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More regionally mobile and less civically engaged? An analysis based on German panel data

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Extended abstract

Background

In recent decades, forms of regional mobility such as long-distance commuting and multi-local living, i.e. having a second residence close to the place of work, have increased significantly in Germany and other highly developed countries (e.g. BiB 2018; Rüger/Sulak 2017; Burd et al. 2021). These forms of commuting between regions are seen as alternatives for internal migration in advanced societies (e.g. Zelinsky 1971; Green et al. 1999). On the one hand, regional mobility is relevant for the functioning of labour markets (e.g. Haas/Osland 2014) and is positively related to individual wealth, for example occupational achievement (e.g. van Ham 2001). On the other hand, increased spatial mobilisation due to flexibilisation in the labour market could lead to uprooting and isolation, as individuals become detached from place-based social relations (e.g. Putnam 2000).

This contribution examines the effect of regional mobility on civic engagement, using the example of long daily commutes. There are a few cross-sectional studies on the relationship between commuting and civic engagement with mixed results, and longitudinal studies are lacking altogether (for an overview see Bardsley et al. 2022). Civic engagement is an important dimension of social cohesion and hence social sustainability. Among the social processes and structures considered central to the concept of social sustainability at the community level, many are directly or indirectly related to civic engagement (Dempsey et al. 2011; see also Eizenberg/Jabareen 2017): social inclusion, social capital, community, community cohesion, sense of community and belonging and active community organizations.

If the increasing regional mobility of the working population has a negative impact on civic engagement, this would be particularly relevant for rural areas, as many of them are affected by commuter flows to the economic centres and key public services are often provided by volunteers (e.g. Kleiner/Klärner 2019). In addition, it can be assumed that forms of civic engagement that are more commonly practised in rural areas are less compatible with the requirements of regional mobility (Hameister/Tesch-Römer 2017). Analyses differentiated by settlement structure will therefore examine whether and to what extent the relationship between mobility and engagement differs between rural and urban regions.

State of the art and theoretical considerations

Cross-sectional studies on the relationship between commuting and civic engagement that use microlevel data show mixed results, i.e. negative (e.g. Scaff 1952; Putnam 2000; Barrett 2019), no (e.g. Wollebæk/Strømsnes 2010) as well as positive associations (Jung/Kim 2018). There are also occasional

analyses of commuting and political participation or social trust at the aggregate level, showing either a negative or no association (e.g. Humphries 2001; Williamson 2002). There is also some indication that regional context may be an important moderator (e.g. Jung/Kim 2018). A recent panel study based on German data finds a negative effect of work-related multi-locality (i.e. weekly long-distance commuting) on civic involvement, with the reduction being stronger in rural than in urban regions (Rüger et al. 2022).

The contribution draws on three theoretical approaches: The Civic Voluntarism Model, the Commuter's Strain Hypothesis and the Place Identity Approach. The Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba et al. 1995) relies on three factors to explain engagement: resources (e.g. time, money, skills), psychological commitment to the object of engagement, and access to networks. In particular, the resource of time is expected to be reduced by long commuting. In addition, the periodic presence and absence at the place of origin and destination may have a negative impact on access to networks, resulting in a lack of mobilisation for voluntary engagement. The Commuter's Strain Hypothesis (Newman et al. 2014) adds the dimension of psychological resources to the quantitative resource-based approach. It suggests that time spent commuting is perceived as more negative and psychologically stressful than the same amount of time spent in gainful employment. As a result, commuting time leads to a greater reduction in engagement. The Place Identity Approach is based on the assumption of spatial fragmentation between the place of work and residence due to long commutes (Putnam 2000). This fragmentation not only reduces the amount of time workers (can) spend at their place of residence, but also their subjective sense of attachment to it (e.g. Humphries 2001; Jung/Kim 2018). As a result, commuters' interest is divided between the place of residence and the place of work ('pluralised interest'), which could lead to lower levels of local engagement (Scaff 1952).

Based on the theoretical considerations, we assume that longer commuting distances are associated with lower civic engagement at the individual level. As there are differences in commuting behaviour and civic engagement between rural and urban regions, we also conduct differentiated analyses by population density (i.e. rural vs. urban regions).

Data and methods

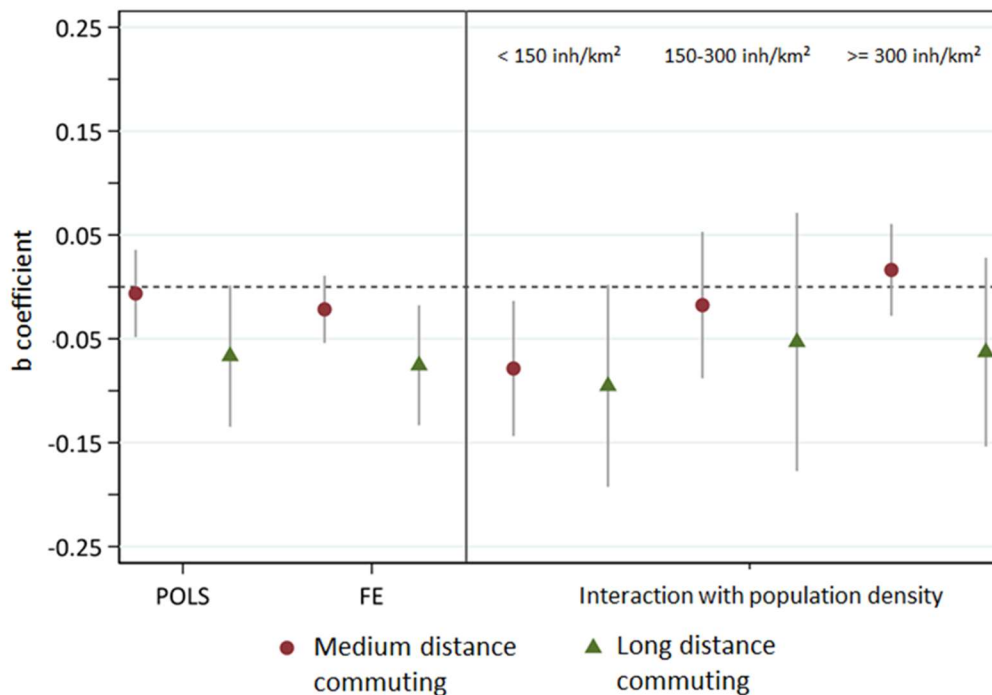
We applied fixed effects (FE) panel regression to longitudinal data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) for the years 1997-2019. The SOEP is a representative dataset of private households living in Germany. The sample (N = 102,171 observations (person-years) from 23,517 individuals) consisted of individuals between 18 and 65 years of age. Civic engagement was measured by the frequency (every week, every month, less often, never) of volunteer work in clubs or social services. Commuting was measured as short distance: < 25 km (N (events): 1,584), medium distance: 25-49 km (N (events): 1,321) and long distance: ≥ 50 km (N (events): 515). Counties with less than 150 inhabitants per km² were classified as 'rural' and those with more than 300 inhabitants as 'urban' (whereas those with 150-300 inhabitants/km² were 'in between'). Control variables were: Employment status, rural/urban region (in relation to main residence), partnership status, children under age 15 in the household, home ownership, subjective health, age, age², period effects (percentage change in GDP compared to the previous year), working hours and number of moves.

We examined the effect of changes in commuting distance (ref: short-distance commuting) on the extent of volunteer work. The advantages of the FE estimator are that it compares the same individuals at different points in time (within-estimator) and can only be biased by time-varying but not time-constant characteristics. Therefore, causal inference is possible with less uncertainty (e.g. Brüderl 2010).

Results and discussion

We found that commuting medium distances ($b = -.022$; $p = .191$) and especially commuting long distances ($b = -.076$; $p = .010$) were associated with a reduction in volunteering compared to short distances (see Figure 1). The negative effects of medium- and long-distance commuting tended to be stronger in more sparsely populated, rural regions.

Figure 1: Effects of commuting on volunteer work, interaction with population density



Notes: b coefficients and 95%-confidence intervals, reference = short distance commuting. Control variables: Employment status, rural/urban region, partnership status, children under age 15 in the household, home ownership, subjective health, age, age², period effects, working hours and number of moves; POLS = Pooled OLS regression.

These findings are in line with our theoretical considerations and support those studies that find a negative relationship between commuting and civic engagement (Scaff 1952; Putnam 2000; Barrett 2019; Rürger et al. 2022). As an explanation for the differences found between types of region, it can firstly be argued, that certain forms of engagement that are less compatible with regional mobility are generally more common in rural regions (Hameister/Tesch-Römer 2017). Secondly, certain forms of engagement that are well compatible with mobility are less common in rural regions among people who are more likely to commute long distances (Kelle/Simonson 2022). The findings also raise the question of the role of the COVID-19 pandemic and digitalisation. In this context, a structural change of engagement ("digitalised civil society") is identified (BMSFSJ 2020). There are both opportunities and challenges for rural regions: On the one hand, digital forms of engagement could be more compatible with regional mobility. On the other hand, rural regions in Germany are more likely to have an insufficiently developed broadband network.

Overall, the findings suggest that while regional mobility is important for economic sustainability, it could have a negative impact on social sustainability by reducing civic engagement.

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