

## Summary: Citizen participation in municipal reforms. Experiences with referendums and citizen surveys. NF-report 9/2017.

The aim of the study has been to shed light on the two most common ways for municipalities to gauge their citizen's views on the possibility of amalgamations with neighboring municipalities in Norway; referendums and citizen surveys. The study is based on analyses of register data, a survey aimed at local politicians and administrative officers, and 25 interviews of mayors, opposition leaders and chief administrative executives in ten selected municipalities.

The two forms of citizen participation give contrasting images of citizen preferences. The survey approach shows a more positive attitude to municipality amalgamations than the outcome of the referendums. The outcome of a survey is also more likely to not be considered in the decisions made by the local councils. Of 146 municipalities that have undertaken both forms of citizen participation, the outcome in the two approaches differ in 40 % of the cases.

The actual participation in the referendums vary to a considerable extent, from 10 % to 74 % of the local electorate. The average turnout is 47,9 %, but is generally higher in smaller municipalities and in municipalities with a high turnout in ordinary local elections. The turnout is also higher in municipalities that ended up with a decision not to amalgamate with neighboring municipalities.

Citizen surveys has been undertaken by the majority of Norwegian municipalities (66 %). The average number of respondents is 467. While the surveys display a more positive attitude to municipality amalgamations than the referendums, this attitude is more pronounced in larger municipalities. However, 12 % of the municipalities undertaking citizen surveys did not give the respondents an explicit opportunity to express opposition to amalgamation as such.

The local politicians' satisfaction with the citizen participation differs insignificantly between small and large municipalities – but the referendums are generally held in higher regard in the smaller municipalities. Generally, mobilizing citizens seems to have more to do with how contested the question of municipality mergers were. Few municipalities have utilized electronic/web-based solutions to mobilize. Those who did, did this with the expressed aim to increase participations from the younger part of the population.

A common view among local politicians is that both referendums and surveys have contributed to a good political process locally, and have contributed with useful advices for the local councils. There are dissenters, however, although this does not seem to relate to the methods or designs involved in the citizen participation.

While the study does not argue that the findings require substantial revisions of current legislation, some recommendations are provided. It is important that the local processes of citizen participation focus on:

- The status of citizens' participation and local politicians attitude towards the outcome
- How the citizen participation is interpreted, i.e. low turnout in referendums, quorum requirements
- The added value of utilizing both surveys and referendums
- Transparency in the applied survey methods
- Letting local council decisions mature, avoiding frequent rematches involving citizen participation
- Increased attention to citizen participation in larger municipalities.