Ever bigger! Ever better?
Municipal size effects on the quality of local democracy in four countries

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IDHEAP / WIPCAD / NIG Course Comparative Public Administration, Lausanne
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Why compare?

Aim: knowing similarities and differences

What?

Aim: drawing practical lessons from reforms / policies abroad

What (not) to do?

Aim: understanding mechanisms causing similarities and differences

Why?
Does size matter?

Does the population size of municipalities have an effect on the quality of local democracy in 4 countries?

Step 1: Practical relevance
Step 2: Theoretical reflection
  What is quality of democracy?
Step 3: How to answer the question?
Step 4: Answers
Amalgamations across Europe

Danish Reform Ambitions

“Larger municipalities can provide the basis for (1) improved task solution where more welfare tasks are solved locally, and (2) democracy will be strengthened as more political decisions are made locally.

98 new municipalities:
66 amalgamations
32 municipalities continue:
- 2 voluntary cooperations
- 3 islands
The Netherlands 1950 - 2015

Bigger municipalities

Fewer municipalities
Results of reforms?

Many evaluations, limited knowledge: immediate, administrative effects

- Evaluations: during or shortly after reforms (*transitional effects*)

- No insight in *structural effects*: long-term consequences for policies / services and for local democracy
Comparing large and small municipalities
‘Small towns and big cities are different sociopolitical environments; they are also inhabited by different kinds of people. […]

In order to isolate the effect … of the sociopolitical environment … , we must separate out the effects of the socioeconomic characteristics of the individuals living in the communities.’ (Verba et al. 1978:273).
Two views on structural effects

Brobdingnag vs. Lilliput?
Brobdingnag: Reform Theory

- Differentiation & Competition
- Professionalisation of administration
- Interest / importance of local politics
- Size
- Political participation
- Effectiveness & efficiency

+ effect: the higher X, the higher Y
Lilliput: Political Community

Citizen participation
Effectiveness & efficiency

Size
Ease of participation

Trust & Sense of community

Size Bureaucracy & Red Tape

Citizen participation
Effectiveness & efficiency

+ effect: the higher X, the higher Y
- effect: the higher X, the lower Y
Dahl & Tufte: a third view

System capacity = high

Citizen effectiveness
low

high

low
What do (Dutch) citizen expect? (N=959)

Forced Choice
74% : performance > democracy

Important question:
Effects of increasing size?

Theory: variety of answers

Which answers are correct?
Proof of the pudding is in the eating!
Size & Local Democracy in Europe

P.E. Mouritzen (DK)
M. Goldsmith (UK)
L.E. Rose (NOR)
A. Ladner (CH)
B. Denters (NL)
# A citizen’s perspective on democracy

## Table 1.1: Dimensions and indicators of democratic quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active participation</td>
<td>- Electoral participation (turnout and informed voting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Non-electoral participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen competence</td>
<td>- Political interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Political knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Subjective political competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political confidence</td>
<td>- Citizens’ perceptions of government’s responsiveness, integrity and competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen satisfaction</td>
<td>- Citizens’ satisfaction with government’s performance (policies, public services and facilities)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Three levels of analysis

Level 1: Four countries
  - *Selection: coincidence*
    - Wide variation in average size
    - Strong local government systems; but differences remain (direct democracy)

Level 2: 50-60 municipalities per country
  - *Selection: maximize variation in size*

Level 3: 30 respondents per municipality
  - *Selection: random (avoid selection bias)*
External validity 1: single country

Study CH1

Study CH2

Study CH3
Scale municipalities in EU (2012)

Average population size

NB: UK even bigger (153,000 inh.)

Bron: Dexia 2013
External validity 2: more countries
Large N research: causal inference

X causes Y when …

- X and Y co-vary
- X precedes Y in time
- Not result of other third factor

1) Control via case-selection (before):
- Variation in size; otherwise: most similar systems
- Isolate structural effects: exclude amalgamated municipalities

X: Size (2000)

Y: Participation (2005)
Size effect: different people?

Different people: more highly educated people in large municipalities

X: Size (2000)

T:
Composition Population

Y: Turnout (2005)

More highly educated people are more active in politics

2) Multivariate analysis:
- Statistical controls
Large N research: causal inference

Large N, quantitative data, limited number of key variables

$X$ causes $Y$ when …

- $X$ and $Y$ co-vary
- $X$ precedes $Y$ in time
- Not result of other third factor
- Plausible mechanism: theory about chain of events that connects $X$ with $Y$

$X$: Size (2000)

$Y$: Participation (2005)

Causal Process: unobserved
Internal validity: Causal mechanisms

- X causes Y when …
  - X and Y co-vary
  - X precedes Y in time
  - Correlation: not result of third factor
  - Causal path analyses: evidence on theoretically plausible mechanisms A and B
Correlation and causal effect

A) Bivariate correlation

Size \rightarrow ?? \rightarrow Contacting

B) Total effect of size (composition)

Size \rightarrow ? \rightarrow Contacting

Composition
Total = Direct + Indirect effects

Size → X1

Composition → X2

X1 → Contacting

Theory
Simplified results (after controls)
Contacting

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>CH</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>DK</th>
<th>NL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weak support Lilliput:
- Consistent negative effect
- Stronger in countries with small municipalities
- Direct effect stronger than indirect effect

No consistent support for Brobdingnag
Political Satisfaction

- Individual Services
- Facilities and Infrastructure
- Problem solving capacity
- Composite Index Political Satisfaction
Effects for satisfaction

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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>-.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.09</td>
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</table>

- Weak negative (total) effect
- Exception CH: highest satisfaction of 4 countries
- No difference between large and small municipalities
- Possible interpretation
  - Kuhlmann: “Switzerland: weaker separation of state and society; weaker public service”;
  - Tradition of community self-governance.
## Findings: size effects

### Negative size effect in three or four countries
- Local contacting (2)
- Party activism (1)
- Satisfaction with local government (3)
- Personal political competence (0)

### Negative size effect in two countries
- Distinctiveness of local voting (1)
- Confidence in local politicians (0)
Community integration

Negative size effects:
- Local connectedness
- Social trust
- Neighbourhood integration
- Associational membership

Social capital provides basis for community self-governance

(alternative for “thin democracy”: professionalized politics and bureaucracy)
Food for thought for eager reformers

Weak corroboration for Lilliput thesis

ALL IN ALL:
- Size Matters …. A little bit!

No support for Brobdingnag thesis
- 0 positive democratic effects
- There may be structural improvements: professionalization / performance / efficiency, but …
- They do not make citizens, more satisfied …