

Visible State, Trustworthy State? Public Services and Political Trust in Germany

Description

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What does a lack of schools, a long journey to the next train station, or the loss of a hospital tell residents about their government? For residents, these changes are more than practical inconveniences. They are visible signs of the state's presence or absence in everyday life, and they may shape people's trust in political institutions.

Political science has long debated how local living conditions influence political behaviour. This debate has gained renewed attention over the past decade, as researchers observed distinct spatial patterns in voting behaviour across Western democracies (see, for example, the blogpost on the [AfD's success in the 2021 German federal election](#)). One prominent explanation for such patterns focuses on neighbourhood deprivation, characterised by economic weakness and a lack of infrastructure. Researchers assume residents of these deprived places believe that those in power do not care about their communities and systematically neglect them. This frustration with the state is then expressed in Trump support, Brexit Leave voting, and far-right party success. In this blog post, I look closer into this mechanism and ask: Does the provision of public services relate to reduced trust in political institutions in Germany? And how can we investigate this link in a way that captures individual attitudes and the immediate neighbourhood context?

Public Services as a Tangible Link Between Citizens and the Government

Public services such as schools, hospitals, and train connections are among the most visible manifestations of the state in citizens' daily lives. They are also inherently place-bound: they are observed, needed, and experienced in specific locations and are often difficult to replace or supplement. Is there a hospital nearby in case of a medical emergency? How far is the nearest train station for commuting? These everyday questions highlight why public services form a crucial and often overlooked dimension of neighbourhood deprivation.

Theoretically, public service provision also speaks directly to the so-called “performance-trust” link. Citizens expect tangible benefits as outcomes of the political system. When the system fails to deliver these expected outcomes, trust in political institutions can erode. In welfare states, providing public services is an essential part of these expectations.

Why Linking Multiple Data Sources Matters

Studying the relationship between public service provision and political trust faces a challenge: no single dataset contains the objective characteristics of a neighbourhood and the individual attitudes of its residents. Surveys provide crucial information about what people think and feel. Still, only administrative records can tell us how many schools, hospitals, or train stations are actually located in a given area.

To bridge this gap, my research links survey respondents to spatially matched administrative data, using the smallest geographic units available. In this study, I use the General German Social Survey (ALLBUS), for which respondents’ addresses were geocoded and the straight-line distance to the nearest school, hospital, and train station calculated. This approach addresses a common limitation in the literature: many studies rely exclusively on residents’ perceptions or data aggregated at higher levels (such as municipalities or districts). This aggregated data may obscure important variation at the neighbourhood scale. However, it also comes with its challenges, since it requires careful handling and storing of the data to ensure privacy and anonymity.

Findings: Objective Conditions Matter But Not As Much As Expected

The analysis reveals a positive association between the provision of health care and public transport with political trust: Individuals who live further away from hospitals and train stations report lower trust in the German government, even after controlling for income, education, political orientation, as well as population density and unemployment rate (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distance to Public Service Facilities and Trust in the German Government

Figure Note. Predicted marginal effects. Data Sources: GGSS 2018, Federal Statistical Office 2017, and BBSR 2022. Fitted Models: OLS multi-level random effect regression with state fixed effects. Survey weights are applied.

Yet, looking at the substantial effects, the relationship is relatively weak and does not hold for the provision of schools. The latter, however, might address an important condition of the mechanism at work: Only if citizens perceive the national government to be responsible for providing a specific service, does the lack of the service negatively affect trust. In Germany, schools are predominantly the responsibility of the federal state, which might explain this non-finding.

Summary and Implications

These findings contribute to our understanding of how place of residence influences political attitudes and voting behaviour. They highlight the importance of considering infrastructural dimensions: public services are visible, locally experienced, and a tangible measure of whether the state is present in citizens' daily lives. Yet the impact of service provision is not uniform. Different services can trigger different attributions of responsibility, and citizens' responses may vary depending on the political salience of the issue or their socio-demographic circumstances. Is the local debate centred on the closure of public services? Does everyone rely equally on train commuting or hospital accessibility? Does everyone perceive the absence of a service in the same way and translate it into feeling forgotten by those in power?

These questions point to the need for more and more detailed research, combining fine-grained data on neighbourhood conditions with individual-level attitudes. Recognising and analysing the neighbourhood dimension is essential for understanding and potentially mitigating the spatial patterns of political discontent observed in many democracies today.

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