Is commuting bad for civil life?

Evidence from three Norwegian cities.

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Introduction

With improved communications and the general availability of cars, residing in neighboring communities while working in the city has become increasingly common. This phenomenon is often regarded as problematic. Suburbanization and the increase in commuting have been lamented for more than half a century (e.g. Lundberg 1934; Schaff 1952). For example, Schaff (1952, 219) concluded that “[u]sually the commuter participates very little in community affairs. Thus, the organizations of the community are largely left in the hands of elderly retired people or women”.

More recently, Robert Putnam (2000) has echoed these concerns by claiming that metropolitan sprawl poses a major threat to America’s stock of social capital. Commuting destroys social capital through two main processes: time displacement and spatial fragmentation. With regard to the former, commuting takes time away from civic engagement. As a result, commuters are less involved in community action and voluntary associations than those living and working within the same community. In a much-cited passage, Putnam claims that “each additional ten minutes in daily commuting time cuts involvement in community affairs by 10 per cent” (op.cit., 213).

When it comes to spatial fragmentation, Putnam claims that the spread of the city disrupts established community boundaries. “(…) [I]t is not simply time spent in the car itself, but also spatial fragmentation between home and workplace, that is bad for community life”
The communities become less “well-defined and bounded” (2000), as citizens may feel as connected to the urban centre in which they work as to the community in which they live. Attachment to the local community becomes more tenuous, thereby weakening civic commitment and social capital.

In sum, the time displacement and spatial fragmentation caused by commuting is one of the main culprits behind the slump in America’s social capital that he claims to have identified. American research has largely corroborated Putnam’s perspective. Commuters interact less socially with others than non-commuters (Flood og Barbato 2005; Besser, Marcus et al. 2008) and neighborhood ties are weaker within communities dependent on commuting (Freeman 2001). Rahn and Yoon (2009) found negative effects on social trust of living in communities with a lot of commuting. Others have argued that those working locally are stakeholders in the development of community life to a greater extent than commuters, and therefore more likely to engage in solving local problems (Immergluck 1998).

Putnam’s ideas about metropolitan sprawl were developed in an exclusively American context. But there is no reason to expect that the mechanisms he describes, i.e. time displacement and spatial fragmentation, should be limited to the US; they should apply to other societies as well. If metropolitan sprawl has the deleterious consequences that Putnam claims, it is important to identify whether this is a universal finding or an American idiosyncrasy.

Indeed, European research has been less conclusive. Lidström (2006) finds no signs of a negative relationship between commuting and citizen participation in Sweden. On the contrary, some forms of public participation are more common among commuters than non-commuters. A Swiss study by Viry et al. (2009) concludes that while commuting decreased the availability of emotionally bonding social capital in the form of supportive strong ties, it could provide increased opportunities for developing bridging social capital and weak ties. This paper further explores the question of whether commuting is negative for civic life, even in a non-American context.

Data and hypotheses

The data we use stem from a comprehensive survey carried out in November 2007 in three Norwegian City Regions (Oslo, Bergen and Stavanger). The data material includes responses
from 6.166 individuals residing in these three cities or in the surrounding municipalities (73 municipalities in total). The three cities are further divided into 30 urban districts. The data is supplemented by context information about the municipalities and urban districts, based on official statistics. The very large sample, the theoretical rationale of the survey and the structure of the data allow us to assess the sprawl hypothesis with a great deal of accuracy.

In the paper, commuting is defined as crossing municipal borders when travelling between home and work. This main variable does not say anything about the distance travelled or about the time used on commuting, but since our interest primarily is to analyze the engagement in and connection to the municipality in which one works contra the one in which one live, crossing municipality borders is an important factor to look at. For the multivariate analyses, however, we also include a variable measuring estimated travel time by car from the respondents’ home (zip code) to the center of the municipality in which s/he is working. In order to analyze the relationship between commuting and social capital, we further divide the respondents into five groups:

1. Inward commuters: People residing in municipalities adjacent to cities while working in the city (13% of sample/776 respondents).
2. Extra-urban local workers: People residing and working in municipalities adjacent to cities (23%/1370).
3. Outward commuters: People living in the city and working in adjacent municipalities (4%/240).
4. City local workers: People living and working in the city (33%/1982).
5. Non-employed: People with no paid employment (27%/1622).

In the analyses, groups 1 and 3 constitute “commuters”, while groups 2 and 4 are “local workers”, whose places of employment and residence are located within the same municipality. In light of Putnam’s thesis, we would expect the following results from the analyses:

**H1: Commuters are less civically engaged within their local community than local workers.**

We measure civic engagement level as participation in public meetings to discuss questions

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1 The estimated travel times are calculated using the fastest route between the respondents’ zip codes identified by Google Maps. Those living and working within cities are ascribed an average travel time of 15 minutes, while those living and working in smaller extra-urban municipalities are ascribed an average travel time of 10 minutes.
related to the local community, local voluntary work, engagement in neighborhood organizations or active membership in other voluntary associations in the local community, and extent of participation in voluntary activity outside the municipality of residence.

**H2:** *Commuters feel less connected to the municipalities within which they reside, and more connected to the municipalities within which they work, than local workers.* We measure attachment by self-reported identification with different areas and interest in politics within and outside the community.

**H3:** *Commuters are less trusting than local workers.* As a consequence of the presumed social isolation of commuters, we expect this group to express lower levels of generalized trust than local workers.

### Commuting and community participation

Commuting is expected to cause spatial fragmentation and loosen the social ties that bind citizens to their local communities. When people live and work in different places, their attachment to the local community becomes more tenuous – contributing to a weakening of individual interest in and responsibility towards the local community. This should result in lower engagement in community affairs among commuters than among local workers (see also Freeman 2001; Immergluck 1998).

In Table 1 we examine commuters’ and local workers’ engagement and participation within their local community in order to test the proposition that suburban commuters are less active within their local community than those living and working locally (H1).
### Table 1: Commuting and local community participation. Percent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participated in or initiated a public meeting to discuss questions related to the local community</th>
<th>Participated in or initiated voluntary work to improve something in the local community</th>
<th>Engaged in neighborhood organizations or other organizations in the local community</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commuters total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inwards</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outwards</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local workers total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-urban</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-employed</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contrary to expectations, the table shows no difference at all in involvement in community affairs or voluntary associations between commuters and local workers. In general, city residents are somewhat less active than residents within the surrounding municipalities. Citizens living in areas affected by metropolitan sprawl are more active than inner-city residents regardless of whether they work in the community or not. This applies to participating in public meetings, participating in or initiating voluntary work in order to improve the local community as well as engagement in neighborhood associations.²

Table 2 confirms that this finding is valid even with regard to other types of voluntary associations. There is no overall difference in activity levels between commuters and local workers, while the slightly lower activity levels within the cities persist.³ The table shows percentage participating *actively* within each of the organizational categories, as nominal memberships of more passive character would include affiliations with national organizations that bypass the local level.⁴

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² Commuting is also unrelated to voting in local elections, although the high proportion reporting to have voted (87% among both commuters and local workers) makes us treat this variable with some caution. In reality, 61.7% voted at the election.

³ With regard to voluntary association participation, another recent study has indicated that the lower activity levels found within the city is a recent phenomenon. While urban and rural citizens were equally active 13 years ago, activity levels have now declined substantially within the cities while associations in the rural areas are holding their ground (Wollebæk, D. og K. H. Sivesind (2010). Fra folkebevegelse til filantropi? Frivillig innsats i Norge 1997-2009. Oslo/Bergen, Senter for forskning på sivilsamfunn og frivillig sektor)

⁴ However, the results are very similar with regard to nominal memberships as well.
We do find some minor differences related to types of associations. City dwellers are more active in cooperative housing associations, for the obvious reason that this housing arrangement is more common within the cities. This is reflected in a significant difference between commuters and local workers, which really is an artifact of the difference between cities and surrounding municipalities.

The differences of greater substantial interest concern religious and agricultural/fishing associations. Within the extra-urban municipalities, non-commuters are more active within these associations than commuters. This reflects that commuting is changing the content of organizational life within these communities rather than its volume. In other research, we have shown that both the mortality and birth rate of associations are much higher in the communities affected by metropolitan sprawl than in more peripheral municipalities (Wollebæk 2010). As these communities have changed from rural peripheries to suburbs to the city, they attract a very different type of inhabitants, i.e. the often highly educated and otherwise resourceful commuters. These people find little of interest in the
traditional organizational society, in which religion played a central role, especially around two of the cities under study here (Stavanger and Bergen). Thus, these associations die in droves as their core supporters age and new recruitment fails (Wollebæk 2010). Rather, the new citizens focus their efforts on organizing for improving conditions in their immediate surroundings, and form associations advocating the interests of a street, an area or a neighborhood vis-à-vis the municipal authorities.

In table 2, all active memberships are summarized. But this activity could take place within the residential municipality, or the energy could be directed towards the community in which the respondent works (Lidström 2010). In the latter case, it could contribute to the “spatial fragmentation” lamented by Putnam and others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of travelling to other municipalities to participate in associational activity</th>
<th>Commuter</th>
<th>Local worker</th>
<th>Diff. Commuters-local workers</th>
<th>Non-employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Inwards</td>
<td>Outwards</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every day</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every week</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every month</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than once a month</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Participation in activities in associations or organizations outside the residential municipality by work- and living status. Crosstabulation.

Table 3 confirms that commuters are somewhat more active in voluntary associations in other municipalities than the one in which they live, than local workers. However, the differences are by no means dramatic. Commuting is not a precondition for such boundary-spanning participation; 44 per cent of local workers in the extra-urban municipalities participate in voluntary activity in the city or in other municipalities outside the one where they live and work, compared to 50 per cent among commuters in these municipalities. The most active group is the smaller group of people commuting outwards from the city, among which more than half engage in voluntary association activity in neighboring municipalities.

In summary, the data provides little support for our first hypothesis. Commuters are as active as local workers in community affairs. When it comes to voluntary associations, the overall activity levels of commuters and local workers are the same, but commuters spend a somewhat higher proportion of their energy on activities outside the municipality of residence.
Commuting and community ties

According to Putnams’ dystopic perspective on commuting, commuters feel closer to the community within which they work than the community in which they reside. To what extent can this tendency be discerned from our data? Below, we examine the extent to which commuters and local workers identify with and express political interest in affairs in their residential communities and beyond.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Commuter</th>
<th>Local worker</th>
<th>Diff. commuters-local workers extra-urban areas</th>
<th>Diff. Commuters-local workers overall</th>
<th>Non-employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Inwards</td>
<td>Outwards</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The neighborhood in which you live</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>7.49</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>7.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The part of the city or the village in which you live</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>7.58</td>
<td>6.61</td>
<td>7.38</td>
<td>7.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The municipality in which you live</td>
<td>7.27</td>
<td>7.31</td>
<td>7.15</td>
<td>7.79</td>
<td>7.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The city region in which you live</td>
<td>6.99</td>
<td>6.93</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>7.17</td>
<td>6.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The county in which you live</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>6.91</td>
<td>6.89</td>
<td>6.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The part of the country in which you live</td>
<td>7.54</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>7.49</td>
<td>7.59</td>
<td>7.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway as a whole</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>9.02</td>
<td>9.22</td>
<td>9.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: How strongly do you identify with the following areas? Crosstabulation, averages on scale 0-10.

Table 4 shows no difference in the degree to which commuters identify with the neighborhood, or the village (bygd) or part of the city in which they live. However, if we focus the comparison on only extra-urban residents, commuters do express a somewhat lower degree of identification with the neighborhood, the part of the municipality in which they live and the municipality as a whole compared to local workers. The differences are modest, but significant. The neighborhood, the village and the municipality are all more important points of reference than the city region for commuters and local workers alike, and commuters in the extra-urban areas feel more connected to their communities than city dwellers do, even though the latter group work and live within the same municipality.
However, there is a clear tendency towards commuters expressing weaker affinity towards the municipality. This suggests that the boundary-spanning character of their social and professional lives may decrease the relevance of such administrative divisions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Commuter</th>
<th>Local worker</th>
<th>Diff.</th>
<th>Non-</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Inwards</td>
<td>Outwards</td>
<td>Extra-urban</td>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in politics in other municipalities in the region (scale 1-4)</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in local politics (1-4)</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Commuting and interest in local politics, and politics in other municipalities within the city region than the one you live in. Descriptive statistics.

While we find slightly lower levels of identification with the local community among commuters, there is no difference in their political interest (Table 5). Commuters and local workers are equally interested in political issues both on a local scale and within other municipalities of the region. Furthermore, commuters express the same level of trust in municipal authorities as local workers (table not shown). These findings contradict the image of alienated commuters disassociated from local politics and with little interest in forming the communities in which they live.

**Commuting and social trust**

As commuting is seen as one of the main culprits behind the drop in social capital in the US, and is hypothesized to decrease social cohesion and sense of community, it should also have an adverse effect on social trust as this is a core component of social capital. But does commuting really destroy trust?

Table 6 shows that this is clearly not the case. There are no significant differences between commuters and non-commuters, or between those living within and outside the city when it comes to social trust. When asked to describe the degree of trust between the citizens within the neighborhood, people living in the suburban municipalities give a more positive

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5 On an eleven-point scale (0=no trust, 10=very high trust), commuters in extra-urban areas score on average 5.30, while local workers in extra-urban areas score 5.46. The differences are not significant.
assessment than those living in the city. This is the case both for commuters and local workers. If metropolitan sprawl and commuting destroys trust, this is an insight which has not yet sunk in among Norwegian suburbanites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commuter</th>
<th>Local worker</th>
<th>Diff. commuters-local workers extra-urban areas</th>
<th>Diff. Commuters-local workers</th>
<th>Non-employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Inwards Outwards Total Extra-urban City</td>
<td>Diff. commuters-local workers extra-urban areas</td>
<td>Diff. Commuters-local workers</td>
<td>Non-employed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most people can be trusted (0-10)</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>6.71</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>6.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in my neighborhood trust each other (% completely agree)</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Commuting and trust in other people.

### Multivariate analyses

In Table 7, we subject the main indicators above to multivariate analysis, including control variables corresponding with the dimensions in Verba et al.’s civic voluntarism model (Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995; Lidström 2006). The regression analyses show that commuting does not have an independent effect on any of the three dimensions studied above. Community participation is positively related to political interest and organizational memberships, local identification increases with residential tenure, trust in local politicians and interest in local politics, while social trust is positively related to high age, high education and institutional trust. The only significant bivariate relationship we observed above, that between commuting and identification with the local community, is eliminated when controls for residential tenure is introduced in the model. Thus, this relationship appears to have been a spurious effect of the shorter time of residence among commuters compared to local workers. Interaction effects with commuting and all the other independent variables in the analysis were introduced stepwise, none of which resulted in a significant increase in the explained variance. The variable measuring estimated minutes of travel between home and work fared no better than

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6 If tenure is removed from the regression, there is a very weak, negative effect of commuting (unstandardized beta=-.688, standardized beta=-.036), indicating that commuters score -.688 points lower on a 33-point scale of local identification.
the commuting dichotomy in the regressions. In sum, the regression analyses give no support to any of the three hypotheses.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Community participation</th>
<th>Local identification</th>
<th>Social trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter (=1)</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City (=1)</td>
<td>-.046**</td>
<td>-.050**</td>
<td>-.092**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated travel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distance home-work</td>
<td>(.003)</td>
<td>(.003)</td>
<td>(.020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(minutes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Resources**

- Female (=1)  -.046**  -.046**  .095**  .096**  .073**  .072**
- Age (years)   .065**  .065**  -.067**  -.064**  -.111**  -.116**
- Education (1-4) .029*  .030*  -.015  -.015  .102**  .103**
- Household income (1-8)  .050**  .050**  .038**  .039**  .026  .026
- Immigrant (=1)  .034**  .034**  -.008  -.007  -.025  -.026
- Non-employed (=1)  -.044*  -.044*  .015  .019  -.061**  -.055**
- Student (=1)  -.011  -.011  -.057**  -.066**  .064**  .067**
- Years living in municipality (log)  .045**  .046**  .458**  .456**  -.001  -.001

**Engagement**

- Trust in municipal/city council (0-10 scale)  .021  .019  .225**  .225**  .240**  .238**
- General interest in politics (1-4 scale)  .038*  .039*  -.077**  -.077**  .039*  .038*
- Interest in local politics (1-4 scale)  .195**  .195**  .180**  .179**  .047**  -.046**

**Recruitment**

- Number of organizational memberships (log=1)  .176**  .176**  .014  .015  .033*  .033*
- R² adj.  .143  .144  .343  .344  .111  .111

Table 7: Multivariate analyses (OLS regression) of community participation, local identification and social trust. Standardized beta coefficients.

Community participation: Additive index of three items in table 1, plus dichotomy representing active membership in one or more voluntary associations (Cronbach’s alpha=.62). Local identification: Additive index of first three items in table 3. Cronbach’s alpha=.87). Social trust: 11-point scale used in table 6.

Education: (1) Primary schooling, (2) Secondary schooling, (3) College/university <=3 years, (4) University >3 years. Trust in municipal/city council: scale from 0 (no trust) to 10 (very high trust). General interest in politics/local politics: (1) very little interest, (2) little interest, (3) some interest, (4) very interested. City: (0) Surrounding municipalities, (1) city area.

### Discussion and conclusion

In this paper we have examined the thesis that metropolitan sprawl and increased commuting are among the factors that erode social capital and civic life more generally. In light of Putnam’s thesis, we expected that people who reside in municipalities adjacent to cities while working in the city would participate less in community affairs, be less actively involved in voluntary organizations, and feel less connected with their local communities compared to city dwellers and extra-urban non-commuters. We also expected that this would lead to a drop in levels of social trust within this group.

Our results show that:

(a) With regard to involvement in local community affairs (taking part in or initiating a public meeting to discuss community affairs, participation in communal voluntary work,
engagement in local community association), there are no differences between commuters and local workers in the extra-urban municipalities. In fact, commuters are substantially more active than city dwellers. With regard to participation in voluntary organizations, there are no differences between the groups, whether we measure nominal memberships or active participation. There are some minor variations with regard to the types of associations the different groups involve in: City dwellers are more often engaged in cooperative housing associations, while extra-urbanites are more involved in house owners’ associations and neighborhood improvement associations. Residents in extra-urban municipalities are also more involved in associations related to traditional culture and work (religion and agriculture). A slightly higher share of the engagement of commuters takes place in other municipalities than their place of residence, but they are also at least as active within neighborhood and local community associations as local workers. In sum, H1 (Commuters are less civically engaged within their local community than local workers) is not supported.

(b) With regard to feeling connected to the local community, commuters in extra-urban areas identify somewhat less with their neighborhoods and municipalities than local workers in the same areas. But compared to those living within the city, the extra-urban commuters are slightly more connected to their local environments. Commuters are no less interested in local politics, no more interested in politics in other municipalities, than local workers. In sum, H2 (Commuters feel less connected to the municipalities within which they reside, and more connected to the municipalities within which they work, than local workers) finds very limited support in our data.

(c) There are no differences between the groups with regard to social trust, or in the assessment of commuters and non-commuters about whether people in their neighborhoods trust each other or not. The only difference in our material is that those living in extra-urban environments generally give more positive assessments of their neighborhoods than those living in cities, whether they commute or not. H3, (Commuters are less trusting than local workers), is not supported.

In summary, the results seem to give very little reason for concern with regard to the negative consequences of commuting. Commuting does not seem to destroy social capital or civic engagement, and the areas affected by metropolitan sprawl seem as active and trusting as the cities, if not more. The spatial fragmentation and time displacement commuters experience do not preclude them from participating in and feeling connected to their local communities.
This raises the question of whether American research, which consistently reports negative effects of commuting, is representing the problem accurately. The effects of spatial fragmentation and time displacement should be, in principle at least, universal.

Thus, fragmentation and displacement are probably not the only mechanisms at work. Part of the explanation is likely to be found in the higher level of racial and economic segregation in American suburbs, which transforms conflicts between citizens into conflicts between local governments and depresses interest in local affairs (Oliver 2001). Such segregation is as yet much less manifest in Scandinavia, and the social problems of deprived suburbs are minor compared to American metropolitan sprawl areas.

Lidström (2006) suggests that the means of transportation may play a role; that commuting using collective means of transportation may have a more positive effect than driving alone in a car. We are not convinced that “[t]hose commuting by collective means of transportation could be more exposed to conditions that trigger political activism”, because of different views from the window or the sharing of a “social space” with other commuters, even though there is little or no communication going on between passengers (Lidström 2006, 878). While there is very little to indicate that commuting in itself has a negative effect on civic participation, we find the arguments for a positive effect of riding the bus or subway strained. Pending empirical evidence to the contrary, we would argue that most other activities that are undertaken during the day would represent stronger influences on one’s propensity to participate.

However, Lidström also puts forward another, more plausible alternative hypothesis: that it is not commuting in itself that represents a problem, but the combined, excessive demands of work and commuting. It is well known that the American labor market is more demanding than the Norwegian; the average number of work hours per worker is 34 per cent higher in the US compared to Norway (OECD 2004). It would seem that commuting within a Scandinavian-style work regime does little harm to civic life, but that the problem arises when a long travel to work is combined with excessive work demands.

This interpretation is strengthened by the reasons given by the respondents to a question concerning why they are not more active in civic life. On six of the seven items, including “too busy with other activities”, “lack of child care”, “problems with transportation”, “feeling of not being welcomed”, “lack of information” and a “feeling that it would not make any difference”, there are no significant differences between local workers and commuters in the extra-urban areas. The only reason that distinguishes significantly between commuters and local workers is “an inflexible and demanding work situation”. Thus, the main reason
why commuters feel that they are unable to take part as much as they would like is work-related.

If this hypothesis holds true, the American research results may not be easily transferred to countries with less arduous labor markets. The results of this survey indicate that one should not focus solely on where, but also on the conditions under which people live and work.

References


