Size and Democracy Revisited
A Critical Discussion of the Claimed Trade-off between Problem-Solving Capacity and Citizen Participation

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Abstract Classic literature on size and democracy argues that there is a trade-off between opportunities for broad citizen participation and communities' ability to deal effectively with the challenges faced by their locality. Consequently, smaller political units enrich democracy, while larger units strengthen the capacity to govern. We argue that although the trade-off may be relevant within a framework concentrating on representative democratic institutions, the trade-off is questionable in the light of more recent contributions on democratic, network-based governance. The article develops this argument, and suggests elements that should be included in a revised theory of municipal size.

Keywords: • local government • citizen effectiveness • citizen participation • system capacity • governance capacity

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1 Introduction

Scholars tend to see a trade-off between smaller political communities that offer citizens rich opportunities to participate on the one hand, and larger political communities that are able to deal effectively with the different challenges faced by localities on the other. This presumed tension between democratic participation and capacity has long historical roots in political science, partly dating back to Ancient Greece. In the early 1970s, Robert Dahl and Edward R. Tufte reformulated this tension in modern academic language in their well-known and widely acclaimed volume, "Size and Democracy" (Dahl and Tufte 1973).

The presumed trade-off between capacity and democracy has long been at the heart of a problem which plagues attempts to reform local government. On the one hand, large units are known to be necessary for the efficient and effective provision of public services. On the other hand, small units are believed to be more conducive to a sense of belonging, a high rate of individual participation, and close contact between political elites, leaders and ordinary citizens (Newton 1982, 190; see also Kjellberg 1985). The argument is pertinent. In analyses of the question of municipal size in a European context, the apparent trade-off between capacity and democracy is still a fundamental premise in the literature (e.g. Baldersheim and Rose 2010; Swianiewicz 2010; Denters et al. 2014; Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, and Serritzlew 2014; Gendzwill and Swianiewicz 2016, Steiner et al. 2018).

The aim of this article is to critically discuss the above-mentioned trade-off between capacity and democracy. We will demonstrate that while the claim seems valid in the context of a classic representative democracy, newer practices and theories of governance and democracy raise questions about the validity of the trade-off and the effect of size on capacity and citizen participation. We anchor our discussion in contemporary literature on governance, and discuss the relevance of size given different relationships between problem-solving capacity and citizen participation.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, ideas and practices of democratic participation and public government have changed, and we have witnessed a rich theoretical development in disciplines like political science and public administration. Following up on the normative basis for participation laid down by Pateman (1970) and Barbers (1984), critiques of representative democracy as "thin democracy" are broadly recognized. Today, the normative basis for extensive citizen participation is taken for granted in the literature on democratic innovation (e.g. Smith 2009; Geissel and Newton 2012; Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). However, in order to broaden the perspective on democracy and problem-solving capacity we will take our point of departure in recent literature on

'governance'. This is a crucial point, since contemporary governance scholars link citizen participation with efficient problem-solving – rather than separating the two (Rhodes 1981; Peters and Pierre 2004; Boyte 2005; Benz and Papadopoulos 2006; Peters and Pierre 2006; Torfing and Triantafillou 2011; Sørensen and Torfing 2018). We will show how distinguished fields in governance research integrate governance and democracy in one common framework. Our discussion will draw on this perspective to elaborate on the question of size. Although governance networks are normally preferred because they fit better to the scale of problems to be solved than fixed political jurisdictions do, the literature on governance rarely touches on the question of scale (Ansell and Torfing 2015). So far, the relevance of the size of the participating actors in governance networks seems to have been overlooked. Although we do not aspire to fill this knowledge gap, we will point to some possible consequences of size that may be considered in a revised theory of municipal size.

In the following, we first review the trade-off argument and its more recent use by scholars studying the scaling of local government jurisdictions. We then turn to the present literature on governance as a basis for pointing out how democracy and governance are theoretically integrated. Next, we present some possible combinations of citizen participation and problem-solving capacity, as a basis for our discussion of the question of size in the light of more recent governance literature.

2   Recalling the trade-off argument

The suggested trade-off between democratic participation and governance capacity has been a concern for scholars for as long as ideas about democracy have existed. For Aristotle, for example, citizens needed to be few enough in number to know one another's 'characters' in order to make wise decisions. A citizen, he supposed, should be able to survey the entire territory of his city. On the other hand, Aristotle also raised the problem that some democratic units might be *too* small, arguing that very small units have limitations in terms of not being able to solve common problems (Barker 1946; Dahl 1997, 377).

The classical phrasing of this trade-off has been further developed in modern political science and public administration literature. In his analysis of fiscal federalism, Oates (1999), for example, pointed out the challenges involved in matching services to local preferences (which is possible in smaller jurisdictions), and the economies of scale attainable in larger ones (see also Ostrom, Tiebout and Warren 1961). However, in order to make the trade-off as explicit as possible, the contributions by Robert Dahl and colleagues, including Dahl's 1973 book co-authored with Tufte, will serve as our main theoretical point of departure. As expressed by Dahl, the dilemma regarding democracy is as follows: 'The smaller

the unit, the greater the opportunity for citizens to participate in the decisions of
their government – yet the less of the environment they can control. Thus, for
most citizens, participation in very large units becomes minimal and in very small
units it becomes trivial' (1967, 960).

Dahl and Tufte's argument involves a trade-off between *citizen effectiveness* and
system capacity, where the former means that 'citizens [are] acting responsibly
and competently fully control the decisions of the polity", while system capacity
points to whether or not "the polity has the capacity to respond fully to the
collective preferences of its citizens' (Dahl and Tufte 1973, 20).

'Citizen effectiveness'
In addition to voting, Dahl and Tufte (1973, 42) also include levels of interest in
political affairs, party membership, and sense of effectiveness as participants, as
alternative variables to detect different aspects of democracy. They argue that
neither mere participation nor a strong sense of effectiveness is sufficient (Dahl
and Tufte 1973, 66). Participation on the input side of policy making is a
prerequisite to enable people to accurately communicate their views on, and
attitudes towards, public policies to all those who influence decisions; and
decision makers need to respond favorably to such input. They emphasize the
intuitive fact that the cost of communication increases with size. The question is:
how can one avoid unrepresentativeness in leadership as the number of citizens
grows larger? Dahl and Tufte's theoretical proposition stresses that 'only in
smaller-scale politics can differences in power, knowledge, and directness of
communication between citizens and top leaders be reduced to a minimum' (1973,
71-88).

These arguments surrounding the notion of 'citizen effectiveness' later came to
serve as a conceptual framework for scholars working in the fields of European
integration and local government reform, for instance (for an overview, see
Larssen and Serritzlew 2011). One of the most comprehensive empirical studies
that follows directly on from Dahl and Tufte's work is a recent book on 'Size and
Local Democracy', which compares the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark and
Norway (Denters et al. 2014). The authors establish several indicators for
measuring the democratic quality of local political systems including, for example,
local political interest and knowledge, personal political competencies, trust in
local politicians, satisfaction with local government performance, and local
electoral participation. In recent literature on municipal reform, Dahl and Tufte are
among the standard references (e.g. Baldersheim and Rose 2010; Swianiewicz
2010; Denters et al. 2014; Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, and Serritzlew 2014;
Gendzwill and Swianiewicz 2016, Steiner et al. 2018). Analyzing the effects of
the Danish amalgamation reform in 2007, for example, Larssen and Serritzlew
(2011) investigate 'internal political efficacy', defined in terms of indicators like

whether the respondent considers herself qualified to participate, is informed about and understands local politics – or whether this is too complex; and the extent to which they feel competent to hold a public office. Another example refers to Poland, where Gendzwill and Swianiewicz (2016) take their departure in Dahl and Tufte's claim that small scale supports input legitimacy and large scale improves output legitimacy. In this case, the authors find that local democracy generally performs better in smaller municipalities.

'System capacity'
Referring to 'system capacity', the basic question asked by Dahl and Tufte (1973, 111) is whether the capacity of a political unit is related to the size of its population. Economic achievements are associated with economies of scale, with large units having an advantage. However, smaller units can achieve the same economies of scale as larger ones through more or less free trade. Smaller units, however, become dependent – formally or informally – on the actions of people outside them (Dahl and Tufte 1973, 114). When discussing interdependence and autonomy, Dahl and Tufte (1973, 128) point to the fact that all sub-national political units are regulated by the power and authority held at the nation state level. The boundaries of the political system are sometimes smaller than the boundaries of the political problem, making small units dependent on cooperation in some way or another with actors outside – also in economic terms.

In studies of the optimal scale of local government, system capacity is treated primarily as a question of economies of scale. Recalling Newton's (1982, 192-196) contribution, for example, system capacity is discussed in terms of diseconomies of scale, bureaucratic expenses and wastefulness in large units. The same is true for the recent literature on local government reform. Drawing attention to the extensively studied Danish amalgamation reform in 2007 once more, the focus in recent studies has typically been on the cost of running the political system (Blom-Hansen et al. 2014) and on policy expenditure (Blom-Hansen et al. 2016).

3   Integrating democracy and governance

Referring to 'citizen effectiveness', Dahl and subsequent scholars working with his ideas typically focus on the institutions and processes of the chain of command inherent in representative democracy (Dalton et al. 2004, 129). In emphasizing the relationship between politicians and voters, the importance of elected representatives becomes pivotal. However, ideas about participatory and deliberative democracy have flourished since the late 1960s (Floridia 2017), and as we have shown these are important constituents of contemporary research on democracy. In the governance literature, the concept of 'citizen effectiveness' is

commonly replaced by '*citizen participation*', which includes various kinds of
participation related to democratic processes.

When referring to 'system capacity', Dahl and Tufte (1973) include economies of
scale as one determinant of system capacity. However, they also stress the ability
of local government jurisdictions to deal with the problems they confront, and the
degree to which they are dependent on cooperation in one way or another.
Grounding the discussion in recent governance literature, the concept of "system
capacity" corresponds to concepts pointing to the capacity of political units to
solve problems – or '*governance capacity*'. That is, 'the ability to organize and
allocate resources to make informed collective choices and to meet public ends'
(Painter and Pierre 2005a, 2; Peters 2011, 5).

The aim of this section is to discuss the relationship between citizen participation
and governance capacity – which we regard as equivalent terms to "citizen
effectiveness" and "system capacity". We will begin the discussion by referring to
a selection of mainstream governance approaches from distinguished fields. As we
will show, they all understand citizen participation and governance capacity as
integrated dimensions of democratic governance.

From representative government towards interactive governance
The first field of study emphasizes the interactive dimensions of the governance
process. While representative democracy is one of the oldest topics in political
science research, the conceptualization of democracy and governance in terms of
'interactive governance' is more recent, and has been used to conceptualize ideas
and practices with a global spread, for example in fields such as planning and
planning studies. Interactive governance points to the complex processes through
which a plurality of social and political actors with diverging interests interact in
order to formulate, promote, and achieve common objectives by means of
mobilizing, exchanging, and deploying a range of ideas, rules, and resources
(Torfing et al. 2012, 14).

The literature on interactive governance suggests many benefits from this type of
interaction between participation and governance. Through interactions with civil
society or market actors, different resources can be linked together, and public
actors can achieve more than if they performed on their own. For example, due to
the many sources of information and insight that exist today, governments could
gain from avoiding litigation costs and making better policy and implementation
decisions with a more solid base (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000, 385; Irvin and
Stansbury 2004, 56–58; Mayer et al. 2005, 181). This, in turn, could improve the
justice of decisions, ease implementation and increase the effectiveness of public
action (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014, 13). Seen from the perspective of the citizens,
interactive governance offers greater influence over political decision-making
compared to the influence they exercise via voting in elections (Irvin and

Stansbury 2004, 56–58; Sørensen 2006, 104). Moreover, through participation citizens also gain civic skills for activist citizenship (Putnam 2000), and policymakers become more responsive to the diverse interests and resources among different stakeholders and stakeholder groups. In sum, interactive governance depicts the process of governance not only in terms of getting things done, but also as an arena for citizen participation.

From input towards output legitimacy

A second field of recent governance research linking citizen participation and collaborative problem-solving looks at legitimacy. Legitimacy implies that citizens are willing to accept the public sector's decisions and actions, even when these do not align with their individual preferences or objectives (Gilley 2006, 502). Traditionally, the essential sources of democratic support and legitimacy have been closely related to the input side of the political system (Crozier 2010). However, with 'New Public Management' and other administrative reform ideas, we have witnessed institutional changes like devolution, outsourcing, partnerships and networks. In sum, these changes have weakened the linkage between popular collective preferences expressed through elections, and policy output (see, for example, Brewer 2007). The link between the 'demos', as understood in the context of representative democracy, and actual system output has, it is argued, become more indirect as elected politicians do not necessarily constitute the core of the political system in the way stipulated by the logic of representative democracy (Crozier 2010).

These developments have spurred scholars to ask to what extent we are witnessing a change in the relative importance of different types of legitimacy. While input legitimacy is concerned with the participatory quality of decision-making processes, output legitimacy refers to the perceived efficiency among citizens of the rules, laws, and services produced by a public government (Risse 2006, 185). A trade-off between the two types of legitimacy has been suggested, implying that output-based legitimacy has become more important at the expense of classical input-based legitimacy (Lindgren and Persson 2010, 450). Other studies raise doubts about such a trade-off in the way that citizens evaluate their (local) governments. Rather, they suggest that the different types of legitimacy could be synergistic, in the sense that citizens tend to evaluate their (local) government both in terms of input and output measures (Gustavsen, Røiseland, and Pierre 2014; Heinelt, Sweeting, and Getimis 2006; Klausen, Sweeting, and Howard 2006). This implies that democratic legitimacy rests on a combination of governments' capacity to deal with and solve the most important problems, and their ability to involve their citizens via democratic channels – the common supposition being, however, that citizen participation and governance capacity are conceptually linked.

From democracy towards quality of government
A third field of contemporary governance studies refers to the 'quality of government'. This developed from an apparent paradox, namely that although the idea of democracy has spread to new parts of the world over the past generation, and countless studies have explored and explained the transformation from authoritarian regimes to democratic elections and leadership, on closer inspection there is no clear link between liberal representative democracy and subsequent social development. States like South Africa or Russia illustrate that the formalization of democratic institutions is no easy road to the many social and cultural qualities we tend to ascribe to democracies (Rothstein 2010).

The reason why democracy does not lead to better outcomes lies, according to Diamond (2008), in the fact that many contemporary democracies only serve a small elite, corruption flourishes within them, members of their governing elites protect each other, and power is misused. According to Rothstein and Toerell (2008, 65), who explore the conceptual premises of the widely used term 'good governance', quality of government should imply 'the impartiality of institutions that exercise government authority'. While democracy in its most classical interpretation refers to access to power, the 'quality of government concept' adds the notion of political equality, underlining that democracy on the input side must be complemented by impartiality on the output side of the political system (Rothstein and Teorell 2008, 170). That is, the quality of the public administration involved in developing and implementing public policy is just as important as the quality of the democratic institutions involved. This implies that democracy and citizen participation need to be understood in relation to, and not separately from, the process of problem-solving and governance capacity.

From co-production towards co-creation
The fourth field of relevant governance studies refers to 'co-creation', understood as a further conceptual development from the more classical term 'co-production'. The latter concept refers to the interactive process through which the providers and users of public services apply their respective resources and capabilities in production and delivery (Lusch and Vargo 2006). Clearly concerned with delivery, co-production has no strong link to democracy. Co-creation, however, captures the new and broader trend of interaction in society where a plethora of public and private actors collaborate in order to find and provide new and better solutions to shared problems and challenges (Torfing et al. 2012). The urgent problems of our time, like climate, migration or cybercrime, can arguably not be solved single-handedly by governments. Efficient solutions require collaboration with other relevant and affected actors who have the knowledge, resources and ideas to foster new and potentially disruptive ideas and implement them in practice (Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2017; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2014; 2015). Building on Arnstein's widely known ladder of

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participation (1969), a 'ladder of co-creation' will feature the systematic engagement of relevant public and private actors in co-initiation, co-design and co-implementation of new solutions working as its telos. In contrast to the classical ladder, the ladder of co-creation would simultaneously be concerned with the enhancement of democratic influence *and* the fostering of effective solutions to shared problems. In terms of governance and democracy, co-creation therefore means developing the operational level of public government into an arena for citizen participation.

4   Size and democracy revisited – discussion and conclusion

The four fields of academic research referred to above share a common understanding of *governance capacity* and *citizen participation* as integrated dimensions of democratic governance – not as separate functions. If one replaces the original concepts used by Dahl and Tufte (1973) with their closest equivalents in governance theory - governance capacity and citizen participation - one gets the impression that the presumed trade-off can and should be questioned.

Figure 1 illustrates four theoretically possible combinations of citizen participation and governance capacity. The argument about a trade-off (illustrated by the arrow) implies that actors need to define a balance between cells 2 and 3. However, the governance literature, as we have seen, leaves us with the impression that all four cells represent possible outcomes, at least theoretically.

Figure 1:   Four possible empirical outcomes of citizen participation and governance capacity

		Governance capacity	
		Low	High
Citizen participation	Low	(1) **Malfunctioning democracy**	(2) **Governance without democratic mandate**
	High	(3) **Participation without content**	(4) **Democratic governance**

'Malfunctioning democracy' (cell 1) is an outcome that most actors are likely trying to avoid. In this outcome, neither the capacity to act, nor the involvement of citizens, is present. Cell 1 therefore represents a clear state of failure. In its most

extreme form, *'Governance without democratic mandate'* (cell 2) is an outcome which maximises governance capacity and minimises citizen participation. The size or complexity of public institutions can lead actors to sacrifice participation at the expense of capacity, for instance when they regard citizen participation as an element that interrupts decision-making processes. *'Participation without content'* (cell 3) represents the opposite output to 'governance without democratic mandate' (cell 2). In this case, citizen participation is well developed, but there are few significant decisions to be taken due to limited governance capacity. This type of outcome could follow from a mismatch between the scaling of the problems that a local government must deal with, and the geographical demarcation of a local democracy. The last cell in table 1, labelled '*Democratic governance'* (cell 4), is an outcome where both citizen participation and governance capacity is high. The above discussion has illustrated that on theoretical grounds, there are few reasons to exclude this as an outcome accomplishing two desirable qualities of public institutions simultaneously.

The comparison between the suggestion about a trade-off involving 'citizen effectiveness' and 'system capacity' on the one hand, and contemporary writings about democratic governance on the other, shows that there is a significant difference between the two positions. Based on recent governance literature, we put forward good reasons to question the trade-off argument set forth by Dahl and Tufte. However, taking into account the fact that local governments had a very different role in the late 1960s, when the modern version of the trade-off argument was first articulated, this conclusion is hardly surprising. A substantial body of theory has brought us new analytical perspectives as well as new practices referring both to governance and participation. Therefore, we find no reason to reject the classical writings on this topic, including Dahl and Tufte, as such. It is obvious, however, that the empirical and theoretical basis for the initial claim was different over 50 years ago. Today, it is therefore questionable to use only the presumption about a trade-off between citizen participation and governance capacity as the main premise for local government research and reform.

On the other hand, questioning the presumption about a trade-off does not mean that size does not matter for citizen participation and governance capacity. Intuitively, it would be strange to imagine that size has no consequences for the workings of political institutions. The question of size is significant, but how does it matter and for what? As we have seen, based on the literature on governance the answer is not obvious. For some of the authors referred to above, size explicitly does not matter (Rothstein and Teorell 2008:172), while for others size is simply not mentioned as a relevant variable to explain citizen participation and governance capacity. Size is undertheorized and low on the research agenda among governance scholars, and so far, theoretical presumptions about the size of political bodies are lacking.

What should size mean in the context of democratic governance, then? We do not believe there is an easy answer to that question, nor do we have any ambitions to develop a fully revised theory of municipal size in this article. We will, however, point to two basic insights based on the above discussion that are possible ingredients for a future theory of size and democratic governance.

First, size matters for the *selection* of tasks for local governments in terms of scale, administrative capacity and expert knowledge (Oates 1999; Howlett and Ramesh 2016). The larger a local government, the more its professional staff can specialize, and the more specialized services it can provide. Being a municipality of 500 compared to 50.000 inhabitants makes a difference for relatively advanced services like e.g. emergency medical assistance or environmentally friendly waste management, or for the capacity to make substantial investments in infrastructure for transport or business development.

The second insight has to do with the *composition* of responsibilities. The more varied the tasks a local government is responsible for, the more room there will be for innovative links between different services and functions. A varied set of responsibilities provides more room for local government maneuvering, and thereby increases its policy capacity (Painter and Pierre 2005). In addition, the composition of responsibilities will be significant for some of the types of participation discussed above, for example co-creation. The open and interactive search for solutions in co-created processes requires that there is a menu of options and tools available.

Comparing these two principles with contemporary reform processes that affect the size of local governments, the second consideration about the composition of tasks seems less important than the first. In most countries, the discussion about tasks for local governments seems to be dominated by "scale", "professional competencies" and "efficiency", and addresses these different functions one by one.

A more fruitful approach, given the relevance of the composition of responsibilities suggested above, would involve a discussion about the total mix of functions and tasks that a local government needs in order to work as a well-functioning arena for democratic governance. For example, following the four strands of governance literature outlined above, this would imply that output legitimacy is increased by services and solutions that respond to citizens' needs; that quality of government is ensured by democratic standards and impartial processes; and that citizens are involved through co-creating processes of initiation, design and implementation.

In this way, we have demonstrated that size has both direct and indirect consequences for democratic governance. Further theoretical and empirical reasoning will be needed in order to develop a theory of size in the context of local governance. We have simply claimed that based on recent governance literature, the classic presumption about a trade-off between citizen effectiveness and system capacity needs rethinking and should be reconceptualised in order to capture the widening of governance and democratic practices that we have witnessed since the late 1960s.

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