IW report on the geographies of dissatisfaction

by: MVF Editor-in-Chief Peter Stegmaier

Subjective perception is almost the only thing that matters

A new report, commissioned by Philip Morris and carried out by the German Economic Institute (IW), sheds a nuanced light on the state of public services in Germany: For the first time, all of the country's approximately 10,800 local authorities have been assessed in terms of their provision of essential public services – ranging from healthcare and transport to education, leisure facilities and digital infrastructure. The Cologne-based researchers led by Dr Matthias Diermeier, head of the IW's Democracy, Society and Market Economy Cooperation Cluster, combined web-scraping data – drawn from sources such as doctor search engines, the Hospital Atlas and Google Places – with a survey of more than 5,000 people. The findings contradict many common narratives about a country that is supposedly left behind across the board.

>> The report does not reveal a simple urban-rural or east-west divide, but rather a more fragmented mosaic. Whilst large cities are, on average, the best served, peripheral communities with good links to major cities also sometimes perform exceptionally well, such as the town of Fahrenkrug in Schleswig-Holstein, which ranks among the ten best-served municipalities in Germany.

Conversely, even in the well-positioned federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, there are regions with significant gaps. Even the familiar east-west pattern holds true only to a limited extent: whilst rural areas in eastern Germany are often less well-served, eastern German towns frequently fare better than their western German counterparts. In terms of subjective perception, the picture is surprisingly positive. Just over half of those surveyed are satisfied with the provision in their immediate neighbourhood, whilst only around one in four express a negative view. The difference between urban and rural areas is also smaller than expected: in towns and cities, a good 55 per cent are satisfied, whilst in rural areas the figure is still around 45 per cent.

Mobility is viewed particularly critically in rural areas, whilst, of all things, educational provision is rated more positively there than in towns and cities – presumably because capacity constraints at schools and nurseries carry greater weight in conurbations than long journeys in the countryside.

The real focus of the study also lies in its political dimension. There are hardly any major differences in the assessment of public services among supporters of the established centrist parties – the SPD, the CDU/CSU and the Greens; in each case, around half consider the provision to be reliable. The situation is quite different among AfD supporters: here, dissatisfaction clearly predominates, with just under 40 per cent assessing the situation negatively and only a little over a quarter positively.

It is noteworthy that this difference persists even when factors such as place of residence, income and education are statistically controlled for. According to the authors, the more critical view cannot therefore simply be explained by the fact that AfD supporters live in structurally weak regions more often than average.

It becomes even more revealing when we look at the link between actual provision and how it is assessed. The analysis shows that, whilst objectively better infrastructure generally leads to higher levels of local satisfaction, However, when it comes to broader political attitudes – such as assessments of the state's effectiveness, satisfaction with democracy or support for the AfD – the objective state of provision plays hardly any role at all. In such cases, subjective perception is almost the sole determining factor.

The study's authors put it this way: political dissatisfaction is not fuelled solely by measurable shortcomings, but largely by how these are interpreted and communicated to the public.

With this finding, the study forms part of an international debate that has long been observed in other countries as well: in France, for example, support for right-wing parties rises as the distance to the nearest railway station increases; in England, hospital closures fuelled the rise of populist forces.

A detailed look at healthcare provision reveals some notable patterns. The study objectively assessed general practitioners, hospitals, pharmacies and care facilities, calculating their accessibility based on journey times by car. At a regional level, it is evident that municipalities in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania perform the worst on average in this area. Furthermore, healthcare provision is found to be particularly closely linked to the

density of educational and leisure facilities, as well as with digital and transport infrastructure.

In terms of subjective assessment, it is immediately apparent that access to pharmacies is rated positively across the board: in towns, four out of five respondents are satisfied with this, but even in rural areas, satisfaction remains significantly higher than for other healthcare services.

The availability of doctors and hospitals, by contrast, is viewed in a noticeably more critical light, with a clear divide emerging between urban and rural areas: whilst around half of people in towns and cities are satisfied with medical care, the figure in rural areas is just over a third. The perceived trend over the past five years is particularly striking: in rural areas, more than one in three people report a deterioration in the availability of doctors and hospitals, a significantly higher proportion than in towns and cities.

The researchers cite as the main cause the concrete experience of GP practices closing and hospitals shutting down in rural areas, whilst in towns and cities it is more a perceived decline in quality or stricter access restrictions that are the deciding factors.

When objective healthcare provision data is linked to satisfaction levels, the study's general findings are confirmed for the healthcare sector as well: better actual provision goes hand in hand with higher satisfaction, but has little effect on deeper-seated political attitudes such as dissatisfaction with democracy or even support for the AfD. <<