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When do subnational jurisdictional mergers impact voting?

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ABSTRACT

Despite numerous territorial reforms of municipalities and regions across Europe, the impact of jurisdictional mergers on voting, i.e., citizens' party vote choice and parties' vote shares, has received scant attention in the literature. In this article, we explore the conditions under which jurisdictional reforms impact voting. We argue that citizens base their vote choice on their merger position when they find the merger issue important and that they are more likely to do so in second-order elections, i.e., in elections that are perceived to be less important. Furthermore, merger-based voting depends on the politicization of the merger process, which is affected by the reform process (top-down versus bottom-up) and whether merger outcomes are in line with the affected communities' preferences or not. Leveraging the 2020 local government reform in Norway, and drawing on both survey and aggregate data, we find that citizens who oppose a merger and find the merger issue important are more likely to vote for an anti-merger party, especially in second-order county elections. At the aggregate level, top-down county mergers that were implemented against the will of the involved constituencies increase the vote shares for anti-merger parties in county (second-order) elections. These results are important because they reveal that subnational jurisdictional reform is clearly linked to vote choice in subnational elections. Thereby, our study adds to an increasing body of research that reveals that citizens care about jurisdictional design at subnational and supranational levels.

1. Introduction

An increasing body of public opinion research reveals that jurisdictional design is often highly politicized. Citizens are divided in their support for European integration (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016) and they have strongly diverging opinions on the legitimacy of international organizations (Dellmuth, Scholte, & Tallberg, 2019; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2020). A rich literature reveals that citizen perceptions regarding the European Union and European integration impact voting behavior and drive party competition in both national and supra-national elections (e. g., De Vries, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

The politicization of jurisdictional design at the subnational level has received much less attention in the literature even though many European countries have amalgamated local and regional jurisdictions (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010): Between 1990 and 2014, 15 out of 40 European countries have reduced the number of municipalities by more than 10% (Swianiewicz, Gendźwiłł, & Zardi, 2017, pp. 12–14) and in the past two decades, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Sweden, and Turkey have amalgamated regional governments (Hooghe et al., 2016;

Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021).

Given the spread of jurisdictional mergers, it is important to study their political consequences. Existing research has found negative repercussions for local democracy and results from both aggregate- and individual-level analyses suggest that citizens turn away from (local) politics after jurisdictional mergers. The change in the status quo and particularly the increase in jurisdictions' size alienates citizens from the political process (Tavares, 2018). Those affected by jurisdictional mergers participate less in elections (e.g Allers, de Natris, Rienks, & de Greef, 2021; Rodrigues & Tavares, 2020) and become more disaffected with local democracy (e.g., Hansen, 2013, 2015).

Our research addresses three gaps in research on the political consequences of jurisdictional mergers. First, we do not know whether and how jurisdictional mergers impact party vote choice. Most studies focus on the impact of subnational mergers on turnout in local elections or on individuals' perceptions of local democracy but very few studies set out to investigate whether and how jurisdictional reforms are linked to *voting*, i.e., citizens' individual vote choice or parties' aggregate vote shares. (Blesse & Rösel, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2018). Second, we lack

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empirical evidence on the role of the *reform process*. Scholars have hypothesized that "top-down" reforms implemented by higher-tier governments should generate more negative repercussions than "bottom-up" reforms where local constituencies have a say in the reform process. Yet, only few studies have tested this argument empirically and provided evidence that bottom-up reform processes indeed have less negative repercussions for local democracy (Bolgherini & Paparo, 2023). Third, few studies combine individual- and aggregate-level analyses which hampers the identification of the conditions under which citizens' individual-level voting behavior 'surfaces' at the aggregate level.

Our contribution in this article is to address these three gaps by theoretically fleshing out and by empirically studying the conditions under which jurisdictional mergers are relevant for individual citizens' vote choice and impact parties' aggregate vote shares. We argue that the politicization of jurisdictional mergers matters for voting in subnational elections. When jurisdictional mergers are a salient and contested issue, we expect an impact on election outcomes. Our argument proceeds in two steps. First, at the individual level, we hypothesize that citizens' positions on the merger issue are linked to the probability that they vote for a vocal anti/pro-merger party, i.e., a party that takes a decisive stance against or in favor of merging jurisdictions. We further hypothesize that this relationship is stronger among citizens that attribute higher importance to the merger issue and that the impact of position on and importance of the merger issue on voting is stronger in second-order elections, i.e., elections that are perceived to be less important by most citizens (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schakel & Jeffery, 2013).

In a second step, we discuss the contexts in which we expect individual-level voting behavior to become observable in aggregate party vote shares. We argue that this depends on the politicization of the merger process in the pre-merger jurisdiction. A larger number of voters will choose a party based on the merger issue when a merger has been politicized. The extent of politicization, in turn, depends on the merger process and is higher when there has been a referendum on the issue and when a reform is implemented against the preferences of the affected jurisdiction.[1]

Our empirical focus is on the Norwegian local government reform which took effect on 1 January 2020. The reform reduced the number of municipalities (*kommuner*) from 428 to 356 and the number of counties (*fylkeskommuner*) from 19 to 11, whereby some jurisdictions were affected by the reform and others were not. The Norwegian case offers two important sources of variation for our study. First, we can assess the reform's impact on party vote choice in municipal and county elections. The municipal and county elections were held on the same date shortly before the reform went into force. Because municipal elections are considered more important than county elections by most Norwegians (Mjelde, Folkestad, Aars, & Christensen, 2016; Stein, Folkestad, Aars, & Christensen, 2021, p. 451), we can assess whether voting based on the merger issue varies across first- and second-order elections. Second, the politicization of the merger issue differed widely between subnational jurisdictions. Some municipalities held consultative referendums, while others did not, and some counties merged voluntarily whereas other counties were forced to merge by the national government despite vocal opposition.

Our empirical analysis reveals that citizens who oppose mergers and find the issue important have a higher probability to vote for an anti-merger party. We find a stronger relation between position and importance for county election vote choice when compared to municipal election vote choice. At the aggregate level we find an increase in anti-merger party vote shares in counties that were forced to merge by a decision of the national government. However, we do not find a relationship between the politicization of municipal mergers and vote shares

for anti- and pro-merger parties in municipal elections. Collectively, our results reveal that i.) jurisdictional mergers matter for party vote choice (in addition to turnout), that ii.) voting based on the merger issue is more prevalent in second-order elections, and that iii.) individual-level behavior is observable in aggregate party vote shares in second-order elections held in jurisdictions where the merger issue is most politicized.

In the next section we review the literature on the political consequences of subnational jurisdictional amalgamations and their impact on political behavior. We also present our theory and hypotheses on when we expect mergers to have an impact on the probability to vote for a pro- or anti-merger party and when to expect this individual-level behavior to be visible in aggregate election outcomes. The third section presents data and method and in the fourth section we discuss the results. In the final section we summarize and discuss the main findings.

2. Jurisdictional mergers and voting for pro-merger and anti-merger parties

Scholars have shown a growing interest in the political consequences of subnational jurisdictional reforms. Aggregate-level analyses reveal that turnout (temporarily) decreases after a merger (Allers et al., 2021; Bhatti & Hansen, 2019; Heinisch, Lehner, Mühlböck, & Schimpf, 2018; Koch & Rochat, 2017; Rodrigues & Tavares, 2020). Individual-level analyses show that citizens in merged municipalities feel less politically efficacious (Lassen & Serritzlew, 2011), trust their representatives less (Hansen, 2013), are less satisfied with democracy (Hansen, 2015), and feel less attached to their local community (Hansen & Kjaer, 2020). These results are commonly explained by the fact that amalgamations create larger jurisdictions which 'alienates' citizens from their representatives, makes them think that their voice matters less and, hence, they retract themselves from the political process (Dahl & Tufte, 1974). However, scholars have also emphasized that there is variation across merger processes. For instance, some countries implemented large-scale amalgamation reforms "top-down", i.e., they force local governments to merge, whereas in other countries, merger processes are more incremental and "bottom-up", with local jurisdictions deciding themselves whether to merge or not (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010). Scholars typically expect stronger negative repercussions under top-down than under bottom-up reforms because citizens feel that they are being left out of the decision process in top-down reforms. However, to date, empirical evidence on this question is scarce. An exception is the study by Bolgherini and Paparo (2023) which shows that it is indeed particularly top-down jurisdictional reforms that have a negative impact on turnout. Beyond this study, we have, however, little empirical knowledge on the role of the reform process for the political consequences of jurisdictional mergers.

A second gap in the existing literature is that very few studies have focused on the electoral consequences of jurisdictional mergers. Indeed, while one way for citizens to express discontent and alienation is to *exit* the political process – and hence not turn out in elections – another possibility is *to voice their discontent by voting for protest parties*. Some evidence suggests that protest and radical right parties perform better in local jurisdictions that underwent top-down institutional reforms in Germany and France (Blesse & Rösel, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2018). The explanation proposed by these scholars is that protest parties, i.e., the German Alternative für Deutschland and the former Front National in France, took up a localist position and a stance against centralization reforms. Citizens who opposed the mergers may have voiced their discontent by voting for these protest parties based on their anti-merger positions. Apart from these two cases, there is very limited evidence on whether subnational jurisdictional mergers impact party vote choice.

A third gap in the literature concerns combining individual- and aggregate-level analyses. Studies on the political consequences of jurisdictional mergers have so far either focused on aggregate- or on individual-level analyses. However, to better understand how individual-level dynamics relate to electoral outcomes at the aggregate

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[1] We follow De Wilde (2011, p. 560) and define a "politicized" issue as an issue that is salient and around which there is polarization or contestation.

level it is important to establish the conditions under which individual level behavior is likely to surface at the aggregate level. Hence, in addition to investigating whether and how jurisdictional mergers impact individual-level party vote choice, we also set out to examine whether and how the politicization of the merger decision process is linked to aggregate vote shares for anti- and pro-merger parties.

Fig. 1 offers a set of four hypotheses. Hypotheses 1–3 explain which citizens are likely to vote for parties based on the merger issue and when they tend to do so. Hypotheses 4a and 4b concern the conditions under which these individual-level vote choices will translate into a change in party vote shares at the aggregate level.

Our argument starts from the premise that vote choice is affected by citizens' *position* on the merger. We may expect citizens to vote for parties that share their position on the merger issue (H1a and H1b). Yet, parties compete on a number of different issues and voters may prioritize some issues over others when deciding which party to vote for. A voter who supports a merger may vote for an anti-merger party because her vote choice is based on other, more important issues on which she agrees with said party. Based on a rich literature on issue salience and vote choice, we may expect particularly those citizens who find the merger issue important to base their vote choice on the merger issue (H2). (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Dennison, 2019, p. 441; Walgrave et al., 2020). Hence, we can formulate the following three hypotheses (Fig. 1):

H1a. Citizens who do not support a jurisdictional merger have a higher probability to vote for an anti-merger party.

H1b. Citizens who support a jurisdictional merger have a higher probability to vote for a pro-merger party.

H2. Citizens' probability to vote for an anti-/pro-merger party based on their merger position is higher for citizens who find the issue of jurisdictional mergers important.

Beyond the importance that citizens attribute to the merger issue, we also hypothesize that the extent to which a voter bases her party vote choice on the merger issue also depends on the other issues at stake in an election. There is a vast literature on the second-order election model that reveals that voting against parties in national government in subnational (and supra-national) elections is related to the (perceived) importance of a sub-national election (Marien, Dassonneville, & Hooghe, 2015; Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Subnational elections are perceived to be less important than national elections by many voters because there is 'less at stake'. National governments decide over essential policies such as the economy, taxes, welfare state policy, foreign policy, and defense, whereas the competences of subnational governments are more limited in scope. In many countries, subnational jurisdictions often decide on valence issues such as garbage collection, sports facilities, or water and sewage treatment. As a result, voters do not bother to turnout in subnational elections and those who do tend to use the subnational election as a 'referendum' or 'opinion poll' to voice their discontent about national government. However, the extent to which subnational elections are conceived to be second-order varies widely and depends mainly on the authority exercised by a government and on the presence and strength of local and regional identities (Hough & Jeffery, 2006; Schakel & Dandoy, 2013; Schakel & Jeffery, 2013). By extension, one may expect that citizens are more inclined to base their vote choice on the merger issue when the stakes in an election are lower (Fig. 1):

H3. Citizens' probability to vote for an anti-/pro-merger party based on their position on the merger is higher in elections that are (conceived to be) more second-order.

Under which conditions do these individual-level dynamics become visible at the aggregate level in parties' vote shares? We theorize that this depends on the extent to which a merger issue has been politicized in a (pre-merger) jurisdiction (Fig. 1). The more an issue has been politically debated and contested, the more likely it is that a significant number of voters base their vote choice on it (Zaller, 1992). In the context of jurisdictional mergers, we argue that the extent of politicization depends on *how the merger decision was made* and whether the *outcome of the merger process aligns with citizens' preferences* (Fig. 1).

In many countries – e.g., Iceland, Japan, Norway, and Switzerland – mergers were preceded by local referendums (Folkestad, Klausen, Saglie, & Segaard, 2021; Karlsson & Eythórsson, 2022; Miyazaki, 2014; Strebel, 2023). Before a referendum is held, local parties and politicians campaign on the issue and try to convince citizens to vote in favor or against a merger. Citizens are more knowledgeable and informed on an issue in a context of strong campaigning and they hold more consistent positions on such issues (Zaller, 1992). Hence, one may expect that a larger number of citizens will base their party vote choice on the merger issue when a merger referendum is held before an election. Yet, also when jurisdictional amalgamations are not decided in (local) referendums they can be highly politicized and contested. In particular, when mergers are implemented top-down by higher-tier governments, they can generate considerable debate among political elites and receive attention in local and national media (Lassen & Serritzlew, 2011;
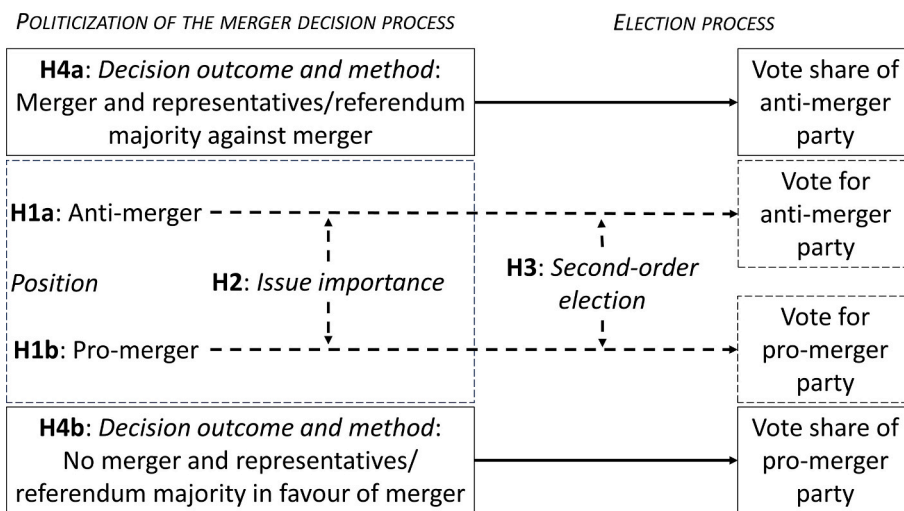

Fig. 1. Graphical presentation of the theoretical arguments.
Notes: Dashed boxes and lines represent individual-level variables and mechanisms, whereas solid boxes and lines represent aggregate-level variables and causal linkages.

Myksvoll, Tatham, & Fimreite, 2022; Stein, Broderstad, & Bjørnå, 2022).

Merger processes lead to an outcome, i.e., jurisdictions are going to be merged or not. We may especially expect citizens to base their vote choice on the merger issue when the merger outcome is against their preferences. Public opinion research has demonstrated the existence of a 'negativity bias' for citizens' vote choice. Voters are more likely to base their vote choice on issues they disagree with or on information that they perceive to be negative (Canache, Mondak, Seligson, & Tuggle, 2022, Sulitzeanu-Kenan & Zohlnhöfer, 2019). Hence, citizens who are against a merger are more likely to vote for an anti-merger party when a jurisdiction is merged whereas citizens who support a merger are more likely to vote for a pro-merger party when a jurisdiction is not merged. This individual-level behavior can be expected to become visible at the aggregate level, when a decision outcome is against the *expressed* opinion of a *majority* of citizens or their representatives. Hence, we can expect the politicization of a merger – captured by the decision method and the mismatch between merger outcome and constituencies' preferences – to impact the vote shares of anti- and pro-merger parties (Fig. 1).

H4a. Vote shares for anti-merger parties are larger in jurisdictions which merged and in which a majority of the citizens/representatives were against the merger.

H4b. Vote shares for pro-merger parties are larger in jurisdictions which did not merge and in which a majority of the citizens/representatives were in favor of a merger.

3. The Norwegian local government reform of 2020

To test our hypotheses, we focus on the Norwegian local government reform which is in force since 1 January 2020. This reform reduced the number of municipalities from 428 to 356 and the number of counties from 19 to 11. We leverage two characteristics of this case. First, the reform entailed jurisdictional amalgamations at different *levels* which enables a comparison of the impacts of citizens' positions (pro/anti-merger) and perceived importance (finding the merger issue important or not) on their vote choice in municipal and county elections. Second, the politicization of the reform processes varies considerably between the municipal and county reforms as well as between municipalities and between counties. In what follows we describe the characteristics of the reform that are crucial for testing our hypotheses (see Appendix A.1 for a more detailed description of the reform processes).

The decisions for merging municipalities and counties were taken in June 2017. Municipal (*kommunestyre*) and county council (*fylkesting*) elections were held simultaneously on 9 September 2019 when voters elected representatives for the new, merged, municipality and county councils. Elected representatives took office on 1 January 2020 when the local government reforms went into effect. During the 2019 local election campaign, the municipal and especially the county mergers featured prominently in the national media. Importantly, all parties except for one took clear positions on the local government reform issue. The most fervent and vocal opponent against the mergers was the Center party (*Senterpartiet*, Sp) whereas the Conservative party (*Høyre*, H) appeared as the main pro-merger party (Fitjar, 2021, p. 27; Stein et al., 2021, pp. 454–455). Other parties represented in the national parliament were either against—i.e., the Green party (*Miljøpartiet de Grønne*, Md), the Socialist Left party (*Sosialistisk Venstre*, SV) and the Red party (*Rødt*, R)—or in favor—i.e., the Progress party (*Fremskrittspartiet*, Frp), Liberal party (*Venstre*, V) and the Christian Democratic party (*Kristelig Folkeparti*, Krf)—of the mergers but proponents were (far) less vocal about the merger issue. The Labour party (*Arbeiderpartiet*, Ap) was internally divided and it supported the reforms until 2015 when it took a more critical stance towards the reforms (Klausen, Askim, & Christensen, 2021).

The municipal and county mergers allow us to assess the impact of both election type and politicization of the merger process (hypotheses 3

Table 1
Politicization of municipal and county merger reform.

Politicization	Merger reform type	
	Municipal (bottom-up)	County (top-down)
Low	No merger, no referendum (N = 164)	No merger (N = 4)
	Merger, no referendum (N = 46)	Voluntary merger (N = 6)
	Merger outcome in line with referendum	Voluntary merger, forced partner (N = 4)
	No merger (N=126) | Merger (N=33)	
	Merger outcome *not* in line with referendum	Forced merger (N = 5)
High	No merger (N=19) | Merger (N=21)	

Notes: N refers to number of municipalities (column 2) and number of counties (column 3) in each category. The number of municipalities included in the analysis (N = 409) is lower than the total number of 428 municipalities before the merger. This is because we could not obtain data for 19 pre-merger municipalities. Dashed lines indicates that the category include merged and not merged municipalities because the number of municipalities in the sub-categories are low. Figure C.4.3 presents results for a categorization with 6 categories.

& 4). First, regarding election type, most Norwegians find municipal elections more important than county elections (Mjelde et al., 2016; Stein et al., 2021) and a comparison enables us to assess whether voting for pro-/anti-merger parties is more prevalent in county than in municipal elections and, hence, allows us to assess whether voting based on the merger issue is more prevalent in second-order county elections (hypothesis 3).

Regarding the politicization of the merger issue (hypotheses 4a and 4b), we expect larger changes in vote shares for pro- and anti-merger parties (for *Høyre* and *Senterpartiet* respectively) in municipalities and counties where the merger issue was politicized which, in turn, depends on the decision method and outcome (Fig. 1 and Table 1). The municipal reform was a voluntary bottom-up process and municipal councils took the decision to merge or not.[2] Before taking a decision, many municipalities held a consultative referendum whereas others did not, and most municipalities took a decision in line with the referendum result, but a few municipal councils decided against the will of a majority of their citizens (Askim, Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, & Serritzlew, 2020; Folkestad et al., 2021; Klausen et al., 2021). A referendum induces politicians, parties, and citizens to take a position on the merger issue and a referendum is often preceded by political campaigns which, thus, increases the politicization of jurisdictional mergers. If local councils took a merger decision against a majority of voters in a referendum, we can expect a particularly strong mobilization around the jurisdictional merger issue. For municipal mergers, we therefore expect the lowest level of politicization on the merger issue for 164 municipalities that did not merge and where there was no referendum on the merger. The next group consists of 46 municipalities that merged but did not hold a referendum on the merger. In these cases, the merger could have been an uncontroversial issue, and local officials did not see a need to hold a referendum. The third and the fourth group include respectively 159 and 40 municipalities that held a referendum on the merger and where the preferences of the local voters for/against merging were either acted upon or not. We expect that politicization is stronger when the

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[2] Except for 10 municipalities which were merged by the national government against the will of the local council (out of a total of 118 municipalities that merged).

preferences of a majority of citizens expressed in a referendum were not respected.[3]

In stark contrast to the municipal reforms, the county reforms were a top-down process whereby the merger decision was made by the national parliament. Before a county merger proposal was submitted to the national parliament, the national government invited the counties to express their views on the planned mergers. Out of 19 counties, four were not merged (in line with their preferences), six counties merged voluntarily, four counties were not opposed to a merger but preferred to merge with other counties than proposed and five counties were not willing to merge but were forced to (Myksvoll et al., 2022; Stein et al., 2022). We expect the highest politicization of the merger issue, and accordingly changes in anti- and pro-merger party vote shares, among the five counties that were forced to merge, and among the four counties that in principle supported a merger but wanted to merge with other counties. Again, this is based on the idea that politicization is higher if the outcome of the merger goes against the will of county residents and/or representatives. We expect lower levels of politicization of the merger issue and anti- and pro-merger party voting among six counties that voluntary merged and among four counties that did not merge.[4]

4. Data and methods for the individual- and aggregate-level analyses

Our empirical analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we look at survey data to test our individual-level hypotheses (H1-H3). Survey data comes from wave 16 of the Norwegian Citizen Panel (Ivarsflaten et al., 2020). The Norwegian Citizen Panel is a web-based panel survey with a random sample of respondents drawn from the Norwegian population registry that were invited to participate by postal mail. Wave 16 was fielded online in November 2019, just after the local elections which were held on 9 September 2019. The general response rate from 18,093 contacted persons was 71.3% (12,904). The survey questions we use were fielded to a sub-sample of 1,764 respondents and when we exclude observations with missing values on either the dependent or independent variables, we retain 1,405 respondents. As it is common in general population surveys, population strata with higher education levels are over-represented among our respondents. To account for this, we have checked for the robustness of the results by applying survey weights, which account for the distribution of gender, age, education, and county of residence (see Appendix B.7).

Respondents were asked which party they voted for in the last municipal and county elections. These questions provide us with our main dependent variables, i.e., whether a respondent voted for an anti- or pro-merger party (0 = no; 1 = yes).

We also use two questions that asked respondents whether they support the municipal and county mergers and respondents could answer with a simple yes (=1) or no (=0). Another set of questions asked respondents how important various issues were for them when they casted their municipal and council votes. One of the issues in the lists presented to the respondents were municipal and county mergers. We differentiate between respondents who found a merger issue important (=1) or not (=0). We estimate the following logit model with respondents' vote choices (*j*) nested by respondent (*i*):

$$y_{ij} = \beta_1 * \text{Support merger}_i + \beta_2 * \text{Importance merger}_i + \beta_3 * \text{Support merger}_i$$
$$* \text{Importance merger}_i + \beta_4 * \text{Election type}_j + \beta_5 * \text{Support merger}_i$$
$$* \text{Election type}_j + \beta_6 * \text{Importance merger}_i * \text{Election type}_j + \beta_7 * \text{Support merger}_i$$
$$* \text{Importance merger}_i * \text{Election type}_j + \alpha + \lambda_i + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

y_{ij} represents a binary outcome variable, i.e., whether a respondent *i* voted for an anti- or pro-merger party (=1) or not (=0) in the municipal or in the county election *j*. We run separate logistic regression models for each party. Our interest lies in two independent variables and their interaction: the direct effect of supporting municipal/county mergers (β_1) and the direct effect of perceiving the municipal/county merger issue to be important (β_2) for vote choice. Hypothesis 2 states that pro- and anti-merger voting is more prevalent among citizens who find the merger issue important, and this hypothesis can be tested by an interaction effect between support and importance (β_3). Hypothesis 3 states that pro- and anti-merger voting is more prevalent in second-order elections and this hypothesis is assessed by including election type (β_4) (1 = municipal election; 2 = county election) and its interactions with support (β_5), importance (β_6), and the interaction between support and importance (β_7). Given that we test both the causal link of support and importance of municipal *and* county mergers with vote choice simultaneously, the above set of beta coefficients appears twice in our model. The core of our model, thus, generates a total of thirteen beta coefficient estimates (election type (β_4) appears only once).

The model includes a constant term (α) and a set of individual-level control variables (λ_i). We control for four vote motivation variables. Respondents could indicate whether it was important for them (1 = yes; 0 = no) to sanction (i) or reward (ii) the municipal/county or national government (i.e., retrospective voting) and to make sure that municipal/county (iii) or national government's interests (iv) are well represented (i.e., prospective voting). We also include municipal/county attachment (1 = attached; 0 = low attachment), center-periphery perceptions (1 = strong; 0 = weak), gender (1 = female; 0 = male), age (2 = 60 years or more; 1 = 30–59 years; 0 = 29 years or less), and education (1 = university education; 0 = less than university education). ε_{ij} represents the error term. The full question wording can be found in Appendix A.2 and descriptive statistics are provided in Appendix B.1. Vote choices in municipal and county elections are nested in respondents and the models apply corrected standard errors for this clustering. Full regression model results are displayed in Appendix B.2. As a robustness test, we ran models that include fixed effects for municipalities which drop 248 respondents because these are the only respondents who were sampled in their municipality (Appendix B.5).

In a second step we analyze aggregate-level data to assess under which conditions pro-/anti-merger parties' vote shares are likely to change in conjunction with the level of politicization of a merger (hypotheses H4). Here, we also use municipal and county election results, and we have assembled municipal-level election outcomes for municipal and county elections held in 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. Descriptive statistics are shown in Appendix C.1. Our unit of analysis is the pre-merger municipality. The election results for merged municipalities are broken down to the pre-merger units by relying on district-level data. We employ difference-in-differences models which is a common strategy for examining aggregate-level effects of jurisdictional reforms (Bhatti & Hansen, 2019; Blesse & Rösel, 2019; Heinisch et al., 2018; Koch & Rochat, 2017):

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 * \text{Merger politicization}_i + \beta_2 * \text{Election Year}_t$$
$$+ \beta_3 * \text{Merger politicization}_i * \text{Election Year}_t + \lambda_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

y_{it} represents the outcome variable, i.e., the vote share for an anti- or pro-merger party in a given municipality *i* in election year *t*. β_1 is the coefficient for the variable 'merger politicization' which represents the extent of politicization around the merger issue as described by the four different groups of municipalities and counties in Table 1. Tables A.1.1

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[3] The third and fourth groups do not distinguish between municipalities that merged and that did not merge because of the small numbers of municipalities within the sub-categories. Results for the full six-fold classification are provided in Figure C.4.3 in Appendix C.4.

[4] We follow Myksvoll et al. (2022, p. 1125), who have classified counties into these four different groups based on an analysis of parliamentary documents that provide information on the counties' assessment of mergers and potential merger partners.

and A.1.2 in Appendix A.1 show the distribution of municipalities (and respondents) across these different merger process types. β_2 is the coefficient of the binary variable representing the pre-/post-reform period, i.e., the election years 2007–2015 (0 = pre-reform) and 2019 (1 = post-reform). While municipal and county mergers were not yet implemented at the time of the election, voters voted for council representatives of the newly merged municipalities and counties who took office in January 2020. Moreover, merger reform plans were announced in June 2017 and voters did not know in the 2015 local elections whether their municipality or county would be merged or not. Most importantly, β_3 represents the coefficient for the interaction between 'merger politicization' and the 'election year' variable. This difference-in-differences estimator indicates how the dependent variable changes in a certain type of municipality/county when we move from the pre- to the post-treatment status compared to the same change in a baseline municipality/county (i.e., municipality did not merge and did not hold a referendum; county did not want to and did not merge). In addition, the model includes municipal (λ_i) and election-year (δ_t) fixed effects, a constant (α), and an error term (ε_{it}). Given that our outcome variables are vote shares, we use standard OLS regression.

5. Results: municipal and county mergers and voting for anti- and pro-merger parties

How is support for mergers and the importance ascribed to the merger issue linked to vote choice? In Figs. 2 and 3 we show predicted probabilities (and their 95% confidence intervals) to vote for the main anti-merger (*Senterpartiet*, Sp) and for the main pro-merger party (*Høyre*, H) in the municipal and county elections. Respondents are differentiated according to whether they support a merger and whether they found the merger issue important. This yields four types of respondents: no support-not important; no support-important; support-not important; and support-important. We estimated probabilities for these four types of respondents for the municipal mergers (left-hand side; probabilities a-d) and the county mergers (right-hand side; probabilities e-f). In addition, we estimated the impact of position and importance on vote choice in both municipal (suffix 1) and county (suffix 2) elections producing a total of 16 predicted probabilities. It is important to note that the vote choice probabilities displayed in Figs. 2 and 3 are based on models that include 1,405 respondents who voted in *both* the municipal and county elections. In the appendix we present full model results (Appendix B.2) as well as the differences between the predicted probabilities and their statistical significance (Appendix B.4). Furthermore, the appendix presents graphical results for all anti- and pro-merger parties (Appendix B.3).

Anti-merger party voting is more prevalent among respondents who find the merger issue important (Fig. 2). The probability to vote for the Sp (Senterparti) in a municipal election increases from 11% to 19% when a respondent does not support a municipal merger and finds the merger issue important instead of not important (Δ a1-b1: 8 percentage points; p < 0.05). The probability to vote for the Sp in a county election increases from 12% to 27% for a respondent who does not support a county merger but finds the merger issue important instead of not important (Δ e2-f2: 15 percentage points; p < 0.01). We find that the probability to vote for Sp is only higher for respondents who are against a merger and who find the issue important. Thereby we find strong support for hypothesis H2 but not for hypothesis H1a.

Hypothesis H1b is confirmed for pro-merger party voting but only when it concerns county mergers. Respondents that support the county mergers have a higher probability to vote for H (Høyre) than those who oppose mergers – independently of the importance they attribute to the merger issue (Δ g2-e2: 10.4 percentage points; p < 0.01, and Δ h2-f2: 14.9 percentage points; p < 0.01). However, pro-merger party voting is not dependent on the importance respondents ascribe to the merger issue (Fig. 3). Thus hypothesis H2 is confirmed for anti-merger party voting but not for pro-merger party voting. In sum, we find that vote

choice for Sp is associated with both municipal and county merger support and importance, whereas vote choice for H is only associated with county merger support. These different results can be explained by a 'negativity bias': voters who are opposed to a merger are more likely to base their vote choice on the merger issue than voters who support a merger. Further evidence for a 'negativity bias' is provided by the importance respondents ascribe to the municipal/county merger issue. Opponents consider the municipal/county merger issue much more important than supporters: 49% versus 23% (p < 0.01) for municipal mergers and 42% versus 23% (p < 0.01) for county mergers.

Figs. 2 and 3 provide for several pieces of evidence to support hypothesis H3 which posits that anti- and pro-merger voting should be more prevalent in second-order, county, elections. The first piece of evidence is that the differences between predicted probabilities to vote for an anti- or pro-merger party for the four types of respondents are smaller and less often statistically significantly different from zero when it concerns municipal mergers. None of the differences between these predicted probabilities are statistically significantly different from zero (at p < 0.05) when the model includes fixed effects for municipalities (Appendix B.5). Hence, we cannot be certain whether anti- and pro-merger voting relates to merger position and merger importance or to a variable that varies at the municipal level. For example, position on and perceived importance of the municipal merger issue may be impacted by a stronger representation of pro- and anti-merger parties in a municipality. In stark contrast, in the case of county mergers, the differences between predicted probabilities for the four types of respondents are larger and remain statistically significantly different from zero (at p < 0.05) when the model includes fixed effects for municipalities (Appendix B.5).

A second piece of evidence is provided by a comparison of predicted probabilities between municipal and county elections within the same type of respondents. These probabilities are remarkably similar for all four types of respondents and for both municipal and county mergers except for one instance. Respondents who do not support a county merger and who find the county merger an important issue have an 8.5%-points higher probability to vote for the Sp in a county election than in a municipal election (Δ f1-f2: 8.5%-points; p < 0.05; Fig. 2). Hence, this type of respondent tended to switch to another party in the municipal elections, probably based on a motivation that was not merger-related and conceived to be important too.[5]

Hypotheses H4a and H4b concern the conditions under which pro-/anti-merger party vote choice becomes visible in parties' vote shares at the aggregate level. H4a and H4b state that this depends on the extent to which the merger issue has been politicized in the (pre-merger) jurisdiction. Before turning to the aggregate analysis, we first assess in Fig. 4 whether the percentages of respondents who support the merger of municipalities/counties and who find the issue of municipal/county mergers important, are different across the level of politicization of the municipal/county mergers (see Table 1 and Tables A.1.1 and A.1.2 in Appendix A.1).

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[5] A third piece of evidence is provided by predicted probabilities for national election vote intent in 2019 and national vote choice in 2021 (Appendix B.6). The predicted vote probabilities for the Senterpartiet for a respondent who does not support a county merger and finds the county merger important are statistically significantly higher (p < 0.05; delta method) for both national vote intent 2019 and national vote choice in 2021 when compared to municipal vote choice in 2019. However, the predicted probabilities to vote for the Senterpartiet for a respondent who does not support a municipal merger and finds the municipal merger important are not statistically significant different between national and municipal elections. These results suggest that top-down mergers may have a longer-lasting impact and may even affect national vote choice. However, we think that the higher vote probability for national elections in 2021 can be ascribed to a general debate about centralization reforms including the closing down of hospitals, district police offices, and university campuses during the campaign before the national election of 2021.
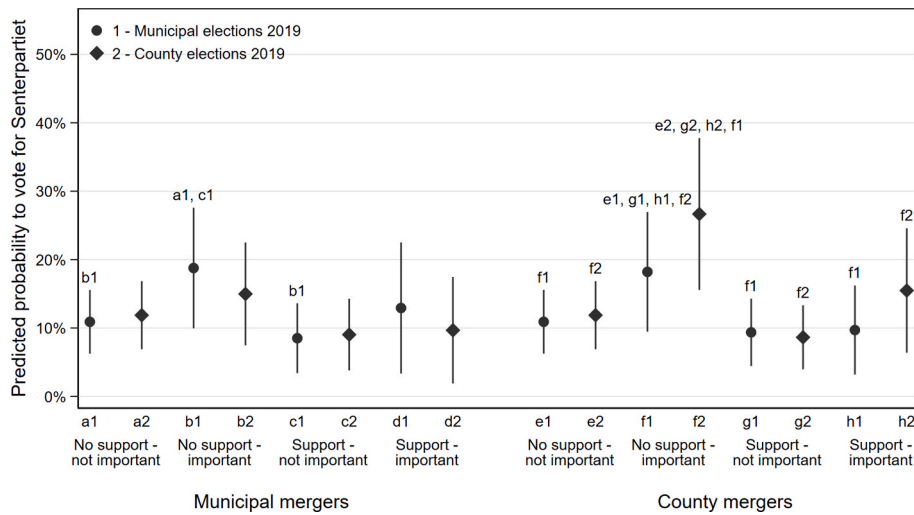
Fig. 2. Probability to vote for an anti-merger party (*Senterpartiet*, Sp)

Notes: Shown are predicted probabilities to vote for the Senterpartiet (Sp) for respondents who support municipal/county mergers or not and find the municipal/county merger issue important or not while the other variables are kept at their mode or median. The letter-number combinations indicate which predicted vote probabilities are statistically significantly ($p < 0.05$; delta method) different from other predicted vote choice probabilities. Reading example: the predicted probability to vote for Sp in municipal elections among those who do not support municipal mergers and find municipal mergers an important issue (probability b1) is significantly higher than the predicted probability of those who do not support municipal mergers and do not find the issue important (probability a1) and of those who support municipal mergers and find the issue not important (probability c1).
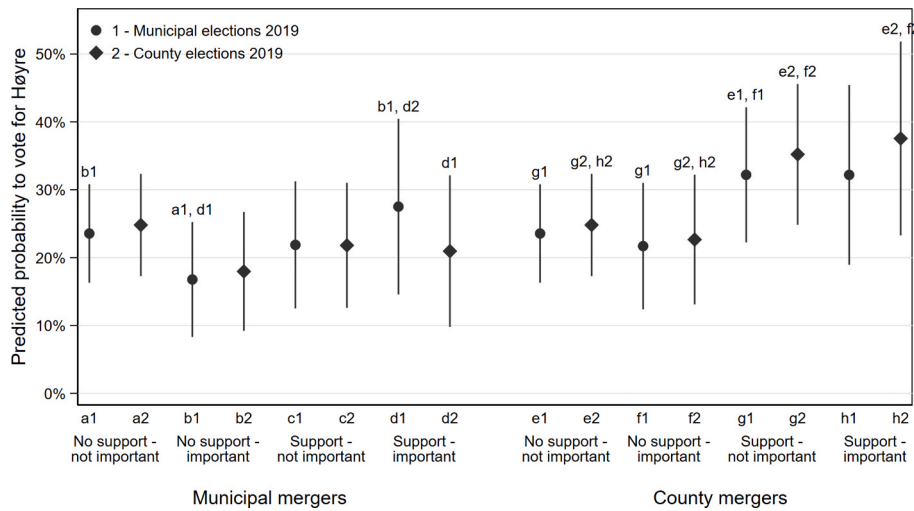

Fig. 3. Probability to vote for a pro-merger party (Høyre, H)

Notes: See Fig. 2. Reading example: the predicted probability to vote for H in municipal elections among those who support municipal mergers and find municipal mergers an important issue (probability d1) is significantly higher than the predicted probability of those who do not support municipal mergers and find the issue important (probability b1).

Fig. 4 shows stark differences across counties but not across municipalities. While we find a strong association between the (hypothesized) politicization of the merger issue and the percentages of respondents who support and find the merger issue important for counties, we do not find similar patterns for municipalities. Analyses of variance (ANOVA) and subsequent Bonferroni tests reveals that the percentage of respondents who support the county mergers declines from 57% in counties that did not merge, to 47% ($p < 0.10$) in counties that merged voluntarily but with a partner forced upon them and to 39% ($p < 0.01$) in counties that were forced to merge. The percentage of respondents who indicate that the county merger was an important issue when they cast their vote increases from 21% in counties that did not merge, to 43% ($p < 0.01$) in counties that were forced to merge. In contrast, support for municipal mergers varies less across different categories and is higher than support for county mergers across the board. Respondents

from merged municipalities that did not hold a referendum are most supportive of municipal mergers (74%) and significantly differently so ($p < 0.05$) than respondents from the other three municipal merger categories. Yet, respondents from the latter three categories do not differ in the municipal merger support from one another. In addition, respondents from municipalities that took a merger decision in line with the referendum outcome find the issue most important (43%), and significantly more so than respondents from municipalities that did not merge and did not hold a referendum (27%; $p < 0.01$).

These varying patterns between municipal and county merger types might be explained by the voluntary, bottom-up, process of municipal mergers and the top-down nature of county mergers. First, bottom-up municipal mergers generate less resistance than top-down county mergers because they generally take into account citizens' preferences. Indeed, even in municipalities that merged without a referendum, the
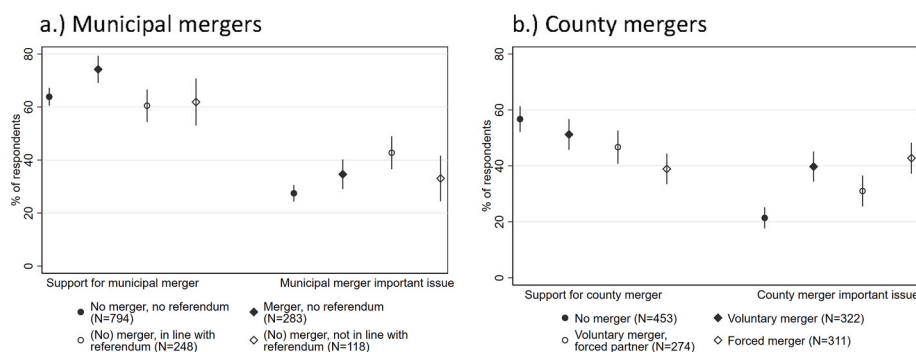
Fig. 4. Support for and importance of municipal and county mergers across politicization levels.
Notes: Municipalities and counties are classified into four types according to their hypothesized level of politicization displayed in Table 1. N=Number of respondents.
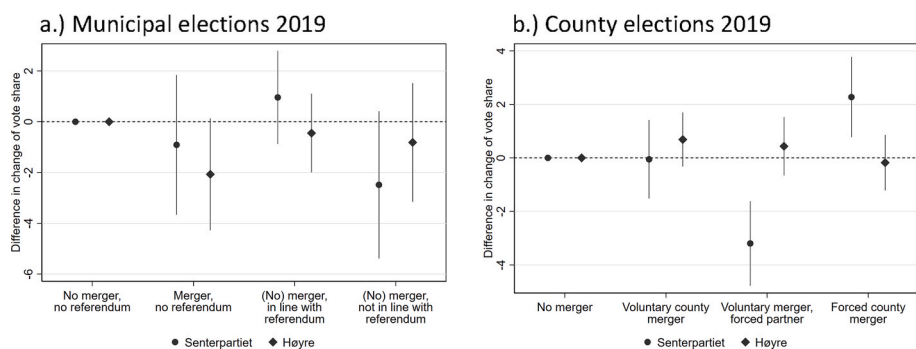

Fig. 5. The impact of politicization around municipal (left) and county (right) mergers on vote shares for Senterpartiet and Høyre
Notes: Shown are the estimated regression coefficients for the difference-in-differences estimators and their 95% confidence intervals. Municipalities and counties are classified into four types according to the hypothesized level of merger politicization displayed in Table 1. Full model results are displayed in Tables C.2.1-C.2.2 in Appendix C.2.

high levels of support in the absence of a referendum might be explained by the fact that positions on the merger were clear and no opposition stood up and hence no consultative referendum was considered necessary by local representatives. Second, in contrast to municipal merger support, county merger support clearly follows the expected pattern: the more a county merger goes against the interests of county representatives (as identified by Myksvoll et al., 2022), the lower the support for the county mergers.

After having examined merger support and importance across these different municipal and county contexts, we now turn to the analysis of the anti- and pro-merger parties' vote shares at the aggregate level of the municipality. The coefficients displayed in Fig. 5 are the estimated differences of vote share gains or losses for *Senterpartiet* and for *Høyre* between the baseline merger politicization type ('no merger and no referendum' for municipal elections and 'no merger' for county elections) and the other merger politicization categories of municipalities and counties (Table 1).

We do not find statistically significant differences in anti- and pro-merger parties' vote shares between the different categories of municipal merger mobilization (Fig. 5a). We also do not find empirical support for hypotheses 4a and 4b when we analyze vote share gains/losses for the other anti- and pro-merger parties across municipal merger politicization (Appendix C.3). In addition, the results remain robust when we operationalize 'politicization' of the merger issue in other ways (Figure C.4.1-C.4.6 in Appendix C.4), when we exclude 10 municipalities that were forced to merge by the national parliament (Figure C.6.1), and when we exclude special cases such as municipal splits, multiple mergers in sequence, or municipalities that merged before the 2020 reform (Figure C.6.2).

The robustness of the results across widely differing operationalizations of municipal merger process types corroborates the interpretation

that a voluntary, bottom-up, process provides less ground for political contestation given that citizens' preferences for or against mergers are taken up and considered early in the process. Based on these findings, we reject hypotheses H4a and H4b regarding the politicization of the merger process for the municipal mergers and for municipal elections.

In stark contrast, hypothesis H4a is confirmed by the analysis on the impact of county merger politicization on county election results. Fig. 5b reveals that the *Senterparti* performed better (+2 percentage points) in the 2019 county elections in counties that were forced to merge compared to counties that did not merge. In addition, finding an impact of politicization of a merger in county elections but not in municipal elections is also in line with the results from the individual-level analysis which suggests that especially citizens who oppose mergers and find the merger issue important are more likely to base their vote choice on the merger issue in second-order county compared to (less second-order) municipal elections.[6] Finding support for hypothesis H4a but not for H4b suggests that voting for anti-merger parties is more prevalent than voting for pro-merger parties as a reaction to jurisdictional mergers. This result is in line with the findings from the individual-level analysis regarding a stronger disposition of merger opponents to base their vote

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[6] A difference-in-differences analysis on vote shares won by Høyre and Senterpartiet in the *national* election of 2021 reveals that the politicization of the municipal mergers do not have an impact and that Høyre's vote shares are not impacted by the type of county merger (Appendix C.5). Senterpartiet's vote shares are larger in counties which were forced to merge (+2 percentage points) or that voluntarily merged (+2 percentage points) but are lower in counties that voluntary merged but with a forced partner county (−2 percentage points). These results suggest that top-down mergers may also impact vote choice in national, first-order elections. See also footnote 5.

choice on the merger issue than merger supporters.

These results displayed in Fig. 5b remain robust when we operationalize 'politicization' of the county merger issue following a classification of counties proposed by Stein et al. (2022) (Figures C.4.7 and C.4.8 in Appendix C.4). Fig. 5b shows that the *Senterparti* performed significantly worse (−3 percentage points) in counties that voluntarily merged but with a forced partner county. The robustness analyses on vote share gains/losses for the other pro-merger and anti-merger parties reveal that the *Arbeiderparti*, the other, less vocal, anti-merger party, *gained* vote shares in counties that voluntarily merged but with a forced partner (Figure C.3.2). This is in line with the evidence reported above: support for county mergers is higher in counties that voluntarily merged but with a forced partner county (Fig. 4). We can only speculate on the reasons why respondents turned to the *Arbeiderparti* instead of the *Senterparti* to express their discontent with the county merger. One explanation could be that Ap is perceived to be a moderate anti-merger party that is in favor of mergers on the condition that counties decide themselves with which other counties they would like to merge.

In sum, we, thus, find an impact of county merger politicization on anti-merger parties' vote shares in county elections, but we do not find an impact of the politicization of the municipal merger process in municipal elections. However, at the individual level, we find some evidence of anti-merger voting also based on the municipal merger issue and in municipal elections. These seemingly contradicting findings can be reconciled in two ways. First, voluntary, bottom-up municipal mergers may generate less opposition because citizens' interests are directly taken into account during the decision-making process. Therefore, fewer voters will base their vote choice on the merger issue and individual-level behavior will be not be observable in *aggregate* party vote shares. By contrast, the top-down county merger decisions were taken against the expressed preferences of county representatives which may have provided anti-merger parties with a better opportunity to mobilize resistance in county elections and hence more voters have cast their vote on the basis of the merger issue. Indeed, studies that find an impact of jurisdictional reforms on protest voting were all conducted in a context of top-down reforms (Blesse & Rösel, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2018; Rösel, 2017). Hence, the extent to which citizens' preferences are taken into account during the process leading up to a jurisdictional merger might have an impact on the possible backlash that results from such a reform (see also Bolgherini & Paparo, 2023).

Second, this finding might also result from the election type. Norwegian county elections are considered more second-order than municipal elections (Mjelde et al., 2016), and hence the merger issue has to compete with fewer issues for voters' attention. This interpretation squares with the study of Blesse and Rösel (2019): they find evidence for protest voting in county elections in Germany, but not in state elections in Styria, with the former being more second-order than the latter. While we are not able to disentangle these two explanations in the aggregate-level analysis with the data at hand, both of them can apply at the same time.

6. Discussion

Scholarship on jurisdictional reform has been increasingly concerned with its political consequences. In this article, we have used the case of the Norwegian local government reform of 2020 to study a question that has received scant attention: do jurisdictional mergers impact voting? At the individual level we find an association between citizens' position on jurisdictional mergers and the importance they attribute to them and the probability to vote for an anti- or pro-merger party. These associations are (1) more pronounced for merger opponents who find the merger issue important, are stronger for (2) county than for municipal mergers and (3) in second-order county elections where fewer other issues are at stake. At the aggregate level, we find that the most vocal anti-merger party performs better in county elections in counties where the merger was highly politicized because counties were forced to merge. These are

also the counties where support for the mergers was the lowest and where the salience of the merger issue was the highest.

Our study has several limitations that open up avenues for future research. First, our findings are based on cross-sectional data and we cannot disentangle whether citizens took up an anti- or pro-merger stance because they adopted the position of their preferred party or whether parties followed the positions of their supporters. Future research should, therefore, trace respondents' vote preferences and parties' positioning over several elections. Second, future research should explore alternative motivations for party vote choice as a reaction to a jurisdictional merger. Rather than basing their vote on the *issue* of the jurisdictional merger, voters in affected territories might also be concerned with securing territorial representation and vote for candidates from their pre-merger jurisdiction.

Finally, our study has focused on the 2019 election and the question may be raised whether the impact of jurisdictional mergers lasts longer than one election. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed assessment of the 2023 local elections, but it seems that the merger issue has lost traction. The most vocal opponent of the mergers, the Senterparti, has significantly lost in vote shares when the 2019 local elections are compared to the results of the 2023 local elections: from 14.4% to 8.2% in the municipal elections and from 16.7% to 8.7% in the county elections. These vote share losses can be explained by the merger issue losing relevance while other issues became more salient. After the 2021 national elections, the Senterparti and the Arbeiderparti entered into a coalition government which allowed the reversal of some of the most contested county mergers, such as the forced top-down merger between Troms and Finnmark, and thereby may have soothed the debate on the local government reform. Yet, the coalition government also introduced a much debated 'salmon tax' which is quite unpopular in the coastal areas, such as Troms and Finnmark, where there are relatively large fisheries industries. This suggests that the effect of jurisdictional reforms on voting is rather short-lived. Studying the temporality of jurisdictional reform effects on voting is, thus, also an important avenue for future research.

While our study focuses on the Norwegian case, we can expect to find similar electoral responses to jurisdictional reforms in other settings. Notably, Norway is a unitary state with strong local governments, like other Scandinavian countries. Denmark and Sweden both have a history of top-down local government reforms – there we might thus expect a stronger electoral impact – whereas Finland recently has experienced bottom-up municipal mergers, a setting which according to our results would provoke less strong reactions. Our results might travel to other European countries as well. To some extent, Norway can be considered a least likely case to observe an impact of jurisdictional mergers on voting, given the relative importance of subnational government (Ladner et al., 2019). In countries where subnational governance structures are less important, we might see even more pronounced effects of jurisdictional mergers on voting, because subnational elections there are more second-order. Ultimately, more comparative research on the impact of jurisdictional mergers on voting is needed (see Bolgherini & Paparo, 2023), but the Norwegian case provides for an ideal setting to study the impact of the reform process and election type – while holding other context conditions at the national level constant.

Our findings are important because they reveal that subnational jurisdictional reform is clearly linked to vote choice in subnational elections. Hence, in addition to an impact of European integration on vote choice in European and national elections (De Vries, 2010; Tillmann 2004), jurisdictional design at the subnational level also matters for vote choice. Our study, thus, adds to an increasing body of research that reveals that citizens care about jurisdictional design at both the subnational and supranational levels (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, 2016). Furthermore, we reveal the conditions under which a jurisdictional merger process impacts vote choice. Bottom-up, voluntary mergers seem to mobilize less than top-down, involuntary mergers (see also Bolgherini & Paparo, 2023) and mergers are more likely to play a role in

second-order elections. Our results also corroborate recent research showing that decision-making procedures have an important impact on the perceived legitimacy of jurisdictional design (Arnesen, Broderstad, Johannesson, & Linde, 2019; Schraff, 2022). This calls for further research on public perceptions on jurisdictional design and jurisdictional reforms across multiple territorial scales.

Appendix

Supplementary materials to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.103033.

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