Size and local democracy:
The final word on the matter?

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70th Birthday Seminar for H. Baldersheim and L.E. Rose

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Across borders

Baldersheim
A recurrent theme in democratic theory

Aristotle

RA Dahl
Two perspectives: Gulliver’s Travels

Brobdingnag

Lilliput
1) Brobdingnag: Reform Theory

Size → Differentiation & Competition → Pro-active attitudes → Political participation

Professionalisation of administration → Citizen performance satisfaction

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

Pro-active attitudes

Size

Community decline & distance

Bureaucratization & red tape

Political participation

Citizen performance satisfaction

+ effect: the higher X, the higher Y

- effect: the higher X, the lower Y
3) Compositional effects

- Small and big cities are “inhabited by different kinds of people”.
- In order to isolate the effects of size we must “separate out the effects of the socioeconomic characteristics of the individual living in the communities”.

(Verba et al. 1978:273)
The proof of the pudding ...

Theory: three answers to question about democratic effects of municipal size

All three have a degree of plausibility. Which answer is correct?

Need for empirical evidence

(Proof of the pudding is in the eating!)
Stage 1:
secondary analysis of existing data; G&P issue 2002

Special issue: *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* vol. 20; 2002


Stage 2:
collection of new data in four countries: CH, NO, DK & NL
Three sets of criteria in SLDE

Ten criteria based on citizens’ orientations and involvement in local democracy

a) Inputs: citizens’ interest, knowledge and participation

b) Throughput: citizens’ confidence in politicians

c) Outputs: citizens’ satisfaction with performance
Three levels of analysis

Level 1: Four countries
- Wide variation in average size
- Similar local government systems; but important differences remain (e.g. direct democracy)

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

Level 3: 30 respondents per municipality
- Selection: random sampling
MLA: stepwise analysis

1) Bivariate correlation

Size \rightarrow Party activism

2) Total effect (minus compositional effect, model 3)

Size \rightarrow Party activism

Backgrounds
3) Total Effect = Direct + Indirect

Size → Political Competition

Personal background

Party activism

Community Integration

+ effect: the higher X, the higher Y

- effect: the higher X, the lower Y
**Findings: size effects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative size effect in three or four countries</th>
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Size effect on contacting

- Negative size effect in three or four countries
- Negative size effect in two countries

- Personal political competence
- Satisfaction with local government
- Party activism
- Local contacting
- Confidence in local politicians
- Distinctiveness of local voting
Size effect on satisfaction

- Negative size effect in three or four countries
- Negative size effect in two countries

- Personal political competence
- Satisfaction with local government
- Party activism
- Local contacting
- Confidence in local politicians
- Distinctiveness of local voting
Our final word on the matter!

No evidence for compositional effects

Weak corroboration for Lilliput thesis
- 6 (more or less) consistent significant negative effects
- Effects may be rather weak
- Size Matters …. A little bit!

Strong refutation of Brobdingnag thesis
- 0 (more or less) consistent positive effects
Reformers: “Brobdingnag not that ugly!”

- Scale increases not so disadvantageous as often claimed!
- More professionalism & specialisation and more legal quality; performance gains

- Other research: no conclusive evidence for systematic positive scale
- Amalgamation reforms are costly: direct costs and opportunity costs
- Our research: if there are advantages, citizens are not appreciative of these