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Entrepreneurial In-Migration, Civic Engagement, and Rural Livability*

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Abstract: Rural entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a driver of economic vitality and community resilience, yet it is not well understood whether self-employed in-migrants remain in rural areas long enough to generate lasting benefits. This study examines differences in intentions to stay between rural self-employed in-migrants and local entrepreneurs, with particular attention to the role of civic engagement. Using data from the 4R-Stat Baseline Survey 2024, logistic regression models estimate the determinants of intentions to remain in the current residential location over the next 12 months. The findings reveal that self-employed in-migrants are significantly less likely to intend to stay compared to local entrepreneurs. Civic engagement plays a meaningful but nuanced role in shaping the intentions of self-employed rural in-migrants to stay. While volunteering is positively associated with staying intentions, group membership emerges as a stronger and more consistent predictor after accounting for business-level characteristics. These results imply that rural livability strategies may benefit from distinguishing between attracting entrepreneurial in-migrants and retaining them, as civic engagement alone may not be sufficient to convert entrepreneurial activity into long-term community commitment.

Keywords: In-migration, Civic Engagement, Rural Livability, Entrepreneurship, Intention to Stay

JEL Codes: R23, L26, R11, Z13

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a vital component of rural economic development and livability. Research suggests that the growth of entrepreneurial ventures in rural regions is directly associated with improvements in living standards and community resilience (Barber III et al., 2021). In recent years, self-employed in-migrants have been

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viewed as potential drivers of rural development. These individuals contribute to job creation, stimulate local markets, and strengthen rural–urban linkages, often bringing unique skills, professional experience, and economic capital (Mukhtar et al., 2018; Haandrikman et al., 2024). As a result, in-migrants can significantly influence both the economic viability and social structure of rural communities. However, while their initial economic contributions are well documented, a critical question remains: do self-employed in-migrants stay long enough for their entrepreneurial activities to generate lasting benefits?

Civic engagement represents a central mechanism through which newcomers establish community connections. Involvement in local governance, volunteer organizations, and community initiatives has been associated with stronger cohesion and enhanced community development (Kordel and Pohle, 2018; Von Reichert et al., 2014). Rural in-migrants are often motivated by lifestyle aspirations that translate into higher levels of volunteerism and community involvement (Nelson and Nelson, 2011). Active engagement can generate broader community benefits, including strengthened identity, inclusivity, and investments in social and physical infrastructure (Guo et al., 2024). Nevertheless, barriers such as the absence of established networks may constrain participation among newcomers (Haartsen and Stockdale, 2018). These constraints highlight the importance of supportive local environments that facilitate integration. Importantly, the relationship between civic engagement and staying behavior remains ambiguous. Participation may deepen place attachment and signal commitment to the community, yet it may also expand professional networks and transferable skills that increase mobility.

Despite this growing body of research, the staying behavior of self-employed rural in-migrants—that is, whether they plan to remain in their communities or relocate—and the role civic engagement plays in this decision, remains underexplored. Most studies focus on migration motivation or initial entrepreneurial outcomes, overlooking how social integration, business success, and community conditions influence long-term retention. This gap limits understanding of whether in-migrant entrepreneurship generates enduring benefits or primarily short-term economic activity in the rural areas where they live.

This study examines the relationship between civic engagement, the social and economic characteristics of self-employed in-migrants and local entrepreneurs, and their intentions to remain in rural communities, with particular attention to the role of civic engagement in shaping staying behavior. Using data from the 4R-Stat Baseline Survey 2024 (Bednarik et al., 2025), logistic regression was employed to identify determinants of entrepreneurs' intentions to stay in or leave their residential locations. Understanding these dynamics is essential for policymakers and community leaders seeking to promote sustainable rural development. The livability of rural areas depends not only on attracting entrepreneurial in-migrants but also on understanding the factors that influence their decision to remain over time.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Entrepreneurial In-migration and Rural Livability

Rural livability reflects the interaction of economic vitality, social well-being, and environmental sustainability. Rural entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a key mechanism for

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economic growth in lagging regions, alongside human capital development, innovation, and regional competitiveness (Stephens et al., 2013). Strong community networks enhance governance and emotional well-being, while ecological conditions influence long-term resilience (Wei et al., 2023; Etuk and Acock, 2017). Entrepreneurship is associated with broader improvements in rural livability, including job creation, economic diversification, and expanded access to goods and services (Mei et al., 2022). Inclusive forms of entrepreneurship, such as women- and youth-led enterprises, can strengthen household incomes and social ties while helping counter demographic decline (Conroy and Low, 2021; Ahl et al., 2024; Bednaříková et al., 2016).

The entrepreneurial activities initiated by self-employed in-migrants substantially contribute to the economic development of rural areas. In-migrants not only fill labor market gaps in rural regions but also stimulate local economies through their consumption patterns and business ventures. In areas experiencing a high influx of new residents, evidence suggests a robust association between in-migration and entrepreneurial growth, with new businesses emerging to serve both local and incoming populations (Kalantaridis, 2010). Migrant entrepreneurs often possess high levels of confidence and adaptability (Nguyen, 2022). In-migrants frequently bring diverse skills, enhance employment opportunities, and contribute positively to labor market dynamics (Eliasson et al., 2014). Bosworth and Atterton (2012) further emphasize that these entrepreneurs can enhance local economic ecosystems and counteract rural depopulation by introducing innovation and generating employment opportunities. Recent rural entrepreneurship research highlights that entrepreneurial outcomes are strongly conditioned by infrastructure and market access, particularly broadband availability, which shapes the viability of rural firm entry and growth (Conroy and Low, 2021, 2022). These constraints are especially relevant for small, remote, and non-employer firms, which constitute a large share of rural entrepreneurship.

2.2. Entrepreneurship and Civic Engagement

The concept of social capital is central to understanding how in-migrants integrate into rural communities and sustain their businesses. Networks characterized by trust, reciprocity, and shared norms facilitate access to information and resources that support both business activities and social adjustment (Coleman, 1988). Participation in civic activities, such as volunteering, charitable giving, organizational membership, and political involvement, promotes social interactions and generates social capital that facilitates cooperation and access to valuable resources and opportunities (Pattie et al., 2003). These networks can help individuals identify economic opportunities and transition into self-employment (Trajano et al., 2023). However, rural entrepreneurial ecosystem research emphasizes that opportunity identification and venture scalability are shaped not only by social capital but also by structural ecosystem conditions such as infrastructure, digital connectivity, and local market depth (Conroy and Low, 2021; Stephens et al., 2013). Beyond providing access to resources, civic engagement may also foster entrepreneurial capabilities. Participation in social organizations and movements can develop leadership, advocacy, and organizational skills that enhance self-sufficiency, an important predictor of entrepreneurial intentions (London, 2010). Entrepreneurship scholars further argue that prosocial motivations encourage individuals to

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pursue entrepreneurial activities aimed at addressing social problems and creating value for communities while also generating personal fulfillment and improved well-being (Shepherd, 2015).

Recent research has moved beyond purely economic explanations to examine the psychological, social, and competence-based mechanisms linking civic engagement and entrepreneurship. Using a large cross-national sample, Chu et al. (2025) show that civic engagement is positively associated with entrepreneurial intention, primarily through eudaimonic well-being rather than hedonic happiness. Grounded in self-determination theory, their findings suggest that civic participation fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn enhance entrepreneurial aspirations. Complementing this perspective, Cegarra-Navarro et al. (2024) demonstrate that individual, emotional, and especially spiritual knowledge strengthen interpersonal competences, which subsequently increase both civic engagement and entrepreneurial intention. Cheng et al. (2026) extend these findings to sustainable entrepreneurship, showing that community engagement is a strong predictor of green entrepreneurial behavior, alongside sustainability mission, innovation, and need for achievement. Collectively, these studies suggest that civic engagement is not merely a correlate of entrepreneurship but an important mechanism shaping entrepreneurial motivation and behavior, although the predominance of cross-sectional designs limits causal inference.

A contrasting perspective is provided by Lois et al. (2026), who argue that entrepreneurial ecosystems are shaped by structural inequalities that condition access to resources, networks, and legitimacy. Their review highlights how gender, race, age, class, and migration status influence entrepreneurial opportunities and participation, challenging the assumption that civic engagement operates uniformly across social groups. This structural lens suggests that the psychological and competence-based pathways identified in prior studies may vary according to entrepreneurs' social positioning. Taken together, the literature indicates that civic engagement is closely linked to entrepreneurial intention and sustainable entrepreneurship through psychological fulfillment, knowledge-based competences, and community embeddedness, but these relationships are embedded within broader structural inequalities that shape who benefits from civic participation and under what conditions.

Although frequent movers may invest less in community networks, entrepreneurial inmigrants can strengthen local ties through collaboration and engagement (Bosworth and Atterton, 2012; Hotchkiss et al., 2022). Their civic participation may include involvement in local governance, community service organizations, volunteer networks, and local development initiatives (Nadler, 2012; Von Reichert et al., 2014). Such engagement can enhance social capital by bridging divides between community groups and fostering inclusivity and participation in public life (Finlay and Haan, 2025; Nelson and Nelson, 2011). Moreover, newcomers who participate in local initiatives often help cultivate community pride and identity, an especially valuable outcome for rural areas facing population decline and economic challenges (Sun et al., 2021). Overall, the literature suggests that accessible and inclusive civic organizations may facilitate the social and territorial embeddedness of self-employed inmigrants, although the strength and direction of these relationships are likely to be context dependent and warrant further empirical investigation.

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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data Collection and Sample Specification

This study uses data from regional surveys covering the North Central, Northeast, Southern, and Western regions of the United States with an initial sample of 18,596 respondents. The survey was developed through a collaboration among the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, the Southern Rural Development Center, and Auburn University to examine key aspects of household, business, and community well-being in rural and urban areas.

Administered as a 20-minute online questionnaire, the survey collected information on a wide range of topics related to community development, including household demographics, migration and staying behavior, and civic engagement. The survey employed region-specific sampling frames to ensure coverage of the underlying population structures in each region. The full sample broadly reflects the regional demographic composition across key sociodemographic characteristics, including age, gender, and geographic distribution, consistent with available population benchmarks. Data were collected in two waves: August–November 2024 (North Central, Northeast, and Southern Regions) and June–August 2025 (Western Region), all through the Qualtrics research panel. Attention-check questions and required responses were used to enhance data quality.

The sample analyzed in this study includes self-employed respondents living in rural areas, defined as open or sparsely populated countryside or towns with fewer than 5,000 residents (ERS, 2023). For the analytic portion of the study, the sample was restricted from 570 self-employed rural respondents to those with complete data on all variables included in the full set of regression models, resulting in a final analytic sample of 463 respondents. This listwise deletion approach ensured a consistent set of observations across all model specifications and eliminated variation in sample composition due to missing data.

To assess potential differences introduced by this restriction, key demographic characteristics were compared between the full sample (N = 18,596) and the final analytic sample (N = 463) in Table A1 in the Appendix. These comparisons indicate broadly similar distributions across key characteristics, implying that the restriction to complete cases did not introduce substantial systematic differences in sample composition. Overall, the analytic sample provides a consistent and comparable basis for regression analyses while maintaining alignment with the broader demographic structure of the underlying survey population.

In the next step, the sample of 463 respondents was divided into in-migrants who moved to the current rural location within the past five years (N=122) and locals who have lived in their community longer (N=341). Focusing on the employee-related business characteristics, Table 1 presents the distribution of business size among self-employed in-migrants and locals, measured by the number of employees. Overall, locals tend to operate larger businesses than in-migrants, as reflected in the higher mean number of employees (77 vs. 63) and the substantially greater total number of jobs created (28,869 vs. 8,493), though the latter difference is partly a function of the larger number of local respondents (420 vs. 150). The results show that while in-migrants make a meaningful contribution to rural employment, their businesses tend to be at an earlier or smaller stage of development relative to those

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of local entrepreneurs. This may reflect differences in time since establishment, access to local capital networks, or the types of industries in which each group operates. The finding that a notable share of migrant businesses (18%) employ more than 100 workers nonetheless indicates that a subset of migrant entrepreneurs achieved substantial scale, contributing meaningfully to local labor markets despite their newcomer status.

Table 1: Distribution of Business Size among Rural Self-Employed Locals and In-Migrants

Business Size	Self-Employed In-Migrants	Self-Employed Locals
No employees	30%	24%
1–4 employees	33%	28%
5–20 employees	14%	13%
21–100 employees	5%	13%
101+ employees	18%	22%
Mean number of employees	63	77
Total jobs created	8,493	28,869
Total number of respondents	150	420

Source: 4R-Stat: Baseline Survey 2024 (Bednarik et al., 2025). Created by the author.

3.2. Method Used

Similar to other studies in which respondents decide whether to move or stay (Garasky, 2002; Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Thissen et al., 2010; Rérat, 2014; Clark and Maas, 2015; Bernsen et al., 2022) and to examine the determinants of staying behavior among self-employed rural entrepreneurs, this study employs logistic regression analysis with robust standard errors clustered at the individual level. The intention to stay of the rural self-employed respondents is perceived as a function of migration status, civic engagement, business characteristics, and respondents' demographic characteristics.

The dependent variable, intention to stay, is measured as a binary indicator of whether the self-employed respondent intends to stay or move within the next 12 months. The key explanatory variable captures migration status, distinguishing self-employed rural in-migrants from local entrepreneurs. Additional covariates include civic engagement measured via participation in a voluntary community service, membership in community groups and associations, voting in local elections, and faith-based involvement in the past 12 months, business characteristics (operating in the service sector, having employees, family business ownership, profitability, and cash-flow stability), and individual demographic characteristics (community satisfaction, education, gender, marital status, and age).

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Table 2: Summary of Variable Definitions

Variable Name	Questions and Answer Options
Intention to stay	Do you intend to stay in your current residential location or move somewhere else in the next 12 months? 1=Stay; 0=Move
Migration status	
Self-employed in-migrant	What is your employment status? [self-employed half/full-time] & How long have you been living in your current residential location? [5 years and less] & Where did you live before you moved to your current residential location? [not in the same community] 1=Yes; 0=No
Civic engagement	
Volunteering	Have you done any voluntary community service in the last 12 months? 1=Yes; 0=No
Group membership	Have you been an active member of a group or association in your community in the last 12 months? 1=Yes; 0=No
Voting	Do you vote in local elections? 1=Yes; 0=No
Faith involvement	Have you participated in church groups or other religious or spiritual organizations in the last 12 months? 1=Yes; 0=No
Business characteristics	
Operating in service	Which of the following categories best describes the industry you primarily work in (regardless of your actual position)? 1=Services; 0=Otherwise
Having employees	How many employees (part-time and full-time) did the business have in 2023 (not including you)? 1=At least one employee; 0=No employees
Family business ownership	Is the business a family business? 1=Yes; 0=No
Profitability	How profitable was your business last year? 1=Profitable; 0=Otherwise
Cash-flow problems	How often would you say that you experienced cash flow problems in your business last year? 1=Never; 0=Otherwise
Demographic characteristics	
Community satisfaction	In general, how satisfied are you with the place where you currently live? 1=Very unsatisfied..., 5=Very satisfied
Education	What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? 1=Higher education (4-year college or higher); 0=Otherwise
Female	What is your gender identity? 1=Female; 0=Male or other
Married	How would you describe your marital status? 1=Married; 0=Otherwise
Age	What is your age in years?

Source: Created by authors.

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Separate models are estimated for the full sample. In-migrants and locals, to assess heterogeneity in the determinants of staying behavior. Formally, the probability that individual i intends to stay is modeled as:

$$\Pr(stay_i = 1) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 InMigrant_i + \beta_2 C_i + \beta_3 B_i + \beta_4 X_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where $InMigrant_i$ denotes migration status, C_i captures civic engagement, B_i represents business characteristics, and X_i includes demographic controls. Coefficients are estimated using maximum likelihood, and robust standard errors ε_i are reported. This specification allows for the identification of factors associated with residential stability while accounting for differences in business embeddedness, social participation, and individual characteristics. Table 2 summarizes the definitions of the variables used in our analysis.

Pairwise correlations among all study variables show that the two primary outcome variables, volunteering and group membership, are moderately and positively correlated, implying that business owners who engage in one form of civic participation tend to engage in the other as well (Table A2 in the Appendix). Both variables are positively associated with faith involvement and negatively associated with voting, which reflects another dimension of civic engagement. Although volunteering and group membership are correlated, the variance inflation factor (VIF) diagnostics did not indicate multicollinearity in the final sample. The lowest tolerance value across all models was 0.62, indicating that the estimated coefficients are stable (Chatterjee and Hadi, 2006).

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics of the variables. Among the 463 respondents, approximately 26% were self-employed in-migrants. Around 80% of respondents indicated an intention to stay in their current location. The majority of businesses operated in the service sector and had at least one employee, while nearly half reported being family-owned.

Regarding civic engagement, one-third volunteered in their community, 24% held group membership, and one-third reported faith involvement. Nearly 73% reported that their businesses were profitable, while 39% experienced cash-flow problems. Just over half of the respondents were married. One-third had a college education, and 45% identified as female. On average, respondents reported relatively high community satisfaction.

Table 4 compares the characteristics of rural self-employed locals and in-migrants. The results in the last column show that local entrepreneurs are significantly more likely than in-migrants to report intentions to stay in their current location and to belong to community groups. In-migrants, by contrast, report higher voting participation. On business characteristics, locals report significantly higher profitability than in-migrants, are more likely to own family businesses, and being married. In-migrants are more likely to operate in the service sector.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The Relationship between Civic Engagement and Intention of Stay

Table 5 presents three logistic regression models (Models 1–3) estimating intentions to stay among self-employed rural respondents, with business and demographic controls introduced

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Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Intention to stay	463	0.795	0.404	0	1
Self-employed in-migrant	463	0.263	0.441	0	1
Volunteering	463	0.335	0.472	0	1
Group membership	463	0.240	0.427	0	1
Voting	463	1.758	0.820	1	3
Faith involvement	463	0.333	0.472	0	1
Operating in service	463	0.657	0.475	0	1
Having employees	463	0.745	0.436	0	1
Family business ownership	463	0.449	0.498	0	1
Profitability	463	0.730	0.444	0	1
Cash-flow problems	463	0.389	0.488	0	1
Community satisfaction	463	3.803	1.037	1	5
Education	463	0.333	0.472	0	1
Female	463	0.451	0.498	0	1
Married	463	0.518	0.500	0	1
Age	463	45.460	13.602	18	87

Source: 4R-Stat: Baseline Survey 2024 (Bednarik et al., 2025). Created by the author.

sequentially. Before presenting the results, it is important to note that the dependent variable captures stated intentions to stay within the next 12 months rather than actual mobility behavior. While residential intentions are widely used in migration research and are considered reliable predictors of subsequent moves, they may not fully translate into realized relocation decisions. Accordingly, the associations reported below should be interpreted as correlates of intentions to stay rather than determinants of actual staying behavior.

Model 1 includes only migration status and shows that being self-employed in-migrant is significantly and negatively associated with intentions to stay, indicating that in-migrants are less likely to remain in their current rural location than local entrepreneurs. This finding is consistent with the broader pattern that in-migrants exhibit lower residential stability than local entrepreneurs (Hotchkiss et al., 2022), though the underlying reasons, whether reflecting structural barriers, lifestyle preferences, or shorter-term business strategies, cannot be determined from these data.

Model 2 adds civic engagement variables. The negative effect of in-migrant status remains negative and statistically significant, proposing that civic engagement does not account for the gap in intention to stay. From the civic engagement variables, volunteering is statistically significant and is negatively associated with intention to stay. Group membership, voting, and faith involvement do not reach statistical significance in this model.

Model 3 introduces business characteristics and demographic control variables. The negative effect of in-migrant status strengthens, suggesting that once business and demographic factors are accounted for, being a self-employed rural in-migrant is an even stronger negative predictor of intention to stay.

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Table 4: Differences in Variable Characteristics Between Rural Self-Employed Locals and In-Migrants

	Self-Employed In-Migrants ($n = 122$)		Self-Employed Locals ($n = 341$)		
Variable	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**Difference**
Intention to stay	0.713	0.454	0.824	0.381	0.111***
Volunteering	0.279	0.450	0.355	0.479	0.076
Group membership	0.148	0.356	0.273	0.446	0.125**
Voting	2.057	0.846	1.651	0.785	−0.406***
Faith involvement	0.303	0.462	0.343	0.475	0.040
Operating in service	0.721	0.450	0.633	0.483	−0.088*
Having employees	0.721	0.450	0.754	0.432	0.032
Family business ownership	0.377	0.487	0.475	0.500	0.098*
Profitability	0.648	0.480	0.760	0.428	0.112**
Cash-flow problems	0.352	0.480	0.402	0.491	0.049
Community satisfaction	3.836	1.031	3.792	1.041	−0.044
Education	0.287	0.454	0.349	0.477	0.062
Female	0.426	0.497	0.460	0.499	0.034
Married	0.418	0.495	0.554	0.498	0.136***
Age	44.697	14.291	45.733	13.357	1.036

Note: Statistical significance reported: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. The two-sample t-test (column "Difference") shows differences in the mean values of the variables between rural self-employed locals and in-migrants: difference = mean (rural self-employed local) − mean (rural self-employed in-migrant).

Among business characteristics, having employees is positively associated with intention to stay, while operating in the service sector and family business ownership are negatively associated. Community satisfaction emerges as a significant positive predictor, indicating that entrepreneurs who are more satisfied with their community are more likely to intend to remain. Being married and being female are positively associated with intention to stay, while age is negatively associated. Profitability, cash-flow problems, education, and group membership do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

Table 6 presents results from split-sample logistic regression models estimating intention to stay for self-employed rural in-migrants (Models 4 and 5) and self-employed locals (6 and 7), revealing distinct patterns in the determinants of stay intentions across migration status. Model 4 examines civic engagement predictors among in-migrants. Volunteering is negatively associated with intention to stay, echoing the pattern observed in the pooled models. Group membership, voting, and faith involvement do not reach statistical significance.

Model 5 adds business and demographic variables. Group membership becomes a significant negative predictor in this full model. The shift from volunteering being significant in Model 4 to group membership being significant in Model 5 suggests that, once business characteristics are accounted for, formal group membership may be more closely associated with staying intentions than informal helping behavior among in-migrants, though this pattern warrants cautious interpretation given the observational nature of the data.

Family business ownership shows a strong positive and statistically significant association with staying intentions among in-migrants. This may reflect deeper community embedded-

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Table 5: The Logistic Regression Models of the Association between Civic Engagement and Intention to Stay among Self-Employed Rural Respondents

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Variable	**Coef.**	**SE**	**Coef.**	**SE**	**Coef.**	**SE**
Self-employed in-migrant	−0.633	(0.246)**	−0.618	(0.258)**	−0.723	(0.280)***
Volunteering			−0.680	(0.291)**	−0.914	(0.300)***
Group membership			−0.091	(0.346)	0.055	(0.373)
Voting			−0.232	(0.143)	−0.024	(0.164)
Faith involvement			0.034	(0.288)	−0.169	(0.316)
Operating in service					0.093	(0.284)
Having employees					−0.695	(0.328)**
Family business ownership					0.672	(0.282)**
Profitability					−0.320	(0.314)
Cash-flow problems					0.471	(0.312)
Community satisfaction					0.500	(0.140)***
Education					0.271	(0.315)
Female					0.392	(0.277)
Married					0.826	(0.268)***
Age					0.025	(0.011)**
Number of observations	463		463		463	
Prob $> \chi^2$	0.010		0.001		<0.001	
R^2	0.014		0.034		0.171	

Source: 4R-Stat: Baseline Survey 2024 (Bednarik et al., 2025). Created by the author.
*Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistical significance reported *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.*

ness among family business owners, though it is equally plausible that entrepreneurs who already intend to stay are more likely to establish or maintain family businesses. This finding underscores how family-based enterprises can embed entrepreneurs within the community and reinforce intergenerational economic ties, consistent with Bosworth and Atterton (2012), who emphasize that family businesses often strengthen local resilience and contribute to the continuity of rural employment. For in-migrants, developing a family business may signal deeper integration and commitment to place, making them more likely to stay.

Education also plays a distinctive role for in-migrants, showing a positive association with intentions to stay. Previous research suggests that better-educated individuals are more likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities, contributing to higher rates of nascent entrepreneurship and the development of more supportive entrepreneurial environments (Blanchflower, 2000; Mueller, 2006). At the same time, highly educated in-migrants may have selectively relocated to rural areas because of stronger preferences for rural lifestyle and amenities. As a result, their intentions to stay may reflect both the entrepreneurial opportunities available in these communities and a stronger alignment between their residential preferences and the quality-of-life attributes offered by rural places.

Profitability is negatively associated with stay intentions among in-migrants. This nega-

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Table 6: The Logistic Regression Models of the Association between Civic Engagement and Intention to Stay among Self-Employed Rural In-Migrants and locals

	Self-Employed Rural In-Migrants				Self-Employed Rural Locals			
	Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7	
Variable	**Coef.**	**SE**	**Coef.**	**SE**	**Coef.**	**SE**	**Coef.**	**SE**
Volunteering	−1.103	(0.522)**	−0.897	(0.614)	−0.480	(0.351)	−0.940	(0.405)**
Group membership	−0.973	(0.661)	−1.814	(0.797)**	0.143	(0.419)	0.502	(0.469)
Voting	−0.397	(0.254)	−0.182	(0.347)	−0.186	(0.178)	0.038	(0.213)
Faith involvement	0.371	(0.559)	−0.156	(0.717)	−0.112	(0.347)	−0.123	(0.402)
Operating in service			0.915	(0.601)			−0.047	(0.360)
Having employees			−0.068	(0.646)			−1.089	(0.460)**
Family business ownership			1.991	(0.664)***			0.303	(0.351)
Profitability			−1.234	(0.591)**			−0.036	(0.401)
Cash-flow problems			0.679	(0.583)			0.360	(0.387)
Community satisfaction			0.359	(0.274)			0.625	(0.182)***
Education			1.346	(0.649)**			−0.053	(0.391)
Female			0.827	(0.554)			0.344	(0.365)
Married			0.250	(0.536)			0.806	(0.348)**
Age			−0.023	(0.019)			0.044	(0.014)***
Number of observations	122		122		341		341	
Prob $> \chi^2$	0.015		0.001		0.556		<0.001	
R^2	0.079		0.229		0.010		0.200	

Source: 4R-Stat: Baseline Survey 2024 (Bednarik et al., 2025). Created by the author.
*Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistical significance reported *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.*

tive association is consistent with the possibility that more profitable entrepreneurs entered with shorter-term strategies or operate in more geographically mobile sectors (Audretsch and Fritsch, 1994; Forslid and Ottaviano, 2003), though it is equally plausible that entrepreneurs already considering relocation invest more intensively in business performance prior to moving.

For self-employed rural locals (Models 6 and 7), the pattern differs markedly. Neither civic engagement variable is significant in Model 6, and only volunteering approaches significance in Model 7, suggesting that civic engagement plays a much weaker or more nuanced role in self-employed locals' intention to stay. This outcome implies that local entrepreneurs may already be embedded in their communities through long-standing social ties, so formal civic participation adds little marginal value to the modeled outcomes. Community satisfaction is a strong, positive predictor of intention to stay among locals, indicating that their commitment to place is closely tied to how satisfied they feel with their community. Having employees is negatively and significantly associated with staying.

Age emerges as a strong and consistent predictor of staying for local entrepreneurs, as older age is positively and significantly associated with staying across models. This finding aligns with earlier studies (Clark and Maas, 2015; Rérat, 2014) that associate younger individuals with higher mobility and greater openness to relocation.

Collectively, the findings reveal that civic engagement plays a meaningful but nuanced role in shaping the staying behavior of self-employed rural in-migrants. While volunteering

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initially predicts staying intention, its effect is superseded by formal group membership once business-level characteristics are accounted for, suggesting that in-migrants may strategically embed themselves in the rural community through organized social ties rather than informal helping behavior (Jack and Anderson, 2002). This aligns with the notion that in-migrants, as relative newcomers, could face a liability of outsiderness (Zaheer, 1995) that formal civic participation helps to overcome by conferring local legitimacy and expanding professional networks.

It should be noted that all associations reported above are correlational in nature. The cross-sectional design of this study precludes causal inference, and the mechanisms proposed here are offered as interpretive possibilities rather than established explanations. Section 4.2 explores alternative interpretations, including reverse causality.

4.2. What Does the Relationship between Civic Engagement and the Intention to Stay among Self-Employed In-migrants Mean for Rural Livability?

The negative association between civic engagement and intention to stay is not readily explained, although several mechanisms may account for this finding. One possible explanation is that self-employment encompasses both necessity- and opportunity-driven entrepreneurs. Individuals with stronger entrepreneurial orientations may be more civically engaged while simultaneously seeking to relocate to areas that offer greater resources and opportunities for business growth. In this context, intention to leave may reflect limitations of the local entrepreneurial ecosystem rather than weaker social embeddedness. Differences in entrepreneurial ecosystems, as reflected in variation in entrepreneurs' social and economic characteristics, may further shape this relationship (Lois et al., 2026). Geographic context may also play an important role. For example, proximity to metropolitan areas can expand access to markets, customers, and business resources while preserving the quality-of-life advantages associated with rural living, making some rural locations particularly attractive to entrepreneurs (Chi and Marcouiller, 2012). Consequently, intentions to leave may represent strategic efforts to improve business prospects rather than diminished attachment to the community. From a rural livability perspective, this suggests that high levels of entrepreneurial civic engagement may not necessarily translate into sustained job creation or long-term business continuity, particularly in rural areas experiencing entrepreneurial in-migration. Communities may attract engaged business owners without retaining the long-term economic benefits their enterprises could generate.

Second, entrepreneurial engagement may reflect capacity and choice rather than constraint. Civic engagement requires time, resources, and social skills and qualities. Self-employed individuals who are civically engaged typically possess greater human and social capital, entrepreneurial experience, and business networks, which facilitate relocation and the establishment of businesses elsewhere if better opportunities arise. Thus, the negative association may reflect entrepreneurial mobility and opportunity-seeking rather than dissatisfaction with rural life or business conditions. As Haartsen and Stockdale (2018) note, in-migrants have already experienced relocation and may demonstrate a greater propensity to move again. For rural livability, this implies that communities may be attractive and functional enough to support entrepreneurial engagement and business formation, yet still

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struggle to retain the self-employed residents who have reasons to leave.

Third, reverse causality can also be considered. Self-employed individuals who are already considering relocation may become more civically engaged as a means of developing transferable skills, expanding professional networks, or maintaining social connections that could facilitate future moves. In this case, higher levels of civic engagement would not necessarily reflect stronger attachment to the community but rather a strategic investment in resources that may support opportunities elsewhere. Under this interpretation, rural livability may depend not only on fostering civic engagement but also on strengthening local economic and entrepreneurial opportunities that enable highly engaged individuals to realize their aspirations within the community.

Fourth, rural livability and entrepreneurial embeddedness can have different meanings for in-migrant and local business owners. For self-employed in-migrants, civic engagement may serve as an entrepreneurial strategy to build customer relationships, establish business credibility, and integrate socially while they evaluate the community's long-term business potential without signaling permanent settlement. For local entrepreneurs, civic engagement may be routine civic participation, disconnected from business decisions or migration intentions. This distinction highlights that livability is not a single, uniform concept for rural entrepreneurs as it interacts with migration history, business type, and life-course factors.

4.3. Study Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The analysis relies on cross-sectional survey data, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships. While the models identify associations between civic engagement, business characteristics, and staying intentions, the direction of causality cannot be definitively determined. Longitudinal data would be needed to assess whether civic engagement directly influences subsequent relocation behavior. Additionally, the sample is drawn from an online panel survey. Although attention checks were used to enhance data quality, panel-based samples may not fully represent the broader population of rural self-employed individuals, particularly those with limited internet access in remote rural areas.

Future research using longitudinal designs, richer measures of social embeddedness, and comparative rural–urban samples would help clarify the mechanisms linking rural livability, civic engagement, and long-term residential stability.

5. CONCLUSION

Civic engagement is not monolithic. Volunteering and group membership capture distinct mechanisms of social integration, and their relevance depends on whether the entrepreneur is a newcomer or a long-term resident. In the pooled models, only volunteering is negatively associated with intentions to stay. The split-sample results reveal that for in-migrants, formal group membership becomes the stronger negative predictor once business characteristics are accounted for, while for locals, civic engagement plays a comparatively weaker role. These results imply that civic engagement should not be treated as a reliable proxy for entrepreneurial rootedness, particularly among rural in-migrants. Volunteering and group

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membership may expand professional networks and transferable skills that facilitate mobility rather than deepen place attachment. This pattern is consistent with several interpretations, including opportunity-seeking behavior, the liability of outsiderness, and reverse causality, though the cross-sectional design of this study precludes causal inference, and these mechanisms remain interpretive possibilities warranting further investigation.

From a rural livability perspective, these findings highlight that attracting entrepreneurial in-migrants and retaining them are two distinct policy challenges. Communities may successfully draw engaged, civically active entrepreneurs without securing the long-term economic benefits their enterprises could generate. Policies aimed at retention may therefore need to go beyond fostering civic participation and focus on conditions that support long-term business settlement, such as family business development, market stability, and deeper forms of community embeddedness. Sustainable rural development depends not only on entrepreneurial in-migration but on creating the conditions that convert entrepreneurial engagement into lasting community commitment.

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Comparison of the Key Sociodemographic Characteristics between the Full Sample and the Final Analytic Sample

Demographic Characteristics	Share of Respondents (%)	
	Full Sample ($N = 18{,}596$)	**Analytic Sample** ($N = 463$)
Gender (%)		
Male	45.1	48.5
Female	54.9	51.5
Age (Mean)	50.4	45.5
Marital status (%)		
Married, spouse present	42.01	42.12
Married, spouse absent	1.36	2.38
Divorced	15.87	12.96
Separated	2.76	4.32
Widowed	7.22	5.83
Never married, living alone	21.58	22.68
Never married, living with a partner	9.20	9.72
Income (%)		
Less than $25,000	22.97	25.33
$25,000–$49,999	26.54	26.86
$50,000–$74,999	18.18	15.94
$75,000–$99,999	12.45	12.88
$100,000–$149,999	11.24	8.95
$150,000–$199,999	4.90	5.02
$200,000–$299,999	2.50	2.84
$300,000 and above	1.21	2.18
Education (%)		
High school & less	36.43	41.68
Technical college	11.45	11.45
Community college	14.58	13.61
Bachelor	24.11	21.81
Graduate	13.43	11.45

Source: 4R-Stat: Baseline Survey 2024 (Bednarik et al., 2025). Created by the author.

Table A2: Pairwise correlations between variables

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
(1) Volunteering	1.000													
(2) Group membership	0.525*	1.000												
(3) Voting	−0.205*	−0.191*	1.000											
(4) Faith involvement	0.377*	0.373*	−0.193*	1.000										
(5) Operating in service	−0.002	−0.012	−0.018	−0.060*	1.000									
(6) Having employees	0.058*	0.058*	−0.037	0.077*	−0.187*	1.000								
(7) Family business ownership	0.123*	0.120*	−0.133*	0.125*	−0.206*	0.186*	1.000							
(8) Profitability	0.070*	0.072*	−0.148*	0.068*	−0.100*	0.152*	0.120*	1.000						
(9) Cash-flow problems	0.029	0.044	−0.121*	−0.020	0.058*	−0.115*	−0.083*	0.239*	1.000					
(10) Community satisfaction	0.049	0.065*	−0.145*	0.059*	0.030	−0.009	0.039	0.111*	0.229*	1.000				
(11) Education	0.169*	0.174*	−0.210*	0.095*	0.074*	0.003	0.024	0.047	0.212*	0.214*	1.000			
(12) Female	−0.023	−0.009	−0.101*	0.004	−0.231*	0.127*	0.096*	0.139*	0.053	0.073*	0.070*	1.000		
(13) Married	0.083*	0.047	−0.060*	0.066*	−0.096*	0.048	0.129*	0.079*	0.081*	0.092*	0.119*	0.017	1.000	
(14) Age	−0.007	0.006	−0.171*	−0.024	0.177*	−0.156*	−0.064*	−0.084*	0.236*	0.253*	0.220*	0.014	−0.007	1.000

Source: 4R-Stat: Baseline Survey 2024 (Bednarik et al., 2025). Created by the author.
*Note: * shows significance at p<0.05.*

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