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# How cross-pressured local politicians choose government loyalty over local voters' preferences. Lessons from a survey experiment in Norway

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how local politicians act when they are torn between local voters' views and their own views or the party line. Against the background of a recent municipal amalgamation reform in Norway that reduced the number of municipalities from 428 to 356, we conducted a survey experiment where the local representatives ( $N = 2,013$ ) were treated with different outcomes from a hypothetical municipal referendum about a potential amalgamation. The results show that local officials representing the government parties are less likely to change their voting behaviour if the voters have view different position on the merger than the representative. They have strong incentives to show loyalty to government reform based on both an individual career prospect and from a multilevel governance framework. Unsurprisingly, we find that if voters and representatives share their views on the reform, the representatives will vote in line with the voters.


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**KEYWORDS** Local democracy; municipal mergers; territorial reforms; representation

## Introduction

Local politicians can often be torn between the views of their local constituency and loyalty to their national party. How do they act when the will of the people differs from their own preferences, be it their own convictions or the party line? From a responsiveness perspective, representatives have a clear incentive to follow the (changing) will of the people (Beyer and Hänni 2018). On the other hand, there are strong arguments in favour of other

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styles of representation, such as being loyal to the party or the politician's own convictions. This is particularly crucial when the reform in place has been implemented by the government party. If this is the case, local party officials have both a personal (Cirone, Cox, and Fiva 2021; Kam 2009) and political incentive – here from a multilevel governance perspective (Hooghe and Marks 2020) – to display loyalty to the reform. So when facing cross-pressure between the view of their local voters and their own views, what do local politicians do?

To answer this question, we fielded a survey experiment with local politicians in Norway ( $N = 2,013$ ) using a recent municipal amalgamation reform that was implemented as the case study (Fitjar 2021; Vabo, Fimreite, and Houlberg 2021). Previous research shows that municipal reorganization has high salience among inhabitants because territorial reform is the most radical and contested reorganization of local government (Ebinger, Kuhlmann, and Bogumil 2019; Tavares 2018). Structural changes of the polity are on the agenda of local politics in many countries due to demographic, societal and technical changes (Swianiewicz et al. 2022). Often the local politicians are the ones who have to take decision about potential mergers, but they are often under cross pressure between the need for structural changes and the resistance from local voters with high levels of place identity (Huijsmans 2022; Stoffelen et al. 2023). In this paper we get to examine how local politicians actually fare when these potential mergers are on the agenda. From 2013 to 2017, a major municipal amalgamation reform was implemented in Norway. All municipalities were forced by the national government to engage in formalized dialogues with neighbouring municipalities about the possibility of merging. This is important because all local politicians were obliged to consider this question. In many cases, the local municipalities were torn between the desire and expectations of the national government to merge and will of their local constituents, where, in many cases, there was fervent opposition to the merger (Folkestad et al. 2019). Put in this position of a mismatch between the views of the voters, would local politicians choose to follow their convictions or be responsive to citizens' preferences?

The local politicians were asked – pretreatment – about their view on the municipal merger reform. Then, the respondents were exposed to an experimental vignette about a hypothetical amalgamation in their constituency. In the first treatment, we varied whether the municipal amalgamation was decided by the local parliament or by the national parliament. The second treatment varied whether a local referendum was in *favour of* or *against* a municipal amalgamation in their municipality. Finally, the respondents were asked if they would vote in favour of or against municipal amalgamations. Thus, it was a  $2 \times 2$  vignette experiment.

Our main finding is that those politicians representing one of the government parties who implemented the reform were less likely to change their position on local municipal amalgamations based on the view of the voters. Unsurprisingly, we find that almost all representatives would vote in line with the voters if they shared the same opinion on municipal amalgamation reform, but around half of the representatives (48.3%) would change their minds if the people had the opposite view.

The remainder of the present paper is structured as follows: First, we present a broad framework built from the political representation, government relationships, and municipal mergers literature. Second, we give details of the data collection and methods applied before presenting and discussing the main results. Finally, we discuss the results and what they mean for our understanding of how representation works.

## **Municipal amalgamation reforms and representation**

### ***Cross-pressured representatives***

In a well-functioning democracy, citizens must have the opportunity to express their preferences (Dahl 1989). In modern liberal democracies, this is done through representation. Representatives are given the authority to act on behalf of citizens, usually through the power of free and fair elections, in which there is a true probability of the incumbent party/parties giving up their power (Pitkin 1967). According to Dahl (1989), a key characteristic of representative democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to citizens' preferences. This means that if a democracy is to function properly, it must create an environment in which its citizens are heard, feel represented and receive the policies they desire. To measure whether representation is properly working, scholars often use the two concepts of congruence and responsiveness. Both are diagnostic tools that can help us tell if democracy works, but they are, however, empirically and theoretically distinct concepts. In addition, both focus on the link between public opinion and representatives' positions or behaviours, but they pursue two different strategies to obtain that insight.

If representative democracy is to function properly, representatives should be responsive to changes in citizens' opinions. In this context, responsiveness is defined as a dynamic and causal relationship between representatives and their constituents (Beyer and Hänni 2018). Responsiveness requires that shifting constituency preferences change representatives' preferences, behaviour, or policy outputs. To study this phenomenon in the real world, we must make assumptions about the direction of causality because, to observe responsiveness, we first must observe a change in public opinion, followed by a change in behaviour by the representatives (Wlezien, 2017). In a survey experimental

setting, however, this is possible because we can elicit the preferences of the representatives' pre-treatment. Thus, we can observe whether they are responding to cues from their constituents.

While experimental research on elected representatives is not commonplace in political science, the field has been rapidly growing in the last decade (Sheffer et al. 2018). Recent evidence from this field find that representatives have some of the same biases as do citizens (Sheffer et al. 2018), that they are not as good as guessing the public's opinion on policy-matters (Walgrave et al. 2023), and that they are less willing to being responsive when public opinion goes against their party preference (Soontjens and Sevenans 2022).

The latter point is perhaps the most relevant to our study. Evidence from Sweden suggests Öhberg and Naurin (2016) that when representatives are contacted by voters concerning a policy proposal that goes against their stated preference and/or the party's preference, willingness to respond to citizen-initiated contacts varies on several indicators, like willingness to adapt, communicate, or explain the proposal. Furthermore, they find that politicians are less likely to expose differences between themselves and the party line, but they are willing to do so within the party, i.e. by expressing their conflicting opinions in intra-party fora.

This tension between the will of the voters and the party whip can put politicians in a challenging situation. In addition to being responsive to their constituents, representatives can also choose to 'tow the party line', both in their own municipality and at the national level. The relationship between the central party and local politicians is an asymmetric power relationship in which loyalty to the central party is valued by local politicians to achieve promotion or political gains. Political parties benefit from presenting a unified message that signals a meaningful position to voters (Cox and McCubbins 2007). Career decisions are made by comparing the costs and benefits of attaining the various offices in a certain polity (Borchert 2011). To reach higher offices, staying too long in local politics seems to be a disadvantage, so achieving rapid promotion is important for a long-term career in politics (Allen 2012). Empirical studies have shown that party loyalty is correlated with promotion to the front bench (Kam 2009), as well as an incumbent re-nomination norm and seniority progression norm (Cirone, Cox, and Fiva 2021). Promotion is distributed preferentially to members whose own policy preferences are proximate to the uncovered set of all party members' preferences (Kam et al. 2010). A key finding from analysing the promotion to high offices is that ministers consistently prefer politically loyal to non-loyal candidates (Bach and Veit 2018). Studying the career of parliamentarians in Norway between 1945–2013 Cirone, Cox, and Fiva (2021) demonstrate that a high proportion of first-time parliamentarians have prior experience in either local or regional office. Most political careers begin at

the local or regional level, with relatively few beginning at the parliamentary level. This does not mean that all local politicians have ambitions about becoming a MP, but most of those who end up in parliament will have started their career in local or regional politics, at least in a country like Norway where 85% of all local councillors are elected on a list representing a national party (Verhelst, Reynaert, and Steyvers 2013).

Drawing on a multilevel governance framework (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Hooghe and Marks 2020; Schakel, Hooghe, and Marks 2015) and the relationship between the centre and periphery (Rokkan and Urwin 1983), there is also a strong political incentive for local politicians to show government loyalty. Cooperation depends on how the participants view each other, as well as on its functional benefits (Hooghe and Marks 2020). Local and central government politicians interact on many different levels, and despite there being differences, loyalty to the central government has many potential gains for local politicians who want to realize their local political projects. On the other hand, some studies (Campbell et al. 2019) have found that dissent acts serve as a valence signal of integrity and trustworthiness. Consistent with the valence signalling mechanism, it uses new observational and experimental evidence to show that British voters have a strong and largely unconditional preference for legislators who dissent. However, it is unclear whether or not this is relevant for other systems where the relationship between the MP and their constituency is not as personal as in the British FPTP system.

Loyalty to national institutions could have two expressions: loyalty to decisions made by the national parliament and/or loyalty to decisions made by the national government. Overall, the literature indicates that local politicians have incentives both on a personal and political level to show loyalty to the central government and the position of their respective central parties. However, when in government, these incentives grow stronger because then, the central party has the power for individual promotion to interesting public positions, but also to ensure tangible local political gains for politicians in the periphery.

### ***Municipal amalgamations***

To explore the dilemmas related to representation and cross-pressured politicians, we use a recent municipal amalgamation reform in Norway. A salient and contested issue like a municipal amalgamation reform initiated by the central government could create a dilemma for local representatives in municipalities manoeuvring among their own political programme, demands from the central government and the will of their constituents.

An optimal jurisdiction size is a cornerstone of government design and has been on the reform agenda in many European countries for decades (for a broader literature review see Gendźwił, Kurniewicz, and Swianiewicz 2021;

Tavares 2018). There are many debates about municipal structure both politically and academically, with both arguments in favour of and against municipal amalgamation reforms. Structural reforms have several motivations, the main one being that mergers can create economies of scale and reduce the public costs of administration and bureaucracy. Studies have found such an effect, and in a more recent literature review, Gendźwiłł, Kurniewicz, and Swianiewicz (2021) conclude that the savings on administrative spending is perhaps the only clearly confirmed gain of territorial amalgamation reforms. A second motivation is that structural and functional changes in the population pattern can require a new municipal structure that is adjusted to the new population pattern (Storper 2014). A third issue that often arises in sparsely populated countries such as Norway is the need for larger units to have the competence and knowledge required to deliver a sufficient quality of government (Boyne 1995).

On the other hand, the critics of municipal amalgamations reform argue that the economic effects might not be so substantial (Blesse and Roesel 2019; Lüchinger and Stutzer 2011) and that potential savings in administrative costs can be offset by opposite effects for other domains, such as voter turnout (Allers et al. 2021), political trust (Hansen 2012) and communal identity (Denters et al. 2014; Ebinger, Kuhlmann, and Bogumil 2019). The potential economic savings, for example, in administrative costs, are likely to be offset by the opposite effects for other domains and come with significant transition costs (Blom-Hansen et al. 2016). The academic arguments concerning municipal amalgamation reforms mirror those in the public and political debate: the pro-reform arguments tend to emphasize larger units for economies of scale and building local government capacity to generate political efficacy (Baldersheim and Rose 2010), while antireform arguments tend to emphasize how political issues in smaller municipalities will be more proximate, of more immediate concern, less abstract in scope and, thus, more amenable to ‘amateurs’ (Lassen and Serritzlew 2011; McDonnell 2020).

### ***The case of Norway***

The political system in Norway is marked by regularity in terms of elections and consistency in the different layers of politics. Local elections in Norway – both municipal and county council elections – are held simultaneously in all municipalities every four years (Saglie and Seggaard 2022) and are often dominated by national parties with more than 90% of the mayors representing a national party (Stein et al. 2020). Norwegian local politicians have a moderately independent position. Historically, Norwegian local democracy has been constructed to give municipalities strong independent power for local issues; on the other hand, national legislation for promoting a universal

welfare state has limited local powers (Kjellberg 1988). Compared with other European countries over the period of 1990–2014, Nordic local government enjoyed considerable levels of autonomy in municipal operations (Balderheim et al. 2019). In many cases, multilevel cooperation between local, regional and national governments was required to achieve the goals and projects outlined by local politicians (Reitan, Saglie, and Smith 2012).

In 2013, a new centre-right government was elected in Norway (Allern and Karlsten 2014), and one of their main priorities was a major overhaul of the structures of the Norwegian public sector, most notable being reducing the number of municipalities (Klausen, Askim, and Christensen 2021; Klausen, Askim, and Vabo 2016). The new government was inspired by a recent municipal amalgamation reform in Denmark, which had the clear objective of reducing administrative expenditures and creating larger and stronger political units at the local level. The Danish amalgamation reform was characterized by the use of authoritative government tools and a nationally directed amalgamation process. The Norwegian reform, on the other hand, primarily used softer tools that involved substantial autonomy at the local level (Vabo, Fimreite, and Houlberg 2021). All municipalities were required to have a discussion with their neighbouring municipality(-ies) about the prospect of a potential merger, but at the end of the day, the municipal council in each of the municipalities had to decide whether they should merge or not. The Conservative-led Ministry of Local Government did not recommend the use of local referendums. Many referendums were held despite the government's recommendations, but the government downplayed these referendums and emphasized that they were merely advisory (Folkestad et al. 2019). There were also financial incentives for the municipalities who chose to merge, and costs of amalgamations would be covered by the national government. This resulted in a relatively mild reform, reducing the number of municipalities from 428 to 356.

Fitjar (2021) has argued that the main predictor for understanding whether municipalities were in favour of or against the local merger was whether the municipality was a central city or a suburb. Although central cities wanted to internalize interjurisdictional spill overs from their public goods production, the suburbs preferred to continue free-riding. Stein et al. (2020) have shown that opposition against central reforms, with municipal reform being the most prominent of the reforms, was important in Norwegian politics as a peripheral and rural mobilization against the central government in the 2019 local elections. Against this background, the question of municipal reform has been a salient issue in Norwegian politics at the local, regional, and national levels in recent years.

In our study, all the politicians were elected on a national and/or local party manifesto, often stating whether or not the party was in favour of or against municipal mergers. According to Saglie (2020) there were debates



internally between different levels inside the political parties about the municipal reform. The congruence between citizens and elites on the specific question of municipal amalgamation can vary across municipalities, which is most likely a function of the saliency of the issue. However, after the national election in 2017, the saliency of possible municipal (and county) amalgamations arose. Thus, citizens did not have a chance to voice their opinions on this question through electoral participation for another two years. The question of whether the representatives were responsive to their citizens was mostly subject to nonelectoral forms of participation, such as opinion polls of local referendums. In our case, we mimic this dynamic by treating representatives with information about a hypothetical referendum that was held in many municipalities (Folkestad et al. 2019). This gave the representatives the possibility of being responsive, here given that public opinion goes against their stated preference for amalgamation. If the representatives chose to change their voting behaviour, they would be considered responsive. If they did not, they would be considered to be unresponsive.

Previous research on elites has found that, compared with citizens, representatives are more sceptical towards referendum results, especially if the outcome of the referendum is unfavourable, that is, goes against their policy preference (Broderstad 2022). Arnesen et al. (2019) also found that the perceived legitimacy of a referendum in the eyes of the public heavily depends on the size of the majority and outcome of the specific referendum in question. In our research, we have not had the opportunity to give details about participation and majority size, but we do give a majority either in favour or against the merger. This gives representatives information about whether they are congruent or incongruent with their constituents. If they are incongruent, theories of representation have laid out about dictates that they should be nudged into changing their preference and, thus, be responsive to (changes in) public opinion.

### ***Hypotheses***

From this framework, we can develop some hypotheses about how politicians would act regarding a municipal merger question. If voters were to share their views for or against the merger, they would almost certainly follow them. The experiment was pre-registered at [osf.io](https://osf.io)<sup>1</sup> There is also an expectation that a substantial part of the local politicians would, from a responsiveness perspective, follow the view of the voters on the question of municipal mergers:

H<sub>1</sub>: Local politicians will follow the view of the voters in the hypothetical referendum, especially when the voters have the same preferences as the politicians.

Even though we expect a large proportion of the local representatives to follow the voters' views, we would also like to know more about those who change their position on the municipal merger. For the second part of the analysis, we have removed all of those who had the same view as their preference for or against a merger, analysing only those who got a different outcome in their pretreatment preference.

As previously mentioned, there are important incentives for local politicians to be loyal to the national institutions; this can take many different shapes. Seggaard and Saglie (2023) have shown that trust in different institutions differs among Norwegian citizens and Norwegians have higher trust in the national parliament than their local parliament. Therefore, it was plausible that a decision made by the national parliament would hold higher legitimacy than a decision made by the local parliament. On the other hand, local democracy is considered essential for fostering civic engagement and responsiveness to community needs (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Scholars argue that the legitimacy of local democracy is grounded in its ability to empower citizens, enhance social capital, and ensure more effective governance at the grassroots level (Fung 2006; Oates 1972). Hence, it is possible that a decision made by the local parliament would have more legitimacy than the national parliament in case of a local merger. As a consequence, we proposed a second hypothesis:

H<sub>2</sub>: If the decision to merge the municipalities was decided by the national parliament, the local politicians are less likely to be against amalgamation.

Party loyalty may also have a potential impact. The reform in question was an important political project for the centre-right government; when in government, the incentives for local politicians to display party loyalty grow stronger because the government parties hold more power. Consequently, local politicians could be torn between government loyalty and the will of the people, but they would have more incentives to uphold government loyalty than politicians from opposition parties. We propose a third hypothesis, as follows:

H<sub>3</sub>: Local politicians representing the national government parties are less likely to be movers.

## Methods and data

One of the major developments in political science over the past decade has been the rise of experiments and surveys on political elites and institutions (Grose 2014; Kertzer and Renshon 2022). Kertzer and Renshon (2022) argue that elite studies are particularly informative to the extent that they test theories directly relating to elites' domain-specific expertise and experience. One

of the central challenges of elite experiments relates to design and recruitment. For our experiment, we have worked with the Norwegian Panel of Elected Representatives (PER) (Peters, Broderstad, and Schakel 2021), which is an online survey panel that annually surveys elected representatives in Norway. We have used the survey fielded in 2021. Through mail, all elected representatives in Norway at the municipal, regional and national levels, a total of 11,308 individuals, received an invitation to participate in the survey panel, with a response rate of 41% ( $N = 4,636$ ). From this panel, we recruited 2,013 representatives from the municipal tier of government through random sampling. Compared with the average response rate in Pew's telephone surveys in 2019, which was 6% (Kertzer and Renshon 2022), we received a substantially higher response rate through the PER. The PER also performs very well in terms of representativeness of gender, age, and party affiliation. Although the PER has respondents from all three tiers of government, for the purposes of our analyses, we only use the politicians at the municipal level.

Before fielding the survey, our hypotheses and survey design were preregistered. To measure respondents baseline preference about merging municipalities, we asked whether they, in general, were in favour or against municipal amalgamations. Respondents answered on a four-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (mean (SD) = 2.5 (1.1)).<sup>2</sup> To ease interpretation, we recoded the agree values (strongly agree and somewhat agree) into one category and the disagree values (strongly disagree and somewhat disagree) into one category. Indeed, this rules out some variation in our data. However, we are not interested in these nuances per se. Rather, we want to distinguish between representatives who support merger policies and representatives who do not.

To test our hypotheses, we introduce two random treatments, T1 and T2, where T1 is a dichotomous treatment detailing whether the decision to merge was given by the local government or the national parliament. T2 related to whether public opinion was for or against the merger. Additionally, we separate the respondents based on the pre-treatment question on whether they are in favour or against municipal mergers. To calculate the average treatment effect (ATE), we estimate the marginal mean for each of the treatment's possible values for respondents who are in favour or against municipal mergers. The calculation of the marginal means are simply descriptive quantities of interest and require no modelling assumptions.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, we analysed who the movers among the politicians were to test our third hypothesis ( $H_3$ ). Because we were only analysing those who had a treatment unfavourable to their base preference, the number of respondents in the mover analysis was reduced to 1,004 respondents (see Appendix D and E for details). The logic behind this classification is outlined in Table 1. To illustrate, if a respondent holds a base preference (pre-

**Table 1.** Movers and non-movers.

Base	Treatment	Vote	Category
Pro-merger	Against merger	Against merger	Mover
Against merger	Pro-merger	Pro-merger	Mover
Pro-merger	Against merger	Pro-merger	Non-mover
Against merger	Pro-merger	Against merger	Non-mover

treatment) and is treated with the opposite position, the respondent is coded as a mover if their change their initial position (base preference) and decide to vote for the opposite position and a non-mover if their stay true to their base preference.

To test our hypothesis about the behaviour of these *movers*, we used a multilevel model with respondents nested in municipalities to estimate the probability of the respondents changing their preferences to match one of the citizens' preferences. Hence, these respondents would be considered a mover. On the individual level, we control for respondents age (in years), in-office experience, level of education, party affiliation, and gender. On municipal level, we control for size of the municipality (as defined by Statistics Norway, SSB) and regional location (See Appendix C for details about the multilevel model and Appendix E for specific coding of the variables and descriptive statistics).

The model takes the following functional form:

Level 1 (*i* representatives)

$$pr(\text{Mover}_{ij}) = B_{0j} + B_{1j}\text{Age}_{ij} + B_{2j}\text{Experience}_{ij} + B_{3j}\text{Education}_{ij} + B_{4j}\text{Party}_{ij} \\ + B_{5j}\text{Gender}_{ij} + e_{ij}$$

Level 2 (*j* municipalities)

$$B_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}\text{Size}_j + \gamma_{02}\text{Region}_j + u_{0j}$$

$$B_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + u_{1j}$$

...

$$B_{5j} = \gamma_{50} + u_{5j}$$

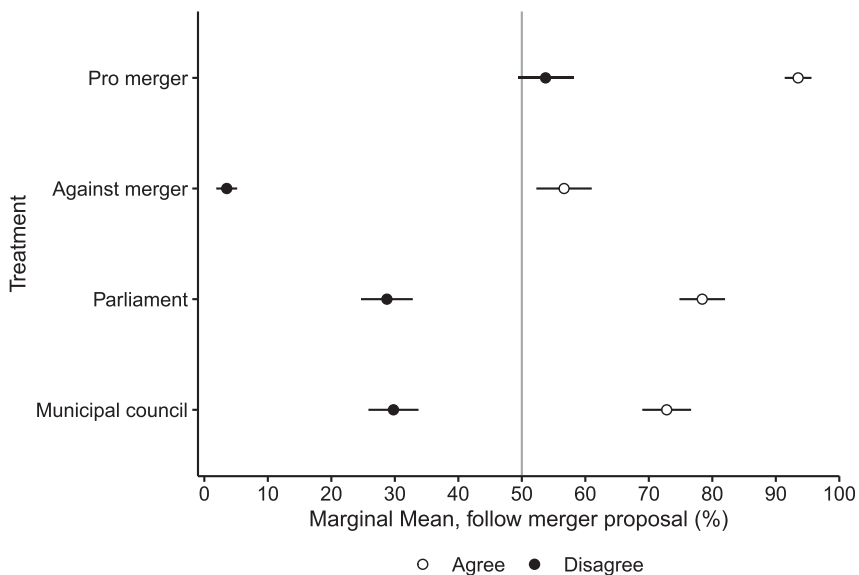
where *i* represents the individual respondents nested in *j* municipalities. As a robustness, we also estimate a linear model (Gomila 2021) to test our hypotheses (See Appendix F) and the results are substantially similar. Thus, there are no reason to believe that the choice of functional form has affected the substantial interpretation of our findings.

When observing the probabilities of being a mover, we have placed several controls in our models. Age and experience (Exp) are the factors that might explain these differences. Studies have shown that younger politicians behave more strategically in response to electoral incentives, probably

because they expect to have longer political careers and stronger career concerns (Alesina, Cassidy, and Troiano 2019). Hence, we have controlled for age, experience, gender and education (*Edu*) in our models (see Appendix D and E for details). The municipal elections in Norway in 2019, as well as the national parliamentary elections in 2021 with strong success for the antireform party – the Centre Party – have shown that the question of central reforms has had more salience in some regions, especially in the northern periphery and in rural areas (Aardal and Bergh 2022; Stein et al. 2020). Other studies have shown that representatives coming from small municipalities and rural areas could lead to a tighter connection with the people and that they are having more to lose in a merger and do not want to be a small part of a larger municipality (McDonnell 2020). Studies have also shown that civic involvement in Norwegian local democracy varies between large and small municipalities (Denters et al. 2014). Therefore, we controlled for municipality size and region.

## Results

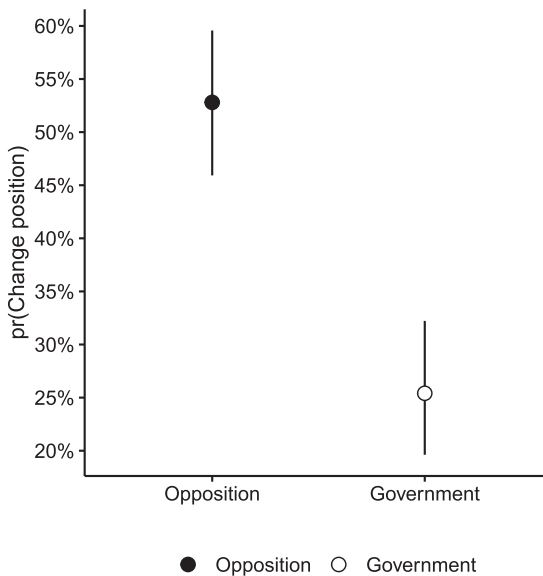
In Figure 1, we show the marginal means of the treatment effect (or ATE) including a 95% confidence interval; they can be directly interpreted as the percentage of respondents willing to follow the referendum outcome. Based on the pre-treatment question, we have categorized the respondents into two groups (pro-merger and against merger). The white dots represent



**Figure 1.** Marginal treatment effects by merger preferences.

the respondents getting a hypothetical referendum in favour of amalgamations and then voting in favour of amalgamations (with a 95% confidence interval). We can see that the respondents getting a favourable outcome in the hypothetic referendum would follow their voters. As expected, almost every local representative would follow the view of the referendum if the voters shared their views about the municipal reform. A large part (48.3%) of the representatives would change their view if the citizens had a different view than their own baseline position, indicating support for  $H_1$ . However, concerning  $H_2$ , we have found that even though there were slightly more representatives that would follow a decision made by the national parliament, the difference between parliament and municipal county was non-significant. Hence  $H_2$  must be rejected (for a detailed regression model, see Appendix B).

In Figure 2, we report the predicted probabilities of being a mover based on whether the respondent was representing one of the government parties (Conservatives, Liberals and Christian Democrats) including a 95% confidence interval. We have found that the probability for politicians representing one of the government parties to change their views if the voters had a different view was significantly lower than their opposition counterparts. This gives support for  $H_3$ . Neither age, experience, gender, education nor municipality size had any significant effect, providing strong empirical evidence for our hypothesized effect. The only other variable nearly reaching statistical significance (at a significance level  $p < 0.1$ ) was being a representative in Northern



**Figure 2.** Probability of movers changing their stance on municipal amalgamation.

Norway or Eastern Norway (see Appendix C). Historically Northern Norway has been marked with peripheral resistance to the centre (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) and recent studies have shown that especially county mergers had strong opposition among voters (Stein, Broderstad, and Bjørnå 2022).

## Discussion

The present study has shown that when local representatives are placed between a rock and a hard place, they do not remain in limbo. Representatives representing parties in national government are more likely than other representatives to choose the rock, which here would be their central party. This finding is robust, with a strong significant effect (at significance level  $p < 0.01$ ), even when controlling for age, gender, education, experience, municipality size and region. There are good reasons for local representatives from government parties compared with other representatives to be less likely to change their view on the reform, even though their local voters have a different opinion. First, from an individual level, showing loyalty and support to the reform initiated by the government could help the individual representative achieve a promotion, which is important for a long-term career in politics (Allen 2012; Kam et al. 2010). Second, from a multilevel governance perspective, mending good relations with national authorities on a question might be beneficial for gaining support from these national authorities in their political projects (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Hooghe and Marks 2020). In many cases, such as infrastructure projects, education centres, larger cultural and sports events and infrastructure, cooperation and joint steering and financing between local, regional and national authorities are required. Third, a final explanation may also be that the political position on the reform is more consolidated in representatives from the government parties. As the representatives for parties promoting the reform, they might have internalized the arguments in favour of the reform, making these individuals less prone to changing their position based on a local referendum. Not all local representatives for the government parties were found to be in favour of the reform, but those who did oppose the reform might also have taken a higher cost by opposing the reform, and that conviction might also lead them to not change their voting behaviour, even though the local population was in favour of a merger.

Interestingly, whether the decision was taken by the parliament or the municipal council did not seem to matter; hence, our  $H_2$  must be rejected. On the one side, there are arguments for the salience of local democratic institutions for local issues. On the other side Norwegian citizens trust their national parliament more than their local council (Segaard and Saglie 2023). Our null finding could indicate that these two factors that pull in

different directions nullify themselves. Some of the arguments about the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the national authorities from a multilevel governance perspective might seem to be less valid in this case. This might also be an indication of the prominent place political parties play in Norwegian politics (Allern 2010). The salient issue for the local representative is not what a majority in parliament has voted for but rather what the position of the representatives' political party is on the reform question. However, the local representative is not only a loyal servant to their national party; they also tend to view themselves as responsive representatives for their voters.

Around half of the representatives would change their positions based on what local voters voted in the referendum. This shows a strong commitment to the responsiveness of political representation and supports  $H_1$ . When treated with a clear majority in a referendum, representatives adhere to the will of the people and give up their preferences for pro/against municipal amalgamation. On the other hand, the other half would not change their view based on a referendum where a majority of the inhabitants have expressed a different view than their own. In this experiment, we did not vary the size of the majority or turnout, but we know from the literature that these are the factors that might play a role (Arnesen et al. 2019). Also a real-life empirical example was the referendum about a demerger of Innlandet county in Norway in 2022, where a majority in the county council decided not to demerge the county, despite a narrow majority in the referendum expressing their support for a demerger (Ertesvåg 2022).

Almost none of the control variables held any significance. This was quite surprising, but it also helps shed light on the mechanisms that we have found. The most important mechanism is that local representatives in Norway tended to view popular legitimacy as very important, and for many this took precedence over their own political beliefs, regardless of their age, gender, education or municipal characteristics. This might tell us something about a democratic zeitgeist or at least the responsiveness of political representatives. Regardless of the socio-demographic characteristics, these politicians have the same inclination to listen to the majority of their inhabitants, at least regarding the question of a municipal merger.

## Conclusion

Our main finding is that local representatives do care about popular opinion; even in a salient issue like the municipal merger reform, around half of the representatives would change their view based on the popular vote. From a responsiveness perspective, this shows that popular opinion matters substantially for representatives who are making decisions about the structure of local democratic units and municipal mergers. The politicians in the



study tended to view popular legitimacy as very important, so much so that it trumped their own beliefs or the position they had run on in their electoral campaign.

On the other hand, the other half did not change their view based on a referendum in which a majority of the inhabitants expressed a different view than their own. The only strong significant factor explaining this was whether the representative was representing one of the government parties responsible for the reform. This shows how party loyalty, especially when in government, might have strong guidance for the political behaviour of local representatives who have incentives, both personally and politically, to maintain good relations with the central party, even if doing so might come at the expense of the popular will.

This experiment has two implications. First, it adds to our understanding of how local representatives seek legitimacy for municipal mergers. If most inhabitants are in favour of or against a merger and politicians know which way the people lean, in most cases, they will have a majority in the municipal council for or against a municipal merger. Second, our findings suggest that it is loyalty to the government party – not the national parliament – that matters the most for local representatives if they are to vote against the majority of their own inhabitants regarding the question of a municipal merger.

There are some limitations to the present research. We present a hypothetical situation to the participants and although we believe it corresponds to a realistic scenario we do not know how they would have acted in real life. We have not differentiated between different levels of turnout and different sizes of the majority in our experiment, even though we know that these are factors that also play a part (Arnesen et al. 2019). Still, we believe that our findings about political movers have relevant implications because we show how the political parties has a salient role in shaping the actions of local representatives when being cross-pressured between voters' will and their own convictions. The present study is also based only on one country and one specific reform, which can be classified as a relatively soft municipal reform (Swianiewicz et al. 2022; Vabo, Fimreite, and Houlberg 2021). It is possible that the question of municipal mergers may have different connotations for politicians in a country where the municipal merger reform was larger and much more contested like in Denmark (Blom-Hansen et al. 2016; Vabo, Fimreite, and Houlberg 2021). Further research could try to do a similar experiment in other countries or at a different political level, like the county level, to explore if similar mechanisms are involved.

## Notes

1. The experiment was pre-registered here: [https://osf.io/aq493/?view\\_only=dab53fc402f94f869ffb53f48aad1765](https://osf.io/aq493/?view_only=dab53fc402f94f869ffb53f48aad1765).

2. The specific distribution of representatives amalgamation preferences are as follows: Strongly agree: 448 (22.3 %); Somewhat agree: 572 (28.5 %); Somewhat disagree: 549 (27.3 %); Strongly disagree: 441 (21.9).
3. See appendix for OLS regression model.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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