

Influence of municipal mergers on election outcomes

Bachelor thesis by

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Summary

Many municipalities have merged during the last few decades, which is the result of a massive shift in responsibilities to the lowest level of government in the Netherlands. Simultaneously, political parties on municipal level without national affiliations have slowly gained electoral ground and have become the largest party on average on the municipal level. This study aims to find out whether there is a relationship between the merging of municipalities and the electoral success of parties without national affiliations. Previous academic research finds that municipal mergers decrease voters trust in the local government, whilst people with less trust in the local government vote more often for parties without national affiliations. Therefore the following hypothesis will be tested: Municipal mergers have a positive effect on the electoral results of political parties without national affiliations.

This hypothesis gets tested via three Difference in Difference (DiD) regression analyses, into which three types of municipalities are included, being: merged municipalities, municipalities that cancelled their merger plans and all 'other' Dutch municipalities. The data on these municipalities comes from the Databank verkiezingsuitslagen, the database of the Kiesraad.

The results of the analysis do not support the hypothesis. Both plans for a municipal merger and the actual merger seem to decrease the percentage of votes parties without national affiliations get. However, the models are not significant, which could be the result of the somewhat limited sample size or the absence of control variables.

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1. Introduction

In the 20th century, the number of municipalities in the Netherlands decreased from 1121 in 1900 to 537 in the year 2000 (CBS, 2004). The process of merging municipalities continues up until now, with the Netherlands currently consisting of 352 municipalities. The mergers are the result of a policy of the national government that wants to give more responsibilities to lower level governments. This decentralization policy can be distinguished into three different types of decentralization. The transfer of financial resources to lower government (fiscal decentralization), the granting of autonomy to lower levels of government (administrative decentralization) and transfers of power (political decentralization) (Rodríguez-Pose and Ezcurra, 2011). The objective of the national government is therefore one of political decentralization. But, the contrary of administrative decentralization is going on with municipalities increasing in size via mergers.

Two types of mergers can be distinguished. The first one is the most common merger in which two or more municipalities of roughly the same size merge, and create a new municipality. The second type is when smaller, more rural municipalities merge with one larger city-like municipality. In this case, the smaller municipality is absorbed by the larger one. However, not all municipalities simply merge together. There are cases in which municipalities with similar population and/or area size as merging municipalities, not merge. These municipalities with cancelled merger plans most often do not merge due to large political resistance (Allers and Geertsema, 2014).

The relationship between municipal mergers and decreasing voter turnout is well established in literature (Lapointe et al. 2018; Heinisch et al. 2018). In addition, municipal mergers also decrease voters' trust in the municipal government (Coolen, 2017). In smaller municipalities people feel more connected to one another and their local government. Therefore people have the feeling they can influence local politics to a larger extent in smaller municipalities than in larger municipalities (Oliver, 2016), which explains the decrease in trust when municipalities grow.

Contemporaneously, the percentage of the electorate who voted for parties without national affiliations during municipal elections has been steadily rising over the past 30 years (Boogers and Salome 2014; Janssen and Korsten, 2003). In consequence, parties without national affiliations are better able to maintain rootedness in society than their political counterparts with national affiliations, even when administrative scale increases (Boogers and Voerman, 2010).

Two trends are visible, municipalities merge together and local parties without national affiliations grow their electoral support. When municipalities merge, new elections are called. News media reports about these elections, and headings often contain something of the following effect: 'Local political party wins local election after municipal merge' (Trouw, 2018; Nos, 2020). The fact that a party without national affiliations becomes the largest party after the amalgamation election could be the result of the tendency of local political parties gaining political ground over the past 30 years. However, the gained political ground might also be subject to the municipal merger taking place, accelerating the electoral growth of the party without national affiliations.

Nevertheless, no research has yet been done into the relationship between municipal mergers and potentially changing voting preferences afterwards. Studying this could provide more insight into how inhabitants view municipal mergers and give political parties in municipalities insight into potential electoral consequences of a merger. Therefore, the aim of this research is to find out to what extent municipal mergers significantly increase the amount of votes parties without national affiliations get, as compared to when the municipal merger would not have taken place.

To study this relationship the following research question will be answered:

To what extent do municipal mergers affect the electoral results of local political parties without national affiliations?

To answer this question, three sub questions are asked:

1. *How did municipal elections results develop between 2002 and 2010?*
2. *How do plans for a municipal merger affect the electoral results of local political parties without national affiliations?*
3. *How do executed municipal mergers affect the electoral results of local political parties without national affiliations?*

The first sub question gives insight into how the percentage of votes for parties without national affiliations developed in the past. The second sub question looks at whether having plans to merge results in a change in the amount of votes parties without national affiliations get, regardless of whether these plans were executed or cancelled. The third sub question differentiates between municipalities that actually merged and municipalities that cancelled their plans, and aims at finding out whether there is a difference between how many votes parties without national affiliations get when a municipality merges or not.

The structure of the thesis is as follows: In chapter 2 an overview is given of the existing literature on the effects of municipal mergers, with a specific focus on the political effects. In chapter 3 the datasets are described and the methodology of the analysis is explained. In chapter 4 the results of the analysis are shown and shed in the light of the literature. Finally, section 5 gives the conclusion of the research and gives recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

Issue ownership has become increasingly important for political parties in mobilizing their electorate to the ballot box. The idea of issue ownership is that voters relate certain issues with certain political parties which results in a voter being more likely to vote for a party that owns an issue important to them (Lefevre, Tresch and Walgrave, 2015; Stubager, 2018). To fathom the relationship between issue ownership, municipal mergers and voting preferences, we first need to distinguish which two types of parties are present in Dutch municipal politics. The political parties with national affiliations are larger political parties active on the national, regional and local level. Political parties without national affiliations are local political parties who are only active in one single municipality. These parties have more active members than parties with national affiliations and are not bound to a national parties ideology (Boogers and Voerman, 2010).

Political parties without national affiliations more often oppose a municipal merger to defend interests of the local communities (Otjes, 2018). Nationally affiliated parties are bound in their view on municipal mergers because their national headquarters could support the policy in favor of municipal mergers. This creates a contradiction between local desires of autonomy and close connection to inhabitants versus national budget cutting policy for nationally affiliated parties. Political parties without national affiliations can therefore own the issue of mergers, and since opposition for municipal mergers is rising, attract voters (van Ostaaïjen, 2019). To get a better grasp of why mergers still take place we have to look at the goals of municipal mergers.

The installment of cabinet Rutte II in 2012 marked a shift in national policy towards municipal mergers. Whereas before the national government held back on imposing local governments on mergers, Rutte II made it an active policy. A numerical guideline of 100.000 inhabitants per municipality had to become the norm (VVD and PvdA, 2012). Two main reasons were the basis for this policy. Firstly, Rutte II wanted to decentralize youth care and employment programs to municipalities. These tasks are complex in nature and require specific, skilled people to carry out the tasks. Smaller municipalities do not have enough of these people whilst larger municipalities do (Geertsema, 2017). Secondly, the merging of municipalities would lead to a reduction of one billion euros of the municipal fund on a yearly basis (Haenen, 2009). This reduction of costs would be the result of less supervision and higher efficiency (Geertsema, 2017; Allers and Peeters, 2014). However, several studies since have shown that the municipal mergers do not result in fewer costs (Allers and Geertsema, 2014; Allers and Peters, 2019). So one of the objectives of the municipal mergers does not get achieved. This in its turn influences how voters view the municipal mergers and the extent towards which they have trust in their local government.

Trust in the government is one of the key factors that determines which parties people vote for (Van Enk and Schmeets, 2019). People who vote for the Party for Freedom (PVV), Socialistic party (SP), 50 plus or party for animals (PvdD) during national elections are more likely to vote for a local party without national affiliations during municipal elections (Meer and Kolk, 2016; CBS, 2015). This can also be partly explained by the fact that the PVV, 50 plus and PvdD are not active in municipal politics. Simultaneously, voters that tend to vote for these parties have below average levels of trust in the government (Otjes, 2018; Enk and Schmeets, 2019). Since Coolen (2017) found that municipal mergers have a negative effect on the trust voters have in their municipality, a sound argument can be made that municipal mergers lead to a rise in the percentage of votes local political parties get, as a result of decreasing trust in the government.

Another reason for the electorate to vote for parties without national affiliations is closely connected to issue ownership and lies within the subject of localism. Localism is defined as the supporting of autonomy on the municipal level, as well as support for the local community (Otjes, 2018). According to Boogers and Voerman (2010) many of the Dutch parties without national affiliations can be characterized as localist parties, which is similar for the Norwegian sister parties (Aars and Ringkjøb, 2005). This means that these parties are seen by the electorate as the primary party that defends the local interest. When municipalities are planning a merger, this becomes a threat to the local autonomy of the municipality. Therefore, people could become more willing to vote for a party that defends these interests, resulting in an increase of votes for parties without national affiliations.

Since this research focusses on municipal election outcomes, it has to be discussed how citizens view municipal elections. The central idea is that citizens view municipal elections, as well as regional or European elections, as elections of the second order (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). In their minds these

elections are of secondary importance, and therefore their vote is mainly based on national considerations, rather than local ones (Otjes, 2020). With this in mind, Schakel en Jeffery researched what parties without national affiliations can do to attract voters. Their findings are that parties without national affiliations can win votes if they can emphasize a distinct regional identity and autonomy (Schakel and Jeffery, 2013). If we look at municipal mergers with this idea in mind, sound reasoning would conclude that these municipal mergers are an opportunity to emphasize the distinct identity and autonomy of a municipality, and therefore opportunities for parties without national affiliations to gain electoral ground.

Janssen and Korsten (2003) did research into the steady rise of parties without national affiliations in the last few decades. They argue that after a municipal merger, strategic benefits which parties without national affiliations have, disappear (Janssen and Korsten, 2003). One of these advantages is having a well-known leader that can attract votes (Boogers and Salome, 2014). This advantage can disappear after a merger since this leader is not so well-known in all the new areas of the newly created municipality. Simultaneously does it become easier for parties with national affiliations to set up a local department in the new municipality due to the larger constituency, resulting in more competition (Janssen and Korsten, 2003). However, these new departments usually are not in place directly after a merger, but take some time to start. These two things are potential reasons to believe that a merger could limit the amount of votes parties without national affiliations get.

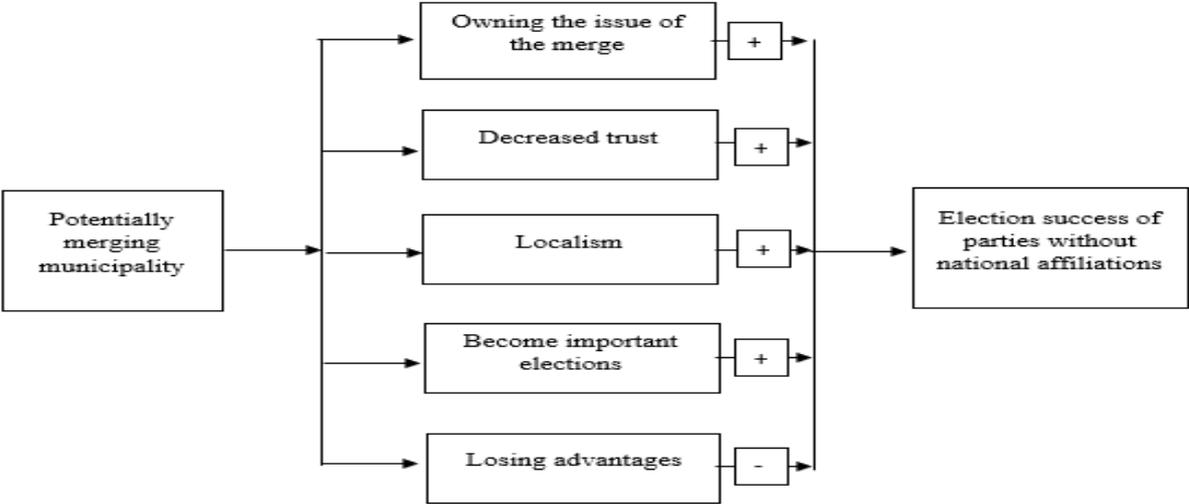
2.1 Hypothesis and conceptual model

Considering the aforementioned literature on the relationship between municipal mergers and voting behavior, the following hypothesis will be tested in this research:

Municipal mergers have a positive effect on the electoral results of political parties without national affiliations.

This hypothesis is based on the theoretical framework which concludes that electoral results improve once parties without national affiliations own the issue of the municipal merger. Secondly, the failed objectives of the national government decrease trust in the government, and since people who trust the government less are more likely to vote for parties without national affiliations during municipal elections, election results should improve after a merger. Thirdly, localism is a factor in improving election results after a merger. Finally, municipal elections gain importance once the potential of a merger becomes real, parties without national affiliations can benefit from this by emphasizing their fight for the regional identity and autonomy. In the meantime, one should take into account that parties without national affiliations could lose specific advantages after a municipal merger, as well as the fact that it could become easier for parties with national affiliations to start new departments in the newly created municipalities. This all results in the following conceptual model, which is visualized in figure 1.

Figure 1. Factors influencing voting behavior after municipal merger.



3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection & variables

To analyze the influence of municipal mergers on municipal election outcomes data from the Dutch Election Authority (Kiesraad) will be used. The Kiesraad is the executive body of the Dutch government who organizes elections. The Kiesraad also has a public database, Databank verkiezingsuitslagen – database election outcomes, in which the election results from every Dutch election are published per municipality per political party.

To research the influence of municipal mergers on election outcomes, a dataset has to be created in which both election results prior to the merge and after the merge are included. Therefore, two datasets of the database election outcomes are used: municipal election outcomes 2006 and municipal election outcomes 2010. The dependent variable in the analysis is the percentage of votes political parties without national affiliations got. The percentage is calculated by dividing the number of votes the parties without national affiliations got by the total number of valid votes in that municipality.

The period in and around 2010 was a time in which many Dutch municipalities were merging, on the brink of merging or cancelling merger plans. This means that by analyzing election outcomes of 2010, we can not only gain insight into the electoral effects of a municipal merger, but also look into the electoral effects of cancelled merger plans. The same set of all municipalities with cancelled merger plans is used as Allers and Geertsema did in 2014. These 33 municipalities did not merge in 2010 due to large political resistance. An outline of the municipalities can be found in table 1. The second group consists of all municipalities that merged on either January 1st 2010 or January 1st 2011. The municipal elections of that year were held on the 3rd of March 2010, which is why both groups of merged municipalities are included. The group consists of 34 municipalities in 2006 who merged into 12 new municipalities in 2010-11. The third group consists of all the ‘other’ Dutch municipalities, so all municipalities that have not merged or cancelled merger plans, and will be used as the control group during the analyses.

The dataset consists of a total of six variables. The dependent variable is the aforementioned percentage of votes for political parties without national affiliations. The second variable is a dummy variable called ‘year’, which indicates whether election results were in 2006 or 2010. 0 refers to 2006 and 1 refers to 2010. The third variable is a dummy variable called ‘plans’, referring to whether municipalities had plans in 2006 to merge. 0 refers to no, and is therefore applicable to all ‘other’ municipalities in the Netherlands, 1 refers to yes and is applicable to all the municipalities shown in table 1. The fourth variable is a dummy variable called ‘merged’ and indicates whether a municipality merged in 2010-11. A 0 refers to the non-merged municipalities that cancelled their plans, a 1 refers to the municipalities who indeed merged. The final two variables are interaction variables called Year-Plans and Year-Merging, which indicate the time treated effect. These two variables are given the value 1 if both the Year and the Plans/Merging dummy is a 1, if this is not the case for both, then the Year-Plans and Year-Merging get the value 0.

Table 1. *Municipalities included in the analysis*

Non-merged municipalities	Merged municipalities	
	Old name	New name
Scherpenzeel	Horst aan de Maas	Horst aan de Maas
Renswoude	Sevenum	
Woudenberg	Meerlo-Wanssum	
Bussum	Reiderland	Oldambt
Muiden	Scheemda	
Naarden	Winschoten	
Weesp	Helden	Peel en Maas
Gouda	Kessel	
Krimpen aan den IJssel	Maasbree	
Oud-Beijerland	Meijel	
Cromstrijen	Venlo	Venlo
Strijen	Arcen en Velden	
Waddinxveen	Moordrecht	

Asten	Nieuwekerk aan de IJssel	Zuidplas
Eindhoven	Zevenhuizen-Moerkapelle	
Helmond	Bodegraven	
Nuenen, Gerwen & Nederwetten	Reeuwijk	Bodegraven-Reeuwijk
Someren	Abcoude	De Ronde Venen
Son en Breugel	De Ronde Venen	
Vught	Eijsden	Eijsden-Margraten
Waalre	Margraten	
Onderbanken	Andijk	
Bergen	Medemblik	Medemblik
Gennep	Wervershoof	
Mook en Middelaar	Breukelen	
Schinnen	Loenen	Stichtse Vecht
Bernheze	Maarssen	
Korendijk	Maasdonk	Oss
Bergambacht	Oss	
Schoonhoven	Bolsward	
Vlist	Nijefurd	
Nederlek	Sneek	Súdwest-Fryslân
Ouderkerk	Wonseradeel	
	Wymbritseradeel	

Source: Databank verkiezingsuitslagen

3.2 Data analysis

To examine whether plans and/or actual municipal mergers influence electoral results of political parties without national affiliations, all three sub questions are separately answered. The first sub question gets answered in chapter 4.1, the second sub question in chapter 4.2 whereas sub question 3 gets answered in chapter 4.3 and 4.4. Chapter 4.1 gives a visual overview of how municipal election results developed in the past. This is important since a DiD analysis requires similar development of the variables prior to the treatment, which in this research is a municipal merger. The first regression model in chapter 4.2 covers sub question two, and aims at finding out whether there is a relationship between the existence of plans for a municipal merger and electoral success of parties without national affiliations. This is done by regressing all municipalities in table 1 on all ‘other’ Dutch municipalities. The variable votes, year, plans and year-plans are all included. All municipalities in table 1 get the value 1 for both 2006 and 2010. The variable year-plans only gets a 1 for 2010, since it is the interaction variable. All ‘other’ municipalities get a 0 value for both plans and yearplans.

The second DiD regression model aims at finding out whether an actual merger has an influence on the percentage votes parties without national affiliations get as compared to when these mergers would have been cancelled. Therefore, only the municipalities that are shown in table 1 are included in this model. The merged municipalities are the treatment group, whereas the municipalities that cancelled their plans are the control group. The variables votes, year, merged and year-merged are included in the analysis. For the merged variable all municipalities that merged get a 1 for both 2006 and 2010, whereas the municipalities with that cancelled their plans get a 0 value. The interaction variable year-merged only has a 1 value for the merged municipalities in 2010, and will indicate how the percentage of votes for parties without national affiliations would have been had they cancelled their plans.

The third DiD regression model is an extended version of the second DiD model. In the model not only the cancelled municipalities are used as the control group, but also the ‘other’ municipalities. Again, the variables votes, year merged and year-merged are included. The labeling of the dummy variables is similar to that of model 2. The added cases of ‘other’ get a 0 for merging, and as a result of that also a 0 for year-merged.

No control variables are used in this research due to the nature of the data. Data gets collected from the database election outcomes which does not include data on other characteristics of the municipality or its inhabitants. Nevertheless, other factors may exist that play a role in someone’s

decision who to vote for during municipal elections. In municipalities that are on the nomination of a merger, disputes on other political themes might be present simultaneously. To deal with this problem, the analysis is done via the difference in difference approach. A DiD analysis deals intrinsically with long term background phenomena by making use of more than one moment of measurement. The assumption is that a phenomenon which was present in 2006 is still present in 2010, only with the new municipal merger as a new larger political point of discussion. Therefore, a difference in the election results can be attributed to the result of the merger. Furthermore, there are no large structural differences between the municipalities that merged in 2010-11 and the municipalities that cancelled their merger plans. This has to do with the objective of a merger, which mainly lies in the desire of the national government to increase the size of municipalities. Therefore, only smaller municipalities are potential candidates for a merger.

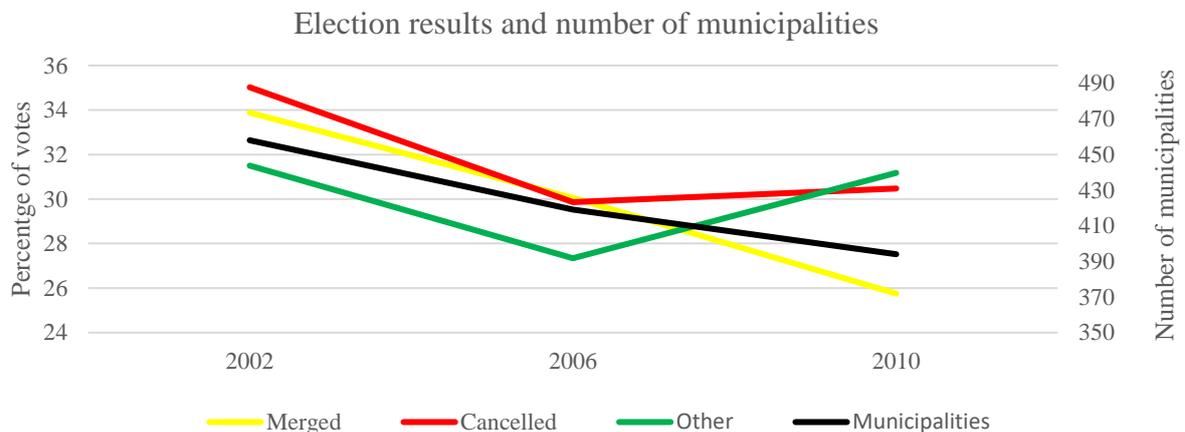
4. Results

4.1 Long term trends

Figure 2 gives a visual overview of how the percentage of votes for parties without national affiliations developed in all three categories of municipalities between 2002 and 2010. The municipal elections of 2002 were a major success for parties without national affiliations. This was the result of the massive popularity of Pim Fortuyn who convinced a lot of voters to vote for parties without national affiliations. (NOS, 2014). Later in 2002, Pim Fortuyn was murdered which caused a downfall in popularity for the parties without national affiliations, shown by the election results of 2006. This trend is in line with the findings of Boogers and Salome (2014), who found that having a well-known leader can benefit parties without national affiliations.

A second trend visible in figure 2 relates to the period of 2006 till 2010, the period that is researched in this thesis. Whereas the theoretical framework predicts an increase in votes for parties without national affiliations in the merged municipalities, an actual decrease is found. In the meantime, the percentage of votes for parties without national affiliations remained more or less stable in municipalities that cancelled their merger plans, whereas an increase can be found in the rest of the Netherlands. To find out whether these differences are significant, several DiD regressions are run. The results can be found in table 2, 3 and 4.

Figure 2. Long term trends on votes and number of municipalities.



4.2 Netherlands vs. municipalities with plans

This analysis aims at researching whether having plans for a merger, regardless of whether the merger actually happens, causes a rise in the votes parties without national affiliations get. This is done by regressing all the municipalities shown in table 1 on the control group, all 'other' Dutch municipalities. The results of this regression can be found in table 2. The results indicate that in 2010, parties without national affiliations got on average 3.8% more votes than in 2006. The coefficient for plans is 1.8% and shows that in municipalities that had plans to merge, parties without national affiliations got 1.8% more votes than in municipalities who did not have plans, regardless of these plans. However, the interaction variable year-plans has a negative coefficient. It indicates that in municipalities who had plans to merge, parties without national affiliations got 3.7% less votes as compared to what you would expect had these plans never existed. But, this result is not significant ($p=0.299$) which means that this result can not be generalized and could be the result of a coincidence.

This result is not in line with what literature would expect. Literature indicates that a merger leads to an increase in the amount of votes parties without national affiliations get, a similar pattern would be expected with regards to plans for a merger. There are potential reasons for this based on the literature. It could be that parties without national affiliations were not able to own the issue of the merger, and therefore gain electoral ground. Or that the parties were not able to present themselves as the local party well enough. However, to make further conclusions about the effect of plans, we have to look further into the effects of an actual merger or cancellation.

Table 2. Difference in difference regression results.

	Coefficient	Robust standard error	Sig.	95% confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
Constant	27.346	0.912	0.000	25.556	29.137
Year	3.836	1.301	0.003	1.283	6.389
Plans	1.841	2.393	0.442	-2.856	6.539
Year-Plans	-3.663	3,523	0.299	-10.576	3.251

N=835, R²=0.0103

4.3 Merged municipalities vs. municipalities with cancelled plans

The previous model showed that having plans for a merger negatively impacts the amount of votes parties without national affiliations get. This model looks into the effect of an actual merger or the cancellation of the merger. The results can be found in table 3. The coefficients for the variables year and merged are relatively low and very insignificant. The coefficient for the interaction variable year-merging is higher at -4.9%, even though it is still insignificant. This indicates that had the merged municipalities not merged but cancelled their plans, parties without national affiliations would have gotten 4.9% more votes during the 2010 elections. Another important thing is the low r-squared value, which is also apparent in the first model. Therefore little of the variables variance is captured by the models, meaning that other variables not captured by the model play a role in influencing the effect of the merger.

Table 3. Difference in difference regression results.

	Coefficient	Robust standard error	Sig.	95% confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
Constant	29.860	3.207	0.000	23.503	36.217
Year	0.616	4.581	0.893	-8.465	9.70
Merged	0.201	4.750	0.966	-9.215	9.617
Year-Merging	-4.925	6.158	0.426	-18.133	7.283

N=111, R²=0.0060

Nevertheless, it is interesting to think about a possible explanation for this drop in votes after a municipality merged. Inhabitants of municipalities who merged did vote for the newly created municipality in 2010. Therefore, as discussed in the theoretical framework, parties without national affiliations could not gain electorate by owning the issue of the merger. One could even argue that they lost the battle for the fight for sovereignty, failing their electorate and therefore getting punished. Simultaneously, the effect of localism is lost, meaning that the fight for the remaining of the local autonomy and community is no longer a present fight. Since municipalities who cancelled their merger are still independent, the fight against a potential future merger remains. Which is an explanation for why the percentage of votes parties without national affiliations got in those municipalities did not drop like it did in merged municipalities. Finally, literature indicates that parties without national affiliations lose specific advantages after a merger. These advantages could be having a well-known leader of difficulty for parties with national affiliations to set up a local department in a smaller municipality. When the municipality grows larger, this becomes easier and therefore parties without national affiliations get more competition.

4.4 Merged municipalities vs. municipalities with cancelled plans & ‘other’ municipalities

Whereas the second model only compares merged municipalities with municipalities that cancelled their plans, this model also includes all the ‘other’ Dutch municipalities. The results can be found in table 4 and show a somewhat similar pattern as the other two models. The year coefficient indicates that between 2006 and 2010 an increase of 3.6% percent in votes for parties without national affiliations is present. Simultaneously, an increase of 2.5% percent of votes for parties without national affiliations would be expected in municipalities that merged, regardless of the merge. However, the interaction variable year-merging shows a coefficient of -7.9%, meaning that had the municipalities not merged, parties without national affiliations would have gotten 7.9% more votes. This result is almost significant

with a p-value of 0.064, even though it still has to be mentioned that the r-squared of the model is low. So again this result is the opposite of what you would expect based on the literature. So it appears as if there are other factors in the background that are more influential than whether a municipality merges or not, which cause a negative relationship between votes for parties without national affiliations and municipal mergers, whereas a positive relationship would be expected based on the literature.

Table 4. Difference in difference regression results.

	Coefficient	Robust standard error	Sig.	95% confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
Constant	27.568	0.878	0.000	25.844	29.291
Year	3.555	1.251	0.005	1.100	6.011
Merged	2.493	3.559	0.484	-4.492	9.478
Year-Merging	-7.865	4.239	0.064	-16.186	0.457

N=832, R²=0.0104

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, the relationship between municipal mergers and the percentage of votes parties without national affiliations get is researched. Three separate Difference in Difference regression models are used to research whether plans for a merger, actual mergers and cancelled mergers influence the electoral outcomes of the following election. The analysis is done by using data from the Databank verkiezingsuitslagen of the Kiesraad.

The theoretical framework concludes with the hypothesis that ‘municipal mergers have a positive effect on the electoral results of political parties without national affiliations’. The first DiD model concludes that the existence of plans for a municipal merger decreases the amount of votes parties without national affiliations get. Based on this result a second DiD model was run in which municipalities that actually merged were compared to municipalities that cancelled their plans. Contrary to what the hypothesis suggests, municipal mergers decrease the amount of votes parties without national affiliations get as compared to when they had cancelled their plans. A possible explanation for this lies in the ongoing battle for sovereignty for the municipalities that cancelled their plans, whereas merged municipalities had nothing to fight for anymore. The third DiD model, in which the merged municipalities were regressed on the cancelled municipalities as well as all ‘other’ municipalities, also indicates that mergers actually decrease the amount of votes parties without national affiliations get.

However, the results of the analysis are limited in their generalizability since the models are not significant. So even though the patterns discussed above can be found in the sample, we cannot say for sure that similar patterns can be found in other merging municipalities or municipalities that cancel their merger plans. There are several potential reasons for this, the first lying in the sample size. Since the amount of merged and cancelled plans municipalities is relatively small (N=34 and 33), significance is less likely to occur in the model as compared to when more municipalities or years were included. A future study into the relationship between municipal mergers and voting preference should therefore make use of a larger sample, for example by including more municipalities and therefore more years. A second reason could be the absence of control variables in the regression models. As stated before, due to the nature of the data, including control variables was impossible, but the method for analysis (DiD) deals with this problem. It could however be that population characteristics differ greatly between the different types of municipalities. Even though the researcher looked into this and no large potential difference became apparent, factors influencing in the background could still be present. Therefore, future research into municipal mergers and voting preferences should make use of data that does include control variables to make a stronger DiD model, to ensure no factors in the background play a role. A final recommendation for future research lies within the factor trust. The main argument made in the theoretical framework relates to trust, being: municipal mergers lead to a decrease in voters’ trust in the local government, and voters with less trust in local government are more likely to vote for parties without national affiliations. To further research this relationship, future research has to include data on voters’ trust in relation to municipal mergers and voting preference.

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