

Literally ‘left behind’? Perceived accessibility and perceptions of institutional bias in rural areas of the Netherlands

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research problem and goal

Peripheral rural regions in Europe face significant challenges in providing adequate access to essential services and employment opportunities, primarily due to the effects of centralization and urbanization (Martínez-Fernández et al., 2012). This trend symbolizes a perceived withdrawal of governmental support, emphasizing the prioritization of urban economic centers and the neglect of rural areas. Consequently, these 'lagging places' may cultivate a sense of abandonment among residents, manifesting in feelings of being 'left behind' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Quite literally, considerable distances to essential facilities, coupled with a lack of transport options and perceived limited efforts to enhance accessibility, may exacerbate feelings of isolation and exclusion (Pot et al., 2020). This experience of neglect may contribute to the perception of institutional bias against peripheral regions, treating them like they ‘don’t matter’, a sentiment commonly associated with populist movements

Previous research by Dijkstra et al. (2020) has highlighted distance as a significant factor contributing to senses of neglect, particularly emphasizing the impact of proximity to the nation’s capital as a driver of discontent. Moreover, communities of discontent are nested within their regional contexts wherein feelings of being left behind may, in addition to the national context, be fuelled by their relative position regarding access to opportunities in nearby places (Larsson et al., 2021). However, regional disparities in distances and travel times to opportunities do not always correspond to differences in satisfaction with access (e.g. Lättman et al., 2018; Pot et al., 2023). Such potential discrepancies between perceived accessibility and spatial data is compounded by regional variations in individual accessibility needs, desires, and abilities.

This complexity prompts the question of whether the relationship between accessibility and perceptions of institutional bias in rural areas is primarily driven by the actual challenges in accessing desired opportunities or by relative differences in the availability of these opportunities. This paper aims to explore the extent to which difficulties in accessing desired opportunities moderate the link between accessibility and perceptions of institutional bias in rural areas, contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics driving regional disparities and populist sentiments in Europe's peripheral rural regions.

Data and methods

This study uses data from a self-administered survey conducted in the Netherlands in 2020. The questionnaire covered activity and mobility patterns, accessibility preferences and satisfaction, and individual characteristics. The survey was distributed in three ways. First, 8,500 postal surveys were distributed in rural areas. A total of 1,619 questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of 19%. Second, online data collection through promotion in local newspapers and social media yielded another 789 responses. Third, at the end of 2020, the survey was distributed online via the Dutch Mobility Panel (MPN) across the country, yielding 1,254 respondents (a response rate of 90%). After deducting the responses that could not be geocoded, the total sample size is 3,378.

The main outcome variable of interest is the perception of institutional bias against the respondent’s living environment. This is measured through a survey question asking whether people felt that the

region has received less attention from the government than other regions (“the region where I live is left behind by the government”). The link with accessibility is measured using an indicator based on spatial data, alongside the ‘Perceived Accessibility Scale’ (PAC), reflecting the degree to which one can participate in desired activities given the current land-use and transport system configuration (Lättman et al., 2018). Moreover, the study includes demographic controls, which are associated with political discontent, as well as individual factors influencing one’s potential to access desired activities.

Main outcomes

Tentative correlation analyses indicate that feelings of being left behind are more closely correlated with the actual number of opportunities rather than with one’s perceived potential to engage in desired activities. This trend is especially pronounced in rural areas compared to more urbanized regions, where the perception of being left behind is more closely tied to outcomes associated with perceived participation potential. Regression analyses support the notion that relative differences in opportunity rather than satisfaction with access to desired activities play a significant role in explaining discontent. Specifically, the effect of perceived accessibility is largely influenced by perceived recent losses of facilities. This indicates that the perceived impact of facility closures on participation may be temporary, and negative assessments of closures are driven more by symbolic and emotional significance rather than actual functional access (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2017). Nevertheless, perceived access to opportunities does become associated with feelings of being left behind when individuals perceive their access as insufficient.

The results highlight the potential role of investing in accessibility infrastructure to address not only functional needs but also to mitigate feelings of being left behind. While some rural areas may not currently experience significant accessibility issues, investing in infrastructure can serve as a proactive measure to prevent future disparities and discontent. By improving accessibility, policymakers can contribute to reducing feelings of exclusion and discontent among residents. The effectiveness, efficiency, and fairness of strategies to mitigate discontent by reducing access disparities - whether through promoting spatial proximity, facilitating mobility, or enhancing digital connectivity - are subject to political debate. The study’s findings indicate that prioritizing access for those presently encountering challenges, coupled with anticipating and addressing potential future issues for the car-dependent majority, can simultaneously enhance functional accessibility and mitigate current and future discontent.

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