The geographical structure of people's settlement in the three West Nordic countries, The Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland is in itself a considerable challenge for the provision of municipal services. It can be argued, therefore, that this can be a challenge for the democracy at the local level. The municipal structure varies in the three West Nordic countries and has changed in the past decades. Geographically the three countries are quite different although the similarities are more obvious when we look at the economic structure – fishing and fish processing are the mainstay of the economy. It can be argued that local communities in the West Nordic countries are facing a certain type of dilemma. On the one hand, decisions at local level need to be based on sound knowledge of local circumstances and conditions and taken in harmony with the local people, if they are to be sensible, successful and legitimate decisions. On the other hand, very small or "too" small local decision-making units often have problems mobilizing and providing the expertise needed to make rational decisions – something that can be called a capacity problem. The problem, or question, on the optimal size of a municipality – or should we rather say optimal smallness – is a relevant and emerging question in, for example, the four larger Nordic countries. But the difference between the West Nordic and the East Nordic (Scandinavian) situation in this sense is that the countries and the municipalities in the west are historically much more smaller in population.

In 2012, the research project *West Nordic municipal structure. Challenges to local democracy, efficient service provision and adaptive capacity* was granted money from the Arctic Co-operation Programme 2012-2014. The overall aim of the project was to collect knowledge on the local level in the three West Nordic countries; the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland by mapping the situation and development in the municipal sectors, focusing primarily on four aspects. The first was; the municipal structure. The second was; the democratic aspect – that is, which consequences the structural development has had for local democracy – to identify the main challenges to democracy, caused by the structural developments. The third; to map the service production capacity and effectiveness of the municipalities, and the fourth; to try to map the municipalities' capacity to manage the development processes which often accompany municipal amalgamations. An overall research question was: What consequences have developments in municipal structure in the three countries had for democracy, local self-government and autonomy, as well as the ability to manage the processes accompanying amalgamations? In September 2014 a report containing this analysis was submitted (Eythórsson, Gløersen and Karlsson 2014).

In a second phase of the project, the project team tried to develop and deepen the insight into these matters by undertaking a survey among all elected local politicians and chief administrators (mayors) in all of the municipalities in the three countries[1]. In the survey there were asked questions aimed at deepening our understanding of the problems and challenges facing the municipal level in the three countries, with a special focus on the findings of the earlier mentioned report from 2014. The survey contained among others some questions focused on local democracy as such as well as its development after amalgamations that have been taking place since year 2000 or so (Eythórsson, Gløersen and Karlsson 2015).

In this article I use the data from this survey to answer following main research questions:

1. What is the general status of local democracy in the three countries?
2. Is there a connection between size and democracy when we are looking at municipalities in a small scale size as is the case in the West Nordic countries?
3. Does peripheral or central position in a municipality affect the attitudes towards democracy as measured in the survey reported?

The operationalization of local democracy is threefold: First, looking at the perception of power and influence by different territories in each municipality. Second, looking at the perceptions of access to the municipal administration. The third is by looking at the perception of ties and contacts to the local politicians.

1. Municipal amalgamations and the impact on democracy

When taking territory into consideration; that is, in this case territory within municipal boundaries, there are different views on democratic aspects such as equality between parts of the municipality or neighbourhoods. The main idea is that citizens in more peripheral, with less population and/or more sparsely populated parts of the municipality are at a disadvantage for influencing decisions, making contact with the elected officials and, in general, find it more difficult to access the administration, compared with those living in, or

close to, the central area of service and administration.

This general assumption is often linked to municipal amalgamations where two or more municipalities merge into one, despite different population structures, varying degrees of peripherality and different preconditions for acting as centres for administration and service. In these cases, there are winners and losers. The largest units usually attain a central role while the smaller ones and those more distant from the centre have to live with the fact that they are peripheral with a view to administration and services. Both Swedish and Icelandic studies have shown the fear or scepticism of people and local politicians in prospective peripheries facing amalgamations with this upcoming situation (Brantgärde 1974, Eythórsson 1998, Steiner et al. 2016). The expected power position of people's current municipality within the proposed new one has clearly shown to be the strongest explanatory factor for attitudes towards amalgamations, both in the Swedish and the Icelandic case. Those residing in the expected administrative and service centre of a new municipality are likely to be much more positive than those residing in the municipalities that are not going to occupy that role. People in the administrative and service peripheries are clearly less interested in amalgamating with the big brother who is expected to consolidate power and use that to its own advantage. This resistance is strongest in the bigger peripheries, often municipalities who have had their own administrative structure, which has not always been the case in many of the small rural municipalities in Iceland. In that way, the big 'losers' have more to lose and thus manifest more resistance in many cases. This means that the correlation between municipal size and attitudes to amalgamations is not always linear: the relationship is more complicated since the possibilities of being the centre have more to do with proportional rather than absolute size.

An evaluation study in Iceland by Eythórsson and Jóhannesson (2002) in 37 municipalities which were amalgamated into 7 in the 1990s showed clear democratic deficits for the smaller and peripheral and gives support to the results from the former Icelandic and Swedish studies. There was considerably more discontent with democratic aspects and administrative structures among people and local leaders in the parts or neighbourhoods of municipalities that had now become the smaller and more peripheral neighbourhoods of a new amalgamated municipality. All the municipalities surveyed showed that people outside 'central places' defined as the proportionally biggest municipality, that became the centre of administration and services after the amalgamation – felt that they were now more distant

from their political representatives than before and thereby their opportunities to influence and lobby decisions were much more limited. Furthermore, the majority of the people living in the periphery believed that political power was now concentrated in these 'central places' (See in Eythórsson 2009 and Eythórsson 2011).

In 2006, just before the great municipal reform in Denmark, Danish political scientists published the anthology *Kommunalreformens konsekvenser* (Blom-Hansen, Elklit and Serritzlew 2006). The results show a clear negative correlation between the size of a municipality and several indicators of democracy, such as trust, voting participation and attending political meetings (Juul-Madsen and Skou 2006).[2] In another study presented in this book Nørgaard-Petersen and Christensen did not find any correlation between municipal size and representation – that is, in bigger municipalities, voters in various social groups used their potential for participating in the democratic process (Nørgaard-Petersen and Christensen 2006). Lassen and Serritzlew (2011) conducted research on the correlation between jurisdiction size and local democracy. Using the Danish structural reform as a case they looked for evidence on internal political efficacy. By internal political efficacy they mean that citizens believe they are competent to understand and contribute to political decision making and by external political efficacy they mean that citizens feel government authorities are responsive to their demands so that participation is something worth struggling for. Among their findings was that in terms of population larger municipal units were necessary for economies of scale but at the same time larger size incurred cost with regard to the quality of democratic order (Lassen and Serritzlev, 2011).

These examples of research on democracy and the impact of structural reforms show that structural territorial reforming by enlarging municipal units is, at the same time, a question of the balance between economies of scale and local democracy – both when citizens and local politicians are asked. These studies have mostly shown us that too much emphasis on seeking economies of scale can have negative consequences for the local democracy. This is in line with what was argued already in 1973 by Dahl and Tufte, that correlation between size and democracy exists.

However, looking at the research examples from Denmark we have to realize that in that case the question was about much larger municipal units than in the case of the West Nordic countries – this even though we are talking about the newly amalgamated Greenland

municipalities.

2. Municipal structure in the West Nordic countries – A short overview

2.1. Faroe Islands

Already in the mid-twentieth century there were 49 municipalities in the Faroe Islands, an autonomous territory of 18 islands with a population of less than 50,000. This structure of numerous small municipalities, with more than half of them having a population of less than 1000, stayed the same all the way into the beginning of the 21st century. The Faroese municipal geography during this period is summarized by Hovgaard et.al. (2004) as following:[3]

- A capital with more than 40% of the population
- Constantly improving conditions for commuting to the capital of Tórshavn have connected over 85% of the nation by road
- A rather peripheral island of Sandøy in the south with a little over 1200 inhabitants and four municipalities
- The even more peripheral Island of Suðuroy, 2:15 hours ferry trip from Torshavn. On Suðuroy there are 7 municipalities with a total population of around 4600
- Geographically remote small islands (municipalities) with low population and difficult communications

Despite massive resistance against law-enforced reform, voluntary amalgamations in the beginning of the 21st century reduced the number of municipalities from 49 in 2000 to 35 in 2005. Early in 2008 a new government came to power and the coalition paper contained clear statements on the municipal structure. “Regional development initiatives and changes in the municipal structure shall ensure fair and balanced opportunities for all areas of the Faroe Islands.” Furthermore, the coalition paper contained statements on deadlines by which municipalities should have grouped into suitable entities that were able to take over more tasks from the state government – and this would ensure even standards of services in

the whole country (Aalbu et. al. 2008).

Prime Minister Jóannes Eidesgaard, said in his opening speech to the parliament (Løgtinget) in July 2008, where he said that the government had decided to reduce the number of municipalities to 7 during the mandate period. (Aalbu et. al. 2008). The government coalition broke up already in the autumn 2008 and these intentions have not yet become reality as other less interested parties have been in power since then.

The amalgamation issue was more or less put off in 2012 with a nationwide referendum on the people's will to amalgamate, with the potential result that the number of municipalities might have gone down from 30 to 7. With only 33 percent voter turnout, this proposal did not receive majority support in any of the 30 municipalities.

Today the number of municipalities remains at 29 – the radical intentions of the 2008 government were never realised as the people of Faroe Islands refused. And people seem to think that this amalgamation wave of the first decade of the 20th century has come to an end. "*The referendum stopped everything*" and "*The reform is dead*" were the answers the authors of this report received from interviews with people from the federation of municipalities in the Faroe Islands. However, if we look at what has happened since year 2000 we see a reduction of municipalities by almost 40% – so the change is noticeable even though the municipal structure characteristics remain the same: Fewer *very small* and more *rather small* municipalities. Only one amalgamation has taken place since 2009 when Húsa amalgamated with Klaksvík in 2017.

2.2. Greenland

When the home rule system was established in 1979 the 18 municipalities in Greenland acquired a more central role in the domestic welfare system taking care of social services, culture, education, housing, planning, fire brigades, water and electricity (Dahl, 1986; Bærenholdt, 2007). In 2007 the Greenland Parliament directed the Greenland Home Rule to implement a new municipal structure for Greenland. This decision led to radical structural

change when 18 municipalities were amalgamated to only 4. New municipal councils were elected in spring 2008 and established from May 2008. The change was formally implemented 1st January 2009. The rationale behind this development was set by the Structural Committee (Strukturudvalget). The main purposes were:

1. To make all municipalities large enough to be able to take over more tasks from the Home Rule.
2. To ensure that the citizens in the municipalities received better and safer services.
3. To gain effectiveness and economies of scale in the municipal service provision.[4]

The number of municipalities was reduced in 2009 from 18 to 4 municipalities but from 1 January 2018 the municipality of Qaasuitsup was split in two: Avannaata and Qegertalik. Therefore, the municipalities in Greenland are five, as we see in table 1:

Municipality	Population
Sermersooq	23039
Avannaata	10730
Qeqqata	9410
Qeqertalik	6538
Kujalleq	6427

Table 1. Municipalities in Greenland 2019 and their population.*[5]*

With the largest municipality of over 20,000 inhabitants, two around 10,000 and the two smallest of around 6,500 the structure has changed dramatically.

In their report *Administrative Reform – Arguments and Values*, Aalbu, Böhme and Uhlin map and analyze the municipal structures, structural reforms and the arguments and values behind them, in all eight Nordic countries. They conclude that no clear public opposition to the reform process in Greenland emerged. Further, they conclude that the in the debate around the reform, the main focus was on efficiency, accessibility and quality in local administration. Thus they think the main emphasis in the Greenland case has been on effectiveness and improved services, just as in the cases of Sweden and Denmark.

2.3. Iceland

The main development pattern is that the number of municipalities in Iceland increased slowly until the middle of the 20th century, and then began to decrease, especially after 1990. The main reason for the increasing number of municipalities until the 1950s (229 at its peak) was the industrialization of fishing, leading people to move from the countryside to the coast in order to work where there were better hopes of earning a decent income. This meant that new fishing villages emerged, and new municipalities were established.[6]

A slow decrease was in the number of municipalities after the mid-twentieth century (204 in 1990) is mainly explained by two forces – a number of rural municipalities ceased to exist due to total depopulation; and some municipal amalgamations. The rapid changes since after 1990 were indirectly facilitated by two referenda on municipal amalgamations – one in 1993 and the second in 2005 – and their implications. The number was down in 124 in 1998 and is at present 72.

In November 1993, referenda were held in 185 municipalities out of 196. Had all the submitted proposals been accepted, they would have meant a drastic reduction in the number of municipalities, down to 43. However, every proposal except one was voted down in these referenda. Only 67 out of the 185 municipalities involved voted for amalgamations. This only caused an immediate reduction of municipalities by 3, but nevertheless the ball had been set rolling and an amalgamation trend never known before had started. By the time of the local government elections in spring 1994, several voluntary amalgamations among those that had voted ‘yes’ in the November 1993 referenda had already reduced the number of municipalities to 171. By the next elections in 1998, the number was reduced further to 124 and was as low as 105 in the local government elections in 2002. Thus, a process was initiated in 1993 which had led to a reduction of municipalities by as much as 47 percent in only 9 years (Eythórsson 2003. Eythórsson 2009, Eythórsson 2012).

In 2003, the Icelandic Ministry of Social Affairs launched a reform project on the strengthening of the municipal level, in cooperation with the Federation of Municipalities. The main objectives were to strengthen municipalities so they would be better able to provide their current level of services and eventually some additional ones. Bringing about such

a change would make it possible to move certain public services from the state to the local level. This required both a revised division of tasks between state and local level, as well as a revision of local government finances. The cornerstone of the project, however, was to strengthen the local level by amalgamating smaller municipalities. Even though the number of municipalities had been reduced by almost 50 percent since 1993 the project commission argued that this had not changed the characteristics of the municipal structure. Still there were far too many small municipalities lacking the capacity to take over more responsibilities from the state.

A referendum took place in 66 municipalities out of 97 in spring and autumn 2005. In these 66 municipalities, residents voted on a total of 17 merger proposals; so a 'yes' to all proposals would have meant a reduction of 49 in the number of municipalities. Referenda were held in April and October on 17 different amalgamation proposals. The 17 different proposals were voted down in 42 municipalities and accepted in only 25. This however led to immediate reduction of municipalities by 8.

No serious or extensive attempts to reform the municipal sector have been implemented in Iceland since 2005. Besides, interest in further amalgamation reforms seems to decline. Surveys among all elected local politicians in 2006, 2011 and 2015 show this. Interest and belief in amalgamations as a measure to strengthen the municipal level became significantly less than before. There is, as earlier, no majority support for law enforcement with regard to amalgamations. Instead, local politicians showed increased interest in inter-municipal cooperation as the way to go further and take over more responsibilities from the state government (Eythórsson & Arnarson, 2012).

But in spite of all attempts to change, the main characteristic of the Icelandic system remains in the year 2019. More than half of the municipalities in the country have less than 1000 inhabitants and 1/3 has less than 500 (see Figure 1) – a trait which has been considered as the main problem through the decades; too many too small municipalities with limited capacity to provide modern services.

2.4. The West Nordic municipal structure in sum

When attempting to sum up and compare the municipal structure in these three countries, the most striking fact is the dramatic development in Greenland, where the structure of local administration was changed after 2007 by amalgamating 18 municipalities to 4 (later 5). In this respect, the Greenland structure differs significantly from that of the Faroe Islands and Iceland. Now, Greenland has few and large communes, both measured in population and areal – at least in West Nordic terms. Even though bigger steps towards reforming the municipal structure have been taken in Iceland than in Faroe Islands, the characteristics are in principle the same. In both cases there are proportionally numerous very small municipalities with limited capacity to take over more welfare tasks and thereby provide modern services. In Iceland, however, there existed a will to strengthen the local level by other means than amalgamating after the referendums in 2005.

Figure 1 illustrates the municipal structure in the three countries at present:

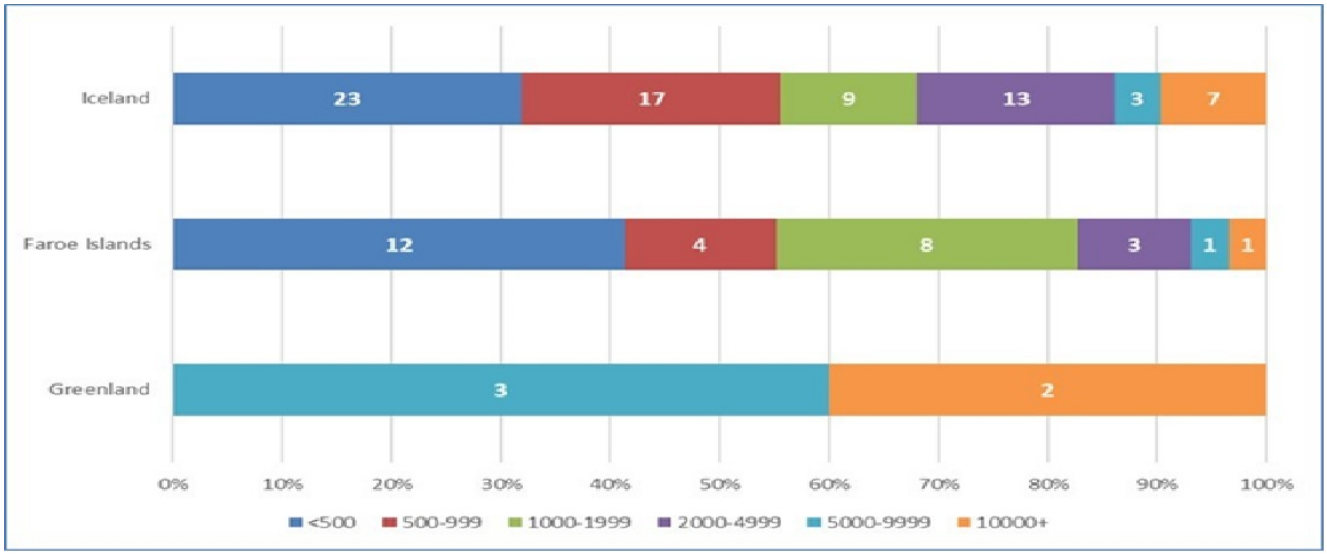


Figure 1. Municipalities in the West Nordic countries in different size categories 2018.

It is clear that the share of small municipalities; that is, with a population of less than 1000, is similar in Iceland and the Faroe Islands, at 55 percent. At the same time municipalities of such limited size do not exist in Greenland anymore.

Table 2 provides an overview of some facts about the number of municipalities and their populations in the three West Nordic countries:

	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Iceland
Total population	51,312	55,751	348,450
Number of municipalities	29	5	72
Average population	1,769	11,229	4,958
Median population	675	9,41	826

Table 2. Municipalities and their population in the West Nordic countries in 2019.

(Based on data from: www.stat.gl, www.hagstova.fo, www.hagstofa.is)

There are, for example, significant differences between the three countries in the average size of municipalities. While Greenland has about 11,000, Iceland has almost 5,000 and the Faroe Islands just under 1,800. However, the average for Iceland is strongly affected by the size of Reykjavík with its 129,000 inhabitants. Therefore, the median scores give a better picture with the Faroes at 675 and Iceland at 826.

3. Local democracy in the three countries

3.1. Local democracy in the Faroe Islands

The coalition paper published by the 2008 government in the Faroe Islands contained clear policy statements on enlargements of the municipalities in order to increase their service capacity and ensure even service standards in the whole country. This was emphasized by Prime Minister Eidesgaard in Parliament in summer 2008 where he announced that the goal was to reduce the number of municipalities to seven. He underlined the democratic aspect in his opening speech to Parliament on the 29th of July 2008:[7]

An important part of democracy lies in decisions being made as close to the citizens as possible, and this is one reason why more and more functions are being transferred to the municipalities. (Translation from Danish)

These arguments of attracting young people to the more peripheral regions by transferring challenging tasks to the municipalities from the state were central in his speech. By this, Eidesgaard was in fact saying that the municipalities were too many and too small and had too limited tasks. In other words, local democracy, even though formally present, lacked content to be effective. This kind of argumentation has, for example, been presented in this context by Dahl and Tufte (1973) as well as by Harald Baldersheim (1987) who stated that it could of course be claimed that municipal amalgamations, which reduced the number of

municipalities and thereby the number of local politicians, appeared to be a centralization of power. But such arrangements could actually prove to be a way to decentralize power, since an increased capacity for service provision also made local units capable of taking over more tasks from state level.

The emphasis in local democracy in the Faroe Islands was, according to this, clearly to make the units bigger and through that give the democracy some content. At the same time further amalgamations can increase the distance between the people and the politicians and even the distance to the administration, for some of them at least.

3.2. Local democracy in Greenland

In a report to the Greenland Structural Committee (Strukturudvalget) in 2005 the Danish political scientist Ulrik Kjær pointed out what the consequences of the reform would be for local democracy in Greenland. He raised a warning flag as to the form of geographical representation in the new extensive municipalities, not at least due to the many instances of very difficult communications between regions, villages and towns. In such a situation small and isolated places would suffer democratic deficits as peripheries in more than one sense. Kjær argued that it was very important, from a democratic point of view and with consideration to welfare services in the new municipalities, that smaller neighbourhoods should not lose all power within the new enlarged municipality (Kjær, 2005). Binderkrantz and Jacobsen (2007) also raised similar questions about the democratic aspect. According to them, increased costs, due to more travel between neighbourhoods in the new municipalities was to be met with a law on the use of videoconferences between isolated villages and neighbourhoods.

In the Annual Report 2011 of The Greenland Federation of Municipalities (KANUKOKA), local democracy is discussed in a separate chapter. It is stated that local democracy was not discussed broadly before the great amalgamations in 2009 – warnings from the scientists did clearly not get through. But in the report it is further stated that 3 years after the reform it is time to go deeper into that discussion. In the beginning of 2009 each of the four new

municipalities was to establish a “geographical mandate” for every one of the former 18 municipalities. However, this was only to apply for the first four year mandate period. The annual report refers to hearings on experiences of this, conducted by the Ministry of the Interior. The hearing showed clearly that the mandate had had different practical significance in the four municipalities and that it seems that the municipalities had understood the term “geographical mandate” very differently.

In a meeting of representatives held by the Greenland Federation of Municipalities (KANUKOKA) in June 2013 representatives from the municipalities formally expressed their evaluation of the impact of the 2009 structural reform, and there were some critical voices on both democracy and services:[8] For example Kelly Berthelsen from Kommune Kujalleq:

When discussing the impact of municipal amalgamation on us, it must be said that on the economic situation it has meant very negative experiences. The intended improvements for the population have been difficult to spot. Reductions in the service-level have been found to be necessary. Also because the conditions within the municipality have been different. Those who had the worst conditions before have noticed improvements. But those who had had better conditions before have experienced deterioration of the service level – e.g. prices for waste management have increased in some places. This is why the benefits of the amalgamation have been difficult to realize. Villages/towns that did not receive satisfactory representation in municipal councils last election period have felt a decline in their part in decision-making, and some settlements that did not get elected representatives in the new joint local councils have also felt the deterioration. This is still the case today. (translation from Danish).

And from the representative Asii Chemnitz Narup from Kommuneqarfik Sermersooq:

In establishing the larger municipalities, like the towns of Nuuk, Paamiut, Tasiilaq and Ittoqqortoormiit their citizens noticed that the local democratic influence became somewhat weaker. There were fewer elected officials, and the municipal council members were now for the entire municipality. The smaller rural communities still have their own elected sub-councils. They are gathered annually for a meeting with the municipal council. But since the participation of the urban population seems to be weaker, we are now setting up local councils, which will serve as an external branch of the municipal council, which has now

been reduced from 21 to 19 members. (translation from Danish).

These two examples taken from the resume of this meeting in June 2013 clearly show that there are problems with the representation of the small villages all over Greenland in their new democratic order.

3.3. Local democracy in Iceland

The earlier mentioned evaluation study of seven amalgamations undertaken in Iceland in 1994 and 1998, where 37 municipalities were involved, showed evident signs of democratic deficits for the smaller and peripheral municipalities. Surveys among the citizens clearly indicated that people outside the central service and administration locations felt that they were now more distant from their politicians than before and thereby their opportunities to influence and lobby decisions were much more limited. Furthermore, the majority of the people living in the peripheral parts believed that political power was now concentrated in these 'central places' (Eythórsson & Jóhannesson, 2002). No other evaluation study has been done since and the results remain. There are some examples of discontent in former municipalities and attempts have been made to accomplish splits or breakouts. This has, for example, been done several times in Sweden since the municipal structural reform in the 1970s and seven such requests were accepted by the Swedish government between 1974 and 1985 (Erlingsson 2005). In the Icelandic case such attempts have always been rejected. The democratic consequences of amalgamations have not been high on the political agenda and can hardly be seen as an emerging problem. (Eythórsson & Jóhannesson, 2002; Eythórsson, 2009).

3.4. West Nordic local democracy in sum

As we have seen, current municipal structure in these three countries is less similar than it

used to be. After the great reform in Greenland the municipalities are not only largest in areal but also in population in the West Nordic comparative perspective. In table 2 above it is shown, however, that the Faroese and Icelandic municipal structures are quite similar compared with the situation in Greenland. The most emerging question about local democracy in Greenland is the geographical representation of small villages and neighbourhoods after the great reform. The concern, just before the amalgamations came into practice, was how these smaller and often very isolated neighbourhoods could be democratically included in the new municipalities and have something to say or decide about their matters. In the Faroe Islands the big issue seems to be mostly connected to the content of local democracy, since the numerous small municipalities have limited tasks. This is, however, not the standpoint of the smaller municipalities which run their own federation and claim that they are doing well as they are. But recently, the two municipal federations were merged into one, so the possibilities for the smaller municipalities to act as such are perhaps at risk. In the Icelandic case much of the discussion in the latest years on democracy on the municipal level is about direct citizen democracy versus the more traditional representative democracy and increased citizen participation in decision making between elections seems to be a key word nowadays. This concern was clearly emphasized in the Local Government Act of 2011. The connection between size and democracy seems to have vanished from the agenda with the latest attempt to reform the structure in 2005.

4. The local leader's perceptions of local democracy

4.1. A West Nordic net-survey

The questionnaire sent out to the local politicians and administrators in the three countries was a net-survey (Eythórsson, Gløersen & Karlsson 2015).

In Iceland there are at present 504 elected representatives, in Greenland 305 (including neighbourhood councils – bygderåd) and in the Faroe Islands there are 208 elected delegates. Only those with accessible e-mail addresses could be included in the population

in this research. In no case we were able to find the e-mails of all elected local politicians; In Iceland we found 454/504 politicians and additionally 41 top administrator. In the Faroe Islands we found 200/206 politicians and, in addition, 14 top administrators. In Greenland we had the toughest problems. Nevertheless, we found the e-mails of 103/305 elected representatives either in municipalities or in the sub municipal units (Bygderåd), as well as 34 administrators. This gave us a population of 495 in Iceland, 214 in the Faroe Islands and 137 in Greenland.

The questionnaire was sent out 21st April 2015 and closed 2nd June. The final response rate varied from something that could be expected in Iceland and Faroe Islands down to a very low rate in Greenland. In Iceland the response rate was 54.0%, in Faroe Islands 52.9%[9] and in Greenland we only received 38 answers which gave a rate of 29.2%. Greenland is problematic in this sense. Even though responses from 38 people can give us some valuable information, any generalization on the basis of such few answers is difficult. Therefore, we had to try to make the best possible use of answers to open-ended questions – especially from Greenland. Our results in the Greenland case have to be seen in this light and should perhaps rather be regarded as indications. Additionally, the survey was conducted at the time when municipalities in Greenland were four and not five as today.

4.2. Democracy and the influence of territories: Status in the new context

In our survey we asked the question (as a statement): *Small and peripheral neighbourhoods in the municipality have less influence*. This was done in order to get the local leaders attitudes towards what in earlier research in Iceland and Sweden was evident and to what extent the attitudes existed in the two other West Nordic countries, since this had not been studies there. In this case we do not only show an analysis by municipal size but also by the leaders' perceived status of a former municipality after amalgamation – whether it was perceived as a central area or a periphery.

The Faroese case does not show strong support among the local leaders for this statement. What is anticipated is the lowest score among leaders from centrally placed municipalities

(3.63) and the highest score among those from the peripheries (4.82) on our 1 – 7 scale where 4 is the mid value. Scores in size groups are more confusing. In smaller units, the leaders give the statement less support than in larger ones, which is against what earlier has been found in other countries! But we have to bear in mind how tight the scores are only ranging from 3.63 to 4.82, just a small part of the scale.

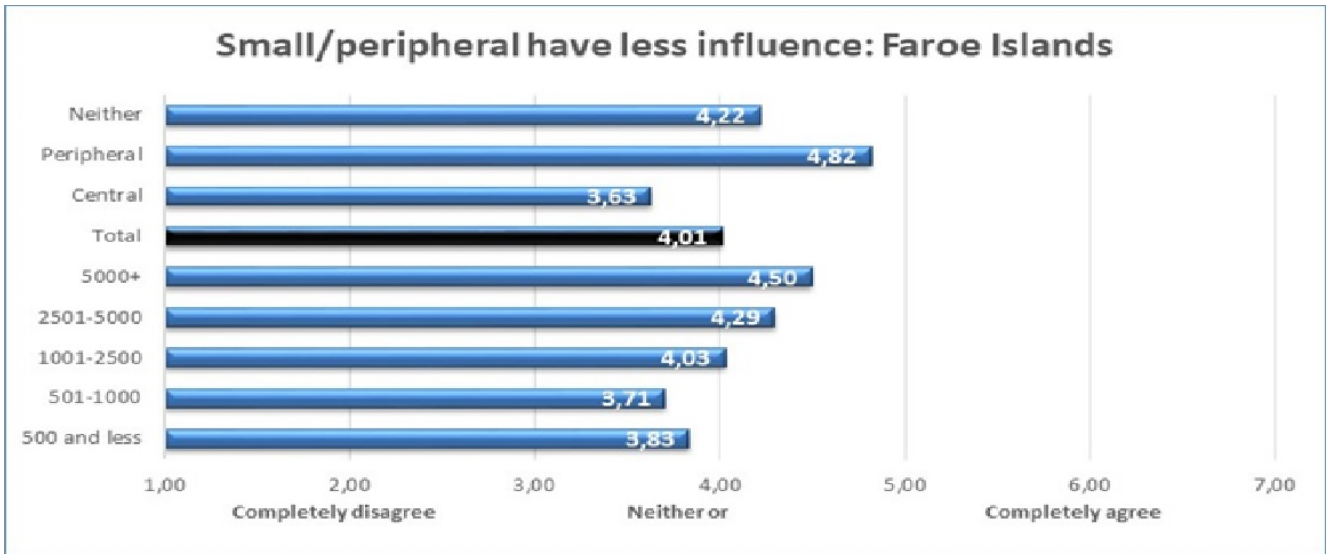


Figure 2. "Small and peripheral neighbourhoods in the municipality have less influence". Mean scores on a scale 1-7 on the above statement (1=Completely disagree; 7=Completely agree). (N=91).

Faroese local leaders do not give much support to the statement that people in smaller and peripheral parts of municipalities are less influential. We see clear sign of Centre – Periphery dimension in the sense that leaders believe that the peripheral parts have less influence. In there is any correlation between this and municipal size it is more of that the ones in the smaller feel less loss of influence. Here we do not see any real difference between tiny and small.

The limited data we collected from Greenland has to be used with caution, since the response rates and number of responses do not allow any broad conclusions. We look instead at results as indicating trends or patterns. Our qualitative data collected also contributes to such an approach.

The scores in figure 3 below show that in peripheral communities and the bigger ones people believe more that the small and peripheral have less influence on decisions.

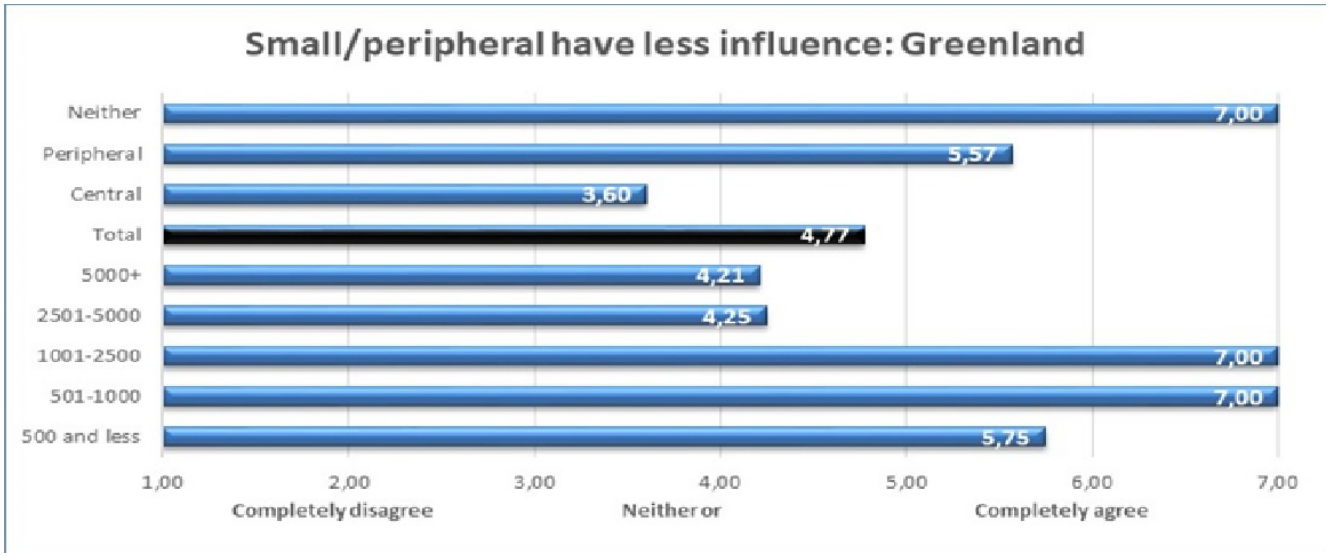


Figure 3. "Small and peripheral neighbourhoods in the municipality have less influence". Greenland. (N=31).

One respondent in a very small sub-municipal unit wrote a comment to support of the statement in the question:

Before the great amalgamation we had a common meeting in the "bygdebestyrelse" (sub-municipal board) together with the mayor (kommunaldirektøren) once a year, where we got information on what had been done or changed for the better in the services to the citizens. All this has now totally disappeared after the amalgamation in 2009. Since then the "bygde-bestyrelse" no longer has any tasks or responsibilities. Other sub-units (bygder) that need more support for development than we do are now prioritized.

This supports our quantitative results – there seems to be some truth in the results provided. The small and peripheral communities in Greenland seem to have been undermined, while this can hardly be said in the Faroese case and not at all in the Icelandic case. This is according to information from local leaders.

Variations show up in Iceland, but support for the statement is clearly weaker than in the Faroes; only 3.10 in general compared with 4.01. However, leaders in peripheries in Iceland (as in the Faroes) demonstrate the strongest support (4.17) much more than their colleagues in the centres (3.32). Variations by municipal size are very small, with the exception that leaders in the 9 largest units strongly disagree with the statement (2.36) while others show scores just above 3. This loss of influence in the smaller and peripheral municipalities does not seem to be emerging in Iceland, presently after a decade since most of the amalgamations in the country already had taken place. Even here we find Centre – Periphery differences but when looking at size it has only to do with the 8 very biggest ones versus all the others. That tells us that there are differences here between tiny and small.

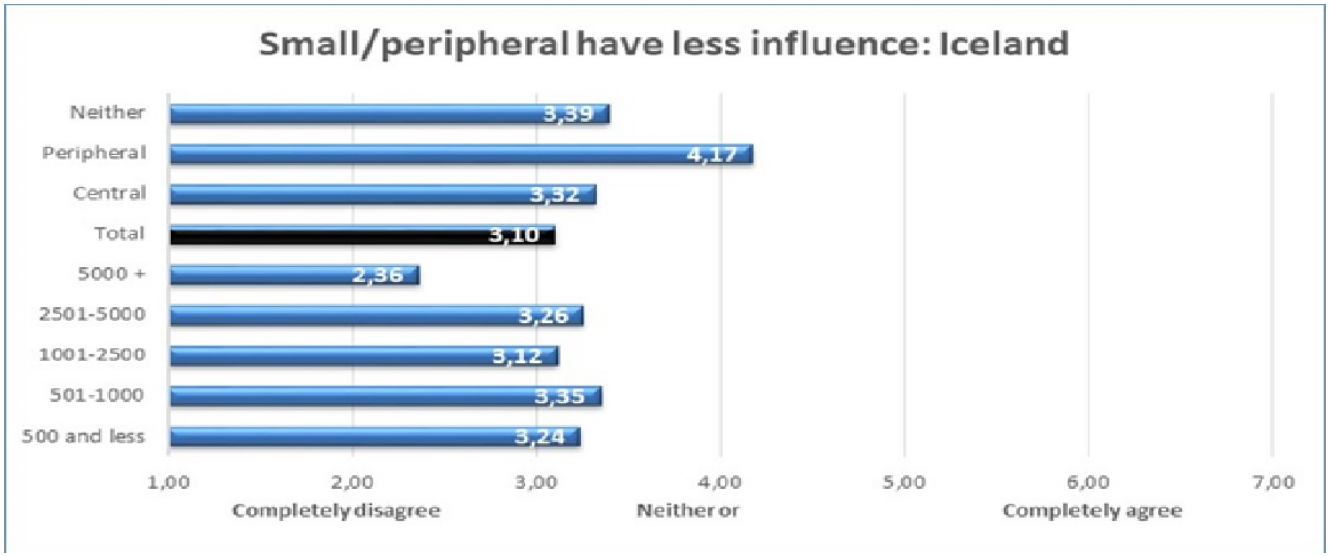


Figure 4. "Small and peripheral neighbourhoods in the municipality have less influence". Iceland. (N=225).

4.3. Accessibility to administration and ties to politicians

Good accessibility to the municipal administration is a part of good local democracy. In an earlier mentioned evaluation study by Eythórsson and Jóhannesson (2002), where seven amalgamations in Iceland in the 1990s were evaluated, clear signs were found, both among the general population and elected officials in the smaller and peripheral parts of the new municipalities, of experiencing increased distance from the administration – in other words reduced accessibility.

In this case the results are built on answers from local politicians and administrators and not from citizens. Whether this makes any difference for the results or not is not easy to say, but our results imply that this is hardly the case, at least not in the Faroe Islands and Iceland. One of the statements in the survey was: “People have good accessibility to the administration”.

In Faroe Islands this seems to be a general opinion among the local leaders. The mean scores are high in all categories (5.30 – 5.97 on our 1 – 7 scale) except in the capital (the only municipality with more than 5000) where the result is “neither or” (4,00). In this sense size seems to matter. A central-peripheral dimension also seems to be absent.

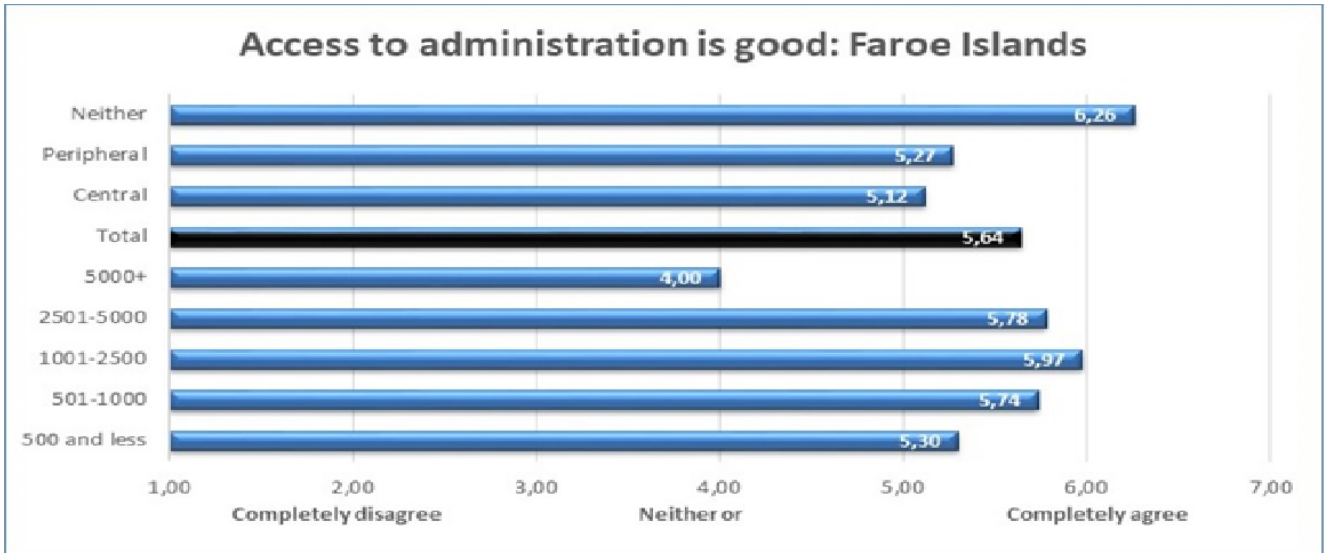


Figure 5. "People have good accessibility to the administration". Faroe Islands. (N=100).

Not so surprisingly, the results from Greenland are different. The statement on good accessibility enjoys much less support- despite some variations between groups. The leaders in smaller units grade the accessibility much lower – the difference between centre and periphery is considerable. How to evaluate these results, with the few answers, low response rate and, last but not least the huge confidence gap, is however difficult to determine. However, a trend seems to be evident.

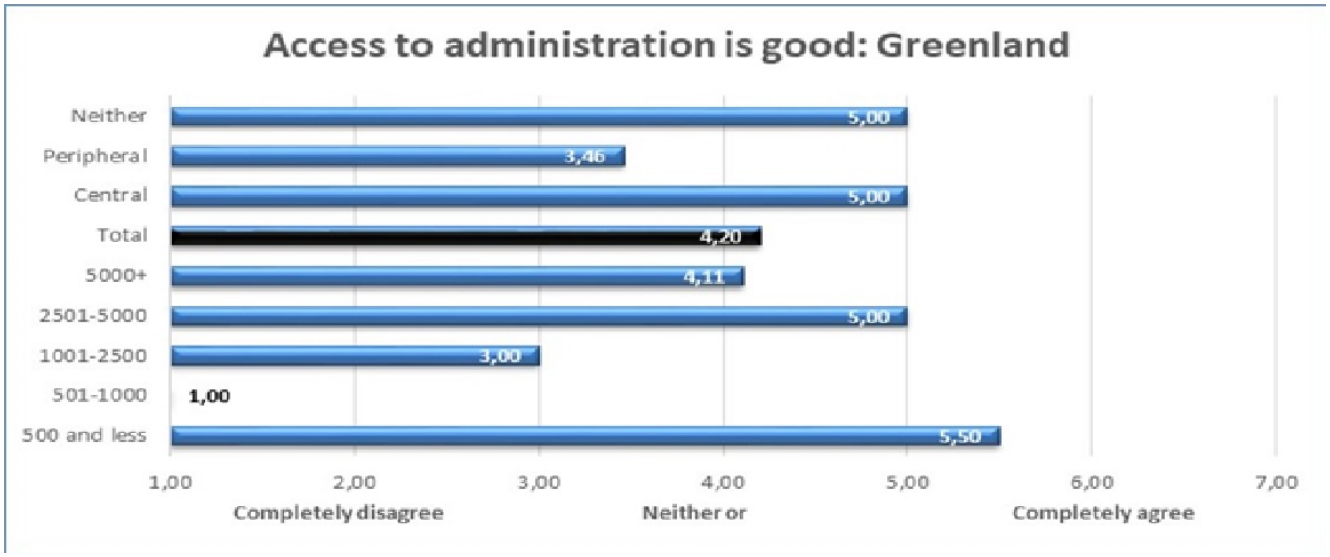


Figure 6. "People have good accessibility to the administration". Greenland. (N=30).

Open answers from the survey and letters from respondents help our understanding of the results. A letter from a sub-municipal bureaucrat, expressed severe criticism with regard to access to administration after the amalgamations in 2009:

The administration of the big municipality in X has now taken over all administrative tasks. The services to the citizens have been significantly reduced, with a long time waiting for an answer and in some cases the administration has not even answered. Services and those responsible for them have become invisible or have disappeared. All administration and tasks of the sub-municipal council have been transferred to the town. At the same time they have reduced personnel in the sub units and the result is less quality in the administration. Many people from different sub-units have complained about this situation but this has neither been responded to nor led to any changes. It is as if the person responsible has become the enemy of the village.

Another respondent who mailed to us wrote:

The amalgamation of municipality X, leading to very spread neighbourhoods and villages has not been good for the people compared with the situation before. The head administrative office has difficulties in understanding the issues brought up and has problems adapting to this new situation.

The survey results show varying attitudes towards accessibility to administration. The letter we received from the small sub municipal unit is however critical. We can at least presume that the views on this are mixed among the Greenland local leaders and negative as a whole.

In the case of Iceland, satisfaction with the accessibility among local leaders is even stronger than in the Faroes (figure 5). The scores are almost all around 6 on the 1-7 scale, which is high.

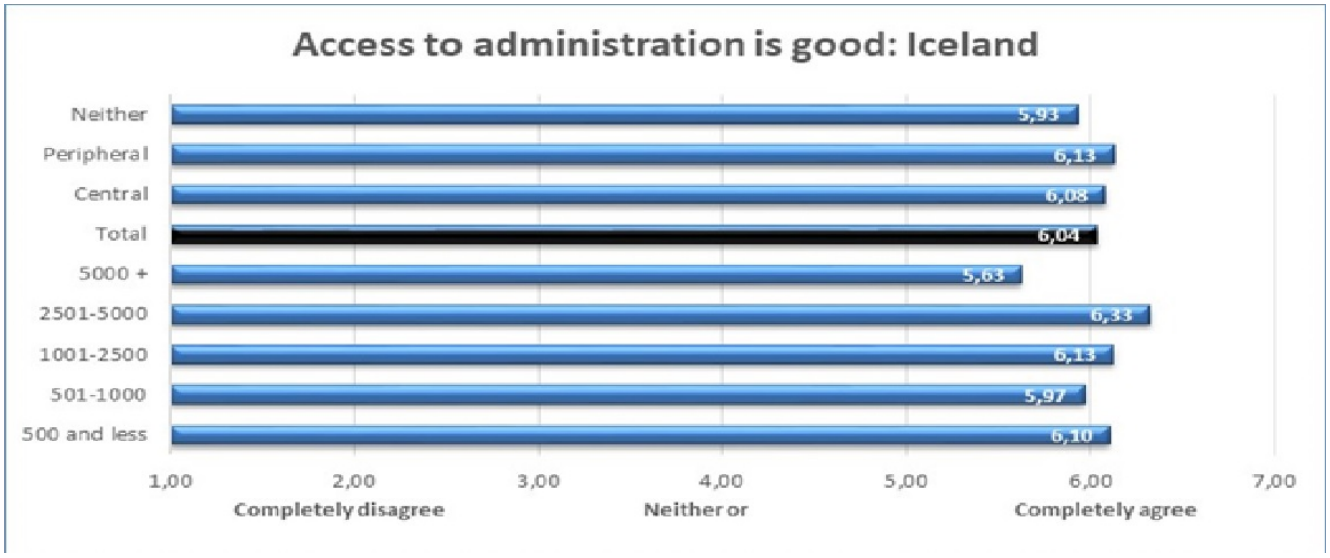


Figure 7. "People have good accessibility to the administration". Iceland. (N=245).

A second of our questions on perceptions of local democracy deals with closeness between citizens and politicians – the contact on a more personal level. Traditional theories on size and democracy tell us that these two are connected and we should expect closer ties in smaller units (Dahl and Tufte 1973). The evaluation study by Eythórsson and Jóhannesson in Iceland in 2002 found that citizens in smaller and more peripheral municipalities, after recent amalgamations, felt that the distance between them and their representatives had increased. In the survey, we brought up the statement "There are tight and close ties between the people and the local politicians".

The results from the Faroe Islands show a correlation between perceived closeness between citizens and politicians on one hand and size of municipality on the other hand. Figure 8 below shows certain differences: Closeness decreases with increasing size, that is when it exceeds 5000. It also seems to be a little less in the periphery than in the centres. However, despite some differences, in general there seem to be rather close ties in the Faroes –

according to the politicians and bureaucrats.

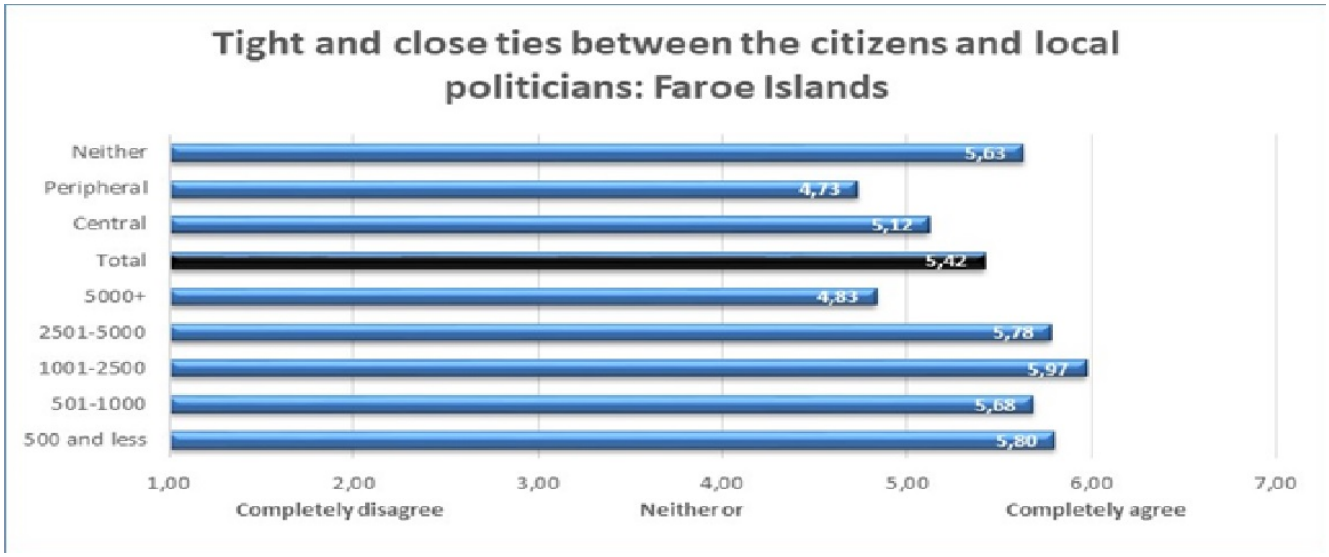


Figure 8. "There are tight and close ties between the people and the local

politicians". Faroes. (N=100).

The survey results from Greenland do not show as strong perception of closeness between citizens and politicians – as before Greenland differs from the other two countries. What we can single out here is what appears to be a difference between the smallest (1,000 and less) and the larger ones – the ties seem to be closer in the smaller context. The centre – periphery difference is even significant with looser ties in the peripheral municipalities.

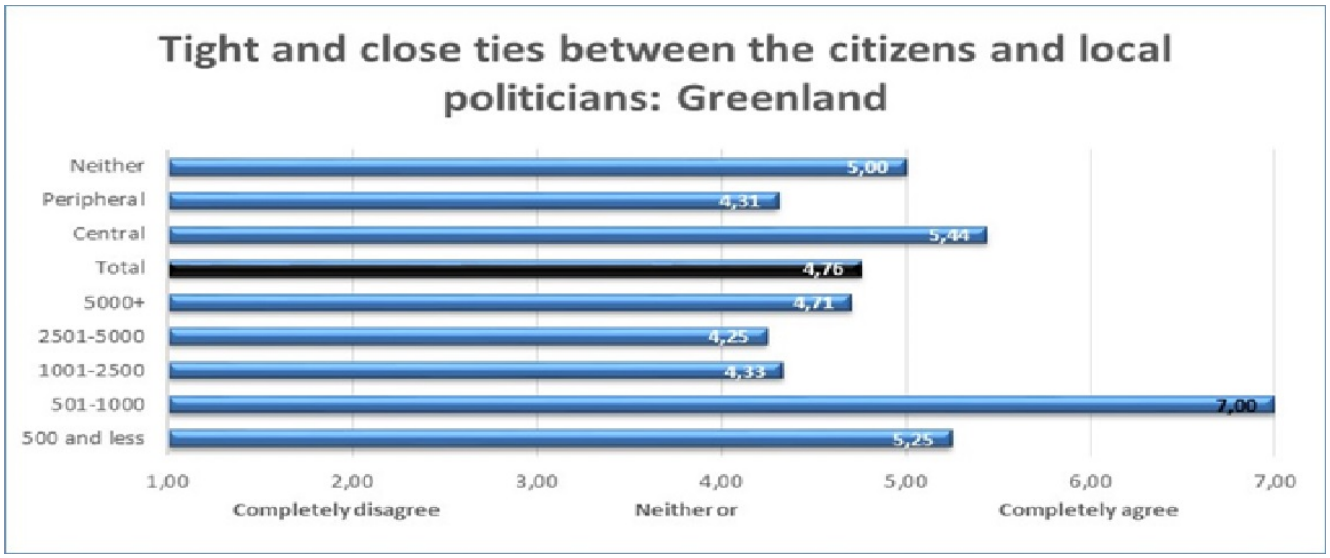


Figure 9. "There are tight and close ties between the people and the local politicians". Greenland. (N=29).

If we look at the results from the Icelandic case, we see evidence of closeness between the elected and the electorate. We only see a slight tendency for less ties with municipal size. Very little differences show up between centre and periphery as is the case in the Faroes.

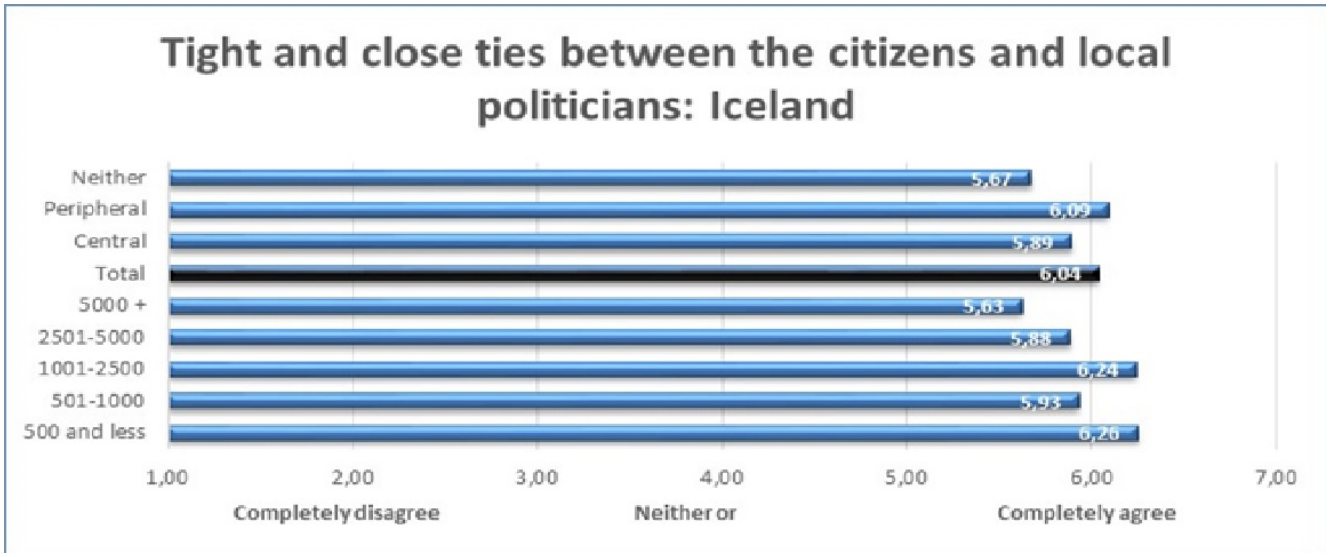


Figure 10. "There are tight and close ties between the people and the local politicians". Iceland. (N=242).

These three figures above do more or less support theories about the connection between closeness, accessibility and municipal population size (Dahl and Tufte 1973). In smaller units the ties are closer – however the differences are not great in Faroe Islands and especially not in Iceland. In these two countries, some signs of differences between centre and periphery appear. But let's keep in mind that this is what politicians and administrators believe. We did not ask the citizens in this study. Greenland deviates significantly on all measured points, both on differences by size and between centre and periphery. The overall scores for Greenland are also lower than in the other two countries which indicates much lower content with these aspects of local democracy.

5. Concluding discussion and summary

We cannot overlook the fact that small local government units have some considerable drawbacks while large ones have some advantages. In this article, I have studied these differences in democracy in three small and sparsely populated countries in the North Atlantic. Two of them have high share of small municipalities on an international scale.

It has appeared that territorial democratic deficits measured through the question on *if smaller and peripheral neighbourhoods have less influence*, are evident in all three countries. The differences by size are not as big as when between centre and peripheral parts. In all three countries the centre – periphery dimension is apparent and especially in Greenland. The size dimension is not as strong in the context – not at all in the Faroe Islands and weak in Iceland. In the case of Greenland it is very clear.

Looking at the other two dimensions, 'Access to administration' and 'Ties between

politicians and citizens' there are not so clear patterns except that the difference between centre and periphery in Greenland seems to be existing. Differences by municipal size are not very evident in any of the countries, ranging from none to slight differences. To sum this up differences between centre and periphery are significant in all three countries when looking at the perceptions of territorial democratic deficits. This is less so if we look at municipal size, however with the differences strong in Greenland. Table 3 below shows a summary of this.

	Country	Territorial democratic deficits	Access to administration	Ties between politicians and citizens
Municipal size differences	*Iceland*	yes	**NO**	yes
	Faroe Islands	**NO**	yes	yes
	Greenland	**YES**	yes	no
Centre-Periphery differences	*Iceland*	yes	**NO**	**NO**
	Faroe Islands	yes	**NO**	no
	Greenland	**YES**	**YES**	yes

Table 3. Summary of the local leaders perceptions of three aspects of local democracy in the West Nordic countries.

Note: **YES** = Differences are significantly strong; yes = Differences exist; no = slight differences; **NO** = no differences at all.

With the overview from table 3 we see that territorial democratic deficits are existing in all cases except size differences in the Faroe Islands. Greenland stands out – local democracy seems to be of far more concern in Greenland than in the other two countries. Icelandic local leaders seem to be more or less content with the situation of access to administration and ties to politicians, while there seems to be more of a question about influence by territory or territorial democratic deficits. The same is for Faroe Islands.

The difference between Greenland on one hand and Iceland and Faroe Islands on the other is apparent and raises questions. Can the widespread discontent in Greenland have to do with how recently their amalgamation reform took place? There were only 5-6 years between the implementation of the reform and our survey. Would things have had to settle down and wounds to cure after this big in scale reform? Or was the reform too big in scale? A study on the consequences conducted for the government of Greenland "Kommunalt demokrati i Grønland" done by the Danish political scientist Ulrik Kjær showed that the discontent with the local democracy among citizens was high and that was even more evident in the peripheral municipalities (Kjær 2015). The pattern we found in Greenland in our West Nordic survey among local leaders is confirmed by the results in the study among the citizens.

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7. Endnotes

[1] In Greenland sub-municipal units (Bygdebestyrelser) were even included.

[2] The authors of this chapter use three indicators for municipal size: population, area and urbanization degree. The discussion of size here is restricted to population numbers.

[3] Hovgaard et.al. 2004, pp. 18-20

[4] See the following document:

http://dk.nanoq.gl/Emner/Landsstyre/Departementer/Dep_for_indenrigsanliggender_Natur_og_Miljoe/Indenrigskontor/Til_kommunerne/Strukturreformen/Strukturudvalget.aspx. (Downloaded on 25th April 2013). Aalbu (et.al.) (2008).

[5] Statistics Greenland:

http://www.stat.gl/dialog/main.asp?lang=da&version=201904&sc=BE&subthemecode=O1&colcode=O

[6] Based on Eythórsson (1998).

[7] Aalbu et. al. 2008 p. 34.

[8] Referat. Delegeretmøde i KANUKOKA 2013.

[9] The response rate was similar in Iceland and the Faroes. In a survey among elected local politicians in Iceland in the autumn 2011 the response rate was 56.6% (Eythórsson and Arnarson 2012) and in a survey sent to mayors and administrative leaders in Iceland, the Faroes and Åland in 2004 the response rate was 61.2% in Iceland and 44.8% in the Faroe Islands (Hovgaard, Eythórsson and Fellman 2004).