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Municipal Amalgamation in Armenia: Citizen Satisfaction with Local Services and Local Democracy

Fusão municipal na Arménia: satisfação com os serviços locais e democracia local

Amalgamación municipal en Armenia: satisfacción con los servicios locales y democracia local

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Abstract

This article examines municipal amalgamation in Armenia in relation to citizen satisfaction with local government performance and experiences of local democracy. It combines independent repeated cross-sectional Civic Engagement in Local Governance (CELoG) surveys from 2015 and 2019 with documentary analysis, interviews and focus group discussions undertaken in 2023. The quantitative comparison distinguishes municipalities classified as amalgamated and non-amalgamated in the supplied survey data, while qualitative evidence explores differences between administrative centers and constituent settlements. Mean satisfaction increased from 1.77 to 1.81 in the amalgamated category and from 1.87 to 2.01 in the non-amalgamated category. The difference between these changes was −0.099 points and was not statistically significant in an exploratory municipality-clustered model (p = .518). Qualitative accounts describe both improved administrative access and investment and concerns about resource distribution, representation, and consultation. The evidence suggests heterogeneous

experiences rather than a uniform deterioration. Changes in electoral arrangements and the wider political environment complicate causal attribution. The article highlights the importance of settlement centrality, local administrative capacity, and accountability in interpreting territorial reform.

***Keywords**:* amalgamation, local democracy, satisfaction with service delivery, decentralization, Armenia.

Resumo

Este artigo examina a fusão de municípios na Arménia em relação à satisfação dos cidadãos com o desempenho do governo local e às experiências de democracia local. Combina inquéritos transversais repetidos e independentes do CELoG, realizados em 2015 e 2019, com análise documental, entrevistas e grupos de discussão realizados em 2023. A comparação quantitativa distingue os municípios classificados como fusionados e não fusionados nos dados dos inquéritos, enquanto a evidência qualitativa explora diferenças entre os centros administrativos e as localidades integrantes. A satisfação média aumentou de 1,77 para 1,81 na categoria de municípios fusionados e de 1,87 para 2,01 na categoria de municípios não fusionados. A diferença entre estas variações foi de -0,099 pontos e não foi estatisticamente significativa num modelo exploratório com erros-padrão agrupados por município (p = 0,518). Os testemunhos qualitativos descrevem tanto melhorias no acesso administrativo e no investimento como preocupações relativas à distribuição de recursos, à representação e à consulta pública. Os resultados apontam para experiências heterogéneas, e não para uma deterioração uniforme. As alterações eleitorais e o contexto político mais amplo dificultam a atribuição causal.

Palavras-chave: fusão municipal, democracia local, satisfação com a prestação de serviços, descentralização, Arménia.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la amalgamación municipal en Armenia en relación con la satisfacción ciudadana con el desempeño del gobierno local y las experiencias de democracia local. Combina encuestas transversales repetidas e independientes de CELoG, realizadas en 2015 y 2019, con análisis documental, entrevistas y grupos focales realizados en 2023. La comparación cuantitativa distingue entre los municipios clasificados como amalgamados y no amalgamados en los datos de las encuestas, mientras que la evidencia cualitativa explora

las diferencias entre los centros administrativos y las localidades integrantes. La satisfacción media aumentó de 1,77 a 1,81 en la categoría de municipios amalgamados y de 1,87 a 2,01 en la de municipios no amalgamados. La diferencia entre estos cambios fue de -0,099 puntos y no resultó estadísticamente significativa en un modelo exploratorio con errores estándar agrupados por municipio (p = 0,518). Los testimonios cualitativos describen tanto mejoras en el acceso a la administración y en la inversión como preocupaciones sobre la distribución de recursos, la representación y la consulta. Los resultados apuntan a experiencias heterogéneas, no a un deterioro uniforme. Los cambios electorales y el contexto político más amplio dificultan la atribución causal.

Palabras clave: fusión municipal, democracia local, satisfacción con la prestación de servicios, descentralización, Armenia.

Introduction

The debate about the ideal size of local government units dates back to antiquity but gained renewed prominence in the 1970s through Dahl and Tufte's (1973) *Size and Democracy*. The authors argued that no single size of a political unit is optimal because of the inherent tension between system capacity (effectiveness) and citizen effectiveness (democracy). This tension, known as the Dahl-Tufte dilemma, suggests that while citizens in smaller communities may exercise greater control over political decisions, these communities may lack sufficient capacity to address broader-scale issues. In the decades that followed, this theory received both empirical support and criticism. For example, Mouritzen's (1989) study of local self-government in Denmark found that smaller communities exhibited higher levels of public engagement and local democracy, while Newton's (1982) research in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden suggested that larger communities could provide public services more effectively without compromising democratic values. More recent research by Denters et al. (2014, p. 315) suggests that although "small may not be beautiful, but it has its attractions," there is no consistent evidence that larger communities are inherently more democratic. Although the Armenian case has received relatively limited attention in the literature on decentralization, its significance goes beyond its novelty. Armenia represents a theoretically important case of radical municipal consolidation in a post-Soviet context, where institutional reforms were implemented in the absence of an established legacy of a fully decentralized administrative system. The sharp reduction in the number of municipalities in Armenia, from more than 900 to just 71 in less than three decades, makes it a rare case for testing theories concerning the effects of municipal amalgamation on governance,

particularly in the context of fragile democracies (Gasparyan, 2024). The Armenian case therefore provides an opportunity to refine existing theoretical propositions concerning scale, capacity, and legitimacy, particularly the Dahl-Tufte dilemma, and to assess their applicability in institutionally constrained settings.

Table 1

Number of Municipalities in Armenia

Year	Number (as of December 31)	Year	Number (as of December 31)
1996	919	2009–2015	915
1997	919	2016	793
1998–2002	929	2017–2019	502
2003	930	2020	484
2004–2005	929	2021	79
2006–2008	926	2022	71

Note. Sources: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, Gasparyan (2024).

The history of local self-government reform in Armenia has been characterized by several phases of decentralization and recentralization. The most recent chapter of municipal amalgamation continues these processes, with the aim of finding a balance between local autonomy and administrative efficiency. The country's mountainous terrain and dispersed population made it difficult to ensure the efficient and effective delivery of public services. The merger of smaller units into much larger ones would allow the government to achieve economies of scale, improve public service quality, and lower administrative costs. Another goal of these reforms was to reinforce local democracy by creating more capable local governance units that could better engage with residents and meet their needs.

This article addresses two research questions. RQ1: How did reported satisfaction with local government services change between the 2015 and 2019 CELoG surveys across amalgamated and non-amalgamated municipalities? RQ2: How do citizens and local officials perceive changes in opportunities for participation, representation, and accountability following municipal amalgamation in Armenia? The first question concerns observed differences in repeated cross-sectional surveys; the second concerns perceived institutional change, not a causal estimate of democracy.

The study combines repeated cross-sectional CELoG surveys from 2015 and 2019 with documentary evidence and interviews and focus group discussions conducted in 2023. The surveys describe perceptions at two times, while the later qualitative material explores possible mechanisms and perceived consequences. These sources cannot by themselves isolate

amalgamation from concurrent political and institutional reforms. The findings indicate uneven experiences: mean satisfaction increased slightly in both amalgamated and non-amalgamated groups, while qualitative accounts identify gains in some peripheral settlements and dissatisfaction in some former municipal centers. By analyzing the interconnections between structural reforms, citizen satisfaction, and democratic strength, this research offers a critical perspective on the continuing debate over optimal government size and the effectiveness of decentralization and municipal amalgamation strategies. The conclusions drawn from Armenia's reform experience may have broader relevance for understanding the persistent challenges and opportunities facing local governance in the context of democratization and institutional restructuring.

Institutional and temporal context: The 2015 survey preceded the principal amalgamation phases, whereas the 2019 survey followed some mergers but preceded the completion of the reform program in 2022. The period also encompassed Armenia's 2018 political transition, making it inappropriate to treat the two waves as identical political settings. Post-Soviet legacies of hierarchical administration and dependence on central transfers provide relevant context for local autonomy, but the present data do not identify their independent effects. The 2023 fieldwork captures later retrospective experiences rather than contemporaneous 2019 perceptions. Changes in council electoral arrangements and municipal digital systems also occurred over this broader period and should not be conflated with the territorial merger itself.

Post-Soviet institutional legacies provide a potential explanation for the gap between formal decentralization and lived local autonomy. Centralized decision routines, dependence on higher-level funding and expectations of hierarchical accountability can persist after territorial boundaries change. These are interpretative mechanisms, not variables directly measured by the CELoG satisfaction item. The transition to proportional council elections and council-mediated selection of executives should be described about the applicable legal provisions and implementation dates, rather than treated as an automatic consequence of amalgamation.

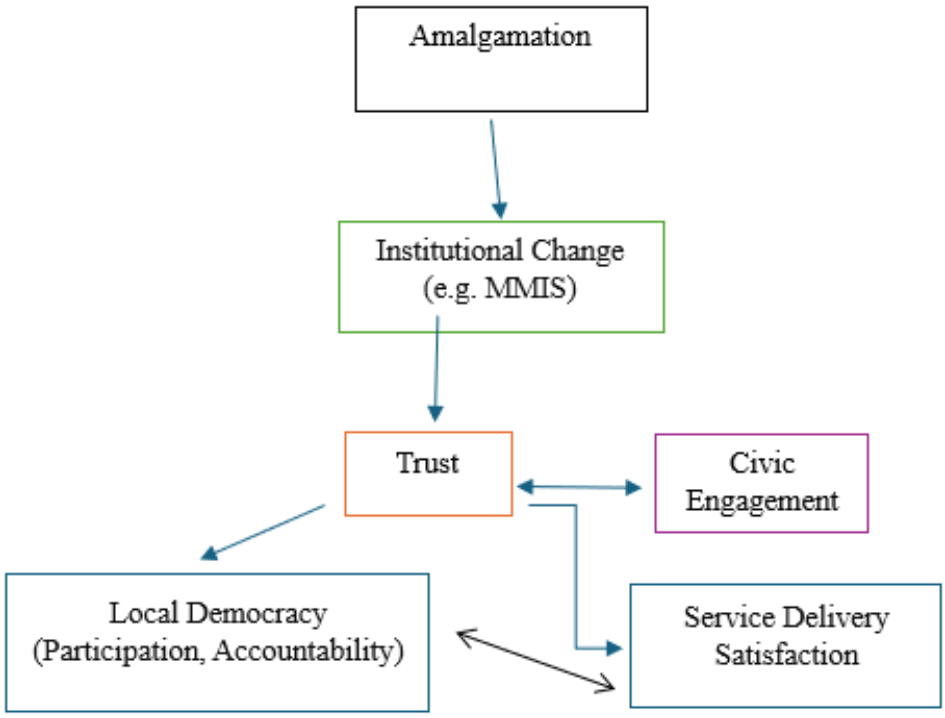
Theoretical Framework

Municipal amalgamation is the horizontal consolidation of previously separate local government units into larger jurisdictions. It differs analytically from vertical decentralization, which reallocates authority between levels of government, although both may occur within the same reform program. Amalgamation may increase administrative capacity and economies of scale, but it may also increase the distance between residents and representatives and

redistribute resources among settlements. The empirical analysis therefore distinguishes territorial restructuring from simultaneous changes in powers, electoral arrangements, and administrative practices. Local democracy depends on citizen participation and trust in local institutions. This section examines the concepts and history of local democracy, particularly the relationship between direct citizen involvement and elected representation. Trust affects government reforms and public perceptions of them, while reforms also affect trust. This reciprocal relationship influences citizen engagement and satisfaction with public services. Public service delivery concerns how local governments provide essential services such as water supply, sewerage, waste management, public transport, and energy. It also explores different ways these services are provided, how institutional reforms affect efficiency, and how public service delivery has changed with New Public Management (NPM) and post-NPM reforms.

Figure 1

Hypothesised Relationships



Together, these concepts provide a framework for studying how municipal amalgamations affect local government in Armenia. This approach links efficient management, citizen involvement, and quality public services. It also provides a basis for future research and a broader perspective on local government reforms in post-Soviet regions.

Amalgamation and Institutional Reforms

Amalgamation reforms are one type of local government reform, although not the most common. Institutional reforms usually follow two directions: vertical and horizontal (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2011). Vertical reforms involve transferring duties and responsibilities from the central government to regional and local authorities and can be divided into "political" and "administrative" decentralization. Political decentralization involves granting political independence to lower levels of government, while administrative decentralization involves transferring administrative tasks. Horizontal (territorial-organizational) reforms take two forms. The "North European" type means combining or merging existing municipalities or administrative areas. The "South European" type keeps municipalities small but creates shared bodies to provide support (Norton, 1994, p. 40).

Although Norton mainly viewed municipal amalgamation within Northern Europe, Vojnovic and Poel (2000) showed that some features of merging municipalities and combining territories had existed in North America since the 1800s. Another key difference is between voluntary and forced (or coerced) amalgamations. Relatively few countries favor voluntary amalgamation. Several authors have assessed the outcomes of these cases positively, especially because voluntary amalgamations can make local governance more efficient by lowering costs (Pupphachai & Zuidema, 2022; Viks et al., 2010). In contrast, much of the scholarship on forced amalgamations is critical, raising concerns about their effects and their ability to achieve the intended goals (Drechsler, 2013). However, this distinction has also been criticized, mainly on the basis of observations that several Southern European countries failed to implement their reforms successfully (Kuhlmann et al., 2022). This study does not intend to weigh the advantages of municipal amalgamation against its drawbacks. Instead, it examines whether the provision of local public services has become more effective and efficient following amalgamation. To this end, both theoretical and empirical studies on municipal amalgamation are reviewed.

Theoretical Studies on Amalgamation

1. Swianiewicz (2010) summarised the main arguments for amalgamation as follows:
2. Larger local governments have more capacity to provide a wider range of functions, so territorial consolidation (amalgamation) allows an allocation of more services to the local level.
3. There is an economy of scale that allows for a less expensive, more effective provision of services in the larger local government units.

4. Since large local governments can provide more functions, it is more likely that citizens will be interested in participation in local politics.
5. Territorial organization with large local governments produces fewer income disparities among municipalities, so there is a diminished pressure for horizontal equalization systems, which may be costly for the national budget and/or a politically sensitive issue.
6. Large local governments can be more effective in planning and in economic development policies.
7. In territorially consolidated (amalgamated) systems it is easier to reduce problems of free-riding, i.e., situations when locally provided services are consumed by residents who live (and pay local taxes) in another jurisdiction. (Swianiewicz, 2010, p. 3)

Recent studies show that amalgamation outcomes depend heavily on several factors, including the process, scale, and institutional context. Efficiency gains and service improvements are generally modest and uneven, while transition costs, heavier staff workloads, and losses of local identity can be substantial (Galizzi et al., 2023). These risks are especially pronounced when consolidation is coerced and local self-government protections are weak (Erlingsson et al., 2021).

Empirical Studies on Amalgamation

Empirical studies in this area have mostly been single-country case studies. Nonetheless, researchers have also identified a number of large-N comparative studies. Research has not focused exclusively on countries with strong institutions and functioning liberal democracies. For instance, such studies have examined reforms in countries such as Zimbabwe (Roe, 1995), Australia (Drew et al., 2016), Sweden (Hanes & Wikström, 2010), Denmark (Blom-Hansen, 2009). These studies had substantially different findings.

Recent scholarship highlights the importance of voluntariness and local adaptability in merger processes. Voluntary mergers, as observed in parts of Germany and the Netherlands, often yield better outcomes in terms of legitimacy, integration, and long-term institutional stability than coercive or top-down reforms (Teles, 2016). It also emphasizes the importance of viewing the effects of amalgamation as conditional and not uniform. The literature links amalgamation reforms to declining turnout, demonstrates the importance of process design and public support for reform consequences, and finds rather modest or uneven efficiency and service gains (Allers et al., 2021; Beeri & Zaidan, 2021; Galizzi et al., 2023; Myksvoll & Broderstad, 2024; Netswera, 2022; Valkama et al., 2022). Similarly, the evidence from

Armenia indicates that amalgamation was perceived as a major reform for local authorities' capacity building while also stressing the continuing needs in participation, fiscal autonomy, and accessibility of local services (Council of Europe, 2022; OECD, 2024; SIGMA, 2025).

The idea that amalgamation would lead to large-scale economic savings is derived from the concept of economies of scale. On this basis, larger municipal units are expected to deliver services and administer municipal affairs more efficiently, lowering costs per person. However, real-world evidence shows mixed results. Studies by Swianiewicz and Łukomska (2019) and Gendźwiłł et al. (2021) demonstrate that some instances of amalgamation save money, but in others municipalities face financial problems. Examining individual services adds complexity because some public services may benefit from being larger, while others may not (Tavares, 2018). While merging can improve management by pooling resources and simplifying operations, it also brings challenges in integrating different administrative cultures and systems (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007). Options such as intermunicipal cooperation can achieve similar efficiencies without the problems of a full-scale amalgamation (Bel & Warner, 2015). Leadership and stakeholder involvement are important for successful reform. Studies from Latvia and Denmark demonstrate the crucial role of local leaders in shaping the outcomes of reforms (Blom-Hansen et al., 2016; Teles, 2016). There is also an ongoing debate on the effect that amalgamation has on local democracy and public participation. Critics argue that it may weaken local representation and reduce engagement, while supporters believe it can improve governance (Dollery et al., 2012). Empirical evidence is mixed: some studies find reduced participation, whereas others find only marginal effects (Lefèvre, 2008). Ways to preserve democracy include keeping local advisory councils, ensuring that diverse voices are heard (Lizundia & Misra, 2022), and improving communication between citizens and elected officials (Mouritzen, 2008).

Financial sustainability is another key issue in the amalgamation debate. Although, in theory, amalgamation promises to improve fiscal indicators, it often does not translate into tangible outcomes. The expenses associated with amalgamation, especially at the initial stages, can be quite substantial, as there is a need to harmonize systems and practices (Hanes & Wikström, 2010). In the long term, sustainability depends on a number of factors, such as improved debt management, more efficient tax collection, and more effective service delivery (Fox & Gurley, 2006). Cases of de-amalgamation also offer valuable insights. Among the main reasons for de-amalgamation is dissatisfaction with service delivery, while other prime reasons include loss of local identity or a lack of impact on fiscal health (de Souza et al., 2015). However, several case studies, including those from Queensland, Australia, show that de-amalgamation also brings complexities and potential unintended consequences (Bell et al.,

2016). These experiences underscore the importance of considering local preferences and the potential for unintended consequences when deciding to launch amalgamation reforms (Aulich et al., 2014).

Local Democracy

Local democracy is an integral part of good democratic governance, highlighting the importance of citizens engaging in everyday politics and trusting local institutions. This section examines local democracy and the role of trust, providing a basis for analyzing how reforms affect local democracy and service delivery in Armenia.

Conceptualizing Local Democracy

Local democracy is crucial because it allows citizens to participate directly in decision-making, promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility. Schaap and Daemen (2012) point out the limitations of established democratic systems and the need for new ideas to ensure wider public engagement. These views are key to understanding how local democracy works in Armenia. Edwards (2012) further examines the conflicts and connections between participatory and representative democracy, offering lessons on integrating new forms of participation into established government systems. These ideas are especially important for Armenia's decentralization efforts, which aim to improve public involvement and government responsiveness. The effect of leadership on local democracy, studied by Bergström et al. (2012), and Irene et al. (2024), adds more complexity. Their findings on how leadership styles can facilitate or hinder democratic processes and citizen involvement apply directly to Armenia's local government.

The Role of Trust in Local Democracy

Trust is a key concept in the discourse about local democracy because it affects how people connect with public institutions and how those institutions work with citizens. At the local level, trust can affect whether people want to take part in decision-making, follow public order, and judge how well local authorities are doing (Bouckaert, 2025). In turn, people's experiences with public institutions, such as regarding their transparency (Almasi & Mohammadi, 2024), the quality and ease of use of public services and the availability of opportunities to participate (Drapalova, 2024), can strengthen or weaken trust (Bastianen & Keuffer, 2024; Verhoest et al., 2024). Trust should therefore be understood both as an outcome of good governance and as a factor in local government functioning and the acceptance of reform (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Gasparyan, 2023, 2026).

Changes in the public sector may also affect how citizens interact with institutions and consequently have an impact on trust, but the opposite may hold true as well: the current level of trust can also affect how reforms are accepted and carried out. Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003) describe trust as both a cause and result of public sector performance and reform. This reciprocal relationship is especially important for amalgamations. Changing territorial boundaries can change how close citizens feel to local leaders, how easy it is to access municipal institutions, and how services are organized. They may determine the relationships within newly created administrations. Trust helps explain how these institutional changes affect how citizens view local democracy.

Participation, Local Autonomy, and State-Society Relations

The growth of local democracy reflects broader political and institutional changes towards more local control and citizen involvement in government. Local governments have become stronger as both service providers and democratic institutions by gaining more independence and as governments have become less centralized across different political systems (Keating, 1995). This perspective demonstrates that local democracy is not just about elections or official representation but that it also involves the influence citizens can exercise over decisions that affect their communities and whether local governments have enough independence to meet local needs. Participatory theories of democracy highlight the importance of citizens being directly involved. Pateman (1970) argues that participation is important not only for individual choices but also because it helps democracy develop. Later research on participatory governance examines systems that give people more direct opportunities to influence public decisions (Fung, 2004) and act as co-creators (Rodriguez Müller et al., 2021). These methods can strengthen representative institutions by giving citizens more ways to express their opinions, hold leaders accountable, and shape policies.

These ideas are closely linked to theories about decentralization and local autonomy. Decentralization aims to move decision-making closer to citizens, so public authorities can better respond to local needs and preferences. More local autonomy can also encourage policy innovation and make services more responsive, but the impact of decentralization depends on the specific institutional and political context in which authority is given (Faguet, 2014). In Europe, the European Charter of Local Self-Government highlights this principle by making local autonomy a key part of democratic governance (Council of Europe, 1985).

The relationship between local authorities and citizens is shaped by more than just formal rules. Civil society groups, grassroots movements, and other forms of civic engagement can influence how local institutions work and how citizens interact with them. Studies on

democratic decentralization show that when public institutions and organized groups work together, they can create new ways for people to participate and hold officials accountable (Heller, 2012). Participatory budgeting illustrates this relationship. In places like Porto Alegre, direct citizen involvement in decisions about public resources has created new ways for people to take part in governance and can help build transparency, accountability, and trust (Wampler, 2012).

Municipal Size, Democratic Engagement, and Governance Quality

The relationship between municipal size and democratic engagement is an important debate in the literature on amalgamation. One of the main questions here is whether larger municipalities possess the administrative capacity required for effective governance to offset the cost of increasing the distance between citizens and local authorities. Research on municipal size has continually examined voter participation, political representation, citizen engagement, and the accessibility of local government as possible indicators of this trade-off (Denters & Rose, 2005).

There is some evidence on voting behavior that supports the idea that smaller municipalities have certain benefits. Studies on voter participation show that smaller municipalities often have higher turnout and stronger connections between citizens and local officials. For example, Frandsen (2002) and Denters *et al*. (2014) found these patterns. This is important for amalgamation, because increasing the size of municipalities can simultaneously make residents feel more distant from decision-makers. However, there is an argument that there are many factors that affect democracy, not just size. Larger municipalities may have more resources, and different ways for people to participate can help reduce the loss of closeness. De Sousa et al. (2021), along with da Cruz et al. (2019), highlight the need to balance different types of legitimacy. Input legitimacy is about giving citizens chances to participate and share their views. Throughput legitimacy focuses on how well, transparently, and responsibly decisions are made. Output legitimacy is about whether institutions deliver good policies and services. Thus, the quality of democracy in local governments depends on more than just participation. A municipality might offer good services but lack participation or transparency, or it might have strong participation but limited administrative ability.

Political leadership also shapes this relationship. Local leaders can influence how much people take part, how open the government is, and how citizens see their local institutions. Populist leaders, for example, may challenge democratic norms by centralizing power or

promoting a more limited idea of citizenship (Mudde, 2007; Paxton, 2020). This means that the quality of local democracy depends on how institutions are organized, what resources are available, the leadership style, and the opportunities for citizen involvement.

Trust, Service Satisfaction, and Institutional Reform

Different dimensions of local governance are connected through the concept of trust. Putnam's (1993) work on social capital emphasizes how trust and networks of civic cooperation can facilitate collective action and reduce the costs of coordination. According to this view, trust is both reinforced by democratic participation and an important element that helps sustain it. In other words, when citizens view local institutions as responsive and legitimate, they may be more willing to participate, while meaningful participation can itself strengthen confidence in those institutions. Trust is also closely connected to how people experience public services. Citizens interact with local government not only through voting and participatory mechanisms but also through their regular experience of services. Earlier research established the link between subjective assessment of services and institutional trust. Recent reports on the Armenian experience further demonstrate that accessibility, responsiveness, participation, and implementation capacity remain central to that relationship (OECD, 2024; SIGMA, 2025).

Public Service Delivery

There is a wide consensus that public services generally refer to water supply, sewage, waste management, public transport, and energy provision (Wollmann, 2015). There are several terms used among scholars. According to Wollmann (2015):

> In Anglo-Saxon terminology they are usually called "public utilities" while for instance they are labelled services publics industriels in French, 'servizi pubblici or servizi di pubblica utilità' in Italian and 'Daseinsvorsorge' (services for the subsistence) in German. (p. 2)

Nevertheless, the most common term used is "public services," which is also how water supply, sewage, waste management, public transport, and energy provision are collectively described. Another term that often goes hand in hand with public services in scientific literature is "personal social services," also known as health services. The European Union labels these services as social services of general interest (SSGI), which denotes "health care, childcare, care for the elderly, assistance to disabled persons or social housing" (European Commission, 2011, p. 2).

Zeithaml (1988, p.3) conceptualizes perceived quality as consumers' overall assessment of a product's excellence or superiority. Applied to public service delivery, this perspective highlights the importance of citizens' subjective assessments of the quality of services they receive. This idea aligns with Oliver's (1980) confirmation/disconfirmation process, in which satisfaction occurs when performance exceeds expectations and dissatisfaction occurs when it falls short (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Schiebler et al., 2025; Setapa et al., 2024).

Parasuraman et al. (1985) first identified ten aspects of service quality, which were later grouped into five main areas in the SERVQUAL model: tangible elements, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These areas help measure the difference between what customers expect and what they experience. According to Selvakumar (2015), all five areas have a strong impact on customer satisfaction and precede it. Customer satisfaction is a key indicator of future behavior. Howard and Sheth (1969) define it as the feeling of being fairly or unfairly rewarded for what you put into a purchase, and recent scholarship further supports this argument (Masitenyane & Mokoena, 2023). Although there is no clear agreement on what leads to service quality and satisfaction, most agree that perceived quality usually precedes satisfaction (Ballart et al., 2024; Rust & Oliver, 1994). There are also studies about decentralization (Wang et al., 2024) and socioeconomic factors (Song et al., 2024), with arguments that these could both reinforce and challenge citizens' satisfaction.

Analytical Expectations

The study evaluates the following expectations, formulated from the theoretical discussion:

H¹: Between 2015 and 2019, the change in mean reported satisfaction with local government performance was less favorable in municipalities subsequently or already amalgamated than in municipalities not amalgamated by the 2019 survey. The expectation concerns a between-group difference in observed change, not an identified causal effect. This is assessed descriptively in the available survey comparison; without a valid counterfactual, the study does not test a causal effect of amalgamation.

H²: Residents of peripheral settlements and residents of former municipal centers experience distinct opportunities for participation, representation and accountability following amalgamation, reflecting changes in administrative proximity and the distribution of decision-making authority. The qualitative evidence examines perceived proximity, consultation and accountability. The role of electoral rules is discussed as a concurrent institutional change rather than assumed to be an effect of amalgamation.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative and qualitative data to analyze government strategies and legislation and examine the implications of amalgamation reform for local governance in Armenia. The text below provides an overview of the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques.

Selection of Public Services

The selection of public services was based on two criteria. First, many municipalities do not provide all public services (some municipalities do not have a sewage system and quite a few are too small for public transportation) while in some cases public service is nationalised (water supply and energy supply) or provided by regional authorities (law enforcement). Second, because this study relies on data from two different sources (municipal reports and household surveys), and the survey grouped some public services together (such as managing the domains of education, culture and sport) the study examined these three areas together with road and bridge maintenance, since these are the services that (almost) all municipalities provide.

Research Design

The mixed-methods research design employed to triangulate the data from quantitative and qualitative approaches allowed for a robust analysis of government strategies and legislation, allowing us to draw insights from multiple data sources. Four distinct approaches were employed in this study. The 2015 and 2019 questionnaires contain comparable questions about satisfaction with local self-government bodies and assessments of municipal activities. The principal quantitative outcome in this article is overall satisfaction with the work of local self-government bodies; it should not be interpreted as a direct measure of the quality of each municipal service. For the principal outcome, the analysis retains valid responses coded 0–4 and excludes blank observations and negative non-response or inapplicable codes. The questionnaires and SPSS metadata were consulted to establish the substantive meaning of the outcome. As the surveys are independent cross-sections, the results compare groups of respondents rather than changes within the same individuals.

Quantitative analysis and inference: The CELoG surveys are independent repeated cross-sections. We compare valid 0–4 responses to question 5.8 (Overall, how satisfied are you with the performance of local self-government bodies?), excluding negative missing

codes and blank values, and distinguish municipality categories 1 (amalgamated) and 2 (non-amalgamated). Standard errors in the exploratory regression are clustered by reported municipality name. Consequently, these tests are indicative rather than design-based population inference; no causal difference-in-differences claim is made.

Document Analysis: Government strategies, policies, and laws were reviewed through careful reading of official documents, white papers, and legislative texts. Academic papers, books, and reliable online sources were also used to support the analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews: We interviewed key officials from various levels of government, such as local administrators from 14 amalgamated municipalities, two regional policymakers (*marzer*[12]), and five central government representatives. The goal was to collect firsthand insights into how government strategies and laws are implemented and their effects.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs brought together opinion leaders and residents from the 14 amalgamated municipalities. Participants came from diverse backgrounds and localities. The conversations focused on how government strategies and laws affect people's daily lives, as well as their experiences and concerns.

For the qualitative analysis, NVivo was used to organize themes. The coding plan was based on key concepts (trust, autonomy, satisfaction) and was refined as new patterns emerged. Consistency was checked by double-coding 20% of the transcripts.

Sampling Strategy

The 14 amalgamated case-study municipalities were selected purposively to capture differences in region, settlement size, settlement centrality, reform phase, and administrative context. This is a maximum-variation logic rather than a probability sample. The choice permits examination of contrasting experiences, especially between former municipal centers and peripheral settlements, but cannot support statistical generalization. The available study materials do not establish a municipality-by-municipality selection matrix, so the precise selection rationale and exclusions require confirmation against the original fieldwork records.

1 According to the law "On Administrative Division" enacted in 1995, Armenia is divided into eleven administrative divisions of which ten are provinces, also known as '*marzer*', while the capital city of Yerevan has a special status.

2 We decided to interview heads of Departments of Education, Culture and Sports as well as of Urban Planning, Land Development and Infrastructure Management from Syunik and Ararat *marzer* because no municipality was selected from the former and only one was selected from the latter.

Data Collection

The data collection process was organized in several steps. First, we reviewed government websites, official databases, and public repositories to identify and review relevant strategies and legislation related to the research topic. Next, a purposive selection of interview participants was conducted, followed by interviews. The main determinants for selection were diversity of roles, experiences, and perspectives within the government structures, as well as direct involvement in policy design or implementation. During the final stage, FGDs were conducted in the 14 amalgamated municipalities. We conducted 17 FGDs in total, including two in each municipality with more than 10,000 residents. Borrowing from the logical framework of prior publications on this topic (Gasparyan, 2023, 2024) and following the arguments by Zheng et al. (2023) as well as Galizzi et al. (2023), this study aims to identify the factors that facilitate or impede the government's strategy in achieving its main goals.

Analysis

Citizen Satisfaction

From 2016 to 2022, the powers of Armenian local self-government bodies changed considerably, especially for mayors and local councils (*avagani*). By the end of 2016, the law "On Local Self-Government" gave mayors 116 direct responsibilities and 34 delegated ones (see Table 2 below). These defined which tasks mayors handled themselves and which they managed for higher authorities. The changes during this time, especially in 2021, aimed to make governance more efficient, involve more citizens, and meet new legal standards. Mayors took on many more direct responsibilities, while the number of tasks delegated from higher levels of government remained about the same. Assigning mayors more direct responsibilities was likely intended to strengthen local governance and increase their influence over municipal policies and services. The steady number of delegated tasks shows that higher government levels kept a consistent approach. Overall, these changes suggest more decentralization and stronger local governance.

Table 2

Number of Mayoral Responsibilities by Year

Year	Direct responsibilities	Delegated responsibilities
2016	116	34
2017	116	34
2018	120	34
2019	121	34
2020	123	35
2021	129	35
2022	130	35

Note. Source: Law "On Local Self-Government."

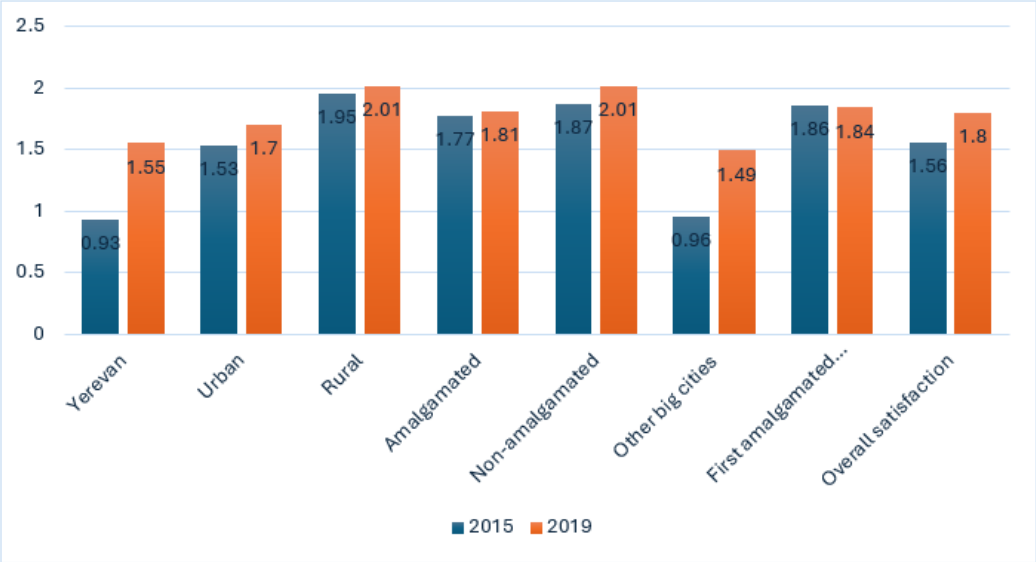
Reanalysis of the CELoG microdata (valid responses to question 5.8) yielded mean satisfaction of 1.77 (n = 391) in 2015 and 1.81 (n = 410) in 2019 for the amalgamated category, compared with 1.87 (n = 544) and 2.01 (n = 523) for the non-amalgamated category. The unadjusted difference in changes was −0.099 scale points. An unweighted linear model with a year-by-group interaction and community-name-clustered standard errors estimated an interaction of −0.099 (95% CI [−0.400, 0.202], p = .518). This comparison is not statistically distinguishable from zero at the 5% level. Because the two waves are independent cross-sections, survey design variables and weights have not been validated, and group composition may change across waves, this is a descriptive association, not a causal estimate of amalgamation.

The second main finding was that interview accounts described concerns about the consequences of amalgamation for some larger settlements. There were several reasons for this. People from the main settlement, where the local administration is based and which usually gives its name to the municipality, often saw other settlements as a burden. For example, one administrator explained that

people worked for our settlement, for the community at that time, and they received, for example, 120,000 drams (~$310 at the time) in salary. Now that the number of settlements has become at least 15, that person still receives the same salary. He says, but my workload has increased five times. But I don't have the budget to even double it.

Figure 2

Mean Overall Satisfaction With Local Self-Government Among Armenian Municipality Categories, 2015 and 2019



Note. Satisfaction was measured on a 0–4 scale. Source: Authors' calculations from CELoG survey microdata.

Second, some respondents in previously large, now-amalgamated municipalities described dissatisfaction. This was mostly because they felt they lost their local identity and had to pay a large share of local taxes without getting much in return. A local administrator in one such settlement said all their plans were canceled after amalgamation, and for two years no projects took place in their area. They said,

I know that while nearby villages do not have a kindergarten, no one will care about our secondary roads and that all these villages are part of our community, our country, but people already started complaining that if there won't be good quality asphalt connecting their house to the school, for instance, they won't pay taxes.

Thus, while it is impossible to speak to overall discontent with service delivery, a clear group feels increasingly frustrated each year. Local administrators also shared this feeling. This distinction between leaders from formerly strong, now non-titular settlements and those from other settlements in amalgamated municipalities was not discussed by Zheng et al. (2023) or Galizzi et al. (2023). To present amalgamation reforms in a positive light, the government established municipal management information systems (MMIS) and citizen service offices (CSOs) in municipalities. Local managers and Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure representatives often mentioned these as examples. While not directly linked

to amalgamation, these changes have had a substantial impact. MMIS and CSOs were designed to provide citizens with access to electronic services and to help municipalities work more efficiently and openly. However, a recent study (Gasparyan, 2024) found that both MMIS and CSOs have efficiency problems, especially MMIS. There is also limited awareness about these systems among local administrators in non-titular settlements and among residents.

Local Democracy

Local democracy is examined here through participation, representation, and accountability rather than a single proxy indicator. The European Charter of Local Self-Government, Article 3(2), requires councils or assemblies chosen through free, secret, equal, direct and universal suffrage and permits executive organs responsible to those councils; it does not require the mayor to be directly elected. Armenia's shift in many municipalities towards proportional-list council elections and council selection of the mayor should therefore be assessed in terms of its practical implications for representation and responsiveness, not described as inherently contrary to Article 3. The electoral changes were introduced alongside, but are analytically distinct from, municipal amalgamation. Some interviewees associated these arrangements with greater distance from local representatives; however, without comparable pre-reform evidence and electoral analysis, the material cannot establish that the rules caused a decline in turnout or participation.

When asked about civic engagement, local administrators said they sometimes gather information on citizens' needs and satisfaction with local services. Almost every municipality has tried at least one way to involve citizens, such as telephone surveys or public hearings. However, very few still use these methods, and only one municipality regularly collects feedback through satisfaction surveys. Most civic engagement now happens through informal conversations. As many administrators put it: "we talk to our residents, we observe their problems, and they know our place; if they have a problem they come here".

Most focus group participants reported feeling left out and not participating in civic engagement activities. Many said that local authorities have not held public hearings or sought public input on important issues recently. One participant said, "They decide for themselves; we hardly do our work; we don't deal with such issues. Perhaps they don't even want to know our opinion." Many others felt the same way. Some pointed out that the *avagani* has become more distant than expected. Before amalgamation, some *avagani* members would share community concerns with the mayor and provide feedback, but this stopped after proportional representation was introduced.

Even though civic engagement is a challenge, some participants expressed satisfaction with formal accountability arrangements. This may be because Article 11 of the law "On Local Self-Government" requires each municipality to have a website with detailed reports on municipal activities, bylaws or strategies adopted by the *avagani*, municipal budgets and budget reports, and information about consultative bodies advising the mayor, among other things. Focus group members who are active in their communities knew that in places with more than 20,000 residents, *avagani* hearings are broadcast so people can follow important discussions. Still, all participants admitted they rarely, if ever, watched these hearings or visited the municipal website. Social media is now the primary channel for municipalities and residents to communicate, and most see it as a better way to share information and interact. However, several participants said municipal staff often lack the skills to manage social media effectively, leading to delays or mistakes in sharing important information and a greater focus on less important topics.

Center-periphery relations and digital governance: Amalgamation combined settlements with unequal fiscal resources, political visibility, and administrative capacity. Accounts from previously larger centers describe increased workloads and redistribution of resources, while some smaller settlements report new investment and access to services. These experiences should not be treated as a universal center-versus-periphery divide: benefits and costs vary by local context. MMIS and citizen service offices may reduce the burden of distance by standardizing transactions and extending access, but their benefits depend on internet connectivity, digital literacy, staff assistance, and physical accessibility. The available qualitative material supports identifying these mechanisms as possibilities; it does not establish a measured digital divide or the net effect of digital tools.

Discussion

Interpretation must distinguish the 2015–2019 survey contrast from changes caused by municipal amalgamation. The 2018 political transition, evolving electoral arrangements, other public investments, and changes in the surveyed municipal population all constitute plausible alternative explanations. A single pre-reform survey wave cannot demonstrate parallel pre-trends. Accordingly, the analysis assesses observed patterns and plausible mechanisms rather than attributing a quantified causal effect to territorial reform.

Citizen Satisfaction with Service Delivery

The survey means do not support a claim that satisfaction declined overall in amalgamated municipalities. They show a smaller descriptive increase than in the non-amalgamated comparison category, but the difference between changes is not statistically distinguishable from zero in the exploratory community-clustered specification (p = .518). H_1 is therefore directionally consistent with the observed means but is not statistically corroborated. These patterns cannot establish an effect attributable to amalgamation.

Local Democracy

The qualitative evidence indicates divergent experiences of participation, representation, and accountability, which are analytically distinct dimensions of local democracy. Some respondents report more administrative resources and service improvements, while others describe reduced proximity to decision-makers, limited consultation, or weakened identification with the new municipality. This offers qualified, context-dependent support for H_2 rather than a uniform democratic deterioration. Changes in the electoral system require separate analysis: Article 3(2) of the European Charter of Local Self-Government allows councils elected by direct suffrage to have executive organs responsible to them and does not itself mandate direct mayoral elections.

Conclusions

The study identifies heterogeneous experiences accompanying Armenia's municipal amalgamation program. Between 2015 and 2019, descriptive mean satisfaction increased in both the amalgamated and non-amalgamated categories, with a smaller increase in the former. Qualitative accounts reveal differences in administrative access, territorial resource distribution, and perceived opportunities for democratic engagement. These observations do not establish that amalgamation caused the differences. The broader reform environment, including Armenia's 2018 political transition, must be considered in interpreting them.

The article contributes to comparative debates by showing why municipality size alone is an insufficient account of reform outcomes: settlement centrality, inherited administrative practices, representation, and uneven capacity may mediate how reform is experienced. Policy implications include transparent allocation of resources across constituent settlements, accessible local consultation, support for in-person and digital services, and monitoring of satisfaction by settlement type. Limitations include independent cross-sectional surveys,

uncertain harmonization and survey design, potentially changing municipal coverage, the absence of a validated counterfactual, purposive qualitative sampling, and retrospective accounts. Future work should use documented sampling weights and primary sampling units, verified municipality-level reform timing, harmonized geographic identifiers, and repeated pre-reform observations where available.

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