



## Local and more local: Impact of size and organization type of settlement units on candidacy



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### ABSTRACT

Following current debates on the study of the quality of local government, this article focuses on the effects of settlement unit size and organizational type on candidacy in local elections within the Czech Republic. Municipal size and institutional design are traditionally seen as important factors influencing political participation at the local level. However, citizens in differently defined settlement units included in a municipality are disadvantaged differently by these factors and thus, de-motivated to participate in politics. The unit of analysis within the article is a settlement unit within a municipality. The article uses Poisson regression to estimate the effect of the absolute and relative size of the settlement unit and different organizational types of settlement unit on the relative number of candidates in the unit. The analysis is based on data from 6,124 Czech municipalities over three sets of elections. The results of the analysis show that increasing absolute size and decreasing relative size of settlement unit have negative effects on the number of candidates in units. Also the institutionally disadvantaged units (defined by the location of the municipal office within the settlement unit) produce smaller number of candidates. The results show the importance of structural factors on the traditionally neglected type of political participation (candidacy) within this field. This allows the formulation of recommendations for local government reforms, not only in the Czech Republic, but also for amalgamated municipal systems.

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### 1. Introduction

This article is concerned on effects of sub-municipal structure of settlement on candidacy in local elections. Municipal reforms have been inseparably accompanied by discussions about the influence of municipality size on the quality of local governance. Two sets of expectations were employed in these debates: firstly, that increase in population size enhances quality and availability of public services. Secondly, that larger municipalities decrease citizens' satisfaction with local democracy and different kinds of political participation (Dahl & Tufté, 1973; Denters, 2002; Denters, Goldsmith, Ladner, Mouritzen, & Rose, 2014; Frandsen, 2002; Keating, 1995; Larsen, 2002; Lassen & Serritzlew, 2011; Oliver, 2000; Raco & Flint, 2001; Reitan, Gustafsson, & Blekesaune, 2014; Rose, 2002). The question of preference between effectiveness and democracy was part of studies of political participation at the

local level as well as of the recommendations for practical reforms, which frequently included municipal amalgamations (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010; Illner, 2003a; Vetter & Kersting, 2003).

Evidence from municipal reforms enriched the debate about the role of size, with the argument that size of population probably covers up more relevant structural factors influencing participation at the local level (Michelsen, Boenisch, & Geys, 2013; Swianiewicz, 2010; van Assche & Dierickx, 2007; van Ostaaijen, Gianoli, & Coulson, 2012). The varying distribution of political powers among disentangled residential areas in one municipality is one of the factors that increasingly attract scholars' attention. Special attention is paid to dominance relationships between individual units, which influence the political participation of their residents. Michelsen et al. (2013) showed that institutional design guaranteeing representation of the interests of distinct local communities within single municipalities through their own council increases turnout, compared to situations where communities' decision-making powers are transferred to the one whole-municipality council. Böenisch, Geys, and Michelsen (2015) looked at the effect of varying sizes of intra-municipal units and showed that the absolute as well as the relative size of the dominant unit decreases

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overall turnout in amalgamated municipalities. Jakobsen and Kjaer (2016) and Saarimaa and Tukiainen (2016), however, found that residents of relatively small units can be motivated to higher degrees of political participation immediately after amalgamation.

Our aim is to contribute to current research with two extensions. Firstly, arguments in local reform debates are often linked to the behavior of geographically-defined groups of citizens. In amalgamated municipalities, inhabitants of disentangled resident areas (or “settlement units,” as we mostly use in the text<sup>1</sup>) have their own political preferences concerning the equal distribution of public goods into their areas as a matter of priority (Michelsen et al., 2013; Bönisch et al., 2015; Olson, 1969).

The settlement unit shall thus be studied as the unique level of analysis. Alas, in studies of factors influencing political participation at local level, the units of analysis are traditionally either whole counties (Put & Maddens, 2015; Seitz, 2008) or whole municipalities (Hajnal & Lewis, 2003; Michelsen et al., 2013; van Ostaaijen et al., 2012). As far as we know, only a few studies focused on the differences in political behavior of different settlement units in amalgamated municipalities (Jakobsen & Kjaer, 2016; Bönisch et al., 2015). Even in them, specific features of settlement units were defined as independent variables describing the whole municipality (regardless of the number of units the amalgamation affected). The only exception is the article of Saarimaa and Tukiainen (2016), which focused on participation in individual units of newly amalgamated municipalities. Because we value the argument of Jakobsen and Kjaer (2016) that there is no singular periphery in an amalgamated municipality, but rather more peripheries (units) with distinct interests, we also take every settlement unit in the municipality as our unit of analysis. We hope that, thanks to descending from the level of whole municipalities down to the level of individual settlement units, we can more precisely show the effects of structural variables on political participation at local level.

Secondly, from the variety of modes of political participation, we look at the decision to run for office. Whereas the majority of studies repeatedly confirmed the negative effect of size on turnout and satisfaction with local democracy, candidacy is a neglected topic even in debates concerning the consequences of local government reforms. Because the link between voters and politicians in representative democracies is created by the pool of willing candidates (Aars & Offerdal, 1998, p. 208), the quantitative supply of candidates into local offices is indeed a significant indicator of the vitality of local democracy (Kjaer, 2007, p. 196). Because settlement units create communities with shared local identities, it is important to have at least one candidate at the level of the settlement unit to enable the possibility to reach descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967) of the unit in the council of the amalgamated municipality. Moreover, the rising number of candidates can lead to substantial representation of units – it means that the deputies coming from some units are not only present in the elected body but they also represent specific interests of their units.

However, there are just a few studies focused on candidacy at the local level (Aars & Offerdal, 1998; Denters & Rose, 2013; Kjaer, 2007; Krebs, 1999; Ryšavý & Bernard, 2013; Saarimaa & Tukiainen, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Thus, we want to fill this gap in the research into political

participation at local level and focus on the effects of size and organizational type of settlement units on the number of candidates in them.

This article investigates the relationship between organizational structure and candidacy in settlement units, focusing on data from local elections in the Czech Republic. The Czech case seems especially interesting for analysis of effect of structural variables on political participation at sub-municipal level, because all external factors are held constant, whereas all substantial factors can vary. Elections are carried out under the same legal framework in the same time, municipalities and their parts have different sizes and are of different types. The historical process of forced settlement and municipal mergers in the era of communism followed by the voluntary decomposition of some amalgamated municipalities in 1990s enabled establishment of three organizational types of settlement units. Non-amalgamated municipalities are composed of just one settlement unit. In amalgamated municipalities composed of two or more settlement units, we further differentiate between the central unit with a local office and peripheral units without local offices. This organizational variety can influence the decision of potential candidates. Although the Czech case is very specific among European systems of local governance due to the high fragmentation of municipalities, our findings about the effect of size and settlement type on candidacy can be valid more generally. Amalgamated municipalities are mainstream in European local governments (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010; Swianiewicz, 2013), and the structural de/motivation to run for office can thus work in the same way also in other European countries.

Our specific research questions are: how do 1) the absolute population size of the settlement unit, 2) the relative population size of the unit within the whole municipality, and 3) the organizational type of settlement units, influence the number of candidates in units?

Our article proceeds as follows: in the first section, we present a model of nascent political ambition, which summarizes individual and structural factors influencing the decision of citizens to run for office. Then, we formulate hypotheses about the effects of absolute and relative size and organizational types of settlement units on the relative number of candidates in those settlement units (the number of candidates per 1000 inhabitants of unit). Then, we introduce relevant information about Czech local government from the view of local reform debates: size structure of municipalities, the settlement structure of Czech municipalities and organizational types of settlement units within municipalities. The fourth section describes the collection of data and the research design. The fifth section contains empirical analysis and findings. The sixth section concludes and discusses the results.

## 2. Factors influencing the number of candidates in the settlement unit – a model of nascent political ambition

Political participation is determined by the amount of resources, motivations, and mobilization at the disposal of citizens. Sources include time, money, political knowledge and skills. Motivations can be external (trust in elected institutions) or internal (confidence in own abilities), and cover political efficacy, the saliency of topics and political ideologies which increase interest in politics. Mobilizing effects correspond to citizens' surroundings: mobilization by a political party, organization, or community membership. Citizens are more likely to participate if they own more resources, and when they are effectively motivated and mobilized (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Candidacy is sometimes viewed as the supreme form of political

<sup>1</sup> For this article, the settlement unit is defined as “geographically separated clusters of houses including the respective areas used by their residents” (Mates & Wokoun, 2001, p. 129).

<sup>2</sup> Closely connected to candidacy is the concept of representation. Our article, however, is focused just on the number of candidates, because we are primarily interested in closely exploring the effects of structural variables on one type of participation, rather than in representation, which is composed from a complex set of elements, such as candidacy, turnout, party choice and effects of electoral rules.

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