Introduction

Municipal amalgamation reforms tend to meet resistance and opposition from the municipalities involved. Such territorial reforms can lead to great changes for the municipalities, as well as their inhabitants, since some may have had their jurisdictional boundaries for a long time. Therefore, it is no wonder that conflicts can occur in connection with such reforms (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010). Such shuffling involving not merely municipal boundaries, but also the political landscape, the structure of municipal administration and service delivery, can lead to comprehensive changes for everyone involved. The Norwegian political scientists Baldersheim and Rose (2010) argue that whether such or suggested changes will lead to conflicts can depend on the strategies used during implementation. They also connect this with the institutional context – national and local – and presented an analytical framework in which institutional context determines both the choice of reform strategy and the pattern of conflicts arising from the reform. All this then determines the outcome. Steiner et al. (2016) examined patterns of conflict related to territorial reforms in European countries using this framework. They based their investigation on surveys among experts in 11 European countries. Their main findings were that top-down initiatives and comprehensive reforms were more likely to trigger conflicts and resistance, while more incremental and bottom-up-oriented approaches would probably engender less struggle and defiance, if any.

In this article, I take a closer look at Iceland, one of the eleven countries from the Steiner (et al. 2016) study, and use Baldersheim and Rose's (2010) framework to analyze two cases of municipal structure reforms. Specifically, the Icelandic national authorities have twice tried to implement a comprehensive territorial reform at the local level. This has been done by setting up referendums in majority of the municipalities, first in 1993 and later in 2005. Neither of these reforms (or reform attempts) ended up being successful. To better explain what brought about these outcomes I address the following research questions:

1. What reform strategies were used in the municipal structural reforms in Iceland 1993 and 2005? Were there any conflicts connected to them and if so, what kind of conflicts?
2. Which were the outcomes of these reforms and can they be seen as consequences of the strategies that were used and the conflicts that came up?

Data and method

The empirical data used is partly from the authors doctoral thesis (1998), where the politics of territorial reforms in Iceland were studied. That data relates to the 1993 referendum on municipal amalgamations in 185 municipalities, its prelude and aftermath. The empirical data used to analyze the reform ending in a referendum in 2005 is mostly from data collection conducted later, but not as thoroughly reported.[1]

In the case of the 1993 reform two kinds of data were used in the analysis. Firstly, the data on voters is from the referendums conducted in November 1993 where the results (yes-votes) in every single municipality were analyzed by the municipality´s population size. Secondly, the data on the local leaders' through an analysis of their responses to a questionnaire sent out in early 1994. Their attitudes and values were compared on an index that was constructed – an index based on 23 questions about municipal mergers that were sent to the Icelandic municipal leaders.[2]

In the case of the referendums in 2005, population size data and results from the referendums are used. No data on local leaders from that case exists.

1. Amalgamation strategies, conflicts and outcomes

Baldersheim and Rose argue that whether changes initiated by territorial reforms will lead to any conflicts may largely depend on the strategies used in the implementation process. They present an analytical framework where institutional context determines both the choice of reform strategy and the pattern of conflicts given rise to (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010). Here we focus on strategies, conflicts, and outcomes.

1.1. Strategies

Baldersheim and Rose define the concept "strategy" as follows: "*Strategies are, for our purposes, the procedures of decision-making adopted by policymakers in order to accommodate interests and stakeholders affected by policy initiatives*" (Baldersheim &

Rose, 2010, p. 12). They name one of these "The Jacobin strategy". It has roots in rational objectives or the rational scientific administrative ideal. This is when a reform is set up, planned, and implemented by the national authorities and is comprehensive – a reform that sweeps across the whole country with all the units in the whole system included – "the entire local government structure in the country is analyzed at one point in time," as worded by Steiner et al. (2016, p. 27). Decisions are made by national-level decision-makers and imposed on local governments. The decisions are, for the most part, forced upon the municipalities. This we can call a comprehensive reform, and the strategy is top-down-oriented, apparently of a strict, forceful, and authoritarian character, but this is not the case in all European countries. Here we should bear in mind that member states of the Council of Europe must respect the charter on local self-government as a rule[3], which means that the member states must allow a certain degree of local participation in the amalgamation processes. This limits the top-down orientation of the strategies that are possible to use (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010). In Norway for example, the local authorities could choose with which other municipalities they amalgamated. In the 1962 amalgamation reform in Sweden (Kommunblocksreformen) the setup was voluntary in the beginning but due to opposition from smaller municipalities, the process was delayed and finally imposed by means of legislation in 1968 forcing the municipalities to amalgamate in 1971 and 1974 (Strömberg & Westerståhl, 1984).

Things were even more top-down and enforced in the great amalgamation reform in Denmark in 2007. In the beginning, the Danish municipalities could choose merger partners, but the final decision was forced upon them if no such partner could be identified (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010; Baldersheim & Rose, 2016; Steiner et al., 2016; Blom-Hansen et al., 2016; Broekema et al., 2016). Similar methods were applied during the great amalgamation process in Greece. Additionally, in both Denmark and Greece, the Jacobin strategy was partly diluted when the capital regions were excluded from the amalgamation reforms, so the reforms were not fully comprehensive.

Another strategy defined by Baldersheim and Rose is "The Girondin strategy". Here, initiatives on boundary changes come from local authorities and even national authorities and are accepted by national governments. This is through a "stepwise bottom-up approach with much room for bargaining between national and local elites" (Baldersheim and Rose 2010, p. 13). Steiner (et al.) describe a bottom-up amalgamation strategy as reforms, usually

voluntary, where the municipality and its citizens decide on their own whether they want to merge with other municipalities (Steiner et al., 2016, p. 26). Here we see the reverse of the Jacobin strategy; the initiative comes from below, and the reform applies only to parts of the state. This Girondin strategy is characterized by bottom-up initiatives and an incremental approach. (see also Kaiser, 2014; Kaiser, 2015).

1.2. Conflicts

Attempts to change a country's territorial division in municipalities are generally bound to meet opposition and conflict. Multiple interests are at stake: local identity, political careers, jobs, and various contracts. All these will be lost as municipalities cease to exist as units, and there will be less need for identity, careers and jobs etc. (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010). At the same time, local identity in a small context can be lost when the territory is no longer independent (Eythórsson & Jóhannesson, 2002). At the same time, central government interests can lie in the need for more competence and enthusiasm at the local level, so that policy at the national level can be better implemented (Baldersheim & Rose, 2016). What kinds of conflicts can arise from this?

Baldersheim and Rose identify two main types of conflict: *left vs. right* and *centre vs. periphery*. The left-right dimension of political conflict is about the distribution of valuable resources in society. While the left side has seen larger municipalities as means to equalize living conditions and tax bases, as well as to enhance welfare provisions, the right has tended to argue in favor of the principle of local identity and local autonomy (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010; Baldersheim & Rose, 2016).

The center-periphery dimension is more complicated. The center-periphery cleavage exists in many European countries, but its significance varies between countries (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983). Iceland and Norway are no exceptions to this, with both countries having significant center-periphery cleavages (Bjørklund, 2013; Bjarnason & Heiðarsson, 2013). The center-periphery cleavage is often about identity, language, religion, lifestyles, and affiliation. In the case of Iceland, the focus is on some of these, but also on the dramatic capital concentration, where the capital of Reykjavík and its surrounding municipalities in the south-west peninsula are home to more than 2/3 of the national population. Centre-periphery cleavages can also occur at regional levels, for example, relating to the size

difference between towns and rural municipalities all over the country. The fear of democratic deficits and injustice has been shown to be evident in the small municipalities, where people worry that that they would be "swallowed" and overrun by the large or dominating population centers. This affects attitudes towards eventual amalgamations and has to do not only with a municipality's population size but also with the relative size of a municipality in a proposed amalgamation. This perspective has emerged in analyses, both in Iceland and earlier in Sweden (Eythórsson, 1998; Brantgärde, 1974). As we will see later in this article, these matters of this nature caused conflicts and opposition to the municipal reforms we scrutinize here.

The analysis presented in the paper aims to identify the reform strategies used and the conflicts that came up. Further how these two shaped the outcomes of the two amalgamation reforms ending in comprehensive referendums in Iceland, in 1993 and later in 2005.

2. Two attempts at territorial reforms: The referendums in 1993 and 2005

This part will analyze the two widespread local referendums on amalgamations held in 1993 and 2005 and present empirical material in order to answer the research questions about institutional context, strategies, conflicts and outcomes.

2.1. The context

2.1.1. The premises for municipal amalgamations

Since the first "Act on Local Government" in Iceland (Sveitarstjórnarlög) was passed in 1961, it has been the law that no municipality can be amalgamated with any other unless a referendum is held on the issue. A majority of votes in favor are a premise for the acceptance of an amalgamation. This has not changed over the years, and no revision of the Act has altered this.[4] Therefore, due to the legal provision on referenda, amalgamation is always in the power of the citizens in each municipality. With the Act on Local Government of 2011, a paragraph on compulsory amalgamations was removed. Since the Act of Local

government 1961 and until then, municipalities below a specific minimum size were to be amalgamated to a neighboring municipality by the national government – if they remained under the size-minimum for a certain period. This minimum, however, was very low. In 1961, it was set to 100 inhabitants for 5 years in a row, then lowered to 30 in the Act on Municipal Amalgamations in 1970.[5] The minimum was raised again to 50 inhabitants, and for three years in a row, by the Local Government Act in 1986.[6] These legal provisions have sometimes led to the compulsory amalgamation of the smallest municipalities, but this has failed to significantly affect the municipal structure.

2.1.2. The pre-history of amalgamations

Interest in revising the municipal structure in Iceland has existed at higher levels since the early 1950s, when the Association of Local Authorities urged the Minister of Social and Health Affairs to initiate a process of municipal amalgamations, but without success. After several attempts and urging by the Association throughout the years, often supported by the Social Democratic Party, things first began to move in the early nineties. All this time, the Icelandic Althingi (Parliament) was reluctant to enforce municipal amalgamations by law, primarily due to opposition from many municipalities, especially the smaller ones. Support for amalgamations by the Association of Local Authorities from the beginning is interesting in this context. While the Association officially pressed for municipal amalgamations, the majority of its member municipalities did not support that policy at all. This reveals the disproportionate power wielded by larger municipalities within the Association, at the expense of smaller ones (Eythórsson, 1998 and 2009).

Another explanation for why hardly any amalgamations were implemented in the period before 1990 was the slow growth of the Icelandic welfare state, which was much slower than in the other Nordic countries. The state, rather than local government, assumed most of the responsibilities and tasks connected to the rapidly growing welfare state, so the functional pressure on the municipalities increased slowly in comparison (Eythórsson, 1998). The Local Government Act of 1961, laws on municipal amalgamations of 1970, and the new Local Government Act of 1986 did not significantly change the municipal structure; the voluntary principle behind municipal amalgamations remained unchallenged in Althingi.

2.2. The 1993 referendums

2.2.1. Implementation – Strategy

In 1991, the Social Democrat and Minister for Social Affairs[7], Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, took the initiative to establish a commission to start a process that would result in a reduction of the number of municipalities – hereafter called "Commission I".[8] The main aim was to establish larger municipalities and therefore be much better capable of municipal services and administration, because larger units were believed to have a better capacity to deliver appropriate welfare services in step with modern standards. However, any amalgamation should be voluntary for each municipality as before; and all proposals on which municipalities were suggested to amalgamate should be developed by themselves or by representative mutual boards within the respective regions.

The commission found a comprehensive territorial reform necessary on the following grounds:

1. Many municipalities were extremely small and lacked the capacity to maintain adequate services.
2. Joint responsibility of the state and the municipalities in various areas was unacceptable.
3. The existing municipal structure was far from matching functional service areas.
4. Significant improvements in road communications that had been done had already made the municipal structure obsolete.
5. Inter-municipal cooperation was widespread, and some of the smallest units had devoted almost all their budget to such arrangements.
6. Administrative costs were far too high in the smallest municipalities.
7. The economic situation of the municipalities varied considerably. Amalgamations would equalize this.
8. Amalgamations were likely to strengthen the rural areas of the country and prevent depopulation and out-migration to the capital area.

The commission completed its task in 1991 and submitted three alternative proposals on what could be done about the municipal structure: The first proposal set 500 as the population minimum, which would have led to a reduction from 196 to 60/70. The second proposal was to amalgamate all municipalities within each of Iceland's counties, leading to a

reduction to 25 municipalities. The third proposal was to keep the existing structure unchanged but instead work for increased inter-municipal cooperation in order to meet the need for more capacity and economies of scale. The commission did not express support for any of the three proposals, but the Association of Local Authorities openly supported the second proposal – the one with the greatest decrease of municipalities (Eythórsson, 2003 Eythórsson, 2012).

At this point, the minister appointed a new commission, called "The Municipal Committee" (Sveitarfélaganefnd) – hereinafter referred to as "Commission II". Its task was to further develop the proposals from Commission I, and, as far as possible, take proposal number 2 into consideration; that is, reduce the number of municipalities to 25. The commission was also to submit proposals on changes in the division of tasks between the state and the local level, adapting to a new reality of much fewer and bigger municipalities. Furthermore, proposals on how the new municipalities could finance their increased tasks should be presented (Félagsmálaráðuneytið 1992).

In a report published in 1992, Commission II submitted its proposals. It contained a benchmark for the minimum municipal population, set at 1000 inhabitants. Committees were to be established in every region/county to make proposals on new municipalities. Referendums should be held on each of these proposals in 1993. In addition, a comprehensive transfer of tasks was to be organized from the state to the local level – involving, at the first stage, primary schools, health care centers, and elderly care, and at the second stage, harbors, handicap services, and planning (Félagsmálaráðuneytið 1992, p. 13). Accompanied by corresponding revenues, this represented a dramatic reform, reducing the number of municipalities from 196 to 25, followed by at least 6 big tasks transferred to the local level in only 5 years. Referendums should be held in 185 municipalities in November 1993. Finally, the regional committees came up with proposals on 32 completely new municipalities created by amalgamations of 185 existing units. Eleven of the 196 municipalities were not affected by this, so the number could have been reduced to 43.

In summary, the initiative to reduce the number of municipalities came primarily from the state, as the Minister of Social Affairs clearly expressed. This configuration was highly comprehensive but not fully inclusive, since 11 municipalities out of 196 were left out. The Association of Local Authorities declared its full support for the reform and recommended

the most comprehensive version. The strategy was highly top-down, as bureaucrats from the Ministry travelled around the country primarily to convince people of the benefits of amalgamation. However, as the law was clear that amalgamations must be voluntary, necessitating a majority of residents voting in favor, the state had to rely on the results in the 32 different referendums.

2.2.2. Conflicts

Before the 1993 referendums, discussions and debates on amalgamation were more frequent than ever. Commissions I and II, which had prepared the reform, also contributed to the debate. The pro side emphasized effectiveness, capacity, and enhanced local government decision-making. It was also maintained that this territorial reform was crucial to making the state better able to implement effective regional development policy, since an extensive migration of people to the capital of Reykjavík from the rest of the country had been ongoing for several decades. Nevertheless, there was massive opposition to the reform (Eythórsson, 2012).

This opposition came primarily from below, from local leaders, mainly in the smaller municipalities and particularly the very smallest ones. The main arguments were that amalgamation into larger municipalities would lead to democratic deficits and injustice since the small units would be overruled and "swallowed" by the larger ones. The skepticism even had its roots in the belief that it would be difficult to amalgamate urban and rural areas because people in these areas had so many different interests (Eythórsson, 1998; Eythórsson 2014).

Research evidence showed a pattern of support and opposition to amalgamations: the people and leaders in small and relatively small municipalities were those who opposed. As far as the inhabitants were concerned, this was the strongest explanatory factor in the November 1993 referendums. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Population	Yes votes (%)
0-249	*34*
250-999	*47*
1000-2500	*47*
2500+	*63*
	*r = .16**

Table 1

Only 34 percent of voters in the smallest municipalities voted for amalgamation, while the percentage reached almost 50 in the larger units; that is, those with a population between 250 and 2500. The voters in the largest Icelandic municipalities were much more positive – 63 percent of them voted for amalgamations.

Another variable, "Relative size", however, had even stronger explanatory power than "Actual size". The idea behind the construction of this variable was that it should be able to be an alternative measure of own municipality's expected status in the new municipality, where a low percentage share meant that the municipality was very likely to receive the peripheral municipality role in the future municipality and in the same way that a high percentage share increased the probability that the municipality would receive a central role.[9] In municipalities with a population of less than 15 percent of the total population in the proposed amalgamated municipality, only 34 percent voted for amalgamation. In municipalities with a population of 15-50 percent, the rate was 46 percent, and in those with more than 50 percent of the population, the pro-votes were 70 percent. An analysis of a 1994 survey conducted among all local leaders in the country reveals the same pattern in this respect, as was the result of the referendum a few months earlier.

Population	Yes votes (%)
0-249	*34*
250-999	*47*
1000-2500	*47*
2500+	*63*
	*r = .16**

Table 2

This shows that *center-periphery* and *large* vs. *small* as well as *relatively large* vs. *relatively small* conflict lines were apparent. A good majority of the smallest and relatively smallest were rural communities in the periphery.

Left-right cleavages were less visible even though the initiative for amalgamation reform came from a social democratic minister. In a 1994 survey of Icelandic local leaders, they were asked several questions about amalgamations.[10] A "For and against amalgamation-index" was constructed from their answers. When the scores are analyzed by party affiliation, we see in Table 3 that local leaders on the left wing (People's Alliance and Social Democrats) scored at that time higher than others on the index.

Party affiliation	Scores on the 0-100
People's Alliance (Socialists)	*71*
Women's List	*58*
Social Democrats	*78*
Progressive Party (Centre)	*61*
Independence Party (Right)	*69*
Total	*66*
	*ETA=.25***

Table 3

This shows some differences between left and right in answers to the question. Leaders affiliated with or supporting the two parties to the left (People's Alliance and Social Democrats) had the highest scores on the index shown (71 and 78).[11] However, efficiency and capacity seemed to dominate the pre-arguments and were to some extent linked to the provision of welfare state services. The strategy of the Ministry to try to convince people at meetings caused widespread opposition, and it was also apparent that leaders and people in small and relatively small municipalities were skeptical and opposed to this very top-down-oriented reform (Eythórsson, 1998).

2.2.3. Outcome

If all submitted proposals had been accepted, it would have meant a drastic reduction in the number of municipalities in Iceland – from 196 to 43. But the referendum turned out to be a great disappointment for the pro side. Only one of the 32 proposals was accepted in all municipalities involved in these referendums. Only 67 out of the 185 municipalities involved voted for amalgamation. This only resulted in a direct reduction of municipalities by three. Nevertheless, a process never known before and hardly expected at that time was about to start. The intended reform had crashed, and the "expected" comprehensive reinforcement of the municipal level was not realized. However, two amalgamations due to the so called 2/3 rule in the Local Government Act reduced the number by 8. Other voluntary amalgamations´, plus two compulsory ones, lowered the number of municipalities to 171 when it came to the Local government elections in the spring 1994. This two-thirds rule, established in connection with the 1993 referendums, allowed municipalities to amalgamate if accepted by two-thirds or more of the total number involved in a specific amalgamation proposal. In such a case, amalgamation was merely a matter of decision for the local councils.[12] So, the amalgamations in the winter of 1993-1994 reduced the number by 25. But there was more to come in the years that followed.

2.2.4. Aftermath

By the next Local government elections, in 1998, the number of municipalities had shrunk to 124 and decreased further to 104 in the in the elections 2002. The process that began in 1993 led to a reduction of municipalities by 47 percent in only eight years, mostly through voluntary amalgamations. I want to try to elucidate this with the following explanations:[13]

1. The so-called two-thirds rule established in the 1991-1993 reform allowed municipalities to amalgamate if two-thirds or more of the total number involved in any specific amalgamation agreed to such a proposal.
2. The transfer of responsibility for primary schools from the state to the local level in 1996 caused extensive fiscal problems for some of the smallest municipalities, encouraging them to reconsider amalgamation. This was, for example, one of the drivers for mergers in the region of Skagafjörður where 11 municipalities amalgamated into one after referendums in the autumn of 1997 (Eythórsson, 1998; Eythórsson & Jóhannesson, 2002; Hlynsdóttir, 2001).
3. With a few exceptions, the initiative for the amalgamations came from below – from

the municipalities and not from the state authorities. This seems to have been a more efficient method than top-down initiated referendums.

It can be argued that the comprehensive debates, discussions, and research work leading up to the 1993 referendums served as a wake-up call for many municipalities. It became increasingly difficult for many small units to provide the services needed. The transfer of the primary schools from the state to the local level played a role there. So, taking indirect effects into account, we can conclude that the 1991 – 1993 territorial structural reform in Iceland was not a total failure. But the problem with the numerous small municipalities remained.

2.3. The 2005 referendums

2.3.1. Implementation – Strategy

In 2003, the Icelandic Ministry of Social Affairs[14] launched a reform project to strengthen the municipal level in co-operation with the Association of Local Authorities, which is said to have taken the initiative to push a new minister to start the reform. An Amalgamation Commission was set up to lead the program. The primary objective of the reform was to strengthen municipalities so they could better provide their current services and eventually take on new ones. Bringing this about would make it possible to move public services from the state to the local level. This required a reassessment of the division of tasks between the state and the local level, as well as a revision of local government finances. But the cornerstone of the project, however, was to strengthen the local level by amalgamating smaller municipalities. As referred to above, even though the number of municipalities had been reduced by almost 50 percent since 1993, the reform commission argued that this had not changed the main characteristics of the municipal structure – many very small municipalities still existing, lacking the capacity to take over more responsibilities from the state as part of the reinforcement strategy.

The commission presented its objectives in a 2004 report:[15]

1. That municipal structure should match the functional labour market and service areas.
2. The municipalities should be capable of performing their statutory duties without

cooperating with other municipalities.
3. That municipal administration should be professional.
4. That the municipalities were capable of taking over more tasks from the state.
5. That municipal finances and economy were based on a firm footing.

Special commissions on financial matters and on the division of tasks were set up to handle those parts of the reform.

As before, all amalgamations were voluntary by law; referendums were to take place in 66 municipalities out of a total of 97 in the spring of 2005. In these 66 municipalities, residents voted on a total of 17 merger proposals, so a "yes" to all would have reduced the number of municipalities to 49. The general commission on financial matters did not agree on its mandate in time, and many local leaders claimed that the time for arguing the case was too short, so the referendums were postponed until October. However, five of these 66 municipalities wished to move ahead right away and vote on amalgamation, since they had completed all their preparations. This was in the Borgarfjörður region, and the referendum was held in April 2005. Referendums were held in 61 municipalities on October 8, where the people voted on 16 different amalgamation proposals. The Minister of Social Affairs had expressed his wish to reduce the number of municipalities to 40-50 through such voluntary amalgamations, even though it was well known beforehand that there was a widespread popular resistance in many municipalities (Eythórsson, 2009).

This time, the initiative came not only from above, from the state; it was also endorsed by the Association of Local Authorities. Whether that should be considered as a top-down initiative is a matter of opinion, since the motivating force comes from both above and below. This calls for some explanations as to why the Association of Local Authorities in Iceland has repeatedly initiated or supported amalgamation reforms while at the same time a large majority of its member municipalities has opposed them. The answer concerns the Association's organizational structure. Representatives in the Association's decision-making organs were chosen in proportion to population size; thus, the larger municipalities gained more representatives. This has been the situation ever since 1945 and still applied at the time of the referendums we are examining. Since the attitude towards amalgamation has always been more positive in the larger municipalities, the decision-making structure in the Association has meant that the official standpoint has been positive. At the same time, the

law states that each municipality must accept an amalgamation in a referendum. This mismatch explains the different standpoints on the amalgamation question over the years.[16]

2.3.2. Conflicts

The objectives and strategies behind this reform were very similar to those applied in the 1991-1993 reform. The main goal was to eliminate units that were too small to be able to accomplish their tasks properly and professionally. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the conflict pattern was similar to that of the former reform. The reform in 2003-2005 is less documented than the 1991-1993 revision, but an analysis of the results in the 2005 referendums shows very similar patterns to those of 1993: As was the case in 1993 the resistance to the reform was much stronger in smaller and proportionally smaller municipalities – in general in the periphery rather than in the towns and population centres. This is shown in Tables 4 and 5:

Population	Yes votes (%)
0-249	*40*
250-999	*38*
1000-2500	*35*
2500+	*62*
	*r = .29**

Table 4

The difference between the municipalities with a population of more and less than 2500 is clear. The support for amalgamations was significantly stronger in the largest units. The same pattern is also apparent when looking at relative size – in units containing more than half the suggested population – the support was stronger among those destined to be big brother in an anticipated municipality.

Relative size	Yes votes (%)
< 15%	*38*
15% - 50%	*32*
50% +	*57*
	*r =.28**

Table 5

No data has been collected on citizens' attitudes towards amalgamation by party affiliation. We saw that the 1993 reform was initiated by a social democratic minister, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir (Alþýðuflokkurinn), and that local leaders to the left were more likely to support amalgamation. In the 2005 case, the government initiative came from the center party minister Árni Magnússon (Framsóknarflokkurinn) and not from the left side. Therefore, no explanations on a left-wing bias can be made for the 2005 instance.

2.3.3. Outcome and aftermath

Referendums took place in 66 municipalities in the spring and autumn of 2005. In these 66

municipalities, residents voted on 17 different amalgamation proposals. 'Yes' to all proposals would have meant a reduction of 49 municipalities, down to 48 in total. A referendum in the Borgarfjörður region (5) was held on the 23rd of April, and in the other 61 regions on 8th October. The 17 different proposals did not receive the necessary support in 42 municipalities but were accepted in 24. This was of little use, since only one proposal was accepted as a whole – that is, by a majority in every municipality in question. This was in East Iceland. Thus, the outcome was a reduction of three municipalities, from 92 to 89. In several cases, municipalities that had voted 'yes' voluntarily continued the process, based on the 2/3 paragraph. At the time of the Local Government Elections in May 2006, the number of municipalities was down to 79.

An evaluation report on the 2003 – 2005 reform suggests some conflicts connected to implementation and strategy. Five main reasons for the limited results of the reform are mentioned (Stjórnsýsluráðgjöf, 2008, p. 4-5):

1. Preparations were inadequate since important questions on the division of tasks and revenues were never answered.
2. The implementation and presentation of the reform were authoritarian – orders from above.
3. The methodology was wrong because initiative from below would have been necessary.
4. The reform lacked political support at the state level.
5. Fear of change was widespread, and many stories of the negative impact of amalgamations affected the voters.

Subsequently, development has been slow in municipal amalgamations in Iceland. As shown in the following table, the number did not decrease more than 15 between 2006 and 2022. This we see in table 6.

Period	N at the beginning of period	N at the end of period	Reduction N	Reduction %
1990-1994	*204*	*172*	*32*	*15,7*
1994-1998	*172*	*124*	*48*	*27,9*
1998-2002	*124*	*105*	*19*	*15,3*
2002-2006	*105*	*79*	*26*	*24,8*
2006-2010	*79*	*76*	*3*	*3,8*
2010-2014	*76*	*74*	*2*	*2,6*
2014-2018	*74*	*72*	*2*	*2,7*
2018-2022	*72*	*64*	*8*	*11,1*
1990-2022	*204*	*64*	*140*	*68,6*

Table 6

We can see the period 1990 – 2006 as a phase of significant reduction in the number of municipalities in Iceland. This was primarily achieved by voluntary amalgamations. So far, the objectives and goals behind the efforts that led to the two reforms have not been reached.

3. Concluding discussion

The initiative for the 1991-1993 territorial reform, with the referendums in November 1993 as a final point, came first and foremost from the Minister of Social Affairs, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir. The set-up was a comprehensive reform, although not all-embracing, since 185 out of 196 municipalities were included – 11 were not. The Association of Icelandic Local Authorities formally supported the reform. The strategy was strongly top-down, as bureaucrats and experts hired by the Ministry travelled around the country to convince people of the advantages of amalgamation. However, as the Act on Local Government in Iceland is, and always has been, it is clear that all amalgamations must be voluntary. The success of this reform was entirely dependent upon the results in the 32 different referendums, with voters in 185 municipalities involved. So, even though it was top-down-oriented, it was all about the ability to convince and influence. The 2003 – 2005 reform had less top-down orientation since the initiative came as much from the Association of Local Authorities as from the state government. Furthermore, it was not as comprehensive as the former endeavor in 1993, since only 68 percent of the municipalities were included this time, compared with 94 percent in the previous decade. In both reforms, the lines of conflict were apparent and very similar. *Central-periphery* and *Big-small* cleavages were present, as we see in the tables above, where the results from both referendums are analyzed.

In both referendums, resistance was significantly stronger in the smallest units and, in proportional terms, even stronger in the proportionally smallest communities. The conflict pattern was clear. The top-down orientation, especially in 1993, seems to have contributed to resistance only in these municipalities. In both cases, the immediate results of these two referendums were limited.

However, in subsequent years, things began to move on, and this was followed by quite a number of voluntary amalgamations. I have concluded that the comprehensive debates, discussions, and research work leading up to the 1993 referendums worked as a wake-up call for many of the smaller municipalities. Difficulties that many small communities faced in providing the obligatory services and the services needed, as well as the transfer of primary schools to the local level, played a role in the 1990s case. Therefore, the 1991 – 1993

territorial reform in Iceland cannot be considered a total failure. The number of municipalities went down from 196 to 105 between 1993 and 2002. But the problem persisted with the relatively numerous small municipalities lacking economies of scale and capacity. Neither the 2005 referendum nor its aftermath changed that pattern.

If we, finally, try to conclude whether these two reforms were top-down or bottom-up oriented, comprehensive or incremental, that is, whether they were in *Jacobin*– or *Girondin* style, there is no short or simple answer.

The reforms were top-down initiated and with top-down-oriented strategies. However, since amalgamations are by law voluntary and because of the already explained mismatch in the decision-making structure of The Association of Icelandic Local Authorities, any enforcing method to push this through is impossible, with or without the support from the Association. Both reforms were quite comprehensive, aimed primarily at eliminating the small municipal units, and should be considered as a mix of the Jacobin and Girondin strategies.

4. References

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Endnotes

[1] See Eythórsson (2009), Eythórsson (2012) and Stjórnsýsluráðgjöf (2008).

[2] This is explained in more details in Eythórsson (1999) in chapter 9.3 p. 126ff.

[3] The European charter on local self-government (Article 5). https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168007a088

[4] Sveitarstjórnarlög nr. 58/1961. Sveitarstjórnarlög nr. 138/2011.

[5] Lög um sameiningu sveitarfélaga nr. 70/1970.

[6] Sveitarstjórnarlög nr. 8/1986.

[7] At that time The Ministry for Social Affairs was responsible for municipal affairs.

[8] The commission was called “Nefnd um skiptingu landsins í sveitarfélög”. [Commisson for the apportionment of the country into municipalities].

[9] This is explained in more detail in Eythórsson (1999) in chapter 11.4, p. 162.

[10] The survey was conducted by Göteborg University; that is, by the author of this article

during his doctoral studies.

[11] Amalgamation reforms in Sweden have historically been driven by parties on the left spectrum of politics. In Norway, amalgamationms have rather been driven by the right-wing (Klausen et al. 2016; Strandberg, 1995).

[12] Lög um breyting á Sveitarstjórnarlögum nr. 8/1986 (8/5 1992).

[13] See also in Eythórsson, 2009.

[14] At that time the Ministry of Social Affairs was responsible for the local government affairs. At the time of writing this belongs to Ministry of Infrastructure.

[15] Félagsmálaráðuneytið (2004).

[16] This is shown with data in Eythórsson (1998, p. 41-43).