the normative, out-group implications for why some identities are salient and others are not. This explanation is akin to how white identity may not be as salient for whites in the United States as racial and ethnic identities are for minority groups because whites comprise the dominant, “acceptable,” in-group. For example, Cramer’s (2016) understanding of rural consciousness would suggest that identifying something as “urban” would be more likely to elicit a negative response, than labeling something as “rural,” because rural individuals hold a self-perceived, marginalized status as a function of urban versus rural power politics. Or, in other words, rural consciousness does not have a twin “urban” sense of resentment, because the sense of distributive injustice is shared only among those who perceive themselves as marginalized (see also, Bell 1992). Moreover, while we primarily find examples of negative affect to place-based appeals in the first test, we emphasize the strong in-group finding among urbanites in the set of candidate quality indicators.

Regarding the lack of a strong in-group finding for rural respondents, several design and sampling decisions
might account for these particular results. Future work in this area, even outside of advertising effects, should consider these limitations. First, while it is clear why the urban images produced a hypothesized effect on rural respondents, it is less clear why the rural images failed to produce similar effects. Maybe place-based consciousness is tied to more rural considerations, where class inequalities are more easily distinguishable, but in this study, something must also be said about the rural images themselves, taken from state and national parks throughout the country. While many of these images are analogous to those featured in political advertisements that invoke a sense of place (Parker 2014), they were not accompanied by rhetorical or more substantive appeals that might have connected these images to a rural-based identity. So, while a panoramic view of Allamuchy Mountain State Park in New Jersey is a very different type of visual stimulus than its experimental counterpart—the streets of Newark—our results suggest that images of scenery from a state park are not the same as images of a rural environment. In other words, there are myriad symbols and connotations wrapped up in a picture of a city skyline, but all of those implicit messages relate back to a specific way of living in that locale. The same cannot be said for a state park, even if the landscape is similar to those places where a majority of the state’s “rural” inhabitants work, live, and recreate. The ambiguous symbolism of these “rural” images could just as likely account for the absence of any treatment effect among urban and rural residents, as much as any type of difference between urban-consciousness (if it exists) and rural consciousness. Furthermore, we would expect the effect of place-based appeals to be moderated by the type of place identity primed.

Similarly, it is important to recognize that for each of the fifty states, the study relies on just one major city—the largest one in the state—to prime urban affect (either positive or negative). In this case, structuring the treatment still garnered negative responses from rural residents, but urban residents were indifferent. Given our sampling method, there was no guarantee that urban residents would come from the city chosen (nor did we expect them to), so these results suggest that while a city skyline might mean the same thing to a rural inhabitant, regardless of that city, the same, perhaps, cannot be said of an urban resident, whose sense of place is specific to particular metropolitan locale. Future research might also consider the locus of power, as represented by urban imagery. In Wisconsin, Cramer (2016) finds that resentment was specifically directed toward the urban center of the state’s capital, Madison. In many of the experimental conditions, the state’s capital matched the largest city, but in many this was not the case. Each state varies in terms of how political power is actually distributed—something individuals are likely highly sensitive to as our results suggest. Moreover, the most politically sophisticated respondents may be well-aware that this is a fictitious candidate and behave differently than if a similarly geographically charged mailer came to their home during a real election. While these sophisticates are randomized throughout the urban, rural, and control groups—thereby not accounting for the treatment differences—we simply do not know what the real place-based effects are once we have taken them out of our artificial laboratory setting.

Finally, while experiments represent the “gold standard” among research methods in their ability to identify causal relationships (Brady 2008; Morton and Williams 2010), there remains valid concerns regarding the generalizability of any artificial manipulation within a confined survey environment. However, our treatment is similar to the types of place-based appeals that individuals would actually encounter in the “real world” (see Figure 2). There is also a concern, as with most experimental designs, with the durability of the treatment effect. We can make no claim given our current study as to how long-lasting the affective response among individuals may be, but we would like to emphasize that emotional

Figure 2. Place-based imagery in 2016 Montana gubernatorial election.
reacts are important not just for what people believe, but often for what they lead people to do (Brader 2006). As such, place-based appeals can be a powerful advertising technique to mobilize support and to tune voters into other, more substantive political appeals.

Conclusion

The 2016 elections brought into stark relief the importance of geography and the identities that spring forth from it as rural America pivoted hard toward Donald Trump and his Republican Party. Indeed, as pundits in the Washington Post and other major outlets have noted, “the deepening fissure between red and blue America” is due in large part to the emotional identity clash between rural and urban places (Guo 2016). Geography interacts with other political attributes and social identities in mutually constitutive processes: political parties compete in electoral districts structured by geography; the persistence of de facto housing segregation means that neighborhood boundaries mirror those of race and class; and in the 2016 Presidential Election over one-third of the entire American electorate lived in counties where there was virtually no competition between the two major party candidates (Jacobs and Ceaser 2016). The experimental design presented above provides an unparalleled ability to control for these myriad interactions and isolate the independent effects of place-based identities and geographic imagery.

In the final analysis, this experiment provides some of the first confirming evidence of causal effects that lie behind candidates’ decisions to make place-based appeals in advertisements. There is confirmatory evidence for both in-group and out-group affect primed by place-based identities—evidence that not only confirms extant work on place as a social identity, but extends the finding in the area of campaign rhetoric and elite-communication. Despite decades of revolutionary technological advancements that “flattened” the globe and challenged the importance of place in everyday interactions, place and context continues to matter in shaping public opinion and political behavior (Friedman 2005; McClay and McAllister 2014). A small, subtle manipulation in the geographic imagery of a campaign ad changed how both urbanites and rural residents evaluated a potential office-holder.

These results, especially, indicate that for at least those Americans who live in rural areas (19.3% of Americans as defined by the U.S. Census), place-based identities remain an important component of the ways in which they make sense of politics. Likewise, while urbanites might not harbor any resentments toward rural politicians (at least as measured in our study), they nevertheless harbor geographic-prejudices when evaluating those politicians. There are significant limitations to this design, but we hope that future research not only corrects for this but also embraces the social identity framework to consider how place-based identities interact with other group-orientations, especially race and class. The relationship between place-based and racial resentment is in particular need of greater exploration. Our data, and qualitative accounts, make this difficult to tease out, given the distribution of racial and ethnic minorities across the urban-rural spectrum. Future work should also consider how perceptions of rural disadvantage and a sense of place correspond with more objective indicators of political power within states, such as differences in government spending by county. Importantly, this study does not consider the potential sources of place-based resentment. Our emphasis on social identity, however, suggests that there is much to be gained by asking parallel questions about the length of time residents of a particular place have lived there. And, since resentment is likely made up of many components, surveys should not only seek to measure perceptions of material inequalities, but also try to understand the cultural and value distinctions people draw between geographically distinct communities. Finally, place-based identities, like other social identities, matter beyond candidate advertisements by factoring into the ways politicians and media elites frame social and economic policy, as well as the ways citizens interact with one another inside civil society.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Cutler (2007) makes this distinction in the extant literature between public opinion studies that focus on information acquisition at the local level, and studies that focus on interpersonal relationships at a local level. Like Cutler, we put forward a theoretical framework that moves beyond this approach, rooted in social identities and group formation.

2. In fact, as citizens more easily “sort” into the two parties, even this distinction has lost some contemporary relevance.
3. It is worth noting that a sense of place merges with, enhances, and takes on new meaning as individuals are members of variegated and multiple social groups, including race and class. As Cramer (2016) suggests, a sense of place can certainly exacerbate racial attitudes as race is geographically structured as well, but it is too simplistic when observing how rural whites actually talk about government assistance to the poor. In fact, a complex and inwardly focused sense of distributive justice seems powerful in explaining why some whites bemoan government assistance to minorities concentrated in urban and suburban locales, while their communities suffer and go into economic decline (perceived or actualized).

4. Both advertisements are available, as of May 8, 2017, on YouTube. Quist’s advertisement is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsM1hdDrz7nE&list=PLESax5w4uV1kXMohdJLbIXxNC4MRnAXO&o=index=4; Gianforte’s advertisement is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjwvrsLWul0.

5. In one of the best well-known studies of affect-transfer, Schwartz and Clore (1988) demonstrate how people report higher levels of life satisfaction on sunny days than those who are asked on overcast day. Presumably the real association between temporary levels of sunshine and life satisfaction is not related, just like a candidate’s message or appeal is not explicitly tied to the image she or he uses in a mailer.

6. In a content analysis of U.S. Senate campaign advertisements in the 2012 and 2014 cycles, Munis (2015) finds that “wild lands” imagery was the most frequently featured place-based imagery. Our rural treatments featuring photos of state and national parks are consistent with Munis’s wild lands categorization.

7. Or, as one of our anonymous reviewers suggested, since we used government webpages to locate appropriate imagery, perhaps it is the case that some states have better-funded public relations resources, therefore making some images more aesthetically pleasing, or powerful.

8. We also run an additional test that includes respondent’s state of residence as an additional block in the primary model of interest. As we document in Table A8 of the Appendix, averaging place perception and treatment effects over state of residence produces results almost identical to the primary model of interest. These results further hold when we simply construct our model on a “match” versus “mis-matched” design, although we are unable to determine treatment heterogeneity across place perception; see pages 19 and 20 in the Appendix for a further discussion of this design, generously suggested by an anonymous reviewer to overcome any qualms about statistical power.

9. A post-hoc power calculation on page 6 in the Appendix suggests that, with given sample sizes and incidences, there is a 74.9 percent chance that we cannot confirm a positive result for respondents who saw the urban treatment, even if one exists, and an 56.7 percent chance of not confirming a positive result for respondents who saw the rural treatment, even if one exists (i.e., Type II errors).

10. There is some debate in the field on the validity of using Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for survey-based research, especially as it relates to claims of external validity. See however, Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012) and their use of MTurk to replicate findings across a variety of research designs.

11. To be sure, we also constructed a standard ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model where the dependent variable took on the unmodified thermometer values ranging from 0 to 100. The substantive results, when compared to our primary model specification, do not change. We present those results for comparison on page 11 in the Appendix, Table A6.

12. See page 8 in the Appendix for a full model specification of the logistic generalized linear model (GLM). Additionally, as Kam and Trussler (2017) have recently argued, examining heterogeneous treatment effects presents experimental researchers with many of the same problems that arise in observational research—namely, the presence of confounding variables that affect non-randomized individual-level characteristics. In the Appendix (page 9) we include an array of control variables, and replicate our main finds in Tables A4 and A5.

13. Average response by treatment condition for all five questions is listed in the Appendix on page 17, Table A10.

14. The full model specification and \( \beta \) coefficients are available in the Appendix on pages 18 and 19.

15. Recent and well documented examples of this strategy include the 2012 U.S. Senate election in Nebraska (e.g., http://www.kenareyhub.com/news/local/contrasting-campaign-styles-of-deb-fischer-and-bob-kerrey/article_95c233ac-dfc3-11e1-bda1-001a4bcf887a.html) and the 2016 gubernatorial election in Montana (e.g., http://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/politics/historical-perspective-on-democrats-outsider-criticism-of-gianforte/article_a169efba-fad9-5412-a9cd-8427c4f8f9b2.html).

Supplemental Materials

Supplemental materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the Political Research Quarterly (PRQ) website.

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