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Fewer, Bigger – Stronger?

The Political Consequences of Local Government Mergers in Switzerland

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Local Government (LG) mergers are an increasingly common phenomenon, and yet surprisingly little research has looked into their political consequences. This article advances the hypothesis that where LG mergers lead to fewer but bigger entities, vertical influence increases at the expense of collective lobbying and in favour of more direct, personal interventions at higher political echelons. To test these two propositions, a cross-sectional analysis of all Swiss cantons as 26 independent LG systems is followed by a qualitative, longitudinal study of a single canton. The implications from both types of analysis are that in terms of LG mergers one is well advised to not only think horizontally but also vertically, i.e. as regards the functions and influence of (the new) municipalities. Normatively speaking, one might either want to encourage or block the direct representation of lower level polities.

Keywords: Local Government mergers, intergovernmental relations, Switzerland

1 Introduction

Local Government (LG) mergers have traditionally been studied from a public administration perspective, determining whether they are beneficial for local service delivery, democracy, and/or citizen identification (e.g. Blom-Hansen 2010, de Vries & Sobis 2013, Hansen 2013; Hansen et al. 2014, Kjaer et al. 2010). The focus of this article, however, lies with the consequences of LG mergers for *vertical* relations in the *political* realm. This distinguishes this approach from studies that centre on intra-local dynamics, by instead thinking of political power as “spreading through a set of interrelated political systems” (Dahl & Tufte 1974, 135), and also from enquiries operating at the individual level and/or searching for the reasons of LG mergers (e.g. Vetter & Kersting 2003, 20). Hence, the guiding question of this research is whether LG mergers in Switzerland, that is the merger of two or more municipalities into a single political and administrative unit, strengthen LG authority vis-à-vis “their” canton.

To gain an understanding of the political consequences of LG mergers is highly relevant given the extent of their occurrence in Switzerland over the past three decades, as discussed in section two. Section three covers comparative evidence so far as well as theoretical reflections on LG size. Thereafter, quantitative results are presented using an original dataset on local autonomy and Local Government Associations (LGAs), in section four, along with a qualitative discussion of the case of Glarus to illustrate the link between LG size and LG authority. Section five concludes.

2 Context

After 130 years of exceptional institutional stability, LG mergers have suddenly become very popular in Switzerland (Kübler & Ladner 2003, 140; Meyer 2011, 364). By 1 January 2014, Switzerland had a mere 2,352 municipalities with a mean population of around 3,400 inhabitants (BFS 2014). That number is the result of several waves of LG mergers, most of them the product of recent years. Since 1980, 822 LGs have disappeared and 146 were formed (BFS 2014). During

the year 2013 alone, 56 LG disappeared (NZZ of 3.1.2014, p. 9) and in every second municipality mergers are a serious option (Geser et al. 2011, 152; Ladner et al. 2013, 47).

Table 1 lists the cantonal population sizes, the number of LGs and their mean populations, plus the number of LGs that have been “merged away” between ad 1984 and 2014. The indicator in the last row represents the share of LGs that have disappeared as a proportion of LGs in 1984 (BFS 2014). Clearly, this share varies greatly: nearly half of all cantons have not undertaken any or just one LG merger, while in a third between 22% and 90% of LGs have disappeared.

Table 1: Extent of LG merger activity in the Swiss cantons, 1984–2014

Canton	Population (31.12.12)	No. of LGs (1.1.14)	Mean LG population	Change 1984–2014		
				No. of LGs (31.12.83)	net decrease	% LGs disappeared
GL	39'369	3	13'123	29	26	89.70%
TG	256'213	80	3'203	180	100	55.60%
TI	341'652	135	2'531	247	112	45.30%
NE	174'554	37	4'718	62	25	40.30%
FR	291'395	163	1'788	260	97	37.30%
JU	70'942	57	1'245	83	26	31.30%
GR	193'920	146	1'328	212	66	31.10%
SH	77'955	26	2'998	34	8	23.50%
LU	386'082	83	4'652	107	24	22.40%
VS	321'732	134	2'401	163	29	17.80%
VD	734'356	318	2'309	385	67	17.40%
SO	259'283	109	2'379	130	21	16.20%
SG	487'060	77	6'325	90	13	14.40%
BE	992'617	362	2'742	398	36	9.00%
AG	627'340	213	2'945	232	19	8.20%
ZH	1'408'575	170	8'286	171	1	0.60%
UR	35'693	20	1'785	20	0	0.00%
SZ	149'830	30	4'994	30	0	0.00%
OW	36'115	7	5'159	7	0	0.00%
NW	41'584	11	3'780	11	0	0.00%
ZG	116'575	11	10'598	11	0	0.00%
BS	187'425	3	62'475	3	0	0.00%
BL	276'537	86	3'216	86	0	0.00%
AR	53'438	20	2'672	20	0	0.00%
AI	15'717	6	2'620	6	0	0.00%
GE	463'101	45	10'291	45	0	0.00%

Source: BFS (2014)

What does this mean for the organisation for political power in Switzerland? As a heavily decentralised and indeed non-centralised, three-layered and consensual semi-direct democratic political system (Mueller 2015b), changes at the local level only have an indirect effect on

politics at the national level. Nevertheless, since 1999 local autonomy does figure in the Federal Constitution (Art. 50). Moreover, the formal division of power into national-cantonal and cantonal-local relations is overlaid by functional and political dynamics in both the vertical and horizontal dimension. While cantons cooperate via treaties (“concordats”) and inter-cantonal conferences, many LGs are part of intra-cantonal Local Government Associations (LGAs) and equally cooperate in various policy areas (Mueller 2014).

It is in this multi-level context of vertical and horizontal, intra- and inter-cantonal relations of a legal, functional and political nature that the Swiss LG mergers have to be placed. In asking for the consequences of LG mergers, it must first of all be understood that as the absolute number of LGs decreases, both the population size of the new entities and the mean size (and area) of all LGs increase. The question about the vertical political consequences of LG mergers is thus first and foremost one about the role of LG size. More particularly, as local population size increases, political influence is supposed to become greater (for example when lobbying the cantonal government) and local service-delivery is expected to become more efficient (due to economies of scale and/or the internalisation of coordination costs). Legally, however, not much is expected to change unless LG mergers are accompanied by more wide-ranging reforms (e.g. as in Glarus, below). The next section discusses these effects theoretically.

3 Theory

To what extent is the size of LGs a factor in determining their influence over decision-making at higher levels? The ability to place issues on the political agenda, influence parliamentary debates, and to exercise a post-parliamentary veto pertain to the three most important policy-making phases. Building on the Local Government literature of the early 1990s (Page & Goldsmith 1987, Goldsmith 1990, Page 1991) as well as other efforts to re-conceptualise “shared rule” (Mueller 2014 & 2015a), it can be further distinguished between direct and indirect, or institutional and personal, and between single and collective influence over decisions taken at a higher echelon (Table 2). In this matrix the greatest influence potential would be ascribed to a coordinated effort by – ideally – all LGs acting together, and the lowest to single, merely indirect channels. However, introducing size complicates matters. Thus a single mayor may very well be highly effective in placing an issue onto the agenda, or veto a decision already taken, if the mayor represents a dominating city such as Geneva, where – with 190’000 inhabitants – 40% of the total cantonal population reside (BFS 2014).

Table 2: Forms of LG influence at the higher level (cf. also Mueller 2014)

	Direct/Institutional	Indirect/Personal
Single LG	Official local (executive or parliamentary) statement/feedback	Mayor or local councillor acting in other capacity (e.g. through <i>cumul des mandats</i>)
Collectively	LG Association statement/feedback	Informal grouping of mayors or local councillors (e.g. in cantonal parliament)

More generally, Hooghe et al. (2013, 195) find that overall population size has a positive and significant effect on regional authority, that is the combination of self-rule and shared rule. Regional population size, in turn, is shown to matter for influence at the European level by Tatham & Thau (2013, 11-13). So the larger a political system both overall and as regards its component units, the more influence lower-level entities have. However, Callanan & Tatham (2013) show that demographics and single or collective authority both matter in explaining the extent and type of regional influence at the European level. The difference thus lies not so much

between regional and local authorities, but between *strong* regions, LGs or LGAs on the one hand and their only *weakly* or barely organised counterparts on the other. So it can be expected that large *and* powerful units to wield even more influence over politics at higher levels.

In the Swiss context, Mueller (2015) finds that it is cantonal area (together with a federal political culture and weak left-wing parties) rather than population size that is positively correlated with local autonomy, while Fiechter (2010, 67) and Rühli (2012, 74) additionally show how the median LG population positively correlates with expenditure decentralisation and “legal” local autonomy, respectively. This is consistent with Fetz & Fischer (2009, 28–29), according to whom 65% of merged LGs with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants doubt their influence has increased, compared to 60% of merged LGs with more than 5,000 inhabitants who claim an increase, mainly through direct channels (representation in cantonal working groups, associations and organisation of canton-wide importance; cf. also Ladner et al. 2013, 56). Geser et al.’s (2011, 165) results point in the same direction: if 76% of local executive members in LGs with more than 20,000 inhabitants rely on direct interventions with the cantonal government, in LGs with less than 500 inhabitants this share decreases to 37%.

Thus, because changes in the vertical allocation of power do not usually accompany LG mergers, there is no reason why LGs mergers should have an impact on their *legal* or *functional* standing. However, as regards the *political* influence of LGs – or local-cantonal “shared rule” (Hooghe et al. 2010, Elazar 1987, Mueller 2014) – the power of LGs is expected to increase to the extent that their number is reduced and they gain in size:

H1: LG mergers lead to an increase of political influence of LGs at cantonal level.

On the other hand, building on Callanan & Tatham (2013), the existing level of local autonomy is expected to add to the size and number of LGs as follows:

H2a: Many, small and weak LGs (situation 1) try to politically influence the cantonal level collectively and institutionally, i.e. through their cantonal LGA;

H2b: Few, large and strong LGs (situation 2) try to politically influence cantonal politics more directly and individually, i.e. via their representatives in the cantonal parliament.

4 Analysis

4.1 Measurement

The dependent variable, local political influence, is operationalised in two ways. Local Government Associations (LGAs) are political organisations of municipalities in a canton, e.g. the Association des Communes Genevoises (ACG). Their strength is calculated via their degree of institutionalisation (Bolleyer 2009) and measured from 0 to 4, with 1 point attributed for the fulfilment of each of the following criteria: existence; website; availability of statutes; and existence of a special group inside the cantonal parliament to represent and lobby for local interests (e.g. the Club des Communes in Fribourg; cf. Mueller 2015a, 81–2). See Annex for cantonal values.

The second way to conceive of political influence is mayors who are also Members of the Cantonal Parliament (MCPs) at the same time (in French: *cumul des mandats*). These matter in two regards: within the cantonal parliament (efficiency potential) and towards the outside, as regards the total number of LGs in a canton (representativeness; cf. Mueller 2014, 93–94). Therefore, the calculation is the following: the mean between the share of mayor-MCPs as a proportion of all MCPs, on the one hand, and of all municipalities in a canton, on the other. For example, in the canton of Glarus the three mayor-MCPs account for $3/60 \cdot 100 = 5\%$ in parliament but $3/3 \cdot 100 = 100\%$ of all LGs, so the value for GL is 52.5%. All data are from 2014. The two ensuing measures

correlate significantly but negatively (Pearson's $r = -.404$, $p < .05$): either influence is exercised through strong LGAs or through mayor MCPs.

To test H1, the independent variable is the extent of LG mergers over the last 30 years (last column in Table 1). To test H2, the number of LGs per canton as of 1 January 2014 and mean LG population size (see again Table 1) as well as two measures of intra-cantonal decentralisation are used (cf. Mueller 2015a):

- *Polity*-decentralisation measures the extent to which LGs are legally and constitutionally autonomous. Its composites are the results of three local secretary surveys (conducted in 1994, 2005, and 2009; cf. Ladner et al. 2013, 74), averaged with the Giacometti-index that classifies Swiss cantons into three groups (Giacometti 1941; amended for Jura by Meyer 1978, 92); and
- *Policy*-decentralisation is the product of the following sub-dimensions: the ratio of local to cantonal revenue, staff and administrative expenditure indicators (BADAC 1997-2008).

These two measures are positively and significantly correlated (Pearson's $r = .430$, $p < .05$), meaning that as LG autonomy in the legal and locally perceived dimension increases, so does LG autonomy in the functional sphere. As controls for the linear regression analyses are used cantonal per capita GDP and cantonal population size (that is the natural log of this latter; BFS 2014). All data are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Data

Canton	Pop.	LGs	LG pop	LG decrease	LGA strength	Cumul	Polity-dec.	Policy-dec.	p.c. GDP
ZH	1408575	170	8285.7	0.0058	3.50	6.27	0.61	1.80	68.80
BE	992617	362	2742.0	0.0905	4.00	5.29	-0.38	0.00	45.64
LU	386082	83	4651.6	0.2243	3.25	13.80	-0.46	1.21	43.91
UR	35693	20	1784.7	0.0000	2.50	0.00	0.18	-1.27	45.71
SZ	149830	30	4994.3	0.0000	3.00	4.33	0.51	0.74	50.17
OW	36115	7	5159.3	0.0000	1.00	8.05	1.31	0.18	39.65
NW	41584	11	3780.4	0.0000	1.00	5.38	1.00	-0.01	73.29
GL	39369	3	13123.0	0.8966	0.00	52.50	0.75	-0.57	73.24
ZG	116575	11	10597.7	0.0000	1.00	5.17	1.54	0.49	93.75
FR	291395	163	1787.7	0.3731	4.00	12.04	-1.39	-1.39	39.56
SO	259283	109	2378.7	0.1615	4.00	8.22	-0.43	0.56	46.84
BS	187425	3	62475.0	0.0000	0.00	0.00	0.31	-1.91	115.18
BL	276537	86	3215.5	0.0000	3.00	9.10	-0.58	-0.86	53.50
SH	77955	26	2998.3	0.2353	1.25	12.38	0.02	0.70	55.13
AR	53438	20	2671.9	0.0000	1.00	22.88	1.06	1.24	44.22
AI	15717	6	2619.5	0.0000	1.00	46.77	0.81	-0.52	45.94
SG	487060	77	6325.5	0.1444	2.00	3.44	-0.22	1.04	44.87
GR	193920	146	1328.2	0.3113	3.00	13.60	0.99	1.25	49.35
AG	627340	213	2945.3	0.0819	2.00	8.90	0.57	-0.64	49.21
TG	256213	80	3202.7	0.5556	3.00	26.25	1.26	0.73	44.92
TI	341652	135	2530.8	0.4534	3.00	6.65	-0.81	-0.61	41.34
VD	734356	318	2309.3	0.1740	3.50	7.00	-1.35	-0.70	52.90
VS	321732	134	2401.0	0.1779	3.00	5.87	-0.41	1.08	38.39

NE	174554	37	4717.7	0.4032	3.00	2.76	-1.80	-0.33	49.77
GE	463101	45	10291.1	0.0000	3.50	1.61	-2.02	-1.58	62.84
JU	70942	57	1244.6	0.3133	3.00	4.84	-1.06	-0.63	38.07

4.2 Cross-sectional analysis

To what extent is the political influence of LGs determined by the extent of LG mergers in a canton? Starting with the *cumul des mandats*, Table 4 lists the main predictors of this form of direct, personal and parliamentary influence.

Table 4: OLS regressions for *cumul des mandats*

	DV1: <i>cumul des mandats</i>			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Extent of LG mergers	28.180***	32.613***	28.411**	30.834***
	(9.338)	(9.232)	(10.296)	(8.693)
Per capita GDP	-0.004			
	(0.115)			
Cantonal population (log.)	-4.934**			-3.469*
	(1.768)			(1.825)
Policy-decentralisation		-1.667		
		(2.246)		
Polity-decentralisation		6.413***		3.930*
		(2.266)		(2.130)
Number of LGs			-0.036	
			(0.025)	
Mean LG population			-0.0001	
			(0.0002)	
Constant	66.172***	5.498**	10.397**	47.764**
	(22.782)	(2.573)	(4.138)	(22.343)
Observations	26	26	26	26
R ²	0.444	0.454	0.316	0.519
Adjusted R ²	0.369	0.379	0.223	0.453
Residual Std. Error (df = 22)	10.218	10.135	11.339	9.510
F Statistic (df = 3; 22)	5.867***	6.086***	3.387**	7.908***

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; all coefficients with VIF < 1.3.*

Table 4 displays the results of four OLS regressions. In all of them, the extent of LG mergers over the past 30 years has a positive and significant influence on direct LG presence in a cantonal parliament. Also important are the population size of canton and the extent of legal autonomy. As regards H2b, neither the absolute number of LGs nor their average population size have a significant effect, so this expectation is partially refuted – although at least one sign (absolute number) points into the theorised direction.

Table 5: OLS regressions for LGA strength

	DV2: LGA strength			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Extent of LG mergers	-0.223	-0.400	-0.151	-0.272
	(0.651)	(0.816)	(0.841)	(0.769)
Per capita GDP	-0.036***			
	(0.008)			
Cantonal population (log.)	0.684***			
	(0.123)			
Policy-decentralisation		0.543**		
		(0.199)		
Polity-decentralisation		-0.996***		-0.565***
		(0.200)		(0.180)
Number of LGs			0.007***	0.006***
			(0.002)	(0.002)
Mean LG population			-0.00003**	
			(0.00002)	
Constant	-3.906**	2.475***	2.017***	1.884***
	(1.587)	(0.227)	(0.338)	(0.275)
Observations	26	26	26	26
R ²	0.706	0.534	0.502	0.586
Adjusted R ²	0.666	0.470	0.434	0.529
Residual Std. Error (df = 22)	0.712	0.896	0.926	0.845
F Statistic (df = 3; 22)	17.591***	8.397***	7.378***	10.361***

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; all coefficients with VIF < 1.3.*

The results presented in Table 5 pertain to the predictors of LGA strength, i.e. collective, rather informal shared rule. Here, we fail to see a significant effect of the extent of past merger activity. Nevertheless, pretty much all the other variables included in the four models seem to matter, although the sign goes in the hypothesised direction. Through step-wise exclusion due to multicollinearity, in the end (model 4) it is again polity-decentralisation but, this time, also the number of LGs that matter for strong LGAs. So LGAs are indeed particularly strong in cantons with legally weak, numerous and rather small average population sizes (H2a). Also, LGAs are stronger in the more populous cantons: this makes sense if we keep in mind that in smaller cantons there simply is no need for heavily institutionalised, formalised and professionalised LGAs (see also next section).

While all models result in modest to good overall fits at significant levels, clearly LG mergers only seem to have the expected relation with direct, personal LG influence (DV1/Table 4). This confirms the discussion above: merged LGs prefer to exercise political influence through direct, individual channels. Direct influence also matters most in the smaller cantons, but only if LGs are endowed with pre-existing levels of local autonomy as defined by law and perceived by municipal clerks. By contrast, the weaker, smaller and the more numerous the LGs in a canton, the more institutionalised and hence apt to influence the cantonal level the LGA (DV2/Table 5). In other words, stronger LGs can go for it alone.

In sum, it is thus not so much (just) the absolute number of LGs but rather their size and the degree of local autonomy that, together, determine whether LGAs are strong or, in turn, whether individual LGs rely more on direct, personal channels within the cantonal parliament, for example through having their mayors elected therein. But what about the shift in the LG landscape from a situation in which there are numerous, small and rather weak LGs to one in which there are but a few, strong and big LGs? While impossible to run such an experiment in the real world, there is, however, the case of Glarus which is discussed next.

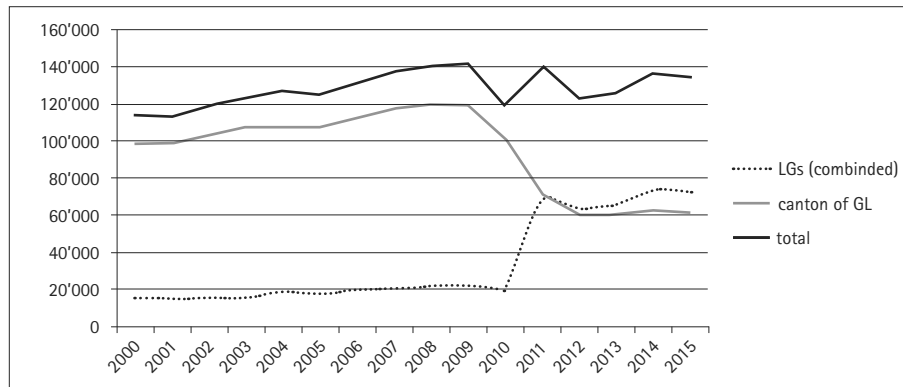
4.3 Glarus, 2006–15

Since 1 January 2011, the Canton of Glarus has but three LGs (Kronenberg 2011), while until 2006 there were as many as 25 *Ortsgemeinden* (political communes), 9 *Tagwen*, 20 *Schulgemeinden*, and 19 *Fürsorgegemeinden*, i.e. various special-purpose local polities. Overall, the LG mergers reduced the total number of LGs by 96% while increasing their average size by 755%, if compared to the previous 25 political communes (the former *Ortsgemeinden*). In line with our expectations, the cantonal LGA should have lost its importance at the expense of direct, personal influence via parliament. Let us first look in more detail at the changes in the policy- and polity-dimension to then move on to the policy of LG influence.

In that sense, and what is special about this case, the merger was accompanied by a *functional* and *fiscal* reform, i.e. a re-allocation of tasks and revenue between the canton and LGs (Glarus 2011, 9). This was a direct result of the LG mergers: the now only three (but much larger) LGs were thought to be able to do more than before by almost entirely financing themselves through their own tax yield. So while notably the competences for transport and social policy were *cantonalised* (resulting in a net relief for all LGs amounting to 14 million CHF per year), primary education, i.e. kindergarten plus nine years of schooling, was completely *communalised*. Thus, if in 2008 all LGs together spent around 36 million CHF on education, by 2011 local education costs had grown to 56 million CHF – an increase of 56% (BSS 2012, 18).

Fiscally, there were three changes. A reform of inter-communal fiscal equalisation was undertaken from horizontal to vertical: the canton alone now covered payments of up to 1 million CHF (Glarus 2010, 68). LGs were also deprived of their 15%-share in the inheritance tax, amounting to a combined income loss of about 0.2 million CHF a year (Glarus 2010, 95), as well as of other, fixed shares in the cantonal tax yield. Finally, the ratio of cantonal to local coefficients applied to the income and property tax (the major tax base in sub-national Switzerland) was changed (Glarus 2010, 92): the overall coefficient, which by 2010 had stood at 95:19 in favour of the canton, was turned into a 54:60 ratio in favour of LGs by 2011 and not to be changed during three years (Glarus 2010, 100). Moreover, in May 2013 the cantonal authorities proposed and the cantonal electorate agreed to lower the cantonal tax coefficient for 2014 even further, to merely 53%, and all three LGs subsequently raised their tax coefficient to 63%, at their local assemblies between 22 and 29 November 2013 (SO GL of 23.11.13 & 1.12.13). As a result, the income tax yield of all LGs combined was higher, in 2012, than that of the canton, and higher still in 2014 and 2015, with the new tax coefficients in force (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Income tax yield in Glarus, 2000–15 [in 1'000 CHF]



Source: Own calculations based on EFV (2016), for 2000–13, and *Jahresrechnungen Kanton Glarus* (2014, 23; 2015, 23–4), *Erfolgsrechnungen Gemeinde Glarus* (2014, 45; 2015, 51), *Glarus Nord* (2014, 3–4; 2015, 5) and *Glarus Süd* (2014, 45; 2015, 43), for 2014–15.

While unusual in the sense that the LG mergers in Glarus were not only extensive but also part of a wider, “structural” reform, our core argument from above – that LG mergers reduce the number but increase the size of the LGs – still holds. Hence, through that reform LGs have become more important functionally, especially through organising mandatory education, and fiscally, by levying even more income and property tax than the canton. But what about their *political* influence? The effect of the LG reform in Glarus should have been the creation not only of “three strong municipalities”, as the official slogan of the canton went, but also of strong local agents on their behalf. How can this be observed? While it is impossible here to give an exhaustive picture of local lobbying, three examples are worth citing:

After the reform, the LGA of Glarus (Gemeindepräsidentenkonferenz, i.e. “mayors’ president”) simply dissolved. This makes Glarus the only canton, except of Basel-City, not having an LGA. As expected, direct localism is now exercised through the *cumul des mandats*: all three mayors of the new LGs are also MCPs – and members of the same party (*FDP.Die Liberalen*; cf. also Glarus 2013). Through their additional function as LG representative, the opinion of mayor-MCPs thus has a higher credibility, and hence more weight than that of “normal” MCPs. Seen from below, to their twin-role of party and local citizenry representative (McDonnell & Mazzoleni 2014, 95) they add a third, that of a *cantonal citizenry* representative. One could even argue that the three mayor-MCPs are more powerful still than the five members of the cantonal government, since they combine both executive and legislative and cantonal and local roles and yet are fewer in number.

5. On 15 November 2012, a parliamentary motion was submitted, signed by all the 16 MCPs elected in the constituency of Glarus South (the “South-parliamentarians”), demanding an annual increase of 4 million of the intra-cantonal fiscal equalisation scheme. This unprecedented move by more than one fourth of the parliamentary membership and from five of the six political parties represented therein did not remain without effect, resulting in a one-off payment of 7 million CHF (SO GL of 24.12.2013). The new local border has united previously heterogeneous interests.
6. The mayor of Glarus South also submitted an official initiative on behalf of his LG concerning legislative changes in the financing of local property maintenance (Glarus 2012). The direct counter-proposal by the cantonal government was passed in its first reading one year later and approved by the *Landsgemeinde* of May 2014 without any debate (Glarus 2014).

LGs in Glarus thus seem perfectly able to play the complete set of tunes available to them: pro-actively, within or outside parliament, and retro-actively and publicly, through their mayors that also have a cantonal parliamentary mandate. The next section concludes by placing the comparative findings and the insights from Glarus into the present Swiss sub-national reform context and highlighting their implications.

5 Conclusion

The “fever” of LG mergers has struck the Swiss cantons very unevenly. In this paper the influence of mergers on the political influence of LGs was theorised, arguing that with a decrease in their overall number and a concomitant increase in their average size, there will be more opportunities for direct local influence, while the necessity to rely on collective lobbying is lessened. Two types of findings have been presented.

First, in a cross-sectional and quantitative analysis, the extent of a canton’s LG merger activity over the past 30 years has emerged as a good predictor of the phenomenon of double tenure, that is the contemporaneous holding of cantonal parliamentary office with mayoralty. On the other hand, that same merger activity does not have a direct influence on LGA strength, probably because it takes longer to de-institutionalise a collective association than for individual mayors to get elected to the cantonal parliament. The trade-off between the two ways to influence cantonal politics becomes visible if we compare the impact of local autonomy understood in a legal sense: positive for the *cumul des mandats*, pointing to a reinforcing mechanism, but negative for LGAs, suggesting a substitution effect. So LGAs are particularly strong in a context of many small LGs with little autonomy.

Second, a closer look at the structural reform in Canton Glarus (2006–15) confirmed the hypothesised causal mechanisms: bigger LGs lobby more for themselves, alone and use more direct channels, for example through “their” representative in the cantonal parliament or direct democratic instruments. Together, LGs in Glarus now collect more income tax than the canton, and the functional empowerment (notably regarding primary and secondary education) has further strengthened their political position, which in turn made the LGA redundant, which is why it was dissolved.

There are three limitations of this study. Apart from cantonal GDP, it was not possible to take financial considerations into account. Although finances mainly play a role for the *reasons* for Local Government mergers and not so much for their political *consequences*, one can easily speculate that because (or rather: if) mergers improve the financial situation, political influence increases, too. The Glarus study seems to confirm this. A second limitation is the somewhat limited view of influence, meaning the possibility to turn cantonal policies in favour of any one or all LG executives. Related to this is the final limitation, which if it was addressed would take us even further away from the goal of this paper: in comparing the extent of possible local influence across all 26 cantons, it was not possible to say *which* channel was more effective for simple reasons of space.

Nevertheless, there are at least two implications to be drawn from this article. First, if the current pace of LG mergers continues, it is only a question of time until we shall witness a re-decentralisation of power to the local level, as in Glarus. Second, existing levels of local autonomy have emerged as a powerful predictor of either individual or collective influence at the cantonal level, so one could venture to predict that where LGs are disempowered, the activities and influence of LGAs will increase and politics will become more contentious. The example of Lucerne, where in October 2016 the *Verband der Luzerner Gemeinden* decided to launch a communal referendum (NZZ of 19.10.2016, p. 14), is a good example for this.

Zusammenfassung

Gemeindefusionen sind ein immer weiter verbreitetes Phänomen der Schweiz. Trotzdem bestehen nur wenige Studien zu ihren politischen Folgen. Dieser Beitrag verfolgt die Hypothese, dass weniger, dafür grössere Gemeinden vermehrt direkt und individuell Einfluss auf die Kantonsebene nehmen anstatt kollektiv und indirekt. In einem ersten Schritt werden dazu alle 26 kantonalen Systeme miteinander verglichen. Als Zweites folgt eine qualitative Betrachtung eines einzelnen Kantons. Folge dieser Analysen ist die Aufforderung, nicht bloss horizontale sondern ebenso vertikale Beziehungen einzubeziehen wenn es darum geht, die Folgen von Gemeindefusionen zu diskutieren. Aus normativer Warte schliesslich stellt sich die Frage, ob die direkte Einflussnahme der Gemeinden via „ihre“ Mitglieder in einem Kantonsparlament gefördert oder eher verhindert werden soll.

Schlagworte: Gemeindefusionen, Beziehungen zwischen Staatsebenen, Schweiz

Résumé

Les fusions des communes sont un phénomène de plus en plus fréquent en Suisse. Néanmoins, peu d'études se sont penchées sur leurs conséquences politiques. Cette contribution suit l'hypothèse que des communes moins nombreuses mais plus grandes vont essayer d'influencer la politique cantonale à travers l'accès direct et individuel, plutôt que collectif et indirect. Cette proposition est soumise à l'analyse empirique en deux pas, d'abord à travers une comparaison de tous les 26 systèmes cantonaux, puis moyennent une discussion qualitative d'un seul canton. L'inférence pour tous ceux qui s'intéressent à ce phénomène est de ne pas ignorer la dimension verticale à côté de celle horizontale. D'un point de vue normatif, on aimerait ensuite favoriser ou bloquer l'accès direct de communes à l'arène cantonale à travers «leurs» représentants.

Mots clés: fusions des communes, intergouvernementaux relations, suisse

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