

Title: Does commuting hinder civic engagement? A panel analysis of Germany

Authors: Heiko Rüger and Thomas Skora

Federal Institute for Population Research (BiB), Wiesbaden, Germany

Heiko.rueger@bib.bund.de

Thomas.skora@bib.bund.de

Theme: 5. Internal Migration and Urbanization

Convenor: Tiit Tammaru, University of Tartu

Short abstract

While internal migration is stagnating or decreasing in Germany and other European countries, there is an increase in alternative forms of regional mobility such as daily and weekly commuting. Although the relationship between commuting and civic engagement has repeatedly been regarded as relevant in the literature, there has been little research on it to date and in particular longitudinal studies are lacking. We expect a negative effect on civic engagement, since commuting is often time-consuming and stressful and can entail periodic absence from the main residence. We apply fixed effects panel regressions to longitudinal data for the years 1997-2017 from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) which is representative of private households in Germany (N=197,795 observations from 39,899 individuals). Using the same data and event history analysis we also examine whether there are indications of reverse causality. Overall, the results show that commuting is associated with reduced civic engagement. Differentiated by the type of engagement, it can be seen that the effects are stronger for volunteer work than for political participation. The longer the daily commute, the larger the negative effect, but we find the largest negative effect for weekly commuting. We also find evidence for the other causal direction: The lower (higher) the participation in volunteer work, the higher (lower) the probability of starting daily long distance and weekend commuting.

Extended abstract

Background, research question and hypotheses

While internal migration is stagnating or decreasing in Germany and other European countries (e.g. Sander 2017; Huinink et al. 2014), there is an increase in daily commuting (i.e. periodically recurring travel between one's place of residence and place of work) and weekly commuting (i.e. use of an occupational secondary residence in connection with commuting, usually on weekends) (e.g. BiB 2018; Rüger/Sulak 2017). Daily and weekly commuting are seen as alternatives for internal migration (e.g. Green et al. 1999; van der Klis/Mulder 2008). In this paper, we investigate the relationship between commuting and civic engagement. Although this question has repeatedly been regarded as relevant in the literature, there has been little research on it to date (e.g. Putnam 2000). There are a few, mostly cross-sectional, studies on the relationship between daily commuting and civic engagement (e.g. Putnam 2000; Newman et al. 2014) but longitudinal studies and studies on weekly commuting that use representative data are lacking.

Since such commuting arrangements are time-consuming and often stressful (“Resources hypothesis” and “Commuter’s strain hypothesis“, Newman et al. 2014) and can entail periodic absence from the main residence (“Re-potting hypothesis“, Putnam 2000), we expect a negative effect on civic engagement overall. Specifically, we expect that the longer the daily commute, the larger the negative effect on civic engagement. Moreover, we expect the effect to be even stronger in the case of weekend commuting since the absence from the main residence during the work week is added to the commute. Finally, we expect to find a negative effect of civic engagement on the probability of starting commuting.

Data and methods

We apply fixed effects panel regressions and event history analysis to longitudinal data for the years 1997-2017 from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) which is representative of private households in Germany (N=197,795 observations (person-years) from 39,899 individuals). Civic engagement is measured by the frequency (every week, every month, less often, never) of (i) volunteer work in clubs or social services and (ii) participation in a citizens' group, political party or local government. Commuting was surveyed using varying indicators in different waves in the course of the panel study. In the following, we present the most common operationalizations. Respondents were identified as weekend commuters when the distance between the main residence and the workplace was ≥ 150 km and the frequency of commuting was weekly or less often (n=1,652; 1.28% of the working population). Respondents were identified as daily short distance commuters when the length of the commute was < 25 km (n=96,867; 74.78% of the working population), as daily medium distance commuters when the length of the commute was 25-49 km (n=17,139; 13.23% of the working population), and as daily long distance commuters when the length of the commute was ≥ 50 km (n=5,584; 4.31% of the working population). For the remaining respondents, the commuting distance could not be determined because they reported changing workplaces (n=8,299; 6.41% of the working population).

We conducted two steps of analysis. First, we analysed the effect of commuting on civic engagement by using fixed effects regressions. The aim was to investigate the following questions: Are there equal effect sizes for starting and stopping weekend commuting? Is the

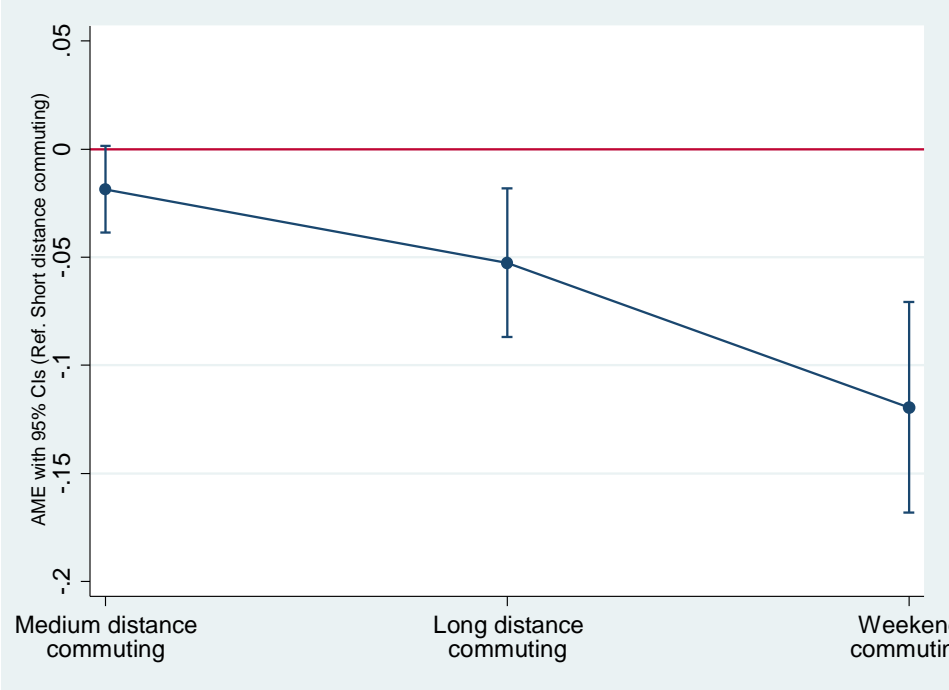
effect moderated by the length of time since starting weekend commuting? Are there differences with regard to short-term (temporary) and long-term effects? Controls were age, age², period (dummies), employment status, partnership status, children under age 15 (yes/no), home ownership, rural/urban (in reference to the main residence) and subjective health. Secondly, we analysed the effect of civic engagement on the probability of starting commuting by using event history analysis. The aim was to investigate whether there are indications of an effect in the other causal direction. Controls were age, age², period, gender, employment status, partnership status, education, children under age 15 (yes/no), home ownership, rural/urban (in reference to the main residence) and subjective health.

Results

Overall, the results show that commuting is associated with reduced civic engagement. The effects are stronger for volunteer work compared to political participation. The longer the daily commute, the larger the negative effect on volunteer work, but we find the largest negative effect for weekend commuting (see Figure 1). Distributed fixed effects analysis reveals that volunteer work starts to decrease already two years before the start of a weekend commuting episode, is lowest in the year after the start of commuting, increases afterwards, but, overall, remains lower compared to the time before the start of commuting. Moreover, the negative effect of starting a weekend commuting episode is substantially larger than the positive effect of stopping a weekend commuting episode.

We also find evidence for the other causal direction: The lower (higher) the participation in volunteer work, the higher (lower) the probability of starting daily long distance and weekend commuting.

Figure 1: Forms of commuting and effects on volunteer work



Notes: GSOEP 1997-2017; own calculations; marginal effects estimated with linear FE regression (reference: short distance commuting)

Discussion and conclusion

We find a negative effect of commuting on volunteer work, especially for weekend commuting. However, we find hardly any effect of commuting on political participation. There are several possible explanations for the latter finding. First, the activity of political participation could be of higher subjective importance. Secondly, for this activity a higher investment could be necessary. Thirdly, political participation could be practised more easily through supraregional networks (e.g. parties). All in all, political participation could be better "compatible" with commutes (cf. Petzold 2016). In addition, we find indications for the other causal direction, i.e. that a high level of engagement reduces the willingness to commute.

A limitation of the data is that the indicators for civic engagement might be somewhat "outdated", meaning that new types of civic engagement could possibly not have been captured. At the same time, panel analysis requires indicators that remain unchanged over time. Also, no differentiation is possible where the civic engagement is carried out in the case of weekend commuting, i.e. whether the activities are carried out at the place of primary or secondary residence. Future research should look more closely at the different types of engagement and the different places where the engagement is carried out: What specific activities are carried out? Are these activities carried out locally or non-local? And, in the case of weekend commuting, are these activities carried out at the place of the primary or secondary residence?

References

- Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung (Hrsg.) (2018): Pendelmobilität in Deutschland. Potenziale nutzen – Belastungen reduzieren. Policy Brief, Oktober 2018.
- Green, Anne E.; Hogarth, Terence; Shackleton, Ruth E. (1999): Longer distance commuting as a substitute for migration in Britain: A review of trends, issues and implications. In: *International Journal of Population Geography* 5: 49-67.
- Huinink, Johannes; Kulu, Hill; Mulder, Clara H.; Schneider, Norbert F.; Vidal, Sergi (2014): The Two Sides of the Same Coin: Challenges of Policy-Making for a Mobile Europe. In: *Population and Policy Compact*, 8.
- Newman et al. (2014): The "Daily Grind": Work, Commuting, and Their Impact on Political Participation. In: *American Politics Research* 42(1): 141-170.
- Petzold, Knut (2016): Berufliche Multilokalität und politische Partizipation: Warum Shuttles an ihrem Arbeitsort aktiv werden. In: *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 42(1): 129–157.
- Putnam, RD. (2000): *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rüger, Heiko; Sulak, Harun (2017): Wochenendpendeln von Erwerbstätigen in Deutschland. Analysen mit den Mikrozensus 1991 bis 2012. In: *Raumforschung und Raumordnung - Spatial Research and Planning* 75(5): 413–427.
- Sander, Nikola (2017): Germany. Internal Migration Within a Changing Nation. In: Champion, Tony; Cooke, Thomas; Shuttleworth, Ian (Hrsg.): *Internal Migration in the Developed World. Are we becoming less mobile?*. Abingdon/New York: Routledge: 226–241.
- Van der Klis, Marjolijn; Mulder, Clara H. (2008): Beyond the Trailing Spouse: The Commuter Partnership as an Alternative to Family Migration. In: *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 23(1): 1-19.