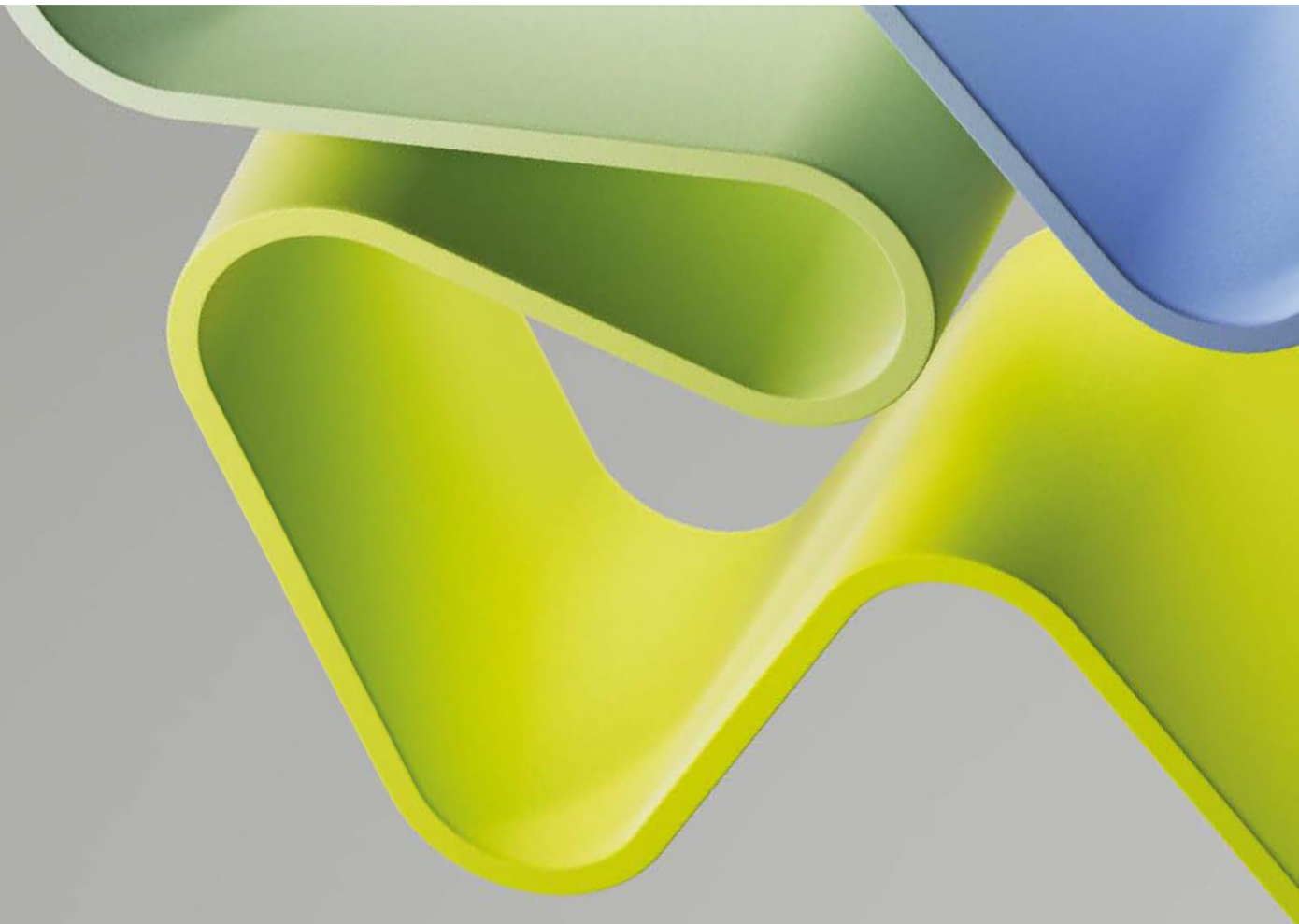


Midterm Evaluation of The Norwegian Local Election Studies of 2019 and 2023



Background

The Norwegian Local Elections Studies (NLES) have been carried out in connection to every local election since 1995 and have generated important knowledge about local elections and local democracy in Norway, with relevance for Norwegian public authorities, academia, and the public. Over the years, the projects have been led from the Institute for Social Research (ISR), Oslo, but several other research institutions have also been involved.

The current call from RCN concerns the local elections in 2019 and 2023 and covers costs during 2019-2020 and 2023-2024, respectively. A total of 12 million NOK was reserved for the project. It was emphasized that the project should carry out a survey of a similar type as in connection to previous local elections, but also incorporate international perspectives. A midterm evaluation would be conducted after the first period to determine whether the project would be funded during the second.

The following main objectives were specified for the project:

- generate new knowledge about local elections and local democracy
- increase insight and lead to proposed measures to enhance local democracy

The call also specified the following research priorities:

- A state-of-the-art review of current knowledge on voter behaviour
- An analysis of voter participation and other forms of participation
- The interaction between the municipalities and inhabitants between elections
- Other topics of relevance to democratic and political processes within the framework of local democracy in municipalities and counties.

The current project is also coordinated from ISR but incorporates additional scholars from other institutions, including Volda University College, Oslo Metropolitan University, NORCE Norwegian Research Centre and the University of Southern Denmark. It is led by Senior Research Fellow Signe Bock Seggaard and Research Professor Jo Saglie, both at ISR. In addition, Research Director Dag Arne Christensen has had a significant role as coordinator of the scientific work in Bergen.

Evaluation of the NLES

As mentioned, the midterm evaluation aims at preparing the ground for a decision about whether or not the project should be funded during 2023 and 2024. More specifically, the evaluation will assess

whether the scientific goals that were set up in the call, and the aims specified in the revised project description have been achieved, and if these are relevant and beneficial to users and the society. The evaluation will also concern the plans for the final period. The Expert Committee is asked to suggest possible improvements of the project.

The Expert Committee that was appointed to carry out the evaluation consists of Senior Researcher Roger Buch, Danish School of Media and Journalism, Aarhus University, Denmark (chair); Professor Emeritus Anders Lidström, Umeå University, Sweden and University Teacher Siv Sandberg, Åbo Akademi University, Finland. The evaluation is based on a self-evaluation and other reports from the NLES, the publications generated by the project, background information provided by RCN and on interviews with the leadership of the project, as well as with stakeholders from the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.

The evaluation report consists of an assessment of six topics – research activities; relevance and benefit to research community, users and the society; national cooperation; internationalisation; recruitment; and organisation and management. The report ends with general conclusions about whether the project has reached its goals and a summary of the Expert Committee's recommendations for the continuing work with the NLES.

1. Research activities

The research related activities have concerned preparations for and implementation of the citizens survey and to write the report in Norwegian where the main results are presented. To a large extent this means a repetition of the proceedings that were carried out during previous local election studies but the 2019 study also included several novelties. Time and efforts were devoted to developing a data management plan and to carry out a Data Protection Impact Assessment. An entirely new element in these local elections was the election of councillors to the municipalities that were to be amalgamated from January 2020. Analysing the potential effects of this reform was an important element in the research plan. Finally, the researchers also aimed at renewing Norwegian local election studies by facilitating comparisons with similar surveys in other countries, initially mainly with Denmark.

The main source of the studies was a citizen survey, carried out immediately after the elections. For the first time the ordinary data collection through telephone interview was complemented by a web-based questionnaire. The idea behind this mixed design was to investigate whether changes over time were substantial or just a consequence of the method of collecting data in a time of declining participation in citizen surveys. In total, 9600 respondents were selected with a stratified selection design that ensured that also smaller municipalities were represented. The response rate was about 43 percent. Additional registry data about the individuals was provided by Statistics Norway. Another source was data from a register of the candidates in the local elections, which was used for analyses of representation and local party systems. In addition, the project has developed an elections results data base with data on all local elections from 1945. Not included in the original

research plan was a funding of a merged data file with all Norwegian local election studies from 1995 to 2019 and a qualitative study of local party branches in three merged municipalities.

The main publication from the project is an anthology in Norwegian¹, published in 2021 with open access. It contains chapters from most of the sub-projects and covers all research priorities that were specified in the call from the Ministry. Special attention was given to the on-going amalgamations, through analyses of citizens' attitudes to these and views on their possible consequences. In addition, a separate chapter analysed a democratic innovation not directly related to the local elections, namely the citizen panel in Bergen. Apart from the anthology in Norwegian, the project has generated five articles published in international academic journals but also a number of papers presented at research conferences, which we expect, will result in further international publications.

Our conclusion is that the research activities have been carried out in accordance with the plans and that the findings have been published in publications as intended, thereby providing the requested state-of-the-art review of current knowledge on local voter behaviour. Apart from ensuring the continuity of the analyses, the project has also been innovative by capturing possible effects of the amalgamation reform for local democracy and by renewing the way that data has been collected. Entirely new activities include a study of local party branches in three merged municipalities and a chapter in an international handbook on local elections and voting in Europe (see further below). The plans for the coming years indicate that the project will continue along these lines.

2. Relevance and benefit to the research community, users and the society

The research group has actively disseminated research findings to the rest of the academia, to public authorities, interest organisations, the media, and the public. The anthology in Norwegian has an accessible form, not only by being possible to download for free, but also as it is written in a way that makes it understandable for the interested public. The data file with the voter survey and the merged file 1995-2019 is also available through Sikt (the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research) for anyone interested in making own analyses. Dissemination in academia includes presentations of research papers from the project at international research conferences, such as ECPR, IPSA, NOPSA and NORKOM but also nationally at the conference of the Norwegian Political Science Association. Some of the papers have already been published, whereas others are work in progress.

Research findings have been communicated to public authorities and interest organisation. The anthology was launched at a webinar in June 2021, followed by a panel discussion with the Minister of Local Government and Modernisation and representatives of the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS). This was also covered by media. Many members of the research group have contributed extensively with comments in media about the local elections as well as on

¹ Saglie, Jo; Bock Seggaard, Signe & Christensen, Dag Arne (eds, 2021) *Lokalvalget 2019: Nye kommuner – nye valg?* Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

their research findings. Researchers have also been used as experts in public commissions with relevance for local government and local elections.

As a way of ensuring that the research would be relevant for the users and the society, a reference group of stakeholders was established. It consists of representatives from the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), the Norwegian Directorate of Elections and Statistics Norway. The leaders of NLES met the reference group in May 2019 to discuss the draft questionnaire.

To summarize, the project has generated results that have been highly relevant for the international and Norwegian research community, as well as for public authorities and the public. In addition, the members of the research group have been very active in communicating their findings, thereby contributing to the general debate about local democracy and local government reform. Hence, *our conclusion* is that the project has reached its goals with regard to relevance and benefit to the research community, users and the society.

3. National cooperation

One of the central aims expressed in the project application was to expand and strengthen the cooperation that has existed between research institutions on issues of local elections and local democracy. The Norwegian Local Election Studies is by itself a forum for collaboration between different universities and research institutions on research on local elections and local democracy in Norway. Four of these institutions receive funding from the project – the Institute of Social Research, NORCE Norwegian Research Centre (both in Bergen and Stavanger), Volda University College and the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) at Oslo Metropolitan University. Researchers at the University of Oslo and the University of Bergen are also involved in the project but without funding. Research partner assessments from the three funded institutions (other than ISR) indicate that the cooperation contributes to strengthening these institutions and the collaboration between them.

The activities carried out with the purpose of strengthening national cooperation among researchers on local democracy and local elections complies fully with the expectations expressed in the call and in the original plans set up by the project. Indeed, the collaboration within the project is so extensive that the leadership sees no need of extending it further. *Our conclusion* is that the activities related to national cooperation has been implemented as intended.

4. Internationalisation

Survey based local elections studies have traditionally been national concerns, with limited exchange and comparisons between countries. This contrasts to the national election studies, with their long tradition of comparative work on similarities and differences in electoral trends and on how the institutional structure affects voting behaviour. Therefore, a

welcome initiative taken in the NLES of 2019 and 2023 is to initiate the establishing of a network of survey based local election research. Indeed, this was launched as one of the main innovations in the project.

The international collaboration builds on a network of scholars that includes researchers from Denmark, Poland and Belgium. As a starting point, the local election surveys in Norway and Denmark would be coordinated in order to facilitate comparisons between these countries. Indeed, one of the articles that has emanated from the NLES is an analysis of women's representation in the local councils in Denmark and Norway². An additional indication of a more international focus in the project is that members of the research team contributed with a chapter on the Norwegian local election system to *The Routledge Handbook of Local Elections and Voting in Europe*, edited by Adam Gendźwiłł, Ulrik Kjaer and Kristof Steyvers³. This handbook is ground-breaking as it represents the first attempt to systematically analyse variations in local election systems in Europe.

However, the other plans for internationalisation have not yet materialized. In the project description for the final two years, it is stated that "we cannot guarantee that the planned cooperation with researchers in Poland and Belgium will be implemented. Whether this will be done, depends to some extent on our Danish partner".

In the application for the local election studies, increased internationalisation was emphasized as the main form of renewal of the local election studies in Norway. We would therefore expect that significant efforts would have been put into ensuring that this is implemented. However, *our conclusion* is that this goal has only partly been reached. It is not satisfactory that further activities in this field is dependent on the Danish partner. As the NLES is one of the strongest local election study networks in the world, it has all that is needed to take the lead in the initiation of this network. Since the original plans seem to have failed, we suggest that a renewed initiative is taken during the second phase. However, this should be limited to an initiation, rather than a completion of the network.

5. Recruitment

The question of recruitment explicitly deals with the extent to which the project is relevant for research training and education at BA and MA level. In order to establish a strong basis for future

² Seggaard, Signe Bock; Kjaer, Ulrik & Saglie, Jo (2022) Why Norway has more female local councillors than Denmark: a crack in the Nordic gender equality model? *West European Politics*.

³ Saglie, Jo & Seggaard, Signe Bock (2022) Norway: local democracy by trial (and error). In Gendźwiłł, Adam; Kjaer, Ulrik & Steyvers, Kristof (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Local Elections and Voting in Europe*. Abigdon: Routledge.

research on local elections, it is important to make it possible for younger scholars to develop their skills within this field of analysis.

Already at the outset, the level of ambition in this field was limited. The two main project partners, ISR and NORCE are research institutions without any teaching. Neither did the original plan include funding of any PhD positions. However, PhD candidates with other funding that are relevant for the NLES are welcome to be attached to the network and when relevant use data from the project. One such PhD student unfortunately dropped out but another candidate from the University of Tromsø is using the above-mentioned merged data file in his research. According to the fact sheet, no Master thesis was completed linked to the project in 2019.

No information has been assembled about how team members are using the project in their teaching although the interviews with the project team indicated that such teaching takes place and that the project reports are included in academic reading lists. However, as the initial expectations regarding recruitment were limited, *our conclusion* is that these have been achieved.

6. Organisation and Management

The management of the NLES has for many years resided with the Institute of Social Research in Oslo and this round is not different. The local election studies fit well into the research profile of the ISR, which also hosts the national election studies. This would facilitate exchange of experiences between the two elections studies. In addition, the joint leadership of the well merited scholars Signe Bock Seggaard and Jo Saglie ensures that the leadership is professional and that lessons from previous rounds inform the implementation of the current. Although there is gender balance in the leadership, the research group as a whole is overwhelmingly male dominated. According to the fact sheet of the project, of the 17 persons listed as members of the research team, only five are women. Nevertheless, this bias has not restricted the project from giving space to gendered related research questions. However, if there is any opportunity at this stage to invite more members to take part in the second phase, female scholars should be prioritized.

As previously mentioned, a reference group with key stakeholders has been established and has been involved in the preparatory stage of the research process. Overall, our impression is that the project administration lives up to required professional standards.

Our conclusion is that the organisation and management of the project functions according to the plan, although the gender balance in the project is as a whole skewed.

Summary and recommendations

The Norwegian Local Election Studies in connection to the 2019 local elections have been very successful in terms of conducted research activities, publications, and relevance to the research community, users and the society. The NLES are together with the Danish Local Election Studies unique with their longitudinal data on local electoral behaviour. It is very

important to continue developing the time series of the data. Overall, the project has reached its goals for the first period, and it is our suggestion that it receives funding for the remaining two-year period. However, we also recommend that the following suggestions are considered.

The broad scope of the project should be considered. The main objectives range from local elections to local democracy, from voter behaviour to other kinds of political participation, from elections to the period between elections, and from knowledge and insight to measures to enhance local democracy. The broad scope is both a strength and a weakness. It makes it possible to engage different researchers and cover many topics but weakens the focus on elections. This is different from the corresponding project in Denmark which is more restricted to just local elections. During the interviews, the research group expressed that it was satisfied with the broad scope, whereas the Department was asking for more focus on electoral issues e.g., patterns of turnout at the municipal level, marginalized groups, personal voting, etc. There is no definite answer to this dilemma, but it needs to be considered, in particular in the longer perspective with the elections in 2027 and 2031.

The research group was confident that the data and the project reports are being used in education and Master theses and are also available for interested PhD students. The project group seems very open for new members, but a more active search and nurturing of new members would be a further improvement. In particular, the project should consider how to invite more female and more young members to the research team to get a better gender and age balance among the researchers. One tool could be to work more focused with Master and PhD students. Further national cooperation with teaching institutions could be a part of that effort.

The NLES project has established and retained a large network of local democracy scholars in Norway, and cooperates with the Norwegian National Election Studies which is also coordinated by ISR. The collaboration with the national elections team may be further developed in particular with regard to joint analyses. The project has also taken the first steps in establishing an international network of local election studies and to coordinate survey questions as a basis for comparative analyses. Setting up such a network takes many years, and we acknowledge that it is a long-term goal. In addition, we would favour that the availability of comparable empirical material is mapped in a more comprehensive way that is not only limited to nation-wide and recurring studies of local elections, but also include surveys carried out in parts of countries, investigations that only have occurred once, questions included in national election studies that concern the local elections and plans for forthcoming local election studies. Perhaps the network developed in relation to the Routledge Handbook could be helpful when carrying out these tasks, but the NLES certainly have the potential to take the lead.

The funding of the project and the use of resources raise a few questions. One problem is the lack of resources between the years of funding. In these years, the project only survives because researchers and research leaders are spending their own research time or work without funding. This stop-and-go pattern is not helpful for the continuity of the project and the exploitation of the data for research and publication, as it makes cooperation, recruitment, and publication more complicated. Funding for research activities throughout the whole electoral period would strengthen the continuity and productivity of the project and would make it easier to recruit younger scholars, who often have less of own research time to spend on these kinds of projects. Another specific

problem concerns the cost of data collection. As the survey has become increasingly expensive to carry out, the amount of resources that can be used for planning and analyses have shrunk. Although there are good reasons for retaining the same method for data collection in order not to weaken the comparability over time, we still suggest that alternatives are considered, as this would generate more resources for analysis and writing. Nevertheless, as the unique value of the NLES lies in the longitudinal data on electoral behaviour in local elections, any policy changes that are made should support rather than reduce that value.

Finally, before the 2023 round of NLES is carried out, the inclusion of current issues with consequences for local democracy will be considered. One given theme is a follow up of the municipal amalgamations 2020. Additional new themes could be climate change, trust in the election process and new patterns of media use etc.

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