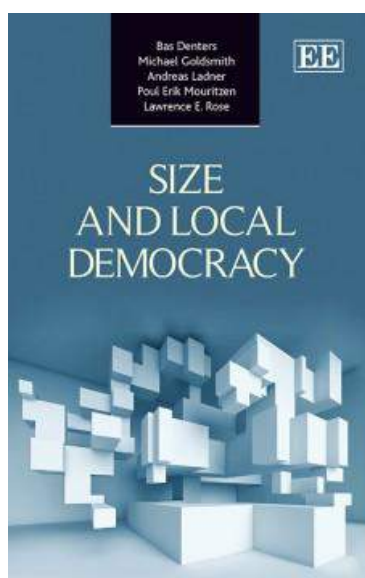


BOOK REVIEW: SIZE AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY

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Size and local democracy. Bas Denters, Michael Goldsmith, Andreas Ladner, Poul Erik Mouritzen and Lawrence E. Rose. Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2014. 462 pp. £105.00 (hardback).

How large should local governments be? This is the first sentence in the introduction (p.3) to the *Size and local democracy* book by five well-established experts in local government studies. But it is also the pivotal question that has exercised minds of scholars and experts from old ages to the present. Many countries have implemented local government reforms in last few decades trying to find best answer to this basic question, resulting in more or less substantial changes in the population size of local government units; either in the direction of small units of only few hundreds inhabitants or large behemoths of several tens or even hundreds of thousands inhabitants. Territorial reform has the nasty habit of being the most important aspect of any local government reform process, and is typically accompanied by heated debates about the effectiveness, desirability and rationality of small- versus large-scale local government units. Such debates are by no means recent occurrence, but definite answer to the basic question is still very eluding one.

Recent political debates about the merits of the amalgamation reforms and the academic debate about the questions “is small really so beautiful” and “is big really so ugly” and deriving point of the most recent comprehensive study by group of five scholars, all senior researchers of local government reform and devolution processes. Determining the optimum size of local government units is complicating process that generates need for large amount of empirical

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evidence regarding the actual effects of size on relevant aspects of democratic governance. Authors set central question “what is the effect of size on the democratic quality of municipal government?” As size has many possible dimensions (population, geography, density, etc.), authors concentrate on population size, seeking the answer to the research question on the basis of empirical analyses of conditions existing in 234 municipalities found in four countries – Switzerland, Norway, Denmark and Netherlands. Authors begin their analysis with the precise definition of the aspects of democratic government trying to clarify how these aspects may be related to size. In the introductory chapter authors are distinguishing between two fundamentally different positions in the debate. On the one side there is the Lovely Lilliput camp of scholars, who hold the view that increasing the size of political units is likely to have essentially negative effects on the democratic quality of local political life. On the opposite side authors recognize Beautiful Brobdingnag adherents, who claim, that increasing system size is likely to have benign effects. Different as there position may be, both camps agree that size really does matter and changes in the population size are thought to have major impact on the democratic quality of governments. There is also the third, quieter camp that claims that size does not matter on the democratic quality in local governments.

More than thirty years ago, Ken Newton in his well know essay in *Political Studies* journal already concluded that “local authorities of different sizes, whether rural or urban, do not differ by more than small amount, if they differ at all, on many measures of functional effectiveness and democracy”. He even claims that size is irrelevant to many aspects of functional effectiveness and democracy. Thirty years later and armed with large amount of collected empirical data from four included cases of local governments, Denters et al. come to the similar conclusions to those formulated by Newton, but with a number of important differences. Most importantly, Denters et co found significant population size effects in more than just a few instances; although size effects found were of small magnitude, they are not making normative claims in terms of relevance or irrelevance of these effects. Denters et co come to opposite conclusion from Newton’s, as they prove that large units may have several disadvantages when it comes to organized participation in politics. It is clear, however, that local government in most European countries have been subject to a variety of forces, which may have reduced the relevance, and impact of population size. For one thing, public policies in many countries have been oriented to ensure that municipalities of all possible sizes have economic resources needed to provide ever-extensive array of public services and facilities.

Denters and co-authors should really be congratulated to tackle with one of the oldest and most neglected questions in modern local politics, i.e. how large should local units be? They are not trying to force simple answer to the simple question, knowing that there is a thin line in complexity of the issue and proving that – contrary to the Beautiful Brobdingnag camp beliefs – small can be a bit more beautiful after all.