

# On environmental issues, the city-country divide in Switzerland is smaller than often assumed

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Switzerland. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

We like to perpetuate the idea of a divide in the attitudes of city dwellers and country people as part of debates on the environment, but it's simply

not the reality, explains Thomas Bernauer. In fact, there is little evidence of a fundamental urban-rural disconnect in Swiss environmental policy.

On one side, we have the conservative country people. They go full throttle in their car, but when comes to the climate and biodiversity, they step on the brake. On the other side, we have the left-green [city](#) dwellers; preachers of climate action while remaining the biggest fans of flying. People often take advantage of these city-countryside clichés as a way of explaining the debate surrounding environmental policy and polling. They promote the image of a deep societal divide between rural objectors (who would rather protect their own interests than the environment) and the sanctimonious urbanites (who demand a green revolution, but do little to contribute towards it).

This environmental policy gap recently became extremely prominent with the introduction of the CO<sub>2</sub> law and the drinking water and pesticide initiative. Opinion polls and the media have also identified a divide in the forthcoming initiative against factory farming, with the rural population against and the [urban population](#) in favor of the proposed action.

What truth is there to this (supposed) city-countryside eco-divide? The issue is complex and I will start by saying that I find such rhetoric misleading since there is very little empirical evidence for this contradiction. But first things first.

## **Not so different after all**

My research group as part of the Swiss Environment Panel used surveys and voting results to investigate whether there is an environmental policy divide between rural and urban populations.

## Swiss Environmental Panel

Working with the Federal Office for the Environment, researchers from ETH Zurich have surveyed several thousands randomly selected people in Switzerland about their attitudes to various environmental policy issues and their behavior twice a year since 2018. More on the Swiss Environmental Panel and a report on city-countryside differences is available [here](#).

Our survey data shows that almost no relevant differences exist between settlement areas in terms of environment-related attitudes and behavior. Of course, attitudes towards environmental issues are much less pronounced in extremely rural places than in larger cities. People surveyed in the countryside also tend to own and drive cars more and eat more meat, while those in the city tend to fly more. Overall, however, environment-related attitudes and behavior patterns are very similar—there is practically no evidence of a city-countryside divide.

### Isolated differences at the ballot box

By contrast, we have seen a slight differentiation in voting behavior in national votes on environmental issues since 2010—but only between extremely rural regions and highly urbanized areas. However, with an average deviation of no more than eight percent till 2020 (12% from 2020 to 2021) between both settlement area types at the extreme ends of the spectrum, it is a stretch to claim a fundamental chasm between city and countryside.

If we consider the last 20 years and include all nine area types, the difference between city and countryside is small and, rather surprisingly, even slightly smaller than is the case for all national votes together.

That said, recently there have been certain initiatives relating directly to agriculture or [fossil fuels](#) that have resulted in wildly different voting behavior between city and countryside. These include the Swiss hunting law, which saw a difference of 18.9%, the CO<sub>2</sub> law (17.8%), the [drinking water](#) initiative (15.4%) and the pesticide initiative (14.5%).

However, to conclude from this that urban and rural populations are polarized on environmental issues in Switzerland is, in my opinion, based on the voting behavior of the past 20 years and the [survey data](#) collected by the Swiss Environmental Panel since 2018, speculative and largely false.

Provided by ETH Zurich

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