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The urban-rural divide from a social stratification perspective. Socio economic disparities in place of residence in France, Germany, Spain, and the UK, 2002–2024

19th Conference “Social Monitoring and Reporting in Europe” Demographic Challenges and Opportunities and their Impact on Individual and Societal Well-being

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Motivation

In the new millennium, demographic and socio-economic change has followed divergent pathways in urban and rural areas

- Rural communities and small towns have faced a decline in population size as well as population ageing, whereas urban areas have grown significantly (Eurostat 2023)
- In particular, economically strong regions/large cities (with a high GDP per head) are recording high population growth (Iammarino et al. 2019)
- The younger and more educated are viewed as the drivers of urbanisation processes (Lopez-Gay 2014; Sander 2014; Kashnitsky et al. 2020)

Motivation

From a social inequality perspective, the question then arises as to how these changes in the socio-demographic composition of urban and rural populations have enhanced spatial separation between socio-economically better-off and worse-off social classes.

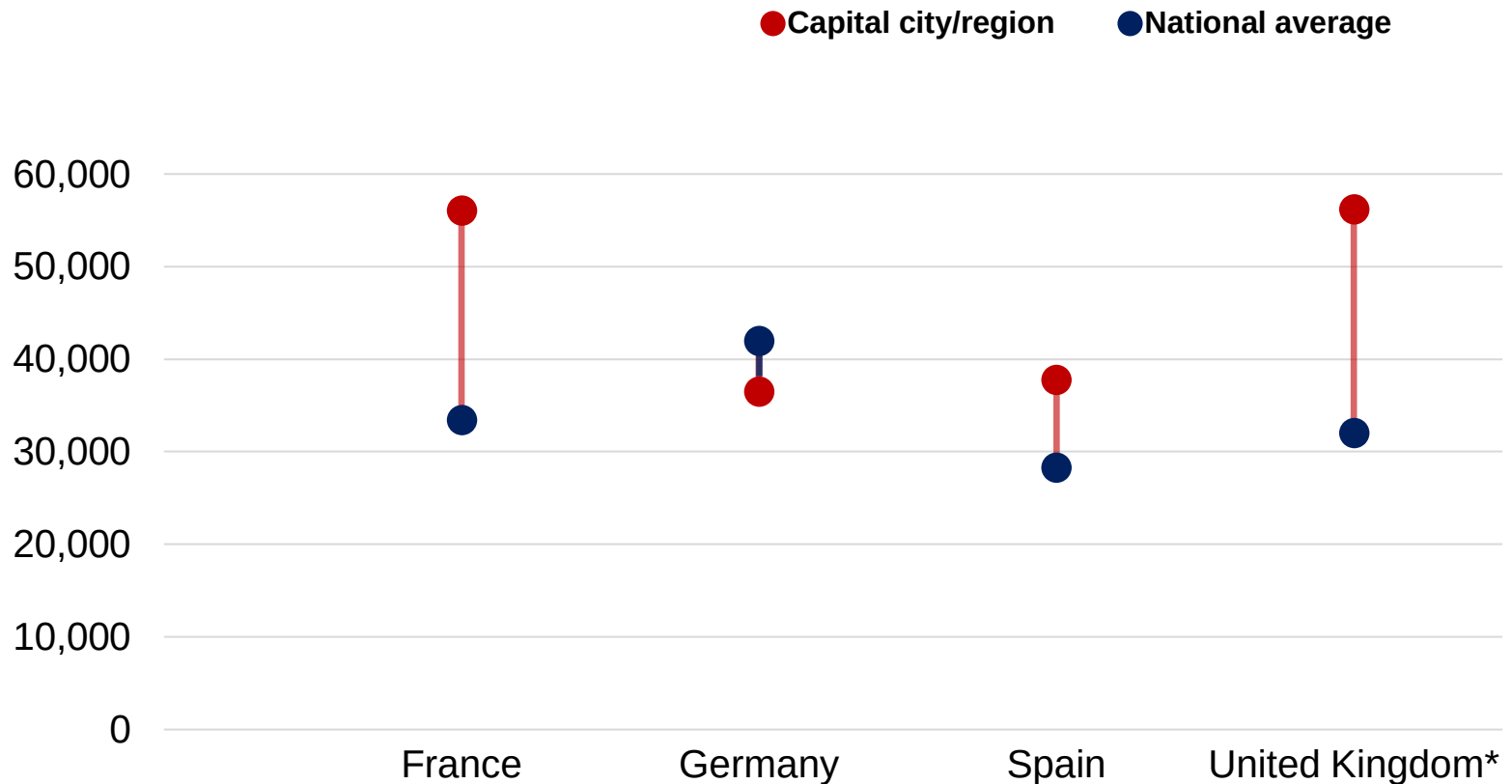
It is argued that...

- the transition towards a knowledge-based economy has reinforced socio-economic inequality and social polarization (Stiglitz 2012; Savage et al. 2015)
- the social structure of post-industrial societies is spatially divided, i.e., the knowledge economy is concentrated in metropolises which attract highly skilled workers – members of the “creative” (Florida 2004) or “new” middle classes (Reckwitz 2021)
- in contrast, the disadvantaged middle and lower classes more likely live in – and are forced away to – small towns and rural communities

At the same time, European societies differ with regard to the degree of centralisation vs. federalisation of political and economic power. This leads to the assumption that degree of urban-rural disparities varies between countries.

Motivation

GDP per inhabitant is an indicator of economic activity (purchasing power standard):



Source: Eurostat (met_10r_3gdp), (nama_10_pc), (nama_10r_2gdp), (nama_10r_3empers)

Research question

Based on these considerations, we may expect that...

- 1) members of the upper classes are more likely to reside in large cities, especially in capital regions, while members of the lower classes are more likely to live in small towns and rural areas.
- 2) this particularly applies to younger birth cohorts
- 3) the concentration of upper classes in large cities/capital regions varies between countries: It is more pronounced in France (Île-de-France) and the UK (Greater London) — whereas in Spain and Germany, this is less the case.
- 4) differences in residential location between social classes have grown over time

Data and sample

Data

We pooled data from the *European Social Survey* (ESS) from 2002 to 2023 and *International Social Survey Program* (ISSP) from 2002 to 2024.

We split the data into three time periods:

- 2002 to 2009
- 2010 to 2015
- 2016 to 2024

Sample

Respondents aged 25 to 64 with valid information on all variables (n = 123,506)

	FR	DE	ES	UK
2002 - 2009	10,807	11,374	10,188	10,028
2010 - 2015	11,742	11,956	11,053	8,654
2016 - 2024	8,175	14,499	7,136	7,894

Source: ESS (2002-2021), ISSP (2002-2022), n = 123,506

Variables

Settlement type (self-accesed place of residence and NUTS-region)

Rural communities (country villages and farms or individual houses in the countryside), small cities (medium-sized and small cities), large cities (big cities and suburbs or outskirts of a big city)

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- France: Île-de-France (NUTS:FR10)
- Germany: Berlin (NUTS:DE3)
- Spain: Autonomous Community of Madrid (NUTS:ES30)
- United Kingdom: Greater London (NUTS:UKI)

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Social class

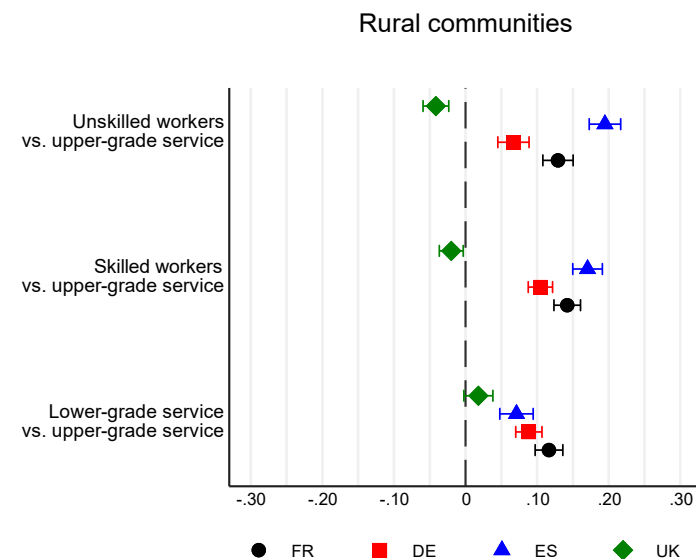
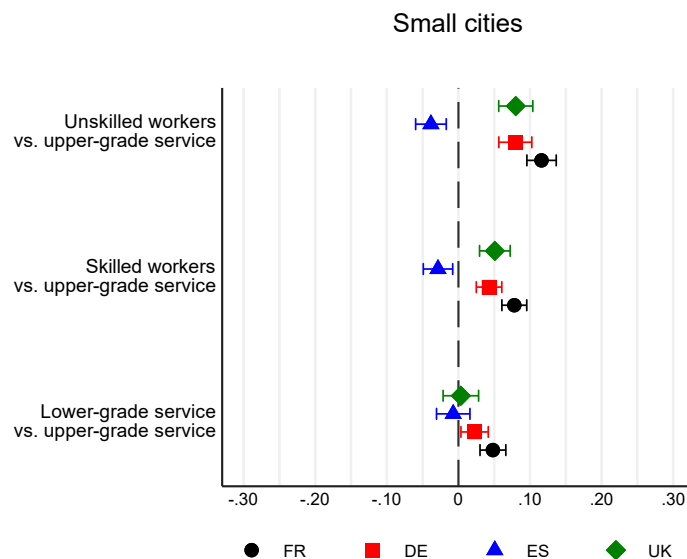
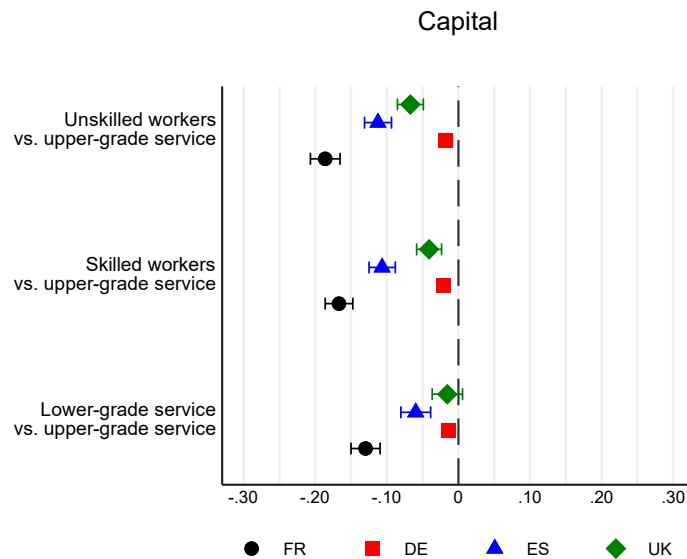
Five classes based on ISCO 88 (COM) and ISCO 08 (Oesch 2006)

- Higher-grade service class (w/o large employers/self employed professionals)
- Lower-grade service class
- Skilled workers
- Unskilled workers
- Self employed (employers with/without employees, self employed professionals)

Multinomial logistic regression (age, gender, time period included as controls)

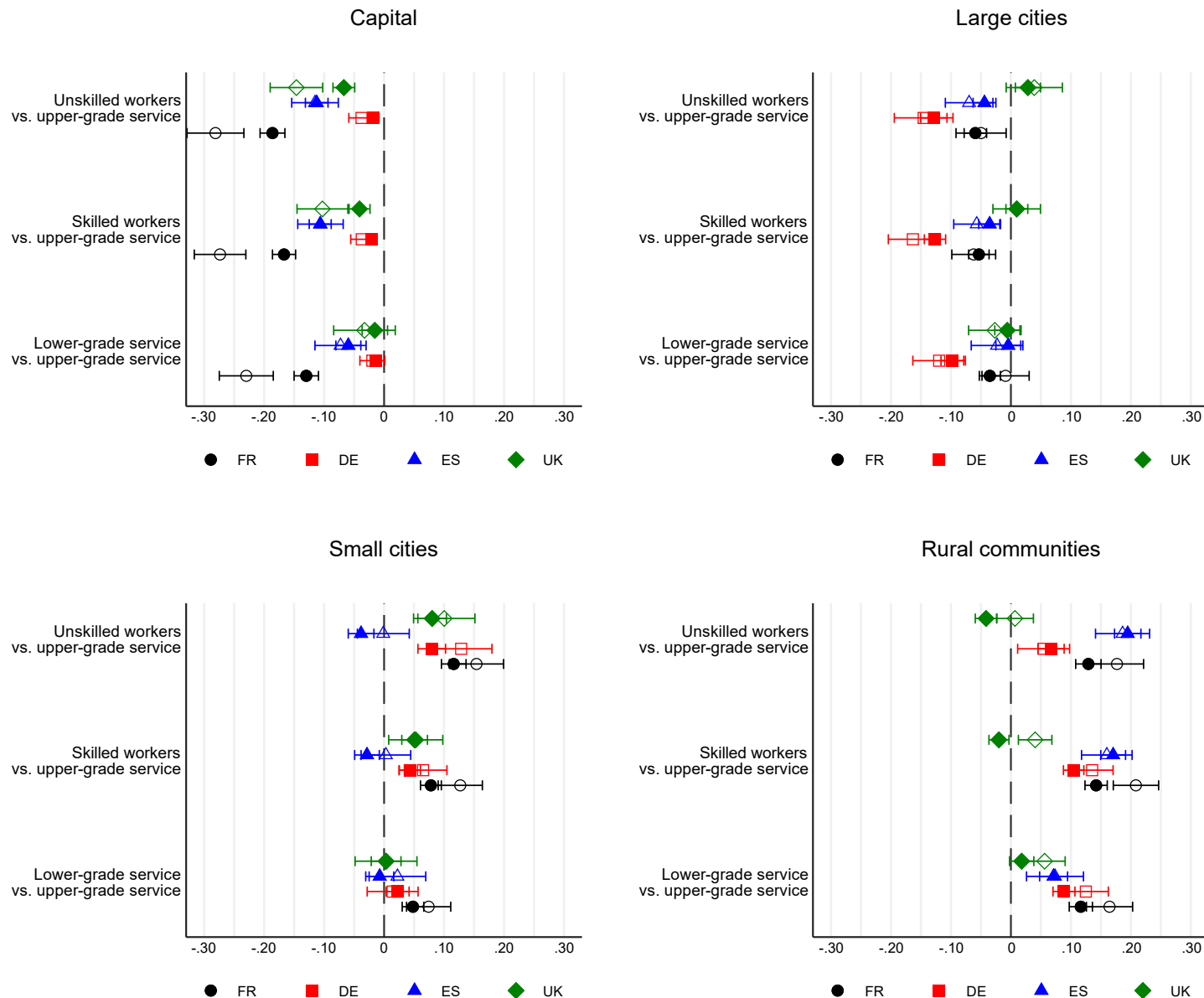
Class-specific differences in place of residence

(AME, 95%-CI, controlled for gender, age and time period)



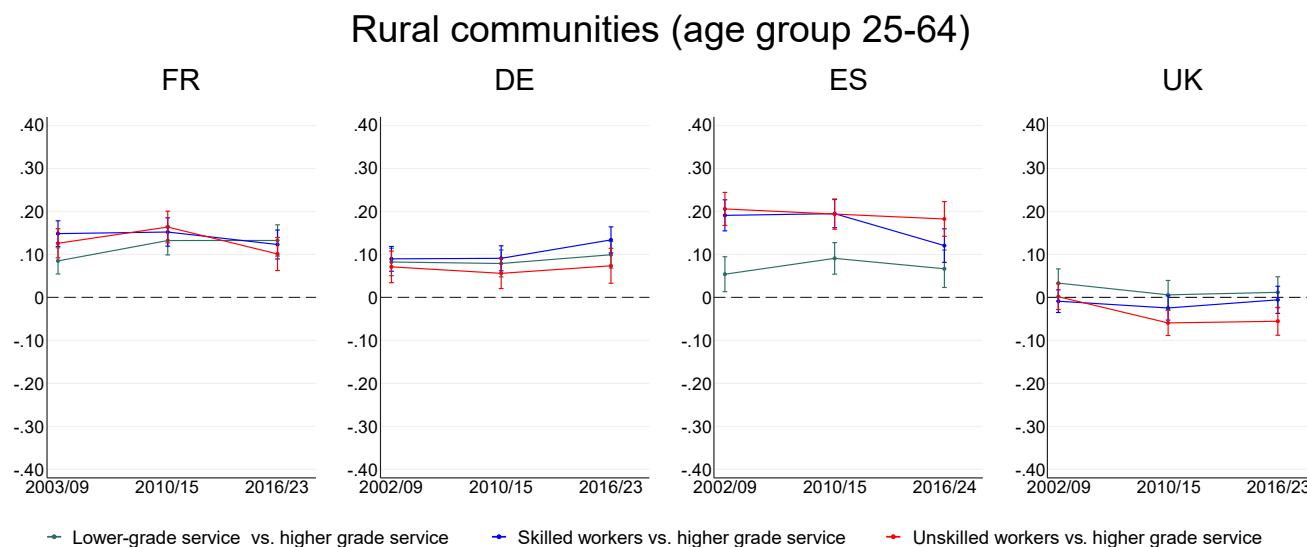
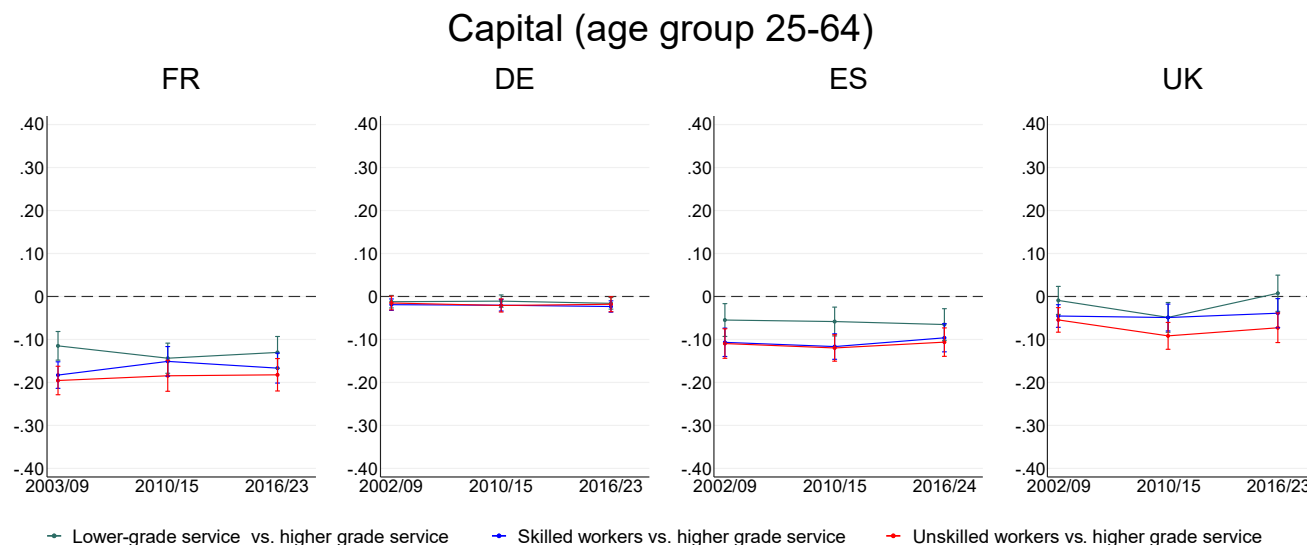
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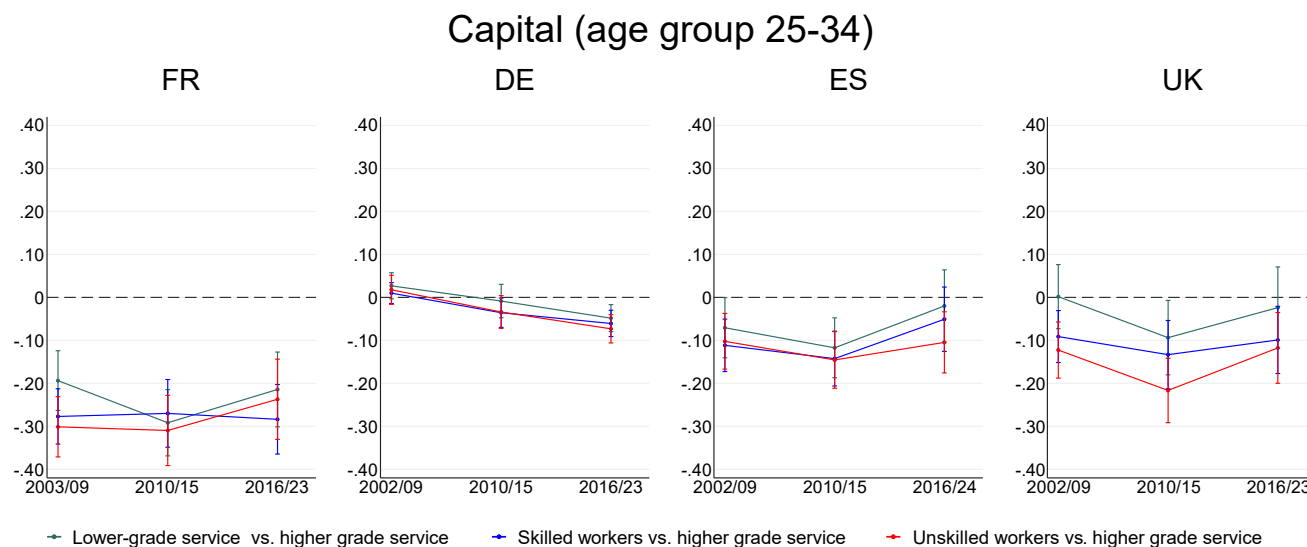
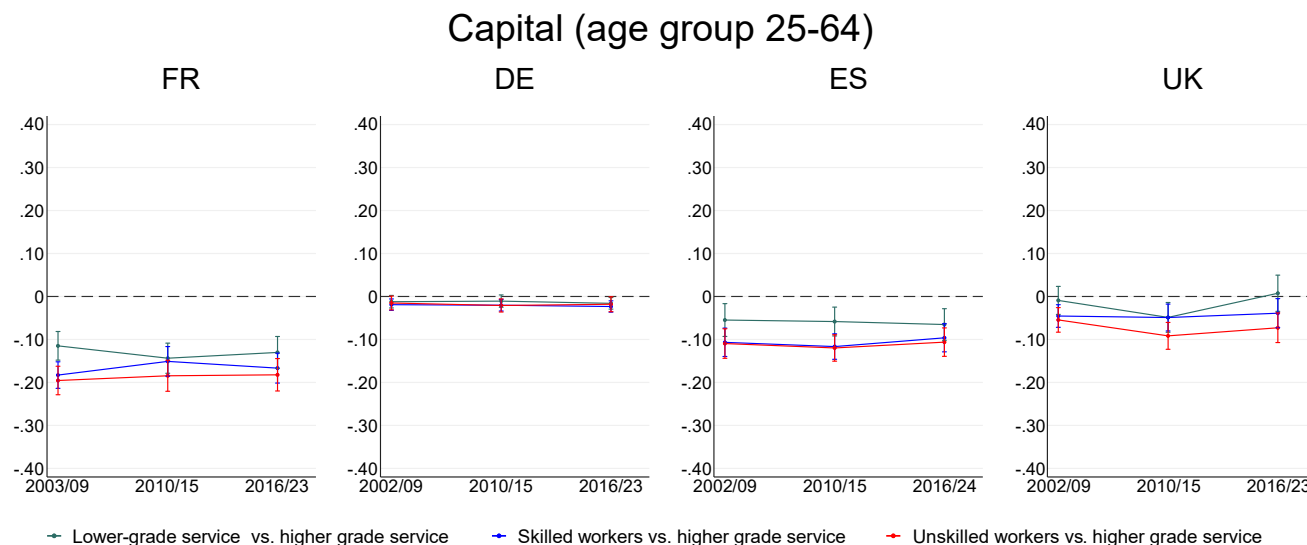


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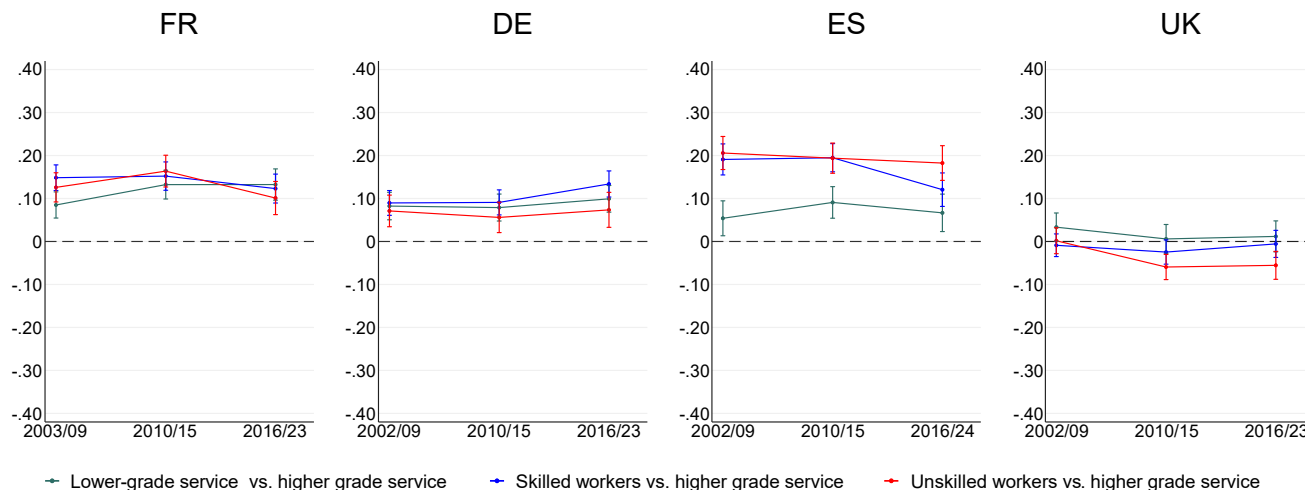


Class-specific differences in place of residence (AME, 95%-CI, controlled for gender and age)

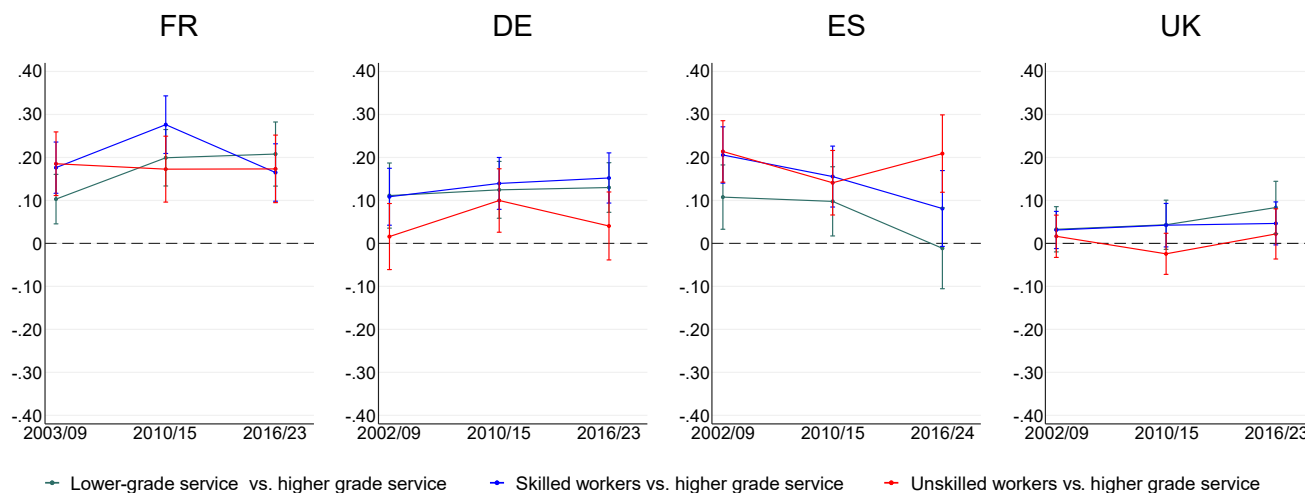


Class-specific differences in place of residence (AME, 95%-CI, controlled for gender and age)

Rural communities (age group 25-64)



Rural communities (age group 25-34)

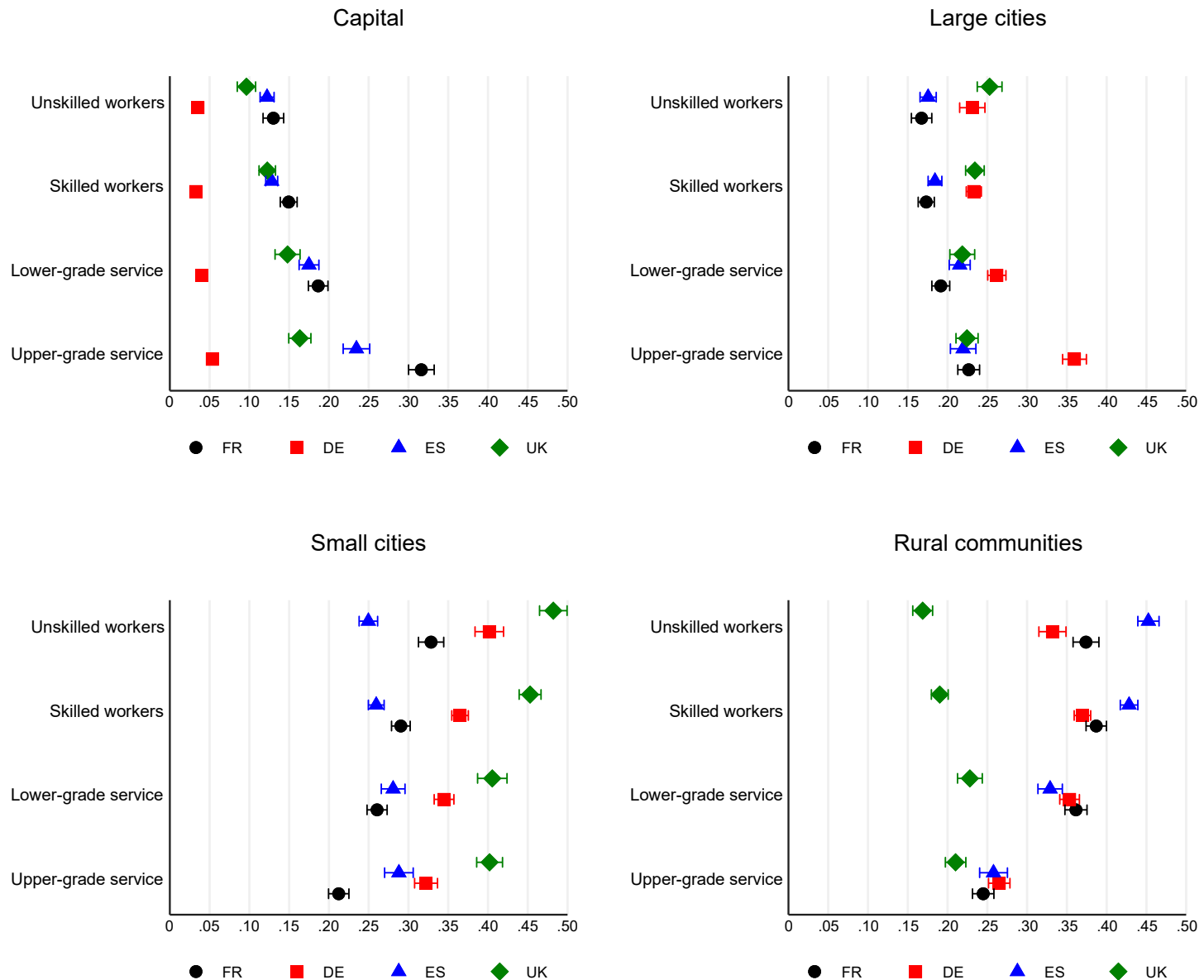


Conclusion

- Unskilled workers are less likely to live in capital cities (and also large cities) and more likely to live in rural communities than the higher-grade service class.
- These differences are particularly evident among younger age groups. Unclear if age-specific patterns reflect cohorts or age effects (probably both).
- Class-specific disparities between capital cities and rural communities are particularly pronounced in France and Spain, but less than expected in the United Kingdom.
 - In the UK regional disparities might matter more than urban-rural differences?
- Still only limited evidence for spatial polarization – not more than 23% (in Spain) and 32% (in France) of the higher-grade service class are living in the capital region.
- Spatial disparities have not substantially increased – at least since the beginning of the millennium.
- “Work in progress”: expand the time horizon, use alternative class schemes, assessing educational differences (Konietzka and Martynovych 2025), refine definition of spatial/regional categories

Class-specific differences in place of residence

(predicted probabilities, 95%-CI, controlled for gender, age and time period)



Source: ESS (2002-2021), ISSP (2002-2022), n = 123,506



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Thank you for your attention

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