

The Dumbing Down of Local Democracy? Referendums and Deliberation in Norway's Municipality Reform.

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Abstract

Norway is currently in the throes of a municipality reform, reducing 426 municipalities to 354 by the year 2020. As a part of this process, more than 200 local non-binding referendums and citizen surveys have been undertaken with the aim of involving the public in the decision whether to amalgamate with neighboring municipalities. This paper investigates the possibilities and limitations of local referendums as participatory tools and as basis for decision-making for local elites. The use of referendums is analyzed in contrast to a deliberative model of local democracy which ideally would involve citizens at every stage of the political process – whereas referendums typically brings them in only at the very end. As such, the referendum-approach is less than well suited to a comprehensive discussion of the issue at hand, thus questioning the participatory value of this approach. The analysis shows that the local referendums on the Norwegian municipal reform have put elected elites in a bind; while the referendums are imbued with an air of electoral legitimacy and democratic decisiveness, they are, in fact, merely advisory. Thus, the local elites retain decision-making autonomy, but deciding against the apparent “will of the people” comes at potentially grave political costs. Exacerbating the local decision-makers» dilemma, is a common perception of the referendum process as emotionally driven rather than fact based – resulting in outcomes that oversimplify a complex issue.

Introduction

The structure of local governments in Norway has remained stable and unchanged for decades. Elsewhere in Norwegian society, change has been encompassing and pervasive with a considerable impact on the roles played by local governments; both in terms of providing services for their citizens and as arenas for democratic participation. Norwegian municipalities have over time been assigned more tasks in the planning, coordinating and developing of local communities. While this has contributed to professionalizing local governments, questions have nevertheless been raised regarding the municipalities» ability to address the changing needs of the population, the new emerging forms of governance in the space between public and private sectors, and in terms of developing the required technical and organizational skills. Specifically, concerns have been raised whether smaller municipality organizations are able to create and maintain a stable and sufficiently specialized expertise, thus questioning the suitability of the prevalent structure of local governments. Added to this, developments in physical and virtual infrastructure have rendered the argument for many smaller local governments less convincing, along with more regionalized labour markets.

As a culmination of this ongoing debate, the Norwegian parliament was presented with the Government's proposal for amalgamating existing municipalities in the spring of 2017¹. In total, 153 municipalities had voted locally in favor of amalgamation, and in 13 instances the Government argued for amalgamating municipalities without local consent (which is the parliament's prerogative). The parliamentary process thus resulted in a reduction from 426 municipalities to 354, which is to be

¹ Prop. 91 L (2016-2017) and Prop. 96 S (2016–2017).

implemented by the year 2020. As a precursor to this decision an extensive round of debates, deliberation and citizen participation had taken place locally. More than 200 local non-binding referendums and citizen surveys were arranged during the preceding 15 months leading up to the Parliament's decision. However, some of these processes were met with criticism. In some instances, turnouts for the referendums were very low, and some of the local surveys have been accused of being biased, or for not being sufficiently based on facts and drawing on samples which do not meet the required level of representativity.

Using this criticism as an analytical point of departure, this paper investigates the possibilities and limitations of local referendums as participatory tools and as basis for decision-making for local elites. The analysis is based on data drawn from an extensive survey of elected members of local councils in Norway (comprising 872 respondents) as well as 25 interviews with politicians and chief administrative officials in a selection of municipalities.

Deliberative and Participatory Ideals

In the context of Norwegian democracy, referendums are somewhat alien to the democratic process, even if referendums have been pivotal in major decisions at the national level (the adoption of constitutional monarchy and the issues of EEC/EU membership). A general skepticism towards referendums is rooted in concerns for the representative democratic model, where referendums may contribute to “fragmented policies, discord and prohibiting innovative thinking” (NOU 2016:4). The issue of amalgamation of municipalities may be particularly susceptible to such criticism (Gjertsen, et.al. 2017). While a referendum at first glance may be suited for answering “yes” or “no” to the question of fusing local governments, the complexity of the issue – spanning the entire range of local government activities – can easily be underplayed. Muddling the local democratic process even further, is the fact that referendums are imbued with the aura of democratic legitimacy, civic duty and gravity which normally is associated with regular elections. However, referendums cannot lay claim to the same degree of legitimacy as elections due to their non-binding status. Referendums may *seem* to be instruments of direct democracy, but cannot be fully regarded as such.

Referendums are naturally of several possible instruments for involving citizens in local decision-making. Broadly speaking, such participation represents a supplement to routine democratic influence through local elections. There are, however, some democratic challenges attached to this. “Supplementary” participation is generally less pronounced among the socially disadvantaged (Offerdal, 2003), and different social groups tend to favour different supplementary channels of participation (Pettersen and Rose 1996:79). Viewed from a local decision-making perspective, supplementary participation also represents challenges in that gauging the public opinion in between local elections may pave the way for opportunistic populism on the part of elected representatives. Additionally, the quality of supplementary participation might be viewed as questionable if the involvement of citizens is not perceived as being representative – socially, geographically, or otherwise – or if the populace's knowledge of the democratic process and the options at hand is lacking (Saglie, et.al. 2016).

Furthermore, some would question the notion that supplementary participation has an actual effect on local decision-making processes. Both Saglie et.al. (2016) and Klausen et.al. (2013) point to the fact that local politicians as well as municipal administrative leaders often view participatory inputs as

lacking in impact. While there certainly are exceptions to this – local media coverage would for instance increase the likelihood of supplementary inputs having an impact on decision-making – the challenge for the local politician is striking the balance between being perceived as “listening and open-minded” on the one hand, and having a “political backbone” on the other. In such situations, the local government leadership may well perceive themselves primarily as a form of vetting institution, separating the participatory chaff from the wheat, as it were.

This vetting function carried out by elected representatives is also prevalent when it comes to referendums, due to their advisory nature. Yet, referendums are likely to be perceived as something more than a mere opinion poll; referendums imply an active choice on the part of the citizen, and are imbued with potentially strong moral and political expectations (Søberg, 2005). As such, referendums might function as if they were in fact binding, thus escaping the so-called *referendum paradox*; that political decisions oppose the apparent will of the people (Nurmi, 1999). Nevertheless, outcomes of referendums are not necessarily clear-cut. The democratic weight of any particular outcome may be subject to different interpretations. A clearly defined majority in a high turnout referendum would obviously provide less interpretive leeway than a more divided outcome in a poorly attended referendum. Also, the possibility that a referendum might present the electorate with many alternatives can contribute to less than decisive outcomes, and even tactically formulations giving decision-makers’ greater interpretative freedom.

However, the use of referendums may be viewed as being at odds with a deliberative model of local democracy – which ideally would involve citizens at every stage of the political process – whereas referendums typically brings them in at the very end. Deliberative democratic theory, unlike voting-centric conceptions of democracy (to which referendums belong), turn away from an individualist understanding of democracy toward a view anchored in conceptions of accountability and discussion (Chambers 2003). The democratic process, then, is less an issue of fixed preferences and interests competing through mechanisms of aggregation, but rather a communicative process of *establishing* interests prior to voting. Accountability replaces consent as the conceptual core of democratic legitimacy (*ibid.*). This does not imply that deliberative democracy replaces representative democracy; rather, it is viewed as an expansion. The objective of deliberative theory, then, is to conceptualize the political setting in which individuals discuss and formulate political intent, participating in the democratic process from their own life contexts (Habermas, 2000) or from their comprehensive world views (Rawls, 1993). While there is no uniform agreement on what the actual *substance* of deliberation amounts to that distinguishes it from mere bargaining or rhetoric (see Elster 1997 and Bohman 1996 on bargaining; see Remer 1999, 2000 on rhetoric), the core of all theories of deliberative democracy is a reason-giving requirement (Thompson 2008). Citizens are expected to *justify* the societal imperatives imposed on each other. In highlighting this justification, politics merely understood as the power of interest, or the aggregation or competition of preferences, is insufficient.

Based on empirical studies, the realism of deliberative democratic theory, has been criticized and the possible dysfunctions of deliberation have been emphasized. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) argue that “deliberation is ill-suited to many issues and can lead to worse decisions than would have occurred if no deliberation had taken place” (p. 191). Other studies are less harsh in their critique, but still object to deliberative theory (Jackman and Sniderman 2006, Mendelberg and Oleske 2000, Conover and Searing 2005). While such empirically based criticism “has never impressed normative theorists”

(Thompson, *ibid.*), it is difficult to ignore without being faced with accusations of utopianism and irrelevancy.

When looking at referendums as an instrument of local democratic participation then, a pivotal question is how referendums can coexist, or possibly even supplement, the notion of deliberative democracy. LeDuc (2015:140) addresses four areas in which referendums tend to *inhibit* deliberation; namely the intrusion of politics, the absence of clarity, the amount and quality of information, and the degree of participation and engagement of citizens in the process.

In Leduc's view, politics easily gets in the way of deliberation; the motives to call a referendum in the first place invariably shape the referendum context. Thus, a "neutral or constrained" stance on the part of (local) governments would benefit the deliberative process. On the other hand, conflating referendums with election campaigns would render "true" deliberation difficult, introducing so-called "second-order effects" (Garry et al., 2006) where the referendum becomes a vote on the popularity of a party or leader, or their performance. The issue of *clarity* can refer to both the number of issues raised on the same ballot or the question wording itself. Deliberation is likely to benefit from a single-issue focus, although any exact limits to "deliberative overload" can be difficult to determine.

While deliberation requires a *well-informed* citizenry, studies of referendum campaigns regularly show that "insufficient information" is a common source for complaints in referendum processes (LeDuc, *ibid.*). If one presupposes a fair and balanced flow of information to the citizenry as a prerequisite for deliberation, referendum campaigns can easily fall prey to negative campaign tactics, particularly in short campaigns with lacking prior deliberation on a given issue (Whiteley et al. 2012, LeDuc 2011). Nevertheless, some point to the importance afforded the issue of voter competence in referendums as being somewhat misplaced; the argument being that information deficiencies affect any participatory mechanism, and possibly even less in referendums than regular elections (Grynaviski 2015). As a basis for deliberation, however, the general argument that an unbiased flow of information is beneficial for deliberation is likely well-founded.

Turnouts in referendums vary generally more than it does in national elections, tending to err on the lower side (Qvortrup, 2013). Nevertheless, particular issues can obviously spur considerable interest. At any rate, in deliberative terms, a minimum level of participation and engagement by the citizenry is required. Keeping in mind that turnout might not be a definitive measure of deliberative engagement, it is nevertheless directly connected to legitimacy. A turnout comprising only a minority of the citizenry is not only susceptible to interpretive leeway, as mentioned above, but may challenge the legitimacy of the process itself. Thus, controlling partisan motives in referendums, providing clarity in wording and an availability of information, and a generally engaged citizenry turning up in force at the ballots, would be conducive to a fertile coexistence between deliberation and referendums. Yet, considerable tension between the two is to be expected.

Referendums and Local Decision-making

210 municipalities (49 percent) have conducted referendums related to the Norwegian municipality reform; some even multiple times. In most of the referendums (69 percent), the local citizenry voted «no» to amalgamating with neighboring municipalities. The turnout varies to a considerable extent, from 10 percent to 74 percent of the local electorate. The average turnout is 47,9 percent, but is

generally higher in smaller municipalities and in municipalities with a high turnout in ordinary local elections. The turnout is also higher in municipalities that ended up with a decision not to amalgamate with neighboring municipalities. By and large, the formal decisions made by the local councils follow the outcome of the referendums. There are some exceptions, however. 32 local councils diverge from the referendum results, a common denominator being that «no»-outcomes are more frequently overruled by local councils: in 22 cases, «no»-votes were overruled in favor of amalgamation, while «yes»- votes were overruled by 10 local councils.

A survey of elected members of local councils shows that the local politicians» satisfaction with citizen participation as such in relation to the municipality reform differs insignificantly between small and large municipalities – but the *referendums* are generally held in a somewhat higher regard in the smaller municipalities. A common view among local politicians is that referendums (and other forms of “supplementary participation”) have contributed to good political processes locally, and have contributed with useful advice for the local councils. While the local politicians» satisfaction with the local processes of citizen participation (not limited to referendums) is not uniformly positive, a closer look at the perceived effects of citizen participation nevertheless shows that a majority (although small) of respondents in the survey view participatory processes as both increasing the legitimacy of decision-making in the local councils, making decision-making easier and giving local politicians good advice. Respondents seem fairly divided in their views on how effective the participatory processes have been in terms of *mobilizing* the citizenry, yet relatively few view participation as generating local conflicts:

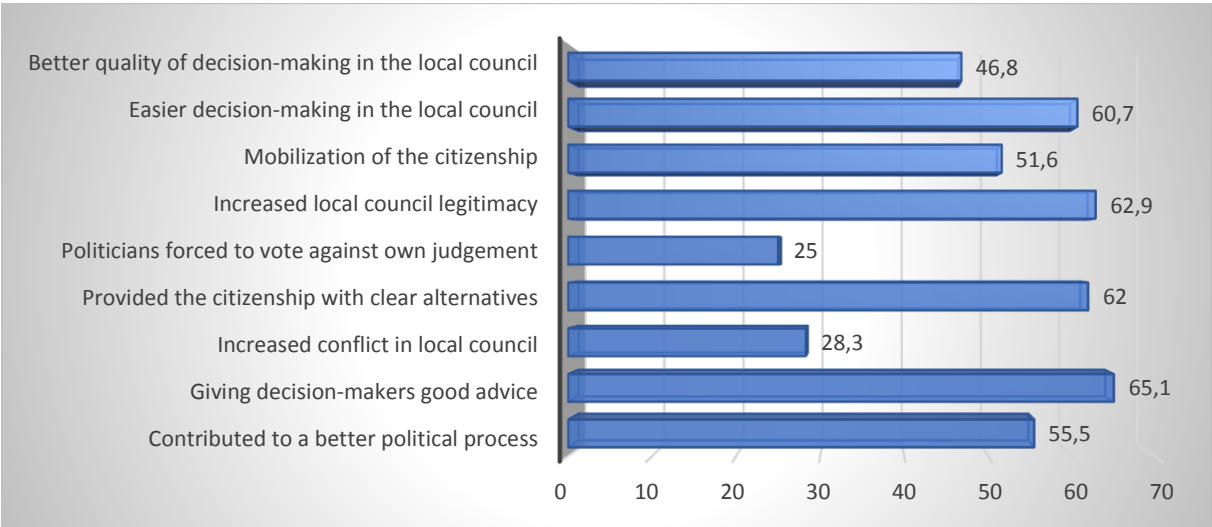


Figure 1: Perceived effects of citizen participation. Elected members of local councils Respondents answering “to a high degree”/”to some degree”. Percent. N=871.

As mentioned above, referendums are somewhat alien to the Norwegian tradition of representative democracy, even if they are not unknown neither at the local nor the national level. In this context, one could perhaps argue that it might seem conspicuous that referendums apparently are strongly legitimizing factors in the municipality reform process. But given that the referendums have strong connotations to ordinary local elections, and the fact that most local politicians view referendums as de facto binding (even if they are not), it might not be a surprise after all (91 percent of respondents highly agree or somewhat agree that the referendums are viewed as de facto binding). Also, a clear

majority of respondents point to the referendums as being the most important form of citizen participation in municipalities where several participatory forms have been used.

Perhaps more surprising is the fact that a majority (65 percent) of respondents in the survey believe that local referendums *should be* formally binding. A pertinent question would be if this expresses a fear of undermining the legitimacy of local democracy, or if it is merely a disclaiming of liability in a difficult and potentially conflict-ridden issue, passing the buck to the citizenry. Other data from the survey suggest that the issue of legitimacy looms large; 75 percent of respondents agree that overruling the outcome of a local referendum is likely to induce negative attitudes towards local politicians and local democracy among citizens. Further strengthening the impression of the strong legitimacy attached to referendums, is the fact that the majority of respondents in the survey view a turnout of less than 50 percent in the local referendum as problematic in terms of the clarity of advice given by the referendum – while the average turnout, as mentioned above, is in fact less than 50 percent. Consequently, a significant number of local politicians probably feels tied to the outcome of a referendum that they also view as providing unclear advice. But then again, this might – for some – also provide interpretative leeway, making the dyad paradox of formally unbinding/de facto binding referendums less of an issue.

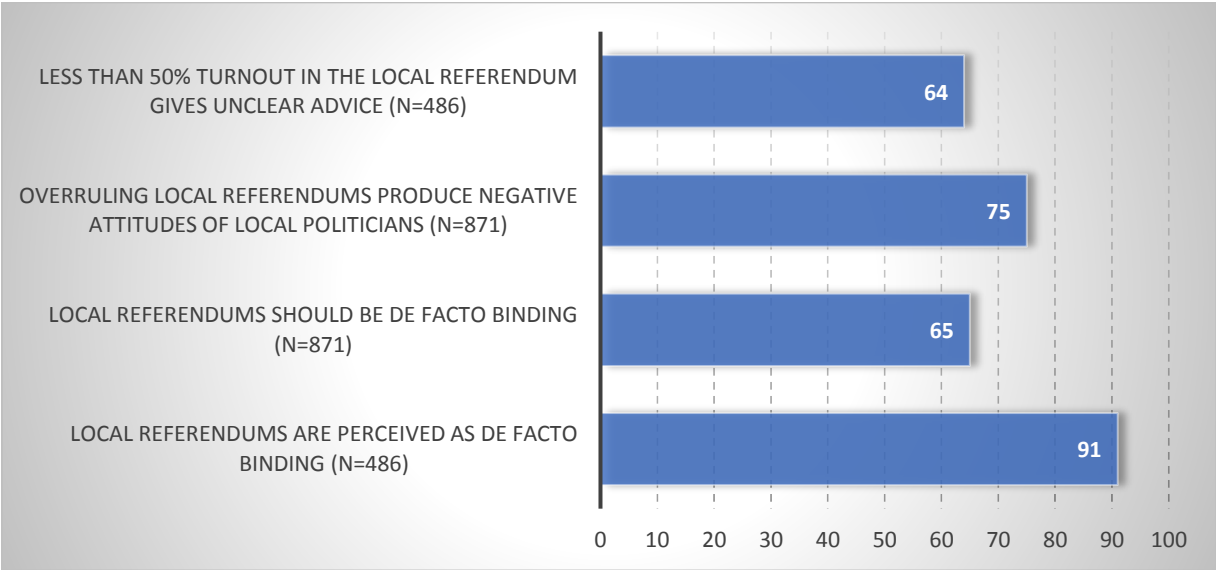


Figure 2: Attitudes towards local referendums among local politicians. Percent.

Three local narratives

As a part of this study, 10 municipalities were selected for case studies based on interview data. Here, we briefly present three cases highlighting the role played by referendums in the local municipality reform process; *Jondal*, *Ski* and *Steigen*.

The small municipality of Jondal with its 1200 inhabitants experienced a costly process leading towards the planned amalgamation with Odda and Ullensvang in 2020. In Jondal, citizen involvement was unable to legitimize the choices of the local politicians to enter a new municipality, but instead contributed to increasing the internal division, among people and local politicians alike. To begin with,

the local council was already divided over the matter, with the Labour Party and the Conservatives supporting amalgamation with Odda and Ullensvang, the Christian People's Party supporting amalgamation with Kvam, and the dominant Centre Party, holding the office of the Mayor as well as 8 out of 17 council representatives, opposing amalgamation as such. The process of citizen involvement included public meetings with politicians from the local council as well as the neighbouring municipalities, and a referendum. However, the result of the referendum became a subject for disparaging interpretations as the ballot paper, which included the three options of no amalgamation, amalgamation with Odda and Ullensvang and amalgamation with Kvam, also allowed for voters to cast a second ballot, which indicated their second preference.

The reasons for the second ballot were rooted in a concern which was raised by some politicians, who wanted people who originally opposed amalgamation to be able to express their second preference, and similarly argued that people who supported one of the options for amalgamation also should be able to express their second preference, if their primary choice would not receive a sufficient share of the votes to win the ballot. This brought about a debate in the local council on how the result should be interpreted in case of the scenario that none of the three primary options would receive more than 50 percent of the vote, however, no agreement of a strategy to interpret the results was reached. The result showed that 50.39 percent of voters preferred no amalgamation, 39.69 percent wanted Jondal to form a new municipality with Odda and Ullensvang, and 9.46 percent preferred the option to amalgamate with Kvam.

This brought about an array of different interpretations; the Centre Party supported the view of the Mayor that this meant that a majority of voters wanted Jondal to continue to exist as a separate municipality, however, the other parties argued that the result was even: roughly half of the voters wanted Jondal to amalgamate with "some other" municipality, and the other half wanted no amalgamation. This supported the view of the Labour Party and the Conservatives, and the two representatives from the Christian Democrats, who originally had supported the Kvam option, that the voters who wanted Jondal to join Kvam in a new municipality also would accept an amalgamation with Odda and Ullensvang. The result was also a subject for debate among citizens, who appeared just as divided as their politicians.

However, the events which unfolded took an unexpected turn when a Labour representative, who had signaled to follow its party in a vote for amalgamation with Odda and Ullensvang, was unable to meet at the following local council meeting, and was replaced with a deputy representative who disagreed with her party colleagues' interpretation of the vote. She voted against amalgamation, arguing that she was compelled to follow the vote of the people who had voted against, according to her view. Her unexpected vote against amalgamation brought about the surprising decision of the local council not to join Odda and Ullensvang in a new municipality. Not being willing to accept defeat on the matter, arguing that the party's "true" view had not been represented at the preceding council meeting, the Labour Party demanded the council to vote again, which outraged representatives of the Centre Party, including the Mayor, who suggested that the matter should be resolved in a new referendum. Not receiving support from the local council for a new referendum, the council cast a new vote a few months later, which saw 9 representatives vote for amalgamation.

Our informants express diverging views on how the result from the referendum should be interpreted, but agree on one matter: the process of citizen involvement has brought about increased divisions in the local council, which already was divided before citizens were asked to advice their politicians in a

referendum. One informant reports that he has received comments from citizens who are frustrated that politicians chose to disregard the will of the people. Some members of the Christian Democratic Party have left the party, some people have signaled intentions to move from the municipality, politicians have received unpleasant messages via SMS and via social media, and the deputy representative who was “blamed” for the initial council vote not to amalgamate with any municipality left the party group and became an independent representative. Some informants believe that the option for casting a “second ballot” did more harm than good, and argue that they should have presented voters with one option only, as the second ballot only brought about confusion on how it should be interpreted. In retrospect, informants believe that the local council should have agreed upon a model to interpret the first ballot as well. Informants express uncertainty on whether the process of involving citizens brought about a legitimization of the result. Even if our informants all express firm beliefs in citizen involvement, they simultaneously express regrets over how it was conducted in the case of Jondal.

The municipality of *Ski* represent, on a Norwegian scale, a larger municipality with 30 000 inhabitants, but because of its proximity to the capital of Oslo, the experience of being underdogs is prevalent. The process towards amalgamation with neighboring municipalities started in March 2015 with the decision of the local government to organize referendum. This also included a broad information activity. A range of information channels were used, and ranged from more passive forms such as information on municipality websites and postal information newsletters, to more interactive forms such as participation in public meetings, discussions in local newspapers and the use of social media. Movies and workshops at high schools were also arranged, which aimed to inform younger people. This was also supported by the possibility to cast votes by electronic means, as well as debates at high schools. However, the political party channel was in only limited use because of internal conflicts within the two dominant parties, the Labour party and Conservatives, on the municipal reform. This was also the main political reason for choosing the referendum approach as a means of citizen participation.

The political dialogue toward the referendum showed few signs of negative campaign tactics. Rather, interparty lack of consent was followed up with a lack of clarity in the political message sent to the electorate. The flow of information to the citizenry was balanced, but the communication was wrapped in an administrative discourse presenting a range of issues such as the sustainability of public services, democratic deficit versus surplus, the need for specialized competence in the health sector, digitalization of municipal planning and infrastructure integrating the region to secure the dynamics of business development. Everybody could find an argument supporting own views on the subject.

The question presented to the voters in the referendum was clear in as much as it was formulated as a yes/no question. The alternatives were: Should the municipality of *Ski* continue as an independent municipality, or should the municipality amalgamate with other municipalities in the region? However, in another way, the question lacked clarity because it was not specified which and how many municipalities that were to amalgamate. But this lack of clarity was deemed necessary since referendums were held simultaneously in all the involved municipalities.

The referendum was held in May 2016 after more than a year of process. While the process leading up to the referendum offered relevant information to the citizenry, information was mostly integrated in an administrative discourse more than that of politics, partly because of the complexity of issues involved. In the end, only a few votes moved between yes and no compared to polls. Voting for or against amalgamation turned out to be a too complex question to be decided by «yes» or «no».

The turnout of 36.5 percent signaled low interest for the referendum despite the attempts to inform and involve throughout the campaign. A narrow majority of 54.7 percent of voters answered yes to amalgamation. The local council did not question this further, and the referendum was regarded as the final say and as a factor which legitimized the process. As it turned out, the municipality of Ski and the neighbouring municipality of Oppegård amalgamated as the only two municipalities in the region.

The small north-Norwegian municipality of *Steigen* with 2500 inhabitants went through a long process of deliberations and two referendums before the final decision of not amalgamating with any municipality was reached. The initial intention was to discuss amalgamation between seven municipalities in the region, but municipalities withdrew from the process one by one, until the people of Steigen were being asked to express their opinion in a referendum in June 2016 with the somehow unclear question of whether Steigen should join “one or more municipalities in the Steigen region with Bodø as the centre of a new municipality.” The majority of voters, 64 percent, voted no to amalgamation, however, when central authorities granted municipalities an extended deadline for amalgamation, the political forces which supported amalgamation (the Conservative, Liberal and Labour parties) demanded that the matter should be re-negotiated, this time between Steigen and Bodø only, and without a second referendum. The local council supported a rematch. A citizen’s initiative was initiated on the internet, with more than 400 signatories demanding a new referendum. This, along with the expectation from Bodø that a new referendum would be held, brought about the decision for a second vote, this time only with amalgamation with Bodø as an alternative. However, the January 2017 referendum did not reverse the decision from the first vote: 60 percent of Steigen citizens who voted expressed their wish for Steigen to remain an independent municipality.

The local council remained divided on the issue, and the opinions between the two factions were irreconcilable throughout the deliberation process. The main argument for an amalgamation has been rooted in the economic situation of the municipality, which struggles with a budget deficit, and even if an amalgamation would have resulted in a large distance between people in Steigen and the decision-makers in Bodø, this was a cost which the yes-faction was willing to bear. An informant from the yes-faction explained this further in an interview, sharing the view that “even if proximity to the people is something which we want, we do not have the economic possibility to implement local democracy.” The prospect of being forced to close schools and be administrated by county authorities were being regarded as synonymous with remaining an independent municipality by the yes-faction. The opposing faction, being led by the Mayor from the Centre Party, was concerned about the democratic aspect of amalgamation with a large municipality, with which Steigen does not even share an overland border.

The local authorities attempted to inform citizens ahead of the referendums by arranging public meetings and disseminating information. However, informants classify the use of referendums as “a difficult subject”, as, as the yes-faction often argued, that “feelings tended to take a dominant stance over facts, which made it difficult for people to understand the matter at hand.”

Local politicians did also discuss whether a citizen survey should be conducted, with the yes-faction arguing that results from such a survey would have been a sufficient advice to local politicians, given that referendums are not binding. The no-faction expressed skepticism towards such a survey, fearing that the results would be in favour of amalgamation to a greater extent if measured by a survey than if measured in a referendum. Hence, a political agreement on how citizens should be involved was not reached.

The informants which were interviewed expressed content with how the referendums were conducted. However, the alternative in the first referendum is regarded as somehow unclear, as it is

not defined on the ballot paper which municipalities should join Steigen and Bodø in a new municipality. Citizens have been active in the process, as turnouts in the referendums were high, (59 and 72 percent), which informants regard as important in terms of the legitimacy of the results, and which also made it difficult for politicians to disregard the results in a vote for amalgamation. Informants do, however, consider it a possibility that the local council would have voted for amalgamation if there had not been a second referendum, especially the politicians who supported amalgamation. This possibility was also discussed at the public meeting, where the question was raised whether there “was any point in voting at all.” Informants who oppose amalgamation regard the referendums as something which complicated the democratic process. Informants believe that the political process concerning the issue and the two referendums have had a negative impact on the political climate in the local council. The division extends beyond the council into the populace; the southern part of the municipality, closest to Bodø, hosts the majority of citizens who support amalgamation, while the no-sayers dominate the northern part.

Conclusion

The analysis of the case-study data intimates that the local referendums on the Norwegian municipal reform may put elected elites in a bind. Local elites may formally retain their decision-making autonomy, but deciding against the apparent “will of the people” comes at potentially grave political costs. Exacerbating the local decision-makers’ dilemma, is a common perception of the referendum process as emotionally driven rather than fact based. While characterizing this as a “dumbing-down” of local democracy may be too harsh, there is certainly a sense of referendum processes contributing to the oversimplification of a complex issue. Nevertheless, there is interpretative leeway in poorly attended referendums, divided outcomes or tactically wording in ballots, making the local elites’ decision-making dilemmas an order of magnitude less.

Certainly, participation in democratic decision-making such as this, should cater for mobilization and engagement of the citizenry, but, ultimately it might not be an involvement or advice that local elites want, or at the very least it could be something that hampers and complicates the decision-making process. While this challenges the degree of “political backbone” among the local elites – it certainly takes some to argue one’s own political judgement in face of an opposing will of the people (however formally legitimate this may be) – it is not just a question of standing up for one’s own best judgement, facts or rationality in the face of popular emotion. The referendum processes can also be an arena for political tactics; to the extent that the local elites recognize that their views are in line with the apparent will of the people, referendums are likely to be more welcome. If the opposite situation is the case, local elites are more likely to stress the *politician’s* responsibility for making the right decision, and underlining that it is the elected representatives who are ultimately accountable for the decisions made. This, again, lends itself to a more positive attitude towards other aspects of participation than referendums. While none of our informants want popular democratic participation at the expense of representative democracy, they do vary in their assessment of referendums on municipality amalgamations as a threat towards representative democracy.

The question then, is whether referendums can realistically be a part of a deliberative local democracy. All the impediments to this as outlined by LeDuc (2015), can be found in the data. “Politics” can to some degree interfere with the decision of using referendums as a means of participation in the first place, the clarity of ballots is sometimes wanting, information and facts can be downplayed in favor of emotionally based campaigns, and the turnout in the referendums have in some instances been very low. As such, the role of referendums in local deliberation hinges more upon the processes leading up

to the casting of votes than any decision-making dilemmas on part of the elites after the fact. Accommodating the pre-referendum process for deliberation might not be an easy task given the very contrasting «yes or no»-logic of referendums, but neither should it be impossible. The best way of incorporating referendums into a deliberative discourse would probably be to clarify the status of the referendum at a very early stage, and securing transparency in how possible outcomes of a referendum would be interpreted and used by elected local officials.

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