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Voter turnout in local elections – the impact of municipal amalgamations. A study of 28 cases in Iceland

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Abstract

In this article I deal with analyzing whether amalgamations of municipalities do affect the voters' participation in elections when it comes to the new merged municipality. I use data from six different local government elections in Iceland; the elections 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2018. I have looked at 28 different municipal amalgamations implemented under that period with 102 municipalities involved. The main question is if the voter turnout in these amalgamated municipalities changes, not least due to the impact of size on democracy. Municipal population size is considered to have a negative effect on democracy as stated in the classic work of Dahl and Tufte (1973). I use accessible data from Statistics Iceland (www.hagstofa.is). The main result is that there is no clear evidence that increased size of municipality through amalgamations ultimately leads to lower voter turnout. However, what is found is that voter turnout seems to go down in pure *urban amalgamations* and tends to go up in pure *rural amalgamations*. Communities that are structurally and culturally similar, seem to develop in the same direction looking at voter turnout.

Keywords: Voter turnout; municipal amalgamations; municipal population size; local government elections; democracy.

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Introduction

Amalgamation reforms often meet resistance and opposition, followed by various other consequences. Such territorial reforms can and often do mean changes for all the municipalities involved and their inhabitants – since some of them may have had their own boundaries for a long time (Baldersheim & Rose 2010). In many cases the resistance is based on democratic concerns – democratic deficits are feared by those who are in the context the smaller or smallest municipalities. This resistance is quite often connected with fear of losing status and/or power in the new context and with being set aside by the big or biggest municipalities in the amalgamation context (Eythórsson 1998; Brantgärde 1974).

Generally, size is seen as having a negative effect on democracy as stated in the classic work of Dahl and Tufte (1973). Newton (1982) and Denters et al. (2014) emphasized that the bigger municipal units in population, the more likelihood for democratic deficits in various ways. The debate over optimal jurisdiction size, balancing size and democracy suggests that while larger municipalities may achieve economies of scale, they might also suffer from diminished accountability and responsiveness to citizens' needs (Trounstine 2010; Lassen & Serritzlew 2011). For instance, Blom-Hansen et al. (2016) argue that municipal amalgamations, often justified by the potential for cost savings, can overlook significant disadvantages, such as reduced citizen engagement and representation.

Increased size of municipal units through amalgamations can have democratic effects in various ways. If such democratic deficits are realized in a newly constructed municipal unit with amalgamation, how do people react to it? Putnam (1993) talks about "civic engagement" and "civic virtue" and that citizenship in a civic community is marked by active participation in public affairs. Referring to Walzer (1974) he argues that "interest in public issues and devotion to public causes are the key signs of civic virtue". Civic engagement and civic virtues as described can include a will or tendency to participate in elections.

But perceiving changes and consequences is one thing and converting them into behaviour is another. In this paper the purpose is to investigate if this might be the case. Could increased size of a municipality after amalgamation and with that perceived loss of power, directly impact people's willingness to participate in the local democracy by, for example, not bothering or wanting to vote in local elections? Bengtsson et al. (2014) argued that when voters do not care about voting or bother to vote, it should be seen as a sign of their discontent or frustration. Verba et al. (1995) named three main reasons for not voting. One of them is that people do not want to vote, meaning they lack interest or motivation to vote (Blais 2006; Eythórsson & Önnudóttir 2017).

So, the main question here is whether amalgamations of municipalities, which lead to a municipality with a bigger population, do affect the interest of people to participate in elections in the newly merged municipality – and if so, how? Do these territorial structural changes (reforms) have an impact on local identity, loss of contact and communication with the political system which thereby could lead to decline in the motiva-

tion to vote? This is done here by studying the impact in a short-term perspective, that is by comparing voter turnout in amalgamated municipalities in the last elections before the amalgamation with the turnout in the first elections after. In that way the impact on democracy here is first and foremost studied by comparing changes in voter turnout. With this study I hope to contribute to the political debate on municipal amalgamations in Iceland and even other countries. The theoretical contribution is meant to be to the theoretical discussion on size and democracy at the local government level.

The main hypothesis in this article is that amalgamations leading to increased population size and bigger political system do affect the voter turnout negatively so that the turnout decreases.

1. Research on voter turnout, democracy, size and amalgamations

Research on effects and impact of municipal amalgamations has primarily focused on the effect of amalgamations on political and economic efficiency (Blom-Hansen, Houlberg & Serritzlew 2014; Hansen, Houlberg & Pedersen 2014; Lassen & Serritzlew 2011; Reingewertz 2012).

Less studies have focused on the political and democratic consequences of these territorial reforms. Kjær and Mouritzen (2003) studied the link between municipal population size and local democracy and, more specifically, in the same book Frandsen studied the connection between municipal size and voter turnout and got mixed results and was not fully able to confirm that increased size led to less voter turnout (Frandsen 2003). Saarimaa and Tukiainen in Finland (2016) could neither in their study. Several studies show decrease in participation rates at local elections after amalgamations (Bhatti & Hansen 2010; Seamon & Feiock 1995). Juul-Madsen and Skou (2006) found empirical evidence that increased size of municipalities in Denmark affected voter turnout strongly negatively while the effect on interest in local politics and participation became much weaker. Similar results have been found by Aurdal and Harvold (1993) in Norway. Same is for Koch and Rochat in Switzerland (2017). They found that in merged municipalities in Switzerland, the decrease in turnout was significantly more than in non-merged municipalities. This drop in turnout was mainly in the first election after the merger.

There also exists evidence on the opposite. Heinisch et al. (2018) did a voter turnout study on the local elections 2010 and 2015 in the Styria region in Austria. Their hypothesis was that while citizens in the local context tended to rely on their own direct contacts in local offices and among political candidates, the increase in population size due to a merger, reduced opportunities for contacts and for having influence on political decisions. Consequently, voters were less informed and less engaged, resulting in lower voter turnout in local elections. Evidence on this in more recent research is also found. Allers et al. (2021) studied Dutch elections and found significant reduction of voter turnout as a consequence of amalgamations; Lapointe et al. (2018) found a strong tendency towards less voter turnout in Finland and van Houwelingen (2017) got similar results for Netherlands. More recent research from Bolgherini and Mollisi (2023) in Italy shows

more complicated findings - that "turnout after merger is affected by the level of dissent in the referenda held before the mergers: municipalities with higher dissent towards amalgamation show higher turnout at the following municipal election".

With this evidence, it appears that existing studies on the effects of municipal amalgamation reforms on voter turnout, have given quite contradictory results. In some cases, reforms are found to increase the voter turnout and in other cases studies show little or no impact.

In a comprehensive literature review of municipal amalgamations and their effects, the Portuguese political scientist Antonio Tavares (2018) divided his coverage of the topic into three types of potential consequences: economic efficiency, managerial effectiveness and democratic outcomes. Looking at the democratic outcomes of the mergers, he recognized negative impact on voter turnout with only two exceptions: Those were: Spicer (2012) who pointed out positive outcomes in Hamilton, Ontario (Canada) and earlier in Ontario, Kushner and Siegel (2003) found that "most residents saw no change in community attachment after amalgamations, and those who did were equally split between those who saw an increase and those who saw a decrease. The authors also found that a significant minority did feel a sense of attachment to the new municipality. Steiner and Kaiser (2017) found no negative effects for local democracy based on perception data in Switzerland.

2. The municipal level in Iceland

Iceland has a two-tier administrative system, national and local. A regional level as an elected instance is absent. Therefore, the lower level is badly equipped to take care of tasks allocated to the median instance as the case in some of the other Nordic countries. While the sub-national level in the other Nordic countries is responsible for a higher percent of public expenditure than Iceland (33% - 65%), the local level in Iceland is only responsible for about 27,6% percent (Hlynsdóttir et al. 2024). However, the Icelandic local government level has been in a continuous phase of reform since the early 1990s, where the aim of the central government has been to make local authorities more capable to take over functions from the state (Hlynsdóttir 2020).

The main historical pattern of the local government structure in Iceland is that the number of municipalities increased slowly until the middle of the 20th century when it reached its peak at 229 municipalities. After that there was a slow decrease, to become faster after 1990. At the local government elections in 2022 the number was down to 64 (www.hagstofa.is). These changes, especially after 1993 were directly and indirectly facilitated by two referenda on municipal amalgamations – the first one in 1993 and the second one in 2005. The referendum in 1993 taking place in 185 municipalities, especially, and the referendum in 2005 taking place in 66 municipalities, contributed to a reduction of the number of municipalities from 196 in 1993 to a number of below 100 municipalities already after 2005 and gradually down to 62 in 2025. However, this reduction has not managed to change the main characteristics of the municipal structure

– small municipalities and a relatively fragmented system with an average population of 6188 and a median of 1266.

3. Method and data

In this study I include all municipal amalgamations in Iceland since the local elections 1998 and until the 2018 local elections – a total of 6 elections. A total of 28 amalgamations with 102 municipalities involved should be sufficient to give an indication on the connection between increased size and voting participation. Only few amalgamations have been conducted since 2018. I compare total voter turnout in the new municipalities in the first elections after the amalgamation with the total voter turnout of calculated numbers in all the involved municipalities in the last election before the amalgamation. This comparison gives an indication of the effects of the amalgamation, at least in a short-term perspective, not allowing any interpretations on a longer-term effect. However, it is important to note that the comparisons presented only give indication of differences but do not prove any causal relationships – even though some causalities are indicated. This has to be kept in mind and that these indications are more kind of exploratory rather than strictly explanatory. Still, this gives indications that tell us something about what structural changes leading to bigger units might mean for voter turnout.

I use data from six different local government elections; the elections 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2018. There was a total of 28 different municipal amalgamations implemented under the period studied. 102 municipalities were involved in these amalgamations. These were all the municipal amalgamations conducted in the country under this period. I use accessible data on voter turnout from Statistics Iceland (www.hagstofa.is).[1]

4. Impact on voter turnout – the analysis

In short, the analysis shows quite mixed results. Looking at all the 28 amalgamations in the period the voter turnout increases after amalgamation in 13 cases, whereof four of them with less than 1 percentage in plus change. Two cases show by far the biggest increase, 17,8 and 18,6 percentages, *Langanesbyggð* and *Hvalfjarðarsveit*. In 14 cases the voter turnout goes down from only -1,0 percentages down to -10,8 percentages. The average change for all cases is 0,0 which only tells us that the net change is zero.

Table 1. Voter turnout change (%) in 28 amalgamated municipalities in Iceland 1998 - 20182

Amalgamation	Change %	Amalgamation	Change %
Langanesbyggð	18,6	*Rangárþing ytra*	-1,0
Hvalfjarðarsveit	17,8	*Húnavatnshreppur*	-1,8
Þingeyjarsveit I	8,8	*Borgarbyggð*	-2,2
Flóahreppur	8,5	*Fjarðabyggð*	-3,4
Hörgárbyggð II	8,3	*Akureyri*	-3,8
Strandabyggð	6,3	*Norðurþing*	-4,6
Skagabyggð	4,0	*Húnaþing vestra*	-4,8
Rangárþing eystra	2,7	*Fjallabyggð*	-4,9
Skeiða- og Gnúpverjahreppur	1,7	*Garðabær*	-5,5
Blönduósbær	1,4	*Fljótsdalshérað*	-8,2
Dalabyggð	0,5	*Hólmavíkurhreppur*	-9,0
Bláskógabyggð	0,2	*Suðurnesjabær*	-9,5
Húsavíkurbær	0,1	*Þingeyjarsveit II*	-9,8
Hörgárbyggð I	0,0	*Múlaþing*	-10,8

But still, there is a great variance in how the voter turnout has developed; from down to -10,8% decrease up to 18,6% increase. The biggest difference is over 29 percentages. This raises questions. Is the development of the voter turnout after amalgamations depending on any factors in the context? Can it depend on developments after the amalgamation four years before? I have no data on such possible explanatory behavioural or institutional factors in order to try to answer these questions. What can be done is to look at structural factors such as what kind of communities were amalgamated in each case – the composition. Different compositions could matter for democratic behaviour. Were these towns amalgamating with other towns or were rural countrysides amalgamating with other rural countrysides? Were towns amalgamating with small villages and/or countrysides? Were communities with different spirits and cultures merging? Could such a merger possibly lead to loss of interest in political matters? Could the size of the amalgamation, measured in the number of municipalities involved, affect the political engagement to go and vote? Could the complexity level of the merger have a negative effect? Further, we could search for explanations in more dynamic factors such as local belonging, democratic aspects or citizen's influence. Myksvoll (2023) suggested that local politicians are more likely to support amalgamation when prioritizing and supporting functional scale considerations, which could have consequences for voter turnout.

4.1 Types of amalgamations

The following tables show a breakdown of voter turnout by type of amalgamation. The first one shows voter turnout in amalgamations where *towns amalgamated with small villages and/or countryside*. This composition could affect voter turnout negatively since here we have communities that are not very homogenous when looking at culture, lifestyle and economic life. Fifteen out of the 28 amalgamations were of this type.

Table 2. Voter turnout development (%) in 15 amalgamated municipalities in Iceland 1998 - 2018. Type: Towns and villages/countryside amalgamated

Amalgamation	Change %
Langanesbyggð	18,6
Strandabyggð	6,3
Rangárþing eystra	2,7
Blönduósbær	1,4
Dalabyggð	0,5
Bláskógabyggð	0,2
Húsavíkurbær	0,1
Rangárþing ytra	-1,0
Borgarbyggð	-2,2
Akureyri	-3,8
Norðurþing	-4,6
Húnaþing vestra	-4,8
Fljótsdalshérað	-8,2
Hólmavíkurhreppur	-9,0
Múlaþing	-10,8

There is no particularly clear pattern here but there is a big variation between decrease and increase in voter turnout even though eight cases show decrease and seven show increase. The increase is mainly in two cases out of the seven and in the other cases the increase is close to zero or just above that. Anyway, the average of the 15 cases is not higher than -0,97%.

Another type is where *rural countryside amalgamates with rural countryside* – rural areas with urban area absent or very small, where we get nine cases. Here we have a category where the communities are homogenous both when looked at culture, lifestyle and most often the economic life. A merger should not necessarily lead to big changes in views of the citizens and therefore not lead to a decrease in voter turnout. There are 9 amalgamations of this type.

Table 3. Voter turnout development in 9 amalgamated municipalities in Iceland 1998 - 2018. Type: Rural countryside amalgamates with rural countryside

Amalgamation	Change %
Hvalfjarðarsveit	17,8
Þingeyjarsveit I	8,8
Flóahreppur	8,5
Hörgárbyggð II	8,3
Skagabyggð	4,0
Skeiða- og Gnúpverjahreppur	1,7
Hörgárbyggð I	0,0
Húnavatnshreppur	-1,8
Þingeyjarsveit II	-9,8

Even here the variation is considerable, but the tendency is clearly more on the side of increased voter turnout when countryside amalgamates with countryside. Average change is positive and measures 4,12%, so amalgamations of countryside municipalities tend to increase voter turnout. Trying to explain this, small community mergers can lead to increased voter turnout, emphasizing factors like enhanced services and better representation. Such outcomes demonstrate that under certain conditions, amalgamations can positively impact voter engagement. However, a study by Grönfeldt and Karlsson (2023) where they investigated differences in satisfaction between residents of purely rural and what they call mixed municipalities suggests, in general, that rural communities appear to be better off when combined with larger service centres. This compared with when they try to stand on their own in a purely rural municipality. This is evident from the fact that residents of mixed municipalities are more satisfied than residents of purely rural municipalities with at least seven of the 13 factors examined.

The third type of amalgamations analysed here is amalgamations where only *urban areas amalgamate*. The results here could be of two kinds: The composition could lead to increased conflict possibly leading to higher voter turnout or on the other hand a loss of interest in politics and therefore lower voter turnout. We have only four examples of such amalgamations in Iceland under the period we investigate, but the results give a clear indication and different results from those in the other two above.

Table 4. Voter turnout development in 4 amalgamated municipalities in Iceland 1998 - 2018. Type: Urban municipalities amalgamate with urban municipalities

Amalgamation	Change %
Fjarðabyggð	-3,4
Fjallabyggð	-4,9
Garðabær	-5,5
Suðurnesjabær	-9,5

In all four cases voter turnout goes down by 3,4 to over 9 percentages. The average is -5,83%. The results point in that sense into the same direction: The voter turnout in all cases goes down after amalgamation.

How can we try to explain these findings – strongly significant decrease in voter turnout? One might suggest that larger merged units can become more complex and bureaucratic, making it harder for residents to navigate the system and stay engaged. Others might suggest that individuals may feel that their influence is diminished in a larger, merged municipality, leading to reduced motivation to vote. Loss of feeling for local connection might also be an explanation. Mergers could weaken the sense of local community and identity, making residents feel disconnected from local political processes. One further explanation can be found in a study by Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson (2014) who found a negative correlation between municipal size and peoples activity measured in activity in political parties. He found that the tendency to activity through membership in political parties was lower in bigger and more rapidly growing municipalities (Kristinsson 2014, p. 71-72).

4.2 Number of municipalities involved in amalgamation – the complexity

One suggestion on what could explain differences in voter turnout change is about the size and/or complexity of the amalgamation, that is: the number of municipalities who amalgamated. Could that possibly affect the political engagement to go and vote? Could voter turnout possibly tend to decrease with increased complexity of the merger? Of the 28 amalgamations, most of them were amalgamations where two municipalities were involved – in quantity the simplest form of a merger. But among the 28 there were also amalgamations with more than two involved and it went up to six municipalities in one of the amalgamations.

A first look at the data shows that the correlation between turnout change and number in amalgamation is very low and far from significant.

Table 5. Correlation between voter turnout change and number of municipalities in amalgamations 1998 - 2018

Correlation	Number	Turnout
Number in merger	1	-0,064
Sig (2-tailed)		0,747
N	28	28
Turnout	-0,064	1
Sig (2-tailed)	0,747	
N	28	28

A second look is to classify the number of municipalities in the amalgamation into three groups, which gives us the table below (table 6). These results do not give any clear results either. We see decreasing voter turnout in amalgamations with two and with four

or more municipalities involved but a strong increase where three are involved. Changes in voter turnout do not seem to be connected to the number of municipalities involved at all.

Table 6. Voter turnout development in 3 different groups of number in amalgamations 1998 - 2018 (%)

Number in amalgamation	Change %
2 amalgamate	-2,02
3 amalgamate	7,15
4 or more amalgamate	-1,86

So, the complexity measured in the numbers involved in the merger does not give us any definite answers to the differences in impact of amalgamations on voter turnout.

5. Concluding discussion

Summarizing the changes in turnout in the different types of amalgamations presented above, we can begin with looking at table 7. We see that while the overall average is 0, *countryside with countryside* amalgamations seem to lead to increased voter turnout. *Urban with countryside* and *urban with urban* amalgamations on the other hand seem to lead to decreasing voter turnout.

Table 7. Average changes in voter turnout in different types of amalgamations 1998 - 2018 (%)

Type of amalgamation	Average change %
All amalgamations	0,00
Towns/villages with countryside	-0,97
Countryside with countryside	4,19
Urban with urban	-5,83

To answer the main research question whether amalgamations of municipalities – which lead to a municipality with a bigger population – do affect the interest of people to participate in elections in the newly merged municipality, as well as the hypothesis that amalgamations have affected the voter turnout negatively so that the turnout decreases, we can say following: There is no clear evidence from this study that increased size of municipality after amalgamation can lead to the voters' reactions to not show up on election day. The voter turnout increased in about half of the 28 municipalities amalgamated in the study period and decreased in about half. In just a few we see changes from the merger that are less than 1%.

Concerning the question what could explain differences in voter turnout change is about the size and/or complexity of amalgamations - the number of municipalities in-

volved, it can be said: When breaking down the material by types of amalgamations and complexity of the amalgamations, no clear patterns are seen except that voter turnout seems to go down in pure urban amalgamations and go up in pure rural countryside amalgamations. Communities that are structurally and culturally similar, seem to develop in the same direction looking at voter turnout as the indicator of that. Complexity of an amalgamation does not seem to lead to voter turnout and there is no tendency towards voter turnout decreasing with more complexity – measured in the number of municipalities involved.

Earlier research has shown mixed results – quite many studies show findings on negative effects on voter turnout while others do not. In this case, we see both. We can conclude that there is some evidence for voter turnout developing similarly in merged municipalities that have social and economic patterns in common – the rural municipalities – the countryside. That evidence is however not very strong but still the clearest pattern seen in this study.

Other possible factors that could make a difference are not easy to find. One possibility could be the political landscape. That is primarily measured through the strength of political parties in the municipalities. However, in very many of the 102 municipalities involved in this study, no traditional party politics existed – the political parties on a national level were not represented at all. In the local government elections of 2022, only half or 235 of the 470 elected politicians represented any political party that had mandates in the parliament.[3] Further, territorial reforming of the local government system in Iceland is only partly dividing the political scene by parties in Alþingi, (the parliament) and is definitely no big issue nor strong cleavage factor in Icelandic politics (Eythórsson 1998; Eythórsson 1999). Kristinsson (2001) has suggested that local politics only partly follow the same lines or patterns as national politics but are instead more local specific.

This study of the possible impact of municipal amalgamations on voter turnout does not show any definite connection between size and democracy – construction of bigger municipalities does not seem to be strongly connected with lower voter turnout. In some cases, it does but in others it doesn´t.

So, to go back to the hypothesis presented in the introduction: The hypothesis was that municipal amalgamations leading to increased population size had affected the voter turnout negatively so that the turnout decreased. That hypothesis has only partly been confirmed by this study. Only in half (14) of the 28 amalgamations in the study, the voter turnout decreased.

Finally, are the changes in voter turnout indicated here something that could be seen as a temporary change due to only four years' experience of the amalgamation? Are the changes something that can be expected to remain due to the bigger size of the municipal unit – something more structural? To answer that a deeper study and a study over longer time is preferable. This study is a first exploratory step to try to find indications og the connection between size and democracy, operationalized in municipal size and voter turnout.

Endnotes

1 Information on voter turnout was also found on the homepage of *The Federation of Local Authorities in Iceland* (Samband Sveitarfélaga) www.samband.is and from the independent homepage *Kosningasaga* https://kosningasaga.wordpress.com/sveitarstjornarkosningar/

2 Amalgamated municipalities named with I or II have gone through one or two amalgamations in the study period. I means the first amalgamation and II the second one.

3 Data collected and calculated by the author.

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