

Very Small Electorates and the Question of the Instrumental Value of Democracy

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Abstract

The democratic decision-making method determines a collective decision on the basis of individual votes of all adult citizens, each vote having the same weight. Jason Brennan (2016) argues that the decisions of individual voters in state-level elections tend to be epistemically defective (avoidance of serious knowledge-acquisition, biased reasoning) and maintains that voters are rational in not doing anything about it, since reducing one's epistemic defects would not augment the chances of one's vote becoming decisive. Yet, incompetently made collective decisions can hardly provide a good means for attaining the outcomes that citizens desire. Democracy appears to fail as an instrument.

We ask whether the problems that Brennan identifies occur even in small municipalities. We argue for a negative answer, making use of insights gained through interviews conducted in municipalities with 300 to 500 inhabitants situated in the Åland Islands. Here, a single vote can be decisive. When voting, the inhabitants wish to delegate municipality-political responsibility to someone they trust. They do not reason in terms of society-level outcomes; due to limited resources, the elected representatives even could not undertake any large-scale initiatives. There is very little electoral competition, but inhabitants can contribute to decision-making in many ways. There prevails a balance between democratic participation and informed decision-making. The equilibrium could easily break down: smaller population size would lead to dysfunctionality, augmenting the size might affect negatively the trust between decision-makers and inhabitants, and increased resources could lead to decisions the inhabitants could not control.

1. Introduction

In the present article, we wish to address certain important problems of democratic decision-making and to pose the question of whether those problems depend on the size of the electorate.

1.1. The fundamental problem of democracy

The democratic form of government is attractive. All adult citizens have equal right to vote, the ideal of citizens' equality is recognized, freedoms of citizens are respected, and citizens may pursue different goals as members of society. Once a democratic form of government has been adopted in a society, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to give all this up. It is also difficult to criticize democracy as an idea, or to accept criticism of it, given the widespread unconscious sense that democracy and "our rights" go hand in hand.

However, democracy appears to have an inherent source of weakness that is rooted in the very foundation of the democratic form of government, as it concerns its fundamental mainstay: the universal right to vote. In democracies, every adult citizen has the same right to vote in elections that affect what governments do. This is a crucial feature of democracy, as it is meant to highlight that on an important level, the distinction between the people who rule and the people who are ruled has been eliminated.

The following facts should be kept in mind when discussing the implications of universal suffrage:

- (1) Individual votes are conditioned by individual psychological factors.
- (2) Individual votes determine a collective decision.
- (3) Democratic decision-making has substantial goals.

Concerning the substantial goals, it must be noted that some of them are very general and thought to be intimately linked with the democratic form of government (securing social justice, promoting common good, equitably advancing citizens' interests), while others are more specific and dependent on citizens' preferences that may change from one election to another (e.g., improving the economy of low-income consumers, facilitating access to public health care).

When considering the above-mentioned three facts, a question immediately arises: How can collective decisions resting on subjective factors ever lead to substantial society-level goals, which seem unattainable without a conscious global vision of an important number of complicated socio-economic factors?

This is the general form of the problem with democracy that we take as a starting point in this paper. It should be observed that the mere formal fact that voting rights are equally distributed over citizens cannot guarantee any specific substantial outcomes. And if substantial goals require a comprehensive view on complicated society-level issues, is there any reason to think that they can be attained on the basis of an electoral decision generated as the sum of a huge number of psychologically conditioned individual voting decisions?

In his book *Against Democracy* (2016), Jason Brennan analyzes the consequences of the three facts discerned above. In state-level elections the number of votes that will be cast is so large that it is extremely unlikely that a single vote could be decisive for the outcome of the election. This is an *objective* feature of the democratic voting situation in elections with a very large number of voters. This fact has nothing to do with the motivation of the voter, and there is nothing the voter or anyone else could do to change it. My individual vote is decisive only if there is a tie: there are two candidates, both potentially relevant for the outcome of the election (e.g., both from parties with real chances of being part of a government), both of which would without my vote get the same number of votes.¹ And when the electorate consists of millions of people likely to vote, the probability that there indeed would be a tie is next to zero. For the outcome of a state-level election it is entirely immaterial whether an individual citizen votes: it is virtually certain that the result of the election is the same with or without the contribution of this specific individual. Citizens are aware of this fact, which is why they do not have incentive to carefully reflect on how to vote. Brennan argues that citizens are actually *rational* in not attempting to acquire political information. The cost of attempting to do so would widely exceed the expected benefit. It seems therefore that the very foundation of democracy (universal suffrage) is weak—it appears to give the citizens a right that they are not motivated to exercise at all or to exercise well. If, then, most citizens end up making uninformed choices when voting, it seems likely that the “incompetently made” collective decision their votes collectively determine will not help attaining the outcomes the citizens want to promote by their votes.² If this is so, democracy is not a good instrument for attaining the outcomes the citizens desire, whatever those desired outcomes are. Brennan’s positive proposal is that we should experiment with “epistocracy”—a form of government in which only those citizens are allowed to vote who are “competent” in a sense that entails

¹ Cf. Brennan (2016), p. 31.

² For a discussion on Brennan’s position, see Ahlstrom-Vij (2019); Fuller (2019); Wikforss (2021); Méndez (2021); Tulenheimo & Ronzitti (2024).

capacity and willingness to acquire relevant information, to apply self-criticism, and to process information rationally.³ It is important to note that this competence requirement in no way limits the outcomes that voters can desire—it merely rules out as voters those citizens (if any) who would employ epistemically dubious means when deciding how to vote.

The three above-mentioned facts regarding democratic decision-making, together with the consequences of the individual voters' lack of incentive to express grounded votes, constitute a problem for democracy. The universal right to vote seems unquestionably a good thing, but when this is guaranteed, it seems in practice unavoidable that democracy fails to give due attention to the complex preconditions of desirable society-level outcomes. It explicitly ignores that the average voter is far from being an ideal informed voter, and this renders democracy problematic as an instrument for governing a state.

The very idea of attributing to the citizenry as a whole a decision determined by individual citizens' separate voting decisions certainly seems to give important power to the individual citizens (and seemingly justifies speaking of the “will of the people”), but the resulting collective decision may end up having none of the virtues that a carefully reflected individual decision would have. When people have significant decisions to make in their personal lives, they normally acquire knowledge and reflect carefully before proceeding to a decision. Collective democratic decisions have implications to an entire state. The questions to be taken into account are demanding: *Which state-level outcomes are preferable, for me as an individual citizen, and for the society as a whole? What means should be employed to attain such outcomes? Is it socially and economically feasible to attempt obtaining the outcomes?* If the democratic decision-making method tends to lead the individual citizens to give *less* attention to their voting decisions than they would give to important personal decisions, while the issues at stake in a democratic decision are *more difficult*, how could it be that by aggregating the citizens' individual voting decisions we obtain a collective decision that takes into account all the requisite complexities?⁴

³ See, e.g., Brennan (2016), pp. 8, 16, 165, 206–207, 230.

⁴ Some philosophers actually put forward a so-called “epistemic defense” of democracy and argue that the citizenry as a whole can make competent political decisions even if the majority of individual citizens could not; according to them, competence is an emergent property of the democratic decision-making process, attributable to the citizenry as a whole. Those who argue for this view refer to certain decision-theoretic “jury theorems” that express facts about large electorates under certain assumptions (e.g., that no large groups of voters are systematically mistaken and that it makes sense to speak of choosing the “correct alternative” when voting). It is

For all these reasons, the following question is highly interesting from both a conceptual and an empirical point of view: how is it possible even in principle to attain outcomes desired by the citizens by means of collective democratic decisions? The discrepancy between the collective decision and the corresponding individual decisions is easily ignored when things proceed smoothly and the advantages of democracy seem evident, but there remains the problem of understanding on what conditions positive society-level outcomes may nevertheless emerge. Part of the difficulty with democratic decision-making, as described above, is related to the size of the electorate: the reason why it is unlikely that an individual vote be decisive is because there are millions of voters. Therefore, the question arises whether reducing the number of voters would render less problematic the relationship between the collective decision determined by psychologically conditioned votes of individual citizens and the desired substantial outcomes of democratic decision-making. Do the problems of state-level democracy occur also in small democratically governed communities?

1.2. Goal of the article

As noted above, in his book Brennan focuses on the way the individual voting decisions are made in *state-level* elections, indicates different epistemic defects that many voters have (lack of serious knowledge-acquisition, biased reasoning), and suggests that the resulting collective decision tends to suffer from its being based on such “incompetently” determined individual votes. We take up the question of whether the democratic decision-making method suffers from similar problems also when it is applied at a *local level*, in very small municipalities. If it does, this suggests that these problems are intrinsic to democracy, whereas if the problems occur in a weaker form or disappear in local settings, the problems seem rather to be related to the specific features of the state level. The goal of this article is, then, to discuss the scope of applicability of Brennan’s critique. Our observations will make use of insights gained through interviews we have carried out in four extremely small municipalities in the Åland Islands.⁵

Brennan formulates what he calls the “competence principle”:⁶ if a *high-stakes* political decision is made incompetently, then the decision is presumed to be unjust, lacks in authority, and must not be enforced. Here, a “high-stakes”

dubious whether those assumptions apply to the empirical reality. For an epistemic defense of democracy, see e.g. Landemore (2013); Brennan (2016), Chap. 7; Brennan & Landemore (2022).

⁵ See Section 1.3 below.

⁶ Brennan (2016), pp. 21, 154–158.

decision is a decision that can deprive citizens of liberty, property, or even life.⁷ The competence principle does not apply to *all* incompetently made political decisions—it only declares as unjust and non-enforceable *those* incompetent decisions that can cause significant harm to the citizens. Decisions of state governments are high-stakes decisions. When evaluating democracy as a method of making decisions at the state level, the question is, then, to which extent a democratic electoral result affects government decisions. Are *electoral decisions* in democratic state-level elections high-stakes decisions? As will be discussed in Section 6.2, Brennan points out that if they are, and if democratic decisions are incompetently made (as he believes they tend to be), then by the competence principle, democratic electoral decisions ought not to be enforced. On the other hand, if democratic electoral decisions are not high-stakes decisions, this means that the voters do not have enough power to sufficiently determine government decisions because in governmental decision-making processes there are mediating factors which manage to eliminate the negative effects of incompetent decisions of the democratic electorate. Either option is highly problematic for democracy.⁸

It must be noted that the size-related comparison we are interested in is *not* between democratically governed states with large versus small electorates. Instead, it is between democratically governed states with large electorates and democratically governed *municipalities* with small electorates. In the cases we choose to consider, the democratically governed entity is administratively *subordinated* to a state. A municipality has less resources than a state, it is to a large extent economically dependent on the corresponding state, and the power it can exercise on its inhabitants is much weaker than the power a state has over its citizens. Unlike a state, a municipality cannot deprive its citizens of liberty or property. That is, electoral decisions in municipal elections cannot be “high-stakes decisions”. Thus, Brennan’s competence principle does not directly concern municipal decision-making: the competence principle does not entail that if some municipal decisions were incompetently made, they would be unjust and ought not to be enforced. In what follows, our general objective is merely to study certain aspects of decision-making that Brennan takes up—whether a single vote can be decisive, whether people have incentive to vote, whether voters are willing to acquire knowledge and to pay attention to their information processing skills, and whether and how voters’ social identity plays a role in their voting behavior—and to establish how municipal-level voting decisions differ from state-level voting decisions in these respects.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 145, 154–155, 201.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 201–202.

Paying attention to features due to which municipal democracy possibly works better than state-level democracy might help to clarify the conditions under which the competence principle indeed becomes applicable.

1.3. Empirical background

We have gathered empirical data from four municipalities of the autonomous Finnish region Åland: Kumlinge, Lumparland, Brändö, and Vårdö. These are the four municipalities of Åland whose population size is less than 500 inhabitants but not much less than 300.⁹ Henceforth, for want of a better expression, we refer to these four as VSMs (“Very Small Municipalities”). In February and March 2025, we conducted interviews in these municipalities with inhabitants, municipal politicians, and local government officers. The interviews allowed us to detect certain features of democratic decision-making that appear to be characteristic to at least some municipalities of very small size.¹⁰

We do not claim to have sufficient data to allow important empirical generalizations. However, we believe to have detected characteristics that are dependent on the context in which voting takes place and that have a bearing on some of those mechanisms that Brennan sees as responsible for the dysfunctionality of democracy. We wanted the interviews to help us, in our theoretical analysis, to direct our attention to features of municipal decision-making that occur in real-life situations in extremely small municipalities. Our objectives are conceptual, but an empirical grounding is needed when commenting on the prospects of non-idealized democratic decision-making.

⁹ At the end of 2023, there were in these municipalities 290, 366, 436 resp. 471 inhabitants. This was the last confirmed data when our visits took place; see Ålands statistik- och utredningsbyrå [ÅSUB] (2024); cf. Table 1 in Section 2.3 below. Kumlinge, Brändö, and Vårdö are among the so-called “archipelago municipalities” [*skärgårdskommuner*]. Vårdö is easily accessible from mainland Åland by a cable ferry in less than 10 minutes, whereas Kumlinge and Brändö belong to the “outer archipelago” [*ytterskärgård*]. A boat trip of one or two hours from mainland Finland or mainland Åland is needed to reach these municipalities. Lumparland is the smallest municipality of mainland Åland.

¹⁰ In Kumlinge we had occasion to discuss with inhabitants, the current chief executive of the municipality, and a member of the municipal executive board who has even worked as a local government officer. In Brändö we spoke with some inhabitants, a former chief executive, and the chair of the central municipal election board. As for Vårdö and Lumparland, we could only gather the viewpoints of the chief executive. Participation in the discussion events we organized varied from one municipality to another; it turned out not to be possible to carry out the interviews in an entirely standardized way.

2. Objectives of voting and the question of decisiveness

We proceed to discern two ways in which citizens may understand the goal of voting in democratic elections. Then we take up the question of decisiveness of an individual vote in elections in small municipalities.

2.1. The act of voting and its goal: the “intended view”

Voting in an election is a goal-directed action. The intended goal is not to select a candidate. Instead, the goal is that certain society-level outcomes that the voter finds desirable be realized (e.g., improving the economy of low-income consumers, facilitating access to public health care, reducing violent criminality, decreasing economic inequality). The voter selects a candidate that he or she judges to be an optimal instrument for yielding these outcomes. This way of understanding what is at stake when we vote will be referred to as the “intended view” on voting. In democracies, the meaning given to the practice of voting is that it offers to the citizens a means to contribute to the society-level outcomes they find desirable. We take it to be a part of this “intended view” on voting that the voters have certain objectives in mind and consciously select a candidate as an instrument for attaining these objectives. This implies that the voters could articulate what the relevant objectives are.

It can very well happen that one votes for a candidate who in fact is not a good instrument for the realization of the outcomes one has in mind. It can be an extremely complex question to know whether and how the desired outcomes could be realized. In particular, not only should one’s favorite candidate declare to wish promoting these outcomes, but the policies the candidate proposes to implement in order to attain these goals should in fact be likely to function. Moreover, it can easily happen that the voter does not have the means (time, expertise, interest) to evaluate whether the proposed policies are a good tool for attempting to arrive at the outcomes he or she prefers. The task can be objectively difficult, as often there are contrasting views on how given outcomes are best achieved and there can be numerous factors to be taken into account. Some candidates may for instance propose tax cuts as an instrument for making the economy grow, while other candidates propose increasing taxes as a tool for the same purpose. Some voters desiring economic growth will vote for candidates of the former type, whereas other voters who likewise desire economic growth will vote for candidates of the latter type. The voters in at least one of these clusters vote mistakenly in view of the goal they have in mind: they choose a candidate whose plan for attaining the relevant goal cannot be right, since mutually contrasting maneuvers—cutting and increasing

taxes—cannot both be suitable tools for the same outcome in the same circumstances.¹¹

2.2. An alternative conception on voting: the “candidate-focused view”

According to the “intended view” just described, the goal of democratic elections is to offer a mechanism by means of which the citizens are called to contribute to the realization of certain society-level political outcomes. Viewed in this way, the role of the candidates in an election is merely instrumental. It is certainly possible to interpret the situation differently. The voter can take the goal of voting to be simply selecting a candidate. In that case, the voter attributes an intrinsic value to the candidate. If so, the voter either ignores any society-level outcomes in whose realization the candidate could play an instrumental role, or at least does not pay careful attention to specific outcomes. We will refer to this second way of looking at elections as the “candidate-focused view” on voting.

To facilitate discussion, we introduce the following terminology. The “result 1” of an election is the set of all elected candidates (ordered according to the number of votes they got), whereas the “result 2” is constituted by all political actions of the elected candidates during their mandate period, leading to various society-level outcomes. That is, “result 1” is simply what is normally called the “voting result” or “outcome of the election” or “electoral decision”, whereas “result 2” consists of all political consequences of the voting result over a time period of several years. The reason why elections are organized is that citizens can use them with the hope that the “result 2” of the election ensuing from its “result 1” would include the political outcomes the citizens desire. However, nothing prevents the voter from adopting the “candidate-focused view” and being principally interested in the “result 1” of the election.

2.3. A single vote can be decisive in a municipal election

The objective indecisiveness of an individual vote in state-level democratic elections is an important factor contributing to the problems of democracy that Brennan discusses. Now, in municipalities with very few inhabitants, an individual vote certainly *can* be decisive in municipal elections (see Tables 1 and 2). Let us take a look at four municipalities in which we carried out interviews.

¹¹ For this example, see Brennan (2016), pp. 50–51.

<i>Municipal elections of 2023</i>	Number of inhabitants	People entitled to vote <share of all inhabitants>	Votes cast	Voter turnout
Kumlinge	290	262 <90.3 %>	189	72.1 %
Lumparland	366	300 <82.0 %>	212	70.7 %
Brändö	436	385 <88.3 %>	279	72.5 %
Vårdö	471	362 <76.9 %>	263	72.7 %

Table 1. Municipal elections of 2023: votes cast, turnout¹²

In municipal elections of year 2023, a candidate who got 7 votes was elected in the municipal council in Lumparland. In Vårdö and Kumlinge, respectively, 10 and 11 votes were enough, while in Brändö 14 votes sufficed for election.¹³ Thus, in Lumparland a single vote (given to a suitable candidate) constituted $1/7 \approx 14\%$ of the votes the candidate needed to be elected in the municipal council, the corresponding percentage in Brändö being half of this, i.e. $1/14 \approx 7\%$. In such circumstances, a single vote indeed can be decisive. There is a relatively high probability that a change in the inhabitants' individual voting behavior would affect a given candidate's chances of being elected and would therefore change the "result 1" of the election—although, as will be discussed in Section 3.4, the overall impact for the "result 2" of the election might still remain minimal, and besides, a candidate may become a municipal council member even without being elected, by becoming a substitute for an elected candidate. (The only requirement for being a municipality-council member is that one's name has appeared on the candidate list; one could end up having such a post even without having got any votes.) In any event, it is clear that the main source for the problems of democracy in state settings—the

¹² ÅSUB (2024); ÅSUB (2023), p. 41; URL = (<https://www.valresultat.ax/2023/kommunalval>) (information retrieved 2025-4-7).

¹³ In a municipality, the members of the municipal council [*kommunfullmäktige*] are chosen on the basis of votes cast by inhabitants in municipal elections. The municipal council is responsible for the municipality's activities and finances. It is the most important decision-making body of the municipality. The municipal executive board [*kommunstyrelse*], again, is responsible for the administration and financial management of the municipality, as well as for preparatory work and execution of the council decisions. Its members are chosen by the municipal council among eligible inhabitants of the municipality, and it must enjoy the confidence of the municipal council.

indecisiveness of an individual vote—is absent in municipal settings of these kinds.

<i>Municipal elections of 2023</i>	Candidates	Elected <share of all candidates>	Elected and in municipal council	Elected and in municipal executive board	Least number of votes received sufficient for being elected <share of all votes cast>	Least number of votes received sufficient for becoming member of municipal council <share of all votes cast>
Kumlinge	13	9 <69.2 %>	6	3	11 <5.8 %>	3 <1.6 %>
Lumparland	16	9 <56.3 %>	8	1	7 <3.3 %>	7 <3.3 %>
Brändö	20	11 <55.0 %>	9	2	14 <5.0 %>	10 <3.6 %>
Vårdö	14	9 <64.3 %>	7	2	10 <3.8 %>	8 <3.0 %>

Table 2. Municipal elections of 2023: votes sufficient for a political position¹⁴

3. Epistemic problems and the incentive to vote

Let us move on to take a look at problems of information-acquisition and information processing, and their dependence on the size of the electorate.

3.1. Epistemic problems of state-level democratic voting

Supposing one has adopted the “intended view” in state-level voting, the most direct and quite possibly the only thing a single citizen can do in order to contribute to the realization of a society-level outcome one finds desirable is to vote. It is a highly nontrivial task to gather enough information to be in a position to say whether voting for a given candidate would indeed be an optimal instrument for one’s intended goal. On the one hand, to improve one’s capacity to make an informed choice, the voter should put effort into knowledge-acquisition. On the other hand, an individual vote will have a next-to-zero effect in any case, whether it is accompanied by deep reflection or cast randomly. As remarked in Section 1.1, Brennan maintains that consequently,

¹⁴ ÅSUB (2023), s. 73; information from the following sites retrieved 2025-4-7:

URL = (<https://www.kumlinge.ax/forvalting/forvaltningsstrukturen>);

URL = (<https://www.lumparland.ax>) (kommunen > förtroendevalda);

URL = (<https://www.brandö.ax/fortroendevalda>); URL = (<https://www.vardö.ax/vardö-kommun>).

the voter not only lacks incentive to change his or her epistemic preparation, but is in fact *rational* in not attempting to improve his or her epistemic capacities for the purpose of voting. Insofar as a rational voter nevertheless opts to get better informed, this is for other reasons, not for the purposes of voting.¹⁵

According to Brennan, most voters are not well informed about politics, and the way in which they process political information is deeply biased.¹⁶ By what observed above, these voters are, then, rational in not putting effort into changing their epistemic state or epistemic dispositions. Yet, Brennan argues that acquiring political information typically *would* change one's voting behavior; in particular he refers to studies according to which voters' policy preferences—and thereby their votes—depend on the political knowledge they possess.¹⁷ Since real-life voters may lack the knowledge in light of which they would vote differently, their actual voting behavior is likely to work against what they themselves would want: they may end up promoting, by their votes, policies that they would not have wanted to promote had they been better informed. The electoral outcome is obtained by aggregating individual votes. If these individual votes are not grounded on knowledge, it seems unlikely that the collective decision these votes determine would nevertheless be supported by the best information that would have been available. This motivates Brennan's view according to which real-life democratic decision-making is a seriously defective tool for whatever outcome preferences the citizens may have—it is a tool that just does not sufficiently take into account knowledge regarding ways to attain the goals set by the citizens, independently of what those goals are.

What interests us here is whether in democratic *municipal* decision-making in considerably small municipalities, inhabitants are similarly *not* encouraged to acquire information or to avoid cognitive biases—and if they are not, whether their voting decisions *would* be affected by being better informed. It must be noted that if indeed municipal citizens are not motivated to improve their epistemic capacities, this cannot be due to the same reason as on the state

¹⁵ Brennan (2016), pp. 30–31, 48–49. Note that if, by contrast, the voter has adopted the “candidate-focused view”, the primary outcome the voter desires is simply that the candidate he or she votes for gets elected (not the later realization of certain society-level outcomes). If this is the principal goal one sets for oneself, the small cost of relevant knowledge-acquisition (identifying a candidate who is likely to get enough votes) would indeed be proportional to the expected benefit.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–30, 36–38.

¹⁷ Brennan (2016), pp. 33–34; Althaus (2003); Caplan (2007); Gilens (2012).

level, because in municipal settings an individual vote precisely *can* be decisive.

3.2. Incentive to vote in municipal elections

It appears on the basis of our interviews that in VSMS, the voter's primary goal in municipal elections is to get someone the voter *trusts* elected in the municipal council. The voter's choice seems *not* to be primarily determined by any desired political outcomes, or by any calculations about which political strategies might best lead to such outcomes. Voters tend to view elections in accordance with the "candidate-focused view". Most inhabitants are happy to delegate the political responsibility to those who will be elected, and simply concentrate on electing a candidate they trust because they know who the person is. Since in VSMS, an individual vote can easily be decisive, the inhabitants have a high incentive to vote. They can genuinely affect the very goal they associate with voting—namely, that a given candidate be elected.

The criteria for preferring one candidate over others may vary from one municipality to another. It came up in our interviews that in some municipalities, many inhabitants feel strong affinity to their village. In such cases, voters living in a village appear to have a tendency to opt for a candidate who comes from the same village. It is thought that the candidate would represent the interests of the village in the municipal council. If there are several candidates from one's village, some of which are one's relatives, one is likely to opt for one's relative. In municipalities in which village-identity plays a weaker role, the choice is in any event based on having personal knowledge of the candidate. The motivation for voting may not be linked to any political goals at all, especially if there are no major pending decisions to be made at the local level soon after the election. This may also depend on the fact that municipal politicians have a rather limited decision-making power, since many issues are decided on a higher level. By one's vote one perhaps wishes mainly to show appreciation for a specific candidate or to acknowledge that he or she is experienced as meriting trust.

It seems possible to say, further, that for their part, decision-makers in VSMS genuinely try to work for the continued existence of the municipality in its more or less current form. If the municipality happens to contain villages with a distinct local identity, a part of the self-assigned task of individual municipal politicians is to create conditions for people to continue living in the villages. The inhabitants genuinely trust that their representatives work for the good of the municipality, and they are justified in their trust, insofar as the intentions of the representatives are concerned.

3.3. Electoral competition in municipal elections

In order to discuss electoral competition—the availability of genuine alternatives among which the voters can make a choice—some remarks about the composition of the municipal council and the municipal executive board may prove useful.¹⁸ All municipal council members are inhabitants who have presented their candidacy in the municipal elections, whereas most members of the municipal executive board have *not* been municipal election candidates. More precisely, if it has been fixed that the number of municipal council members in a given municipality is n , then exactly n candidates are elected. Of the elected candidates, most become municipal council members. However, normally at least the chair of the municipal executive board will be a person elected to the municipal council (with a large number of votes), and therefore this person cannot—according to the legislation in force—be part of the municipal council.¹⁹ For those elected candidates who become members of the municipal executive board, a substitute must be found among non-elected candidates; in this way certain non-elected candidates become members of the municipal council. In what follows, we will refer to those *candidates* who end up having a position in the municipal council *or* in the municipal executive board as “municipal politicians”. Consequently, all elected and some non-elected candidates are “municipal politicians” in this sense, whereas those members of the municipal executive board who have not been candidates in the municipal elections are not counted as “municipal politicians”. Regarding elections, it is also useful to note that in VSMs, there are no political parties at the municipal level.

In VSMs, there is very little electoral competition. In these municipalities it is difficult to find candidates for the municipality election, and those who present their candidacy have a very good probability of being elected. In the 2023 elections, in each of VSMs at least 55 % of the candidates were elected; in Kumlinge almost 70 % (see Table 2 above). In Kumlinge three non-elected candidates became members of the municipal council. In the four municipalities, at most 37.5 % of the candidates remained without a position in the municipal council or in the municipal executive board—i.e., did not become “municipal politicians” in the above sense. In Kumlinge, only 7.7 %

¹⁸ For a brief description of these municipal organs, cf. footnote 13.

¹⁹ There is in 2025 an ongoing preparation of revising Åland’s municipality law [*kommunallagen för landskapet Åland*]; the working group appointed for this purpose has proposed to loosen up the rule and to formulate the revised law so that each municipality can autonomously decide whether one and the same person can be a member of both the municipal council and the municipal executive board; Slotte *et alii* (2025), pp. 46–48.

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of the candidates—namely, a single candidate—remained outside these municipality-political bodies. (See Table 3.)

<i>Municipal elections of 2023</i>	Candidates	Minimum number of “municipal politicians”	Maximum number of candidates not becoming “municipal politicians”	“Municipal politicians”, i.e. candidates who in fact gained a position in municipal board or municipal executive board <share of all candidates>	Candidates who did not gain a position in municipal board or municipal executive board <share of all candidates>	In common between any two possible sets of “municipal politicians”
Kumlinge	13	10	3	12 <92.3 %>	1 <7.7 %>	≥ 70 %
Lumparland	16	10	6	10 <62.5 %>	6 <37.5 %>	≥ 40 %
Brändö	20	12	8	13 <65.0 %>	7 <35.0 %>	≥ 33.3 %
Vårdö	14	10	4	11 <78.6 %>	3 <21.4 %>	≥ 60 %

Table 3. Municipal elections of 2023: likelihood of gaining a political position, robustness of the electoral result²⁰

In retrospect it can be observed, then, that in Kumlinge the probability for a candidate to gain a political position in these elections was 92.3 %, and in each of the four municipalities at least 62.5 %. In each case it was far more likely for a candidate to end up occupying a political position than not to end up occupying one.

It should be noted that because in the 2023 elections, in each municipality the number of candidates only slightly exceeded the number of political posts to be filled, there is nothing much that the inhabitants could have collectively done, even theoretically, to produce a very different electoral outcome. That is, the “result 1” of the election—indeed, the totality of municipal politicians—could not have been radically different. (As will be elaborated in Section 3.4, this fact has implications to the question of whether it would be rational for the

²⁰ Based on information retrieved 2025-4-7 from URL = (<https://www.valresultat.ax/2023/kommunalval>) and from the sites mentioned in footnote 12. Recall that here by “municipal politician” we mean a candidate (elected or non-elected) who has gained a position in municipal board or municipal executive board.

voters to attempt acquiring information as a basis for their voting decision.) In all four municipalities, it was certain that at least one non-elected candidate was to become a municipal council member. In Kumlinge, any two combinatorially possible electoral outcomes might have differed at most regarding $13 - 9 = 4$ candidates, and so the resulting sets of municipal politicians could have differed in at most $4 - 1 = 3$ candidates. Because the least possible number of municipal politicians equals the number of municipal council members plus one, it follows that even if the inhabitants had voted differently, far more than a majority—indeed, at least $(10 - 3) / 10 = 70\%$ —of the people who in fact became municipal politicians would still have been municipal politicians. In Vårdö, too, the majority of municipal politicians is in this sense robust (any two possible sets of municipal politicians share at least $(10 - 4) / 10 = 60\%$ of their members). The highest impact of voting differently would have been in Brändö, but still at least $(12 - 8) / 12 = 1/3$ of the municipal politicians could not have been replaced.

It is important to observe that the robustness of the “result 1” of the election does not contradict the fact that a single vote can (as stated in Section 2.3) be decisive. For example in Vårdö, receiving ten rather than nine votes made it possible for a candidate to be elected. Yet, the “result 1” was bound to be relatively robust in Vårdö, since there were only 14 candidates of which 9 were to be elected: out of the actually elected candidates, $4 / 9 = 44,4\%$ would have been elected according to any combinatorially possible electoral result. As for the “municipal politicians” (in the sense defined at the beginning of the present section), the percentage is even higher: as remarked, in Vårdö at least 60 % of the actual municipal politicians would have been municipal politicians even under any alternative distribution of votes. In sum, both of the following statements are true in VSMs: *an individual vote matters* and *the “result 1” of municipal elections does not depend very much on how the inhabitants vote*. There can well be some variation in which specific candidates become municipal council members (an individual voter has reasonable chances of affecting whether a specific candidate gets elected), but jointly the inhabitants cannot affect very much the composition of the municipal council (any two possible sets of elected candidates share a considerable portion of their members).

3.4. Knowledge-acquisition, competence, and voting in municipal elections

According to Brennan’s analysis, in state-level democratic elections voters tend to be incompetent. Incompetence in the relevant sense derives from the fact that selecting an instrumentally good voting option (“good” in view of the

outcomes the voter desires) requires knowledge and information-processing skills that the majority of voters tend to lack. An incompetently made decision leads voters to vote in a way they would not vote should they be better informed. Can it be said even regarding voters in municipal elections in VSMS that they tend to be incompetent, but rational in not attempting to acquire information?

As remarked above, Brennan's state-level explanation of why it is rational *not* to acquire information when voting is based on the fact that objectively, individual votes are not decisive (Sections 1.1 and 3.1). It was also noted that this explanation is in any event not directly applicable to VSMS, since here a single vote can make a difference (Sections 2.3 and 3.1). Therefore, it might well be worthwhile for the voters in VSMS to invest some time and effort in deciding how to vote. Whether information-acquisition is indeed rational depends, first of all, on how the voter understands the goal of voting.

If one has the "candidate-focused view" regarding municipal elections, one needs no supplementary information. Not acquiring information does not render one's voting decision incompetent. The voter merely needs to have access to the candidate list, concentrate on those people on the list he or she personally knows, and evaluate which one of them best merits his or her trust. As noted in Section 3.2, this is how inhabitants of VSMS in fact seem to view the situation.

If, by contrast, one adopted the "intended view" on voting and focused on the "result 2" of the election (i.e., on the direction that the municipality politics is likely to take during the years to follow depending on how people vote), it would become important to understand which candidates would be the best instruments for achieving one's desired outcomes, and this might well call for information-acquisition and careful reflection. Would it in that case be rational *not* to acquire such information? It would *not* be rational to renounce knowledge-acquisition if the prospects of getting one's desired outcomes realized essentially depended on the "result 1" of the election. However, there are at least two factors due to which in VSMS, the "result 1" of the election does *not* have very much bearing on its "result 2".

First, the *economic possibilities* of VSMS are limited. Tax revenues are low and cost-based subsidies [*landskapsandelar*] by the region Åland intervene to cover expenses deriving from statutory tasks. These municipalities are highly dependent on the region notably for the organization of traffic connections

(archipelago) and health care. As a consequence, they do not have much room for maneuver, regardless of the composition of their municipal councils.

Second, as discussed in Section 3.3, there is very little *electoral competition* in these municipalities. There are so few candidates that almost all of them are elected. The “result 1” of the election is robust: the inhabitants could not have voted in a way that would have yielded a radically different electoral outcome. Even if a single vote can be decisive for one’s favorite candidate being elected, together the inhabitants of a municipality have a rather limited chance of affecting which candidates become members of the municipal council or the municipal executive board (and therefore affecting which candidates remain outside these municipality-political bodies). To be sure, by concentrating votes on certain candidates, the inhabitants can influence the subset of the elected candidates among whom the chairs of the municipal council and the municipal executive board are chosen.

The “result 1” of municipal elections in VSMS does not depend, then, very much on how the inhabitants vote. And even if it did, the “result 2” does not depend very much on the “result 1”, because the resources of the municipalities are limited. Consequently, even if an inhabitant had adopted the “intended view” on voting and had an interest in the “result 2” of the election, he or she would still be rational in *renouncing* to put effort in knowledge-acquisition when deciding which candidate to vote. Furthermore, not acquiring information would *not* render his or her voting decision incompetent. There is nothing much the voters can do, severally or jointly, to affect the future of the municipality, simply because there are no clearly distinct, realizable large-scale political alternatives that would depend on how they vote. The existence of such alternatives would require at least a significantly larger candidate base and/or much stronger economic resources.

We may conclude that the voters in VSMS are rational in not adopting the “intended view” on voting—in not reasoning in terms of large-scale desired political outcomes on which their voting decision could not in practice have any impact. They are rational in adopting instead the “candidate-focused view” and concentrating on relations of personal trust, leaving the task of fixing specific objectives, and the requisite policies, to those who will be elected. They cannot be said to be incompetent decision-makers on this basis.²¹ The

²¹ By contrast, in the state-level setting the “candidate-focused view” would rather itself be a sign of incompetence. That many people nevertheless adopt this view in state-level elections is shown by the fact that people tend to find the notion of “voting erroneously” somehow absurd. There could be no error, if voting for a specific candidate was a goal in itself. Yet, if the goal is to select

goal they set to themselves is merely to select a candidate—this is how they wish to use their right to vote. Therefore, inhabitants need not acquire any political knowledge; they possess the requisite knowledge simply by living in the municipality. They are well aware of the administrative structure of their municipality (municipal council, municipal executive board, local government officers, local authority committees).²² They get to know the effects of municipal decisions rather directly, because they or someone near them is likely to be concerned by these decisions (e.g., fees of daycare or elderly care). Furthermore, records of municipal council meetings are very easily available online and often in summarized form in a local newsletter.

4. Altruism, social identity, and biased reasoning

Let us see how the voter's social identity can be seen as an important factor affecting his or her voting behavior—both in state-level and local elections.

4.1. Rationality of state-level voting

Both Brennan and the political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels call attention to a phenomenon that very frequently occurs in elections: instead of using their vote to express their views on policies that the decision-makers should pursue, people use voting as an expression of their *social identity*.²³ One's voting decision tends to be determined on the basis of the social group with which one identifies oneself. This is highly problematic, since social groups can cluster together mutually unrelated political opinions in an arbitrary way. Brennan clarifies this with the following examples. Abortion rights are conceptually unrelated to gun control. Yet in the United States people who defend abortion rights tend to be favorable to gun control, whereas people who are against abortion rights tend to be against gun control.²⁴ The social identity is primary: the identity determines the views people end up defending—people do not adopt an identity depending on their independently acquired views. For

a candidate who would optimally function as an instrument for society-level goals, it is very easy to vote erroneously.

²² Local authority committees [*nämnder*] are formed around specific topic areas (building, and others such as education, economy and entrepreneurship, elderly care). A majority of the members of these committees have not been candidates in the municipal elections. Together with a relevant local government officer, the members of a local authority committee prepare matters to be discussed by the municipal executive board.

²³ Brennan (2016), pp. 39–43, 49–51; Achen & Bartels (2016) pp. 228, 230, 268, 307 and more generally Chaps. 8–11; O'Connor & Brennan (2024).

²⁴ The phenomenon is not limited to the US. Substantial state subsidies for art and culture are conceptually unrelated to facilitating immigration. Yet for example in Finland left-leaning voters tend to be favorable to both and many right-leaning voters tend to be against both.

example, a person may defend abortion rights because he or she is a Democrat; defending abortion rights is not one of the reasons why someone is a Democrat. The link between voting decisions and social identity may even lead to incoherent behavior. People whose social identity involves being a Republican used to defend free trade until Trump was about to be nominated as a candidate for presidential election in 2016, but from then on the same people announced they were protectionists—and this without even recognizing they had changed their minds.²⁵ Grounding one’s voting option on social identity is a case of *intergroup bias*: we identify ourselves strongly with the group, we are charitable with other members of the group and portray those outside the group as threatening, we adapt to whatever the group thinks and oppose to whatever the others do. Now, information processing is an integral part of competence of the sort needed in political decision-making. Cognitive biases regarding political issues are flaws in political information-processing and thereby sources of *incompetent* political decision-making.²⁶ That is, dependence of one’s voting behavior on one’s social identity is likely to lead to incompetent decision-making.

Brennan argues that social identity actually importantly contributes to the fact that people vote in the first place in state-level elections. He refers to empirical studies regarding voting behavior, according to which voters do not vote selfishly. Instead they vote altruistically. In particular, they tend to be *nationalist* and *sociotropic*—i.e., they tend to vote for what they perceive to be in the national interest and they believe they deserve social acceptance for the way they vote.²⁷ According to this understanding, voters genuinely believe they vote in ways that make things better for everyone, and want the elected representatives to serve the common good of their country rather than their self-interest. Brennan remarks that this empirical finding is surprising, since people are typically selfish in their everyday life. And in terms of the effort required, it is more “costly” to vote than to abstain from voting. How can it be that most people nevertheless opt to vote, and in particular to vote altruistically?

According to Brennan, voting selfishly in state-level elections would be irrational: *rational selfish citizens* would not vote at all, since the costs of casting a selfish vote would exceed the expected benefits of voting. Brennan clearly means this claim to be about the rationality of the act of voting relative

²⁵ For these examples, see Brennan (2016), p. 41; O’Connor & Brennan (2024).

²⁶ Cf. Brennan (2016), pp. 61–62.

²⁷ Brennan (2016), pp. 49–51; Feddersen, Gailmard, & Sandroni (2009); Funk (2000); Miller (1999); Mutz & Mondak (1997). For further references, see Brennan, *ibid.* p. 251.

to its “intended objective”—affecting the outcome of the election (e.g., in parliament elections, affecting which party is given the task of forming a new government). If the goal one associates with one’s act of voting is the personal benefit gained by a specific electoral result, the probability that one’s vote decisively contributes to yielding this benefit is infinitesimally small. In this case, even a minimum effort on the part of the voter is not justified. The voter promotes his or her interests better by staying home and for instance drinking beer. It can be rational for citizens to vote, if they relate the act of voting to their sense of duty, or to their sense of belonging to a social group, or to a certain idea of what is good for the nation as a whole. At least voting to fulfill one’s sense of duty can be selfish. Brennan, however, thinks that rational people typically vote altruistically. The individual vote of an altruistically motivated citizen is not decisive any more than the individual vote of a selfish citizen, but voting is nevertheless rational as a means of contributing to the cohesion of one’s social group. What renders altruistic voting rational has nothing to do with the realizability of one’s desired political outcomes or the vote’s being or not being a good instrument for such ends. Its rationality derives from the social dimension that the voter associates with voting; the social phenomenon of group identity gets manifested via voting—at least the sense of belonging to a group is felt via voting. If this is what one wants to gain, the benefit can indeed be proportional to the cost of voting.

4.2. Social identity and municipal-level voting

We remarked in Sections 3.2 and 3.4 that inhabitants in VSMs tend to adopt the “candidate-focused view” on voting. The reason why they focus on candidates instead of reflecting on society-level outcomes may be the above-mentioned connection between voting and social identity. Is voting in municipal settings affected by intergroup bias? Does voting tend to be altruistic in the strong sense that the voters have the common good of the whole municipality in mind when voting—or perhaps in a weaker sense in which the voting decision is determined on the basis of the interests of one’s social group?

In VSMs, an individual vote can be decisive for getting a specific person elected in the municipal council, so if it somehow serves one’s self-interest that this is what happens (e.g., because the person is one’s close relative), then it indeed can be rational to vote in self-interest. Generally, there appears to be a definite social aspect in inhabitants’ voting behavior, but the analogy with what according to Brennan happens in state-level elections is not perfect. People indeed relate the act of voting to a sense of belonging to a social group, but in some cases the group can resemble an *interest group* more than a group

gathered around an overall conception of what is good for the local community as a whole.

As mentioned in Section 3.2, it came up in the interviews that in some of VSMs, people identify themselves strongly with their village. The social identity triggered by living in a village (and by one's family having lived in the same village for generations) leads to viewing the villagers as forming an interest group. In such municipalities, inhabitants tend to vote *not* thinking primarily of what is good for the municipality as a whole, but to promote interests of their village (continued existence or viability of the village, keeping or gaining services to the village). In such cases neither inhabitants nor their political representatives reason in terms of a comprehensive view of the municipality—or in any event they prioritize the interest of the village, and think of the common good of the municipality primarily via what is good for individual villages. In those municipalities in which village identity plays no determinant role, the voting decision is simply based on knowing the candidate personally. Undoubtedly this often means that the candidate belongs to the voter's social entourage, which itself may be formed around a kind of social identity.

While Brennan needs the assumption of the voters' altruism based on their social identity to explain why people vote in the first place in state-level elections (despite the fact that their votes cannot be decisive regarding any political outcomes), no special hypothesis is needed in the case of VSMs in which the inhabitants' votes can be decisive. Then again, we have argued that inhabitants of VSMs are rational in adopting the "candidate-focused view" on voting, because in any event they could not genuinely affect the "result 2" of the elections. This circumstance strongly encourages basing one's voting decision on one's social identity—since in any event the fundamental electoral choice pertains to a specific person among the candidates (instead of political objectives possibly represented by a candidate). Consequently, even in VSMs voting is typically guided not by self-interest but by the sense of belonging to a larger group. Personal relations guide the voting decision, and this would be likely to constitute a bias if the voters' primary goal of voting was to contribute to substantial society-level outcomes. On the other hand, the very same sense of social identity that could lead to such biases is what motivates the inhabitants to vote in the first place. Relative to goals determined by one's social identity, it is rational for the inhabitant to vote.

In VSMs, voters' eventual biases in their decision-making are not in any significant way related to their being adherents of specific political parties. As

mentioned at the beginning of Section 3.3, in the municipalities considered, there are no political parties at the municipality level. There is just one list of candidates with no party-political divisions. If a member of the municipal council is a long-term active member of a region-level party, this is likely to become visible in his or her work as a municipal representative, but according to the information we gathered, such cases are rare. Overall in municipality politics in VSMs, political ideologies do not have a significant role; the relevant sorts of social identities are not connected to ideologies. Both inhabitants and municipal decision-makers have a pragmatic attitude. People are interested in concrete substantial questions that have a direct impact on their everyday life. Such issues may concern, e.g., taxes, fees, budget of the municipality, daycare, school, and elderly care.

5. Size-induced problems

The size of a government unit affects its functionality and even the preconditions of its continued existence in different ways.

5.1. Self-sufficiency vs. surveyability

In *Politics* (bk. 7, ch. 4), Aristotle takes up the question of how the quality of governing a state depends on its population size. He considers two features: “self-sufficiency” (capacity to provide to the inhabitants what they need) and “surveyability” (the possibility for the citizens to judge whether those who govern have been selected according to merit, and for the governors to judge whether the citizens obey laws). The extent to which a state has these features depends on the size of its population, but varying the size affects the two features in opposite directions: reducing the size improves surveyability but may have a negative effect on self-sufficiency, whereas augmenting the size improves the prospects of self-sufficiency but has a negative effect on surveyability. Consequently, an optimal state is one whose population is not too small, so that it allows self-sufficiency, but not too big either, so that it can be surveyed.

Political scientists recognize a trade-off between related features when discussing municipalities as democratically governed units. Political authorities are subject to two types of normative criteria: *substantial* (they must secure the goods and services the public wants) and *procedural* (people should be in a position to assess the competence and performance of political authorities).²⁸ In their seminal work *Size and Democracy* (1973), Robert Dahl

²⁸ Cf. Denters *et alii* (2014), p. 5.

and Edward Tufte analyze the effects of variation in size of a government unit more specifically in terms of *system capacity* (the capacity of the government unit to respond fully to the collective preferences of the citizens) and *citizen effectiveness* (citizens' ability, acting responsibly and competently, to fully control the decisions of the government unit).²⁹ Of these two types of conditions, the procedural criteria are viewed by the political scientists as being more fundamental for the possibility of qualifying a political system as a democracy: participation of people in the political process is needed.³⁰ This said, neither of the two aspects—substantial, procedural—can be ignored; if the government unit is dysfunctional, it is not of much use to the citizens that they are able to control political decisions. What can be said of VSMS as democratically governed units regarding these two aspects?

5.2. Administrative structure and the question of continued existence

Administrative divisions of a state are not self-sufficient. The “system capacity” of the region Åland depends economically, and for example regarding military defense, on the Finnish state of which it is an autonomous part. The “system capacity” of individual municipalities of Åland, in turn, depends on the region Åland. Whether VSMS meet “substantial” criteria for democratic government must be measured by their capacity to manage their statutory tasks in a manner that takes into account the inhabitants' preferences. A precondition is that the municipalities be capable of continued existence as government units of their own. They must have a democratically determined administrative structure, with local politicians elected from among local residents. Also, they must—with the help of the region—arrange certain services (e.g., collective traffic, school, daycare, elderly care) and carry out certain activities (e.g., development of economy and entrepreneurship).

As indicated above, the size of the population in VSMS is between 290 and 470 inhabitants. An important size-related difficulty is that especially in the municipalities of the outer archipelago (Kumlinge and Brändö), the population size has been shrinking already for decades.³¹ If this tendency were to continue, it might become difficult to retain the requisite administrative structure: there begin to be serious difficulties to engage a sufficient number of inhabitants to be candidates in municipal elections. Also, when a municipal council has indeed been formed, there is the risk that not all council members have the

²⁹ Dahl & Tufte (1973), p. 20; cf., e.g., Dahl (1994), p. 28.

³⁰ Denters *et alii* (2014), pp. 7–8.

³¹ The number of inhabitants in Kumlinge has decreased from 895 (in 1920) via 487 (in 1973) and 445 (in 1993) to 290 (in 2023); the corresponding numbers for Brändö are 1142 (in 1920) via 599 (in 1973) and 538 (in 1993) to 436 (in 2023). See ÅSUB (2025).

time, energy, and commitment that political decision-making would ideally require. Yet, small municipalities need a complete administrative organization just like bigger ones. People may accept to be candidates for political positions and especially to take up positions in local authority committees because they do not wish to disappoint those close to them who request their participation. When people then become members of municipal organs for such reasons, they may not put sufficient effort into their work as political representatives. Things are further complicated by the fact that the municipalities' limited resources may discourage politicians. These are substantial problems of system capacity. The problem is not that the decision-makers would not take into account what the inhabitants want. The problem is much more fundamental. What is at stake is the continued existence and basic viability of the municipality as a distinct government unit.

Insofar as *citizen effectiveness* depends on the decision-makers' being informed of the inhabitants' concerns and their willingness to take these concerns into account, the procedural criteria of good-quality democratic government are met. In the everyday workings of municipal democracy, there are only some relatively minor potential difficulties. Being an elected representative can be taxing: representatives may feel that inhabitants expect them to constantly make sure that everything is running smoothly. Decision-makers often personally know those people who will or would be affected by a given decision. This may complicate decision-making, notably when decision-making involves dealing with sensitive information regarding individual persons. Further, it can become impossible in practice to avoid that a person who is disqualified or has a conflict of interest in an issue nevertheless takes part in deciding about it. A potential risk of nepotism and intriguing exists. Decisions may be affected by social pressure, when decision-makers know they are likely to get negative personal feedback unless they act in a certain way.

Summing up: Despite some minor potential sources of difficulties, there prevails a mutual trust between the inhabitants on the one hand, and the municipal politicians and local government officers on the other. The issue that inhabitants in VSMS experience as the most pressing is related to the very preconditions of system capacity—the question of rendering the continued existence of the municipality possible.

6. The nature and quality of municipal decision-making

In this section, we first evaluate the democratic quality of decision-making in very small municipalities. We then introduce the notion of *epistemic quality*. Taking Brennan's remarks regarding state-level democracy as a starting point, we use this notion first to characterize state-level decision-making, and then municipal decision-making.

6.1. Democratic quality

As explained in Section 3.3, the set of people holding posts as municipal politicians in a VSM is robust: it could have been somewhat different, but not much different. Further, even if the number of candidates in the elections was much larger than what it in fact is, different groups of candidates could not propose radically different courses of action for the municipality, simply because the municipalities have limited resources. In VSMs there is, then, very little electoral competition, which is typically taken to be one of the criteria of good democratic quality. From the viewpoint of this criterion, the democratic quality of municipal decision-making can be considered not to be good.³²

There are, however, compensating factors which are specific to VSMs and act in favor of good democratic quality: (1) Inhabitants have various ways to *participate* in or *contribute* to decision-making, and (2) there is a sense in which municipal decision-makers can be considered as being *accountable* to the inhabitants.³³

There are both organized and informal ways to participate. Regarding organized forms of participation, (a) there is the formally regulated possibility of popular initiative [*medborgarinitiativ*]; (b) inhabitants' meetings [*kommuninvånarträffar*] are organized in which the municipal decision-makers listen to inhabitants' ideas and opinions; (c) there are local authority committees, most of whose members are inhabitants who have not been candidates in municipal elections.³⁴ A significant portion of inhabitants are members of one municipal organ or another. This said, in some municipalities

³² For the notion of democratic quality, see e.g. Diamond & Morlino (2004); regarding in particular the democratic quality of the government in Åland, see Sundberg & Sjöblom (2021).

³³ Diamond & Morlino (2004) enumerate eight criteria that can be employed when assessing the quality of democracies, stressing that these should not be viewed as forming a rigid framework of conditions all of which should be met in order for a democracy to be of good quality: the rule of law, participation, competition, vertical accountability (of elected political leaders to voters), as well as horizontal accountability (of officeholders to other officials and state institutions) [*procedural dimensions*]; freedom and equality [*substantive dimensions*], and responsiveness [seen as bridging procedure and substance].

³⁴ Cf. footnote 22 above.

most local authority committees have been recently suppressed to make decision-making more effective or with the idea that the municipality could instead organize working groups to discuss well-defined questions with the inhabitants. As for informal ways to influence, (a) one may easily contact municipal politicians one trusts and speak directly with the chief executive of the municipality or other local government officers—producing a sense of direct democracy; (b) inhabitants can present written proposals to the municipality, which are then very likely taken up and discussed by decision-makers; (c) meetings can be organized around inhabitants' specific proposals in which inhabitants and decision-makers discuss the proposal; (d) people can, via informal discussions with decision-makers, make sure that a certain proposal will be supported by a majority in the municipal council; (e) associations active in the municipality may influence municipality politics by creating unofficial contacts by means of which decision-making municipal organs are informed of inhabitants' views. It may also be mentioned that there can be entirely "invisible" informal channels that exercise influence, for instance via relatives or village meetings.³⁵ In sum: with respect to the possibility of participation, the quality of democracy in VSMs is very good indeed.

Concerning accountability, municipal politicians can be said to answer for their political decisions to the inhabitants. First, they are certain to get direct feedback from the inhabitants for their decisions, big or small, if inhabitants feel that the decisions go against their interests or the interests of the municipality. In this way, the decision-makers need to be able to justify their decisions. Second, as already remarked in Section 3.4, any information about the municipal decisions that the inhabitants might wish to have is readily available. Third, various further conditions taken to be requisite for accountability are also met: inhabitants' possibilities of participation in decision-making (as discussed above), voters' interest for the elections, and high turnout in elections.³⁶ What is clearly missing is electoral competition: due to the absence of genuinely different alternative electoral outcomes, the voters cannot really "punish" decision-makers in later elections even if the voters would not be content with the decisions made. There are no chances of producing a major turnover. The municipal decision-making mechanism is,

³⁵ Some informal manners of influencing may be "undemocratic": it is not excluded that personal relations can affect decision-making in an undemocratic way. In principle even acting for one's self-interest can be possible by means of municipality politics.

³⁶ For preconditions of accountability, see See Diamond & Morlino (2004), p. 25. In each of the VSMs, voter turnout was over 70 % in the municipal elections of 2023 (see Table 1).

however, *responsive* in the sense that municipal politicians actually strive to seriously work for the good of the municipality and the inhabitants trust that this is what the decision-makers do.³⁷

Interestingly, the small-scale setting causes at the same time lack of electoral competition *and* the fact that municipal politicians can be said to be responsive to the inhabitants—the two could hardly coexist at the state level. Even if inhabitants have only very little power over the composition of the municipal council, the limited size of the local setting renders it socially very difficult for the council members not to take properly into account the inhabitants' views. At the same time the inhabitants have no desire or need to continuously call into question the actions of the municipal council members.

6.2. Epistemic quality and state-level decision-making

We have seen that Brennan reasons as follows when criticizing democratic decision-making: It is an objective fact that individual votes are not decisive. Consequently, the individual voter has no incentive to gain knowledge as a basis of his or her voting decision. As a matter of psychological fact, voters tend to process political information in a biased way. Therefore, the individual citizens' voting decisions are (according to Brennan's criteria) incompetently made, and there can be no guarantee that the electoral result would lead to the implementation of such policies that actually give rise to outcomes desired by a majority during the election. It has been observed that things go rather differently in VSMS: A single vote can be decisive. Voters readily have the information they need for selecting a candidate that corresponds to their preferences—indeed they vote for a candidate they personally know, whom they trust, and to whom they are happy to transfer political responsibility for the next four years. The voters' conception on voting is in accordance with the “candidate-focused view”. Besides, their having this view is arguably rational and does not render their voting decisions incompetent, because in fact the “result 1” of the election does not depend very much on how people vote, and because the “result 2” of the election does not depend very much on its “result 1”, this being due to the limitation of available resources and the limited range of possible actions that belong to the scope of municipality politics.

According to Brennan's understanding, electorates tend to make, out of ignorance and irrationality, systematically incompetent decisions during state-level democratic elections. As mentioned in Section 1.2, he takes his “competence principle” to apply only to high-stakes decisions. Thus, the

³⁷ Regarding responsiveness, cf. Diamond & Morlino (2004), pp. 27–28.

question arises whether *democratic electoral decisions* are such high-stakes decisions.³⁸ This means asking whether the voters' preferences expressed in elections determine in a sufficiently strong sense the actions that the government will take during its mandate period. If democratic electoral decisions are high-stakes decisions, the competence principle declares that they ought not to be enforced. However, as Brennan notes, it is not obvious that democratic electoral decisions are high-stakes; in modern democracies there are many postelectoral *mediating factors* between what voters prefer and the decisions that the governments implement. Therefore, it could happen that democracies work *despite* the electors' incompetence—the mediating factors might lead the government agents to choose policies the voters would not support, and this might be what makes it possible to arrive at good outcomes—outcomes judged good even by the citizens themselves. What actual representative democracies do does *not* depend merely on voters' preferences. Representatives are generally better informed and more motivated than the citizens. They tend to make deals and compromises, which helps attaining relatively moderate political outcomes.³⁹ These mediating factors reduce the effects of the incompetently made electoral decision and shift the political power to more informed citizens. As Brennan puts it, the mediating factors constitute “epistocratic checks” within a democratic system—the political process incorporates reflections based on knowledge-acquisition and moderately unbiased reasoning before arriving from the input (voters' preferences) to an output (a political decision by the government).⁴⁰

Following Brennan, we may adopt the following moderate view on what it takes for a democratic electoral decision to be competently made: (a) voters act on widely available, good information—not necessarily the best information that could in principle be found; (b) they avoid systematic errors regarding politically relevant factual questions;⁴¹ (c) they evaluate information in a moderately rational and unbiased way; and (d) they are aware of their own limits and always look for more and better information on any important decision.⁴² When these criteria are met, the electorate as a whole can be said to be competent; the competence of the totality of the voters derives by definition

³⁸ Brennan (2016), p. 201.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 200, 244.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁴¹ One makes systematic errors if one replies erroneously to factual yes/no-questions more often than one would if one chose how to answer by flipping a coin.

⁴² Brennan enumerates these criteria when discussing conditions without which the democratic electorate cannot be said to make decisions competently (*ibid.*, p. 165). He of course maintains that most people fail to meet these criteria (cf. *ibid.* p. 138).

from the fact that a majority of the individual voters are competent in the sense of meeting the above criteria. We may introduce a notion of “epistemic quality” as a complement to the notion of “democratic quality”. The epistemic quality of a *collective decision* may be assessed in terms of how well it meets these competence criteria. We may describe the epistemic quality of an entire *democratic decision-making process*, then, with reference to the epistemic quality of the decisions made in the course of this process. If the process involves mediating factors, it can happen that the collective decision this process takes as input (namely, the democratic electoral decision determined by the individual voting decisions of the citizens) is not of a good epistemic quality, but the process leads, thanks to mediating factors, to decisions that indeed are of good epistemic quality (a possible example being some decisions of governments in representative democracies).

Whether state-level electoral decisions are high-stakes decisions depends on the strength of the intervening factors. Either (1) the voters’ preferences expressed in elections essentially determine what governments do, or else (2) there are mediating factors that importantly affect government decisions. In case (1), electoral decisions *are* high-stakes decisions. If, further, these electoral decisions are *incompetently* made (which is the case according to Brennan), then—by Brennan’s competence principle—they tend to be unjust, and it might be preferable to adopt an epistocratic form of government, so that the competence principle would not be violated.⁴³ This would mean stipulating that those citizens whose “ignorance” and/or “irrationality” exceeds certain limits would not be entitled to vote; only those citizens would be allowed to cast a vote who vote “competently”.⁴⁴ (For epistocracy, cf. Section 1.1 above.)

In case (2), again, electoral decisions are *not* high-stakes. In the special case that the mediating factors to an important extent improve the epistemic quality of decision-making compared with the epistemic quality of the electoral decision, the resulting decisions end up being *competently* made—the process succeeds in eliminating the negative effects of the incompetent electoral decision. Crucially, this would entail that from an instrumental viewpoint, elections do not matter, which would be contrary to usual arguments in favor of democracy.

Thus, *neither* option—(1) or (2)—provides a justification for democracy. The former option motivates experimenting with an attempt to replace

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁴⁴ Here, “competence” can be defined in terms of the criteria (a)–(d) enumerated above.

democracy by epistocracy, while the latter option means that insofar as we look at the decision-making process instrumentally and focus on the outcomes of decision-making, we might just as well replace universal suffrage by epistocratic suffrage. According to option (2), eventual incompetent electoral decisions produced under universal suffrage are epistocratically corrected by mediating factors before leading to any political outcomes. If postelectoral factors determine all crucial political decisions, it would be difficult to argue that universal suffrage is instrumentally preferable to epistocratic suffrage.⁴⁵ This fact alone would render problematic the idea of democracy as a superior form of government. This said, democracy may have other features due to which it is in practice preferable to epistocracy.

6.3. Epistemic quality and municipal decision-making

What can be said of the epistemic quality of decision-making in VSMs? It was already noted in Section 1.2 that electoral decisions in VSMs are *not* high-stakes decisions. Generally, no individual could lose liberty or property thanks to a mere municipal decision; municipalities lack powers that states possess. Consequently, the competence principle does not apply to any municipal decisions in VSMs. *A fortiori*, then, it does not apply to municipal *electoral* decisions in these municipalities. Besides, since the outcome of the election is robust (any two possible “results 1” of the election coincide to an important extent), voters could hardly be held responsible for the outcomes of the political process, even if municipalities could—thanks to the actions of municipal politicians—make decisions that would radically impact the life of individual inhabitants. Now, the only genuinely high-stakes question in municipal politics is the very question of the continued existence of these municipalities, which itself is of course a precondition of any municipal decisions. Unlike the municipal politicians, the inhabitants with their vote cannot really affect this issue in one direction or another.

By our observations in Section 3, we may indeed conclude that in democratic decision-making in VSMs, the *mediating factors* are what determines the end-results of political decision-making: the municipal council and the municipal executive board in collaboration with local government officers and local authority committees. The electoral result itself plays no significant role, due to the very limited number of candidates in elections—itsself mainly due to the very limited size of the population in these

⁴⁵ That said, this would not automatically be an argument in favor of epistocratic suffrage. It might be that it just does not matter instrumentally whether the input of the political decision-making process is democratic or epistocratic. Besides, postelectoral mediating factors might be needed even under epistocratic suffrage.

municipalities. Yet, it would hardly make sense to replace here universal suffrage by epistocratic suffrage. The number of genuinely different alternative electoral outcomes would not be augmented by reducing the number of voters by any criterion, in particular not by any requirement of competence. By contrast, reducing the number of voters would undoubtedly affect negatively the willingness of the inhabitants to accept delegating all political power to the municipal politicians.

In VSMs, politically relevant decision-making takes place at the level of the political organs of the municipality. Decision-making at this level can be said to fare well when assessed from the viewpoint of competence. First, the decision-making process is designed so that it will involve at least some amount of knowledge-acquisition: local government officers are responsible to do preparatory work for the proposals that the municipal executive board makes and about which a decision will eventually be made by the municipal council; to this end, local government officers are supposed to acquire information on the basis of which matters to be proposed can be evaluated. Second, the decision-making process incorporates sound reasoning: deliberation of proposals in the meetings of the municipal executive board, eventual local authority committees, and the municipal council. These features introduce a rather strong epistocratic component in the decision-making process. The decision-making process can be seen as being of good epistemic quality. Yet the inhabitants, too, are strongly implicated in the process—not because they vote, but because of the plethora of other ways in which they can participate in or contribute to decision-making, as discussed above. These opportunities to participate appear to create, in the small-scale context of VSMs, a climate in which the inhabitants wish to delegate political decision-making to their representatives—each inhabitant to someone he or she trusts and knows personally.

6.4. Democracy vs. epistocracy in small municipalities

In a sense, VSMs combine the best parts of democracy and epistocracy. The small-scale context makes democratic involvement possible without electoral competition, and the system takes care of providing the municipal politicians with relevant information regarding the decision issues before the politicians make actual decisions (thanks especially to local government officers). At the same time the municipal politicians cannot make very radical (and therefore also not very bad) decisions—not because the decision-making mechanism by itself imposes insurmountable constraints on their actions, but simply because the tasks of the municipality are limited and the municipality tends to lack resources.

The balance between democratic and epistocratic aspects of municipal decision-making could rather easily break down. This could happen either because of a significant increase in the number of candidates in elections or because of importantly improved resources at the disposition of the municipality.

Regarding the first option, increased electoral competition would probably diminish the inhabitants' relative trust felt vis-à-vis the elected representatives. The possibility of genuinely different alternative electoral outcomes could be used for "rewarding" or "punishing" incumbent politicians. Proper use of such "retrospective voting" would require considerable epistemic capacities—ability to judge how an individual politician's past actions have affected the present circumstances about which the voter feels positively or negatively.⁴⁶ Achen and Bartels argue that in reality such "rewarding" or "punishing" is based on voters' social identity, not on a reflection pertaining to one's desired political outcomes and the policies proposed—presently or in the past—by different candidates. They conclude that the real effect of retrospective voting is reinforcing the voters' social loyalties, not exercising control over political decision-making.⁴⁷ If this is so, electoral competitiveness tends to lead to incompetent electoral decisions (intergroup bias). By contrast, the lack of electoral competitiveness helps to reduce the negative effects of social identity as a determinant of the inhabitants' voting decisions and thereby creates, in the small-scale local context, a precondition for a feeling of trust toward municipal politicians. It also encourages inhabitants to participate in a dialogue with the actual representatives rather than forming opposing groupings plotting against them and constantly calling into question their actions.

As for the second option, considerably increased resources at the disposal of the municipality would open up to the municipal politicians a larger spectrum of possible political courses of action, which again would augment the risk that the actions chosen would not be adequately supported by the inhabitants. The decision-makers might end up taking too big risks if radically different alternatives were available to them. On the one hand, inhabitants would not have effective means to control them; and on the other hand, inhabitants could encourage the politicians to make too risky decisions. The expert knowledge the municipality can get hold of might not suffice to evaluate the risks, or the temptation to ignore warnings could be too great. In practice, however, the resources of VSMs are limited, and the possible risks that

⁴⁶ For problems with retrospective voting, see Achen & Bartels (2016) Chaps. 5–6.

⁴⁷ Achen & Bartels (2016), esp. Chaps. 9 and 11. See also Ahlstrom-Vij (2018).

theoretically could be accompanied by abundant resources are a rather remote possibility.

The combination of a very small population and rather limited, foreseeable alternative courses of action available to the municipal politicians gives VSMS a special status as government units in which democratic participation goes together with informed political decision-making. Electoral non-competitiveness, the inhabitants' readiness to trust their representatives, and their willingness to leave political decisions to them are interconnected features, rendered possible by the very small size of the population. It is of particular importance for VSMS that municipal politicians make competent decisions—*their* decisions can indeed be high-stakes decisions of a kind, affecting the very existence of the municipality. Depending on a variety of factors (among which directly or indirectly the actions of municipal politicians), the very existence of these municipalities could be jeopardized. For example, several small municipalities could end up being merged into bigger units, necessary private services could disappear, or traffic connections in the archipelago could become severely less frequent. Thus, either by a direct administrative decision of a larger government unit (the region) or by gradual worsening of the living conditions, small municipalities could cease to exist and their areas could even cease to be permanently inhabited. In avoiding such an outcome, informed decisions of the municipal politicians play of a key role.

7. Conclusion

We took as a starting point Brennan's critique of state-level democratic decision-making, based on the fact that the objective indecisiveness of individual votes renders it rational for the voters not to attempt improving their "competence" in political matters: as it is almost impossible that one's vote would make a difference to the outcome of the election, the voter has no incentive to acquire political knowledge. Since Brennan, furthermore, takes it to be an empirical fact that an important percentage of actual voters tends to lack political competence, it seems to follow that the electoral decision—i.e., the result of aggregating a huge number of individual voting decisions—is itself incompetently made: the citizenry as a whole, as a collective body, ignores important factors that affect the quality of decision-making. These factors would not have been ignored had the decision-making been sufficiently supported by knowledge and sound information-processing. This casts doubt on democracy as an instrument for making political decisions.

Our goal in this article was to discuss whether problems of the types that Brennan observes in state-level democratic decision-making occur also in small-scale settings—in democratic decision-making in municipalities with 300 to 500 inhabitants. In order to avoid inadequate idealizations, we have grounded our remarks on interviews with inhabitants, municipal politicians and local government officers in four considerably small municipalities situated in the Åland Islands.

It was clear from the start that eventual problems with democratic municipal decision-making are not directly related to Brennan's "competence principle", simply because this principle is meant to apply to high-stakes political decisions, and decisions at the municipal level do not fall into this category—they cannot deprive anyone of property, liberty or life. However, the question remains whether the relationship between inhabitants' voting decisions and municipal decision-makers' actions exhibits difficulties reminiscent of the problems Brennan detects at the state-level. Therefore we were led to consider and assess whether a single vote can be decisive in municipal elections, whether inhabitants have incentive to vote in the first place, whether voters are willing to acquire knowledge, whether their willingness—or lack thereof—is rational, and whether and how the voters' social identity plays a role in their voting behavior.

Although the empirical data collected through our interviews is limited, we think that it has allowed us to make useful observations about very small government units and to formulate some preliminary conclusions about how the applicability of Brennan's critique depends on the size of the electorate. While electoral competition is almost non-existent in considerably small municipalities, we argued that there are compensating factors which render the quality of municipal democracy good. First, inhabitants have innumerable ways of contributing to political decision-making. Second, municipal decision-makers are in a certain sense accountable to the inhabitants. The latter are interested in elections and there is a very high turnout. Also, inhabitants can easily give direct feedback to the decision-makers, and they have easy access to all relevant information about political decision-making. While at the state level, it can be thought that electoral competition is a necessary condition for decision-makers' accountability to the citizens (offering to the citizens the possibility of "punishing" incumbents for decisions they dislike), here the inhabitants tend to trust that the municipal decision-makers do their best for the municipality. It is our hypothesis that this sense of trust might be destroyed by increased electoral competition, which would probably be accompanied by the emergence of mutually conflicting fractions among the population. This

could lead voting decisions to be based on social identities and therefore to exhibit certain types of biases. Actually, already in municipalities of Åland with around 1000 to 2500 inhabitants, candidates represent competing “political associations” [*politiska föreningar*]; we conjecture that this may affect negatively the relationship between political decision-makers and inhabitants. Evaluating this hypothesis is left for future research.

We introduced the notion of epistemic quality and argued that the epistemic quality of municipal decision-making in VSMs is relatively good. This is not because the inhabitants would base their voting decisions on knowledge-acquisition or demanding information-processing; they merely wish to elect a candidate they trust and know as a person, and to whom they wish to transfer political responsibility. Instead, the epistemic quality derives from the fact that the administrative system is so designed that political decision-makers are supposed to base their decisions on preparatory work carried out by local government officers and/or local authority committees. This type of preparation is grounded on knowledge-acquisition and is in fact likely to have an impact on the actual decisions.

No reasons came to light that would justify maintaining that in considerably small municipalities, political decision-making could be improved by increasing the political knowledge of the voters or by improving the way they process political information. This is mainly due to the fact that there simply are no many alternative political courses of action to be taken in the first place: the set of municipal politicians resulting from a given election could not be radically different even if inhabitants had voted differently, and any set of municipal politicians would have more or less the same limited margin of political maneuver. Interestingly, however, this circumstance has a positive consequence: inhabitants tend to trust the politicians, who seriously attempt to do their best for the municipality.

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