Master Thesis

# Local referendums and organizational challenges of municipalities in Germany

by

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## Abstract

Referendums have become an essential tool of citizen participation and direct democracy at the local level in recent years. While many citizens support and enjoy this participatory tool, the local administrations often do not share their enthusiasm. Although the administrations see benefits in referendums and citizen participation in general, they tend to find these processes demanding. But the research focus so far has not been on administrations´ experience. That is why this paper analyzes what explains differences in the amount and nature of challenges in organizing referendums between municipalities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 officials of eight municipalities to identify the explanatory factors. The gathered data was analyzed, and the results show that local administrations face several administrative, regulatory, communication, and other challenges when organizing referendums. Moreover, the size of the municipality, its experience with referendums, its contact with and support from external parties like neighboring municipalities or experts, as well as the organization of the referendum election are determined as explanatory factors. It was concluded that these factors explain the differences in the amount and nature of the challenges the municipalities face to some extent. This research, therefore, adds insights into the administrations´ referendum experience and shows the importance of local administrations as actors in the referendum process.

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## 1. Introduction

When citizens want to become involved or be the veto players in representative democracies, they can do this through referendums[1] (Knill & Tosun, 2012). This democratic tool can be used to initiate policies and give or refuse consent to policy proposals (Hug & Tsebelis, 2002) - making citizens powerful actors in the public policy process. Examples of when citizens use this power are questions about independence (i.e., Scottish referendum, Brexit referendum), EU matters like further integration or an EU constitution (i.e., Denmark, Ireland, France, the Netherlands), climate issues (i.e., a planned referendum on climate protection in France, Swiss referendum on climate measures) and other topics (Bürgerrat, 2021; Foulkes, 2021; Hobolt, 2005; Kersting, 2021; Qvortrup, 2014, 2016). Especially in Switzerland, but also in other European, South and North American, and East Asian countries (Schiller, 2011a, 2017), citizens often use this tool.

Referendums have also become popular in Germany. In 2014, more than two-thirds of German citizens believed they should be able to directly decide important political questions (Bertelsmann Stiftung & Staatsministerium Baden-Württemberg, 2014; Vetter & Hoyer, 2016). In subsequent years, this number has increased when considering the steady growth of referendums - also influenced by different crises like the climate crisis (Rehmet, Wunder, Mittendorf, Zeybek, & Müller, 2020). Thus, direct democracy has become an important and influential tool for citizens. It is essential for them to have a say in areas such as economic projects, transport projects, and public educational and social institutions (Heyne, 2017). While the organization of nationwide citizen referendums in Germany is legally and theoretically possible, they are only mandatory according to the German Basic Law when the state´s boundaries are changed. As there has never been a nationwide referendum about changing the state´s boundaries, the Federal Republic of Germany has no experience with referendums at the national level (Geissel, 2017; Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag, 2017). So, it follows that referendums at the state and local levels are the mechanism of direct democracy in Germany and the tools of nearly all citizens since the 1990s. Baden-Wuerttemberg was the pioneer state and introduced direct democracy at the local level already in 1956, whereas the state Berlin only introduced this in 2005. Since then, direct democracy at the state and local governance level has been possible in all German states (Haußmann, 2012; Heyne, 2017).

The cause for the reform of the state and local direct democracy laws was the constitutional change of all German states during the 1990s. Although there was no pressure

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[1] Two plurals of the word referendum are common: referendums and referenda. Throughout this paper, the plural referendums will be used based on the consistent use of that plural in the academic literature.

for reforms from the national government, the institutional reform wave spread through all German states. There were many reasons for the institutional change across the states[2], which is why these changes were implemented at different points in time and to different degrees. However, important is that besides the top-down promotion of direct democracy, there was also a bottom-up push for more involvement and direct democracy from the citizens (Hendriks & Tops, 1999; Schiller, 2011b; Vetter, 2009). Citizens were fed up with how local politics worked, resulting in `*Politikverdrossenheit*´ (political dissatisfaction) becoming the word of the year in 1992. Ultimately, the pressure from the political top and the citizens, so a combination of these several individual reasons in the pioneer states, lead to the nationwide reforms. Besides adding laws about referendums as a direct democracy tool, further reform changes included the direct election of mayors. Subsequently, the local governments changed from a local party democracy to a local citizen democracy (Vetter, 2009).

Not only in the 1990s German citizens believed that more citizen involvement, for example, through direct democracy in the form of referendums, would be a good method to hold local politics accountable and ensure that citizens supported important political decisions. In 2014, 80% of the participants of a study by Bertelsmann Stiftung (2014) believed that local referendums are a good tool for citizen participation. This view is supported by Hedrick and Gherghina (2021), who find that in Germany engagement in community life mainly motivates people to participate in referendums while political interests have a low driving force for participation. Hence, the citizens view a local referendum as a decision-making process for solving the communities´ problems rather than a political show-off. This notion of the German citizens differs from US citizens and shows that they are genuinely interested in active participation in local governance (Hedrick & Gherghina, 2021).

In contrast to the citizens´ wishes and demands are the local and state administrations responsible for executing the referendums. Although referendums at both governmental levels are possible, in reality, referendums often happen at the local level[3]. The reasons for that are twofold. On the one hand, people feel like they can change things through direct democracy the easiest and most effective at the local level of governance (de Vries, 2016; Heyne, 2017; Klages & Vetter, 2013). On the other hand, restrictions on the potential topics of referendums[4] as well

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[2] The reasons include a political scandal in Schleswig-Holstein (Barschel affair), the first `free´ elections in the states of the GDR, and direct democracy as campaign advertising in Hesse (Schiller, 2011b; Vetter, 2009).

[3] In Germany there have been 25 referendums at the state level between 1968 and 2021 (Rehmet, 2021) whereas there have been 4.107 referendums at the local level between 1956 and 2019 (Rehmet et al., 2020).

[4] These restrictions depend on the federal states. Some have more thematic restrictions than others. Bavaria, Hesse, and Saxony for example allow referendums concerning municipal taxes, or waste law, immission control law and water law approval procedures while other states like NRW do not allow this (Kost, 2010).

as the fact that the topics of concern for people are located at the lower level of governance lead to referendums at the local level (Ladner & Bühlmann, 2007). Although especially in the last two decades the frequency of citizens´ referendums has increased, mainly as a result of institutional reforms, in many municipalities in Germany there has never been a referendum, and neither the administration nor the citizens have gained practical experience. While on average there have been around 300 referendums initiated per year between 2015 and 2019 and there have been a total of 8.099 referendums since 1956, there are a total of over 11.000 municipalities in Germany (Rehmet et al., 2020; Schiller, 2011b; Vetter & Hoyer, 2016). So, there is an imbalance in the municipalities' experience with referendums. This also means that on the one hand there is this considerable citizen interest in referendums as a democratic tool; on the other are the municipalities that do not have (a lot of) experience with this tool.

Scholars and experts of citizen participation believe that these "newly" introduced tools of referendums can only succeed if the process is supported not only by the citizens but also by the local administration and - at least more or less - by a majority of the members of the council. The three units are equally important for the successful process of the referendum (Klages & Vetter, 2013). But the local administrations are often not as enthusiastic about referendums as the citizens. One reason for that is the lack of experience with referendums for some municipalities because differences in the experience with referendums exist between the municipalities. But more important is that referendums are associated with a high level of effort from the administrative side because of the complexity of the participation process. Furthermore, these processes result in additional costs for the administrations. There are personnel costs within the administration, but there are also possible costs for external moderation, process support, and evaluation. Consequently, it is important for the administrations that the administrative effort is reasonably proportional to the project volume and the expected benefit of the referendum. The effort is often assessed as high because it is perceived as an additional process that arises and adds to a process that was intended without the (complex) involvement of citizens (Rehmet, Weber, & Pavlovic, 1999; Vetter, Klages, & Ulmer, 2013). Additional on the one hand, because more events and communication have to occur as compared to planning and decision-making preparations without citizen participation. Additional on the other hand, because in many cases a referendum is a process that goes beyond the standard processes that have been practiced in the administration and thus does not support routine processes (Wiegandt & Lobeck, 2020).

So, when administrations have to deal with a referendum, they are confronted with a process they might have little or no experience with, which corresponds with more costs and

higher efforts and workloads for the administration, making it challenging. The process is not a standard procedure and combined with the fact that administrative action is often no longer trusted by citizens and fear is widespread that the participation process will not be carried out open to all results (Vetter et al., 2013; Wiegandt & Lobeck, 2020), administrations are under pressure to perform well. However, the municipalities are not all on equal footing concerning the organization of referendums because their administrations´ size and their experiences with referendums differ. Therefore, the research question remains *what explains differences in the amount and nature of challenges in organizing referendums between municipalities?* This research aims to identify the challenges for the municipalities and which factors can explain the differences between the municipalities. The starting point are the efforts of the administrations as identified in evaluations of referendums mentioned above, but further challenges will likely be recognized in the course of the research.

*The scientific and social relevance*

The answer to the formulated research question adds multiple insights to previous research. While referendums, especially at the local level, have become important in the research of direct democracy and citizen participation in recent years, the focus has been on the citizens, their perception of processes like these, and how inclusive referendums are (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung & Staatsministerium Baden-Württemberg, 2014; Vetter & Hoyer, 2016). The administrative processes and challenges have only been analyzed in the evaluation reports of specific referendums. Even if sometimes a comparison with other cities and their administrative experiences is drawn, this is more of an exception (cf. Wiegandt & Lobeck, 2020). But as the local administrative staff has stated that referendums strongly and positively influenced their own longer-term actions and those of the policymakers (Vetter & Hoyer, 2016), the analysis of administrations and their experiences with referendums can generate important insights for scholars and administrations alike. This research will recognize the importance of the local administrations in the processes of referendums while analyzing whether the administrations face challenges in this process and, if so, whether these challenges are widespread among municipalities or singular and which factors influence these challenges. Through this, essential knowledge will be gathered not only for the administrative staff and scholars but also for citizens involved in referendums. The possible identification of challenges, also in relation to municipal features, may help administrations in improving their processes, but it can also help citizens understand the administration´s view of referendums and especially why administrations are sometimes reluctant to engage in the process of referendums. In short, this

research will fill the scientific research gap about the challenges of German local administrations during referendums while also adding to the citizens´ understanding of the administrative side of the process.

## 2. Theory

This section serves as the theoretical foundation for this research, which analyzes the challenges municipalities experience in the organization of referendums and which factors influence the amount and nature of the challenges. In this section, referendums as a democratic tool and the accompanying governance processes are introduced. Further, the current literature is discussed and expectations for the research are formulated in the second part of the section.

### 2.1 Referendums as a democratic tool

There are many theories and models of governance describing the relationship between the governmental institutions and the citizens – ranging from functionalist, postfunctionalist, and institutionalist to the neoliberal narrative and the rational choice (Bevir & Rhodes, 2001; Peters & Pierre, 2016) – but they all share the same basic framework. Governance is the process of governing citizens and therefore describes the decision-making and implementation of policies as well as the oversight of governmental institutions and organizations (Bevir, 2012). In recent years, governance has become prominent in academic discussions. Problems like "wicked problems" and notions like "good governance" arose in order to describe the challenges and chances governance actors of the public sector encounter in the 21$^{st}$ century (Bevir, 2012). However, generally, governance can improve the service provision of the public sector. The best practice approach of good governance and the blended governing styles of the public and private sectors increase the efficiency and effectiveness of governance measures (Stoker, 1998). As explained, these are the shared denominators of different theories of governance, but each theory diverges in the details. Peters and Pierre (2016) assume in their model of governance "high levels of interaction between state and society […] as a central component of the governance process" (Peters & Pierre, 2016, p. 27). This means that citizens are expected to be actively engaged in the decision-making and implementation process of policies. Referendums are hence one option for societal actors to become engaged in governance.

Referendums are not only a means for citizens to initiate the policy making process, but they are also a means for them to react to the performance of the public sector and to correct governance failures (Bellamy, 2018; Cheneval & el-Wakil, 2018). Governance failures in this context can either relate to already implemented decisions or to planned policies in order to prevent the failure from happening. In this, governance failures that result in referendums deviate from typical failures because they are determined based on the subjective view of (a group of) citizens and commonly do not concern internal administrative failures. Instead, they aim to reverse decisions taken in policy areas like the closure of schools or initiate policies in areas where the governments failed to establish policies like climate policies. Examples for this are so called "Klimaentscheide" initiated in cities like Munich (Effern, 2017), Freiburg (Irmisch, Haupt, Eckersley, Kern, & Müller, 2022), or Berlin (Berliner Zeitung, 2021); also furthered by initiatives which support citizens in the organization of these climate referendums (BürgerBegehren Klimaschutz, 2022; GermanZero, 2022).

In that sense, referendums can also be a chance not only for citizens but for the governments and administrations as well. They offer political gains because they can tackle the shortcomings of the representative system and can legitimize political decisions. This is especially the case in Germany where the council can decide to have a referendum imitated by a council decision (cf. Figure 1). Other European countries like France, Austria, and to certain extents Finland, Norway, Sweden, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (Schiller, 2011a, 2017) share this possibility but many countries around the world do not offer this option. These shared political gains reflect the changed political reality (Peters & Pierre, 2016). Politicians and administrations cannot simply govern people; instead, they are directly influenced by societal interests through established governance networks. But in turn, the citizen involvement makes the decision more legitimate. The entire process of a referendum, closely monitored and examined by the administrations, ensures that the government and administration at any governmental level will have to deal with the topic and outcome of the referendum (Vetter et al., 2013). Hence, the referendum process does not end with the referendum, as visible in Figure 1. As the administrations closely monitor the entire referendum process, they can encounter challenges in every phase of the referendum. But they are not as involved in the preparation stages of the referendum, and therefore, the main challenges of the administrations occur after the permission for a citizen petition has been received, in the stages of informing the citizens and the actual referendum (see Figure 1). These main challenges are analyzed in this thesis.

*Figure 1: The process of a referendum in Germany, adapted after Rehmet et al. (Rehmet et al., 2020)*

| |
|---|
| Preparation |
| Public display of the citizen petition |
| Signature collection |
| Examination by administration |
| Permission |
| Citizen petition **OR** Council decision |
| Informing the population |
| Referendum |
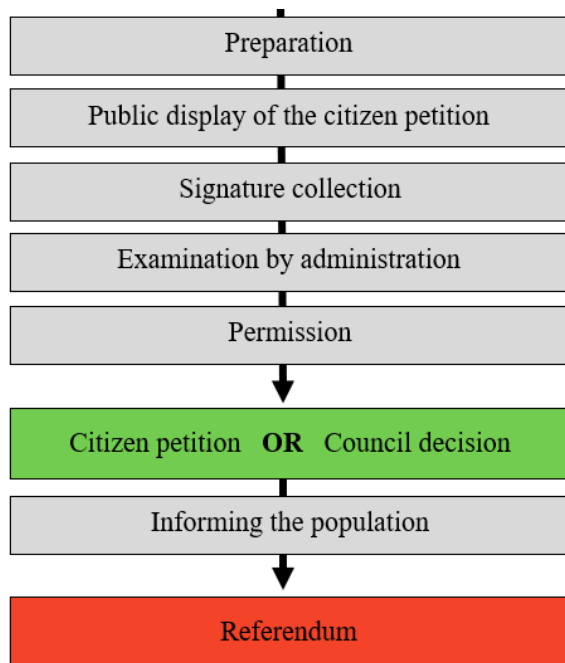
Conversely, a referendum has the effect of a council decision, i.e., the administration has to implement it the same way as a municipal council decision. A complaint can be filed with the municipal supervisory authority if this does not happen. Furthermore, a successful referendum triggers a "block on amendments"[5], i.e., it can only be changed or canceled by a new referendum on the council's initiative before two years have elapsed. In addition, a referendum can only deal with matters that have not already been the subject of a referendum within the last two years. Only after two years, after the expiration of the blocking period, can the municipal council revoke the referendum through a simple council decision. A successful referendum thus has a higher level of protection than a council decision, which the council can change at any time (GO NRW, 1994; Paust, 2005; Unger, 2014; Wegweiser Bürgergesellschaft, 2022). In the case that the outcome of the referendum is not implemented correctly, the administration can encounter more challenges, especially when there are many different interests promoted and protected by the actors even after the referendum outcome. However, this research only focuses on the challenges that occur until the referendum election day because it concentrates on the referendum process and not the implementation process. So, although all referendum changes can be challenging for the administrations for various reasons, the majority of challenges occur in the preparation and carrying out of the referendum election. While the

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[5] These legal obligations and hindrances concern the case of North Rhine-Westphalia. In other German states exceptions exist (Paust, 2005).

other actors are campaigning for their positions, the administrations have to prepare everything and, at the same time, inform the citizens, which can be challenging.

Therefore, the stakes for all actors involved in the referendum are high, and this further shows the power of the citizens in the referendum as a governance process. Following Peters and Pierre´s (2016) definition, the citizens "do not simply express their demands and then go away" (Peters & Pierre, 2016, p. 27), but they stay involved throughout the entire process and even become a control authority after the voting day of the referendum (Vetter et al., 2013). Thus, referendums are a prime example of modern governance, including all chances and possible failures of governance, especially relating to citizen interaction (Schiller, 2011b). This also includes the prospect that citizens decide on an outcome in the referendum unfavored by the political majority or the administration. These two actors, of course, also have significant interests in the outcome and are closely involved in the process. Particularly the administration is actively involved in every step of the process and takes on a double role throughout it. On the one hand, it fulfills its job of being the public service provider, but on the other hand, the administration has its own interests and hence becomes the third political actor of the referendum, next to the government and the citizens. The burdens and challenges stemming from this double role will be, among other challenges, investigated in the following part.

2.2 Conceptualizing referendum-related challenges for local administrations

While the referendums certainly give power to the citizens and local political actors, the local administrations are the main actors in organizing and executing local referendums. However, the administrative actors have not been studied much, and they often were not supportive of the democratic tool and its process in these studies. Vetter and Hoyer (2016), who analyze how citizens, politics, and administration differ in their assessment of the effects of referendums, find that the majority of politicians and administrators do not view the procedures of referendums and their effects negatively, as has been stated in other studies (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung & Staatsministerium Baden-Württemberg, 2014). Nevertheless, they have to learn to accept this "control function" of the citizens, especially if the referendum result is not in their interest. However, the scholars also find that when the citizens´ referendums are "professionally" framed through the early elaboration and discussion of alternatives with various actors (e.g., informal citizen participation), if the voting date is deliberately combined with other elections if necessary in order to mobilize citizens, and if an unambiguous result is achieved in this way, then citizens' referendums can even be a design tool for politics and

administration to solve critical issues of local politics together with the population on a case-by-case basis without diminishing the recognition and performance of representative democratic decisions. Hence, Vetter and Hoyer (2016) have identified communication with citizens as a potential challenge.

Gabriel and Quast (2007) also see communication as a challenge for the municipalities and mainly focus on one aspect. Before and during the referendum process, administrations might have a double role which could complicate the administrative work further. The administrations may develop a project or concept, which becomes a referendum's focus. Although the administration is allowed to have an opinion about the preferable outcome of the referendum (cf. GO NRW, 1994), during the handling and organization of the referendum, the administration has to present itself as neutral. Throughout this phase, the administration has to communicate in an objective, factual style with the citizens and the involved actors of the referendum. This can be difficult when the administration has a clear position on the referendum´s subject. Another challenge related to the administration´s communication with the citizens is that the citizen´s level of knowledge about citizen participation, for example referendums, is expandable, as Perry and Hackenbroch (2017) find. "Information and communication play an important role not only to improve representativeness but also to improve expectation management and promote political trust [of the citizens]" (Perry & Hackenbroch, 2017, p. 37, translated by the author). It is the administration´s task to communicate in an understandable way how the process of the referendum works. Depending on the prior knowledge of the citizens, this can prove to be difficult, mainly because the administration itself is not always familiar with how these processes like referendums work. For that reason, Wiegandt and Lobeck (2020) recommend the usage of citizen-friendly, easy language in the administration´s communication and the combination of information events with city festivals or other events in order to attract and inform a diverse crowd of citizens, also to ensure representative results of the referendum (cf. Vetter et al., 2013). This clearly shows that communicating with and educating citizens concerning referendums is recognized as a municipal challenge in the referendum process.

Kersting and Schneider (2016) stress in their elaboration of the attitudes of municipal council members towards citizen participation the power municipal council members have, but also the power of the administrations during the processes of citizen participation. The authors state that the attitudes of the administrative and political elites are important because implementing the citizen participation procedures is the responsibility of these local political

elites. Consequently, they decide on the implementation of the process and influence its practical execution, for example, its design, the mobilization of and communication with the population, and especially the handling of the participation results. This makes them powerful actors because although some procedures of direct democracy at the local level are clearly regulated by municipal regulations like citizens´ petitions and referendums[6] or council referendums, there are opportunities for the political and administrative elites to exert influence. Wiegandt and Lobeck (2020) also find that three actors, politics, administration, and citizens, all have different, frequently conflicting positions towards citizen participation processes. They identify the central conflict as the discrepancy between the wish for good and sufficiently fast as well as reliable decisions concerning urban development on the one hand and the desire for comprehensive participation, which includes the collection of all available information and weighting of the different interests, on the other hand (cf. Vetter et al., 2013).

Moreover, Kersting and Schneider confirm Vetter and Hoyer´s (2016) findings that administrative and political decision-makers generally view citizen participation as positive. Further positive factors are citizens´ higher acceptance of local political and administrative decisions, a higher quality of these decisions because of the availability of more information, and less "Politikverdrossenheit". Angelika Vetter and the citizen participation working group in Heidelberg (2018) also find that overall the administrative staff views participation processes as a chance to improve their own work. Positive points of citizen participation for the administrative workers are: the information gain, the tendency of citizens to be more satisfied with the results of the policy decision or planning as well as sometimes a higher appreciation for the administration's work in the process, the easier implementation because of the participation, the quicker response in the municipal council. On the whole, the satisfaction with implementing the participation processes in the administrative worker´s office is also relatively positive.

However, negative aspects or challenges are the delays in the decision-making due to the involvement of the citizens and that the participation process may be only used as a "show event" (Kersting & Schneider, 2016, p. 316). The aspect of the delay of the decision-making process acknowledges the internal challenges the administrations can face throughout a referendum, like the lack of (knowledgeable) personnel to deal with the organization of such a

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[6] Although the citizen petitions and referendums are initiated by citizens, the local administration and politics have substantial power in the process because they decide whether the referendum is carried out and if so, what the results are and what future effect this has (Holtkamp und Brockmann, 2016, in Kersting & Schneider, 2016, p. 316).

participation process as well as the necessary structure for it or the lack of financial resources to organize the referendum and the communication essential for it (cf.Bogumil & Jann, 2009; Fuhrmann & Brunn, 2016). Vetter and the citizen participation working group  (2018) also show that the negative point for administrations about citizen participation is the additional time that has to be invested into the process that would have otherwise not been necessary. In addition, the participation processes tend to make the administration's planning more complicated. This directly applies to referendums too. The challenge of the increased workload is related to the challenge of funneling the necessary resources to implement the participation processes as identified by Nelle and Ertelt (2019), and these challenges are all combined in the category of administrative challenges in this research.

One more challenge for the administrations during referendums is the regulatory structure, as Andreas Kost (2010) found. In North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) specifically, the regulatory structures lacked binding regulations concerning, for example, the voting notification of the referendum and postal voting until 2004. Before then, the cities and municipalities had sovereignty in this regard and could decide whether they would send voting notifications or allow postal votes (Kösters, 2005). This resulted in diverse practices across the municipalities, and some municipalities acted more citizen-friendly than others. However, according to Kost (2010), not even half of the municipalities in North Rhine-Westphalia had a statute for referendums at this point. This led to challenges for the affected administrations and inequalities between the different cities and municipalities and further influenced the voter turnout. As the voter turnout for a referendum needs to be at least 20% of the electorate[7] to be valid, this was a serious concern. Hence, in 2004 the North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry of the Interior issued an ordinance on the standards of local referendums in cities and municipalities. Since then all municipalities need to adopt a statute for referendums (*Verordnung über die Durchführung von Bürgerbegehren und Bürgerentscheiden (BürgerentscheidDVO, 2004)* and the sending of voting notifications and the option of postal voting are mandatory (Kost, 2010). Still, the ordinance on the standards of local referendums is very general and has not been updated substantially since 2004. This leaves the local administrations with the challenge of filling the gaps they find in the ordinance, like decisions concerning voting booklets. Combined with the inexperience and lack of expertise among the personnel some administrations have

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[7] It is important to notice that the electorate for a referendum differs from the electorate for federal, state, and EU elections. Whilst in federal and state elections only German nationals older than 18 and in EU elections EU nationals older than 18 can participate, EU nationals older than 16 can vote in referendums and municipal elections in North Rhine-Westphalia (BWG, 1993; EuWG, 1994; Kommunalwahlgesetz, 1998; Landeswahlgesetz, 1993). Therefore, the electorate for referendums is much larger than in other elections.

with referendums, this situation creates serious regulatory challenges for most if not all administrations confronted with a referendum which is why the administrations of smaller municipalities tend to copy the referendum regulations and processes of bigger municipalities and cities or the Association of Towns and Municipalities NRW.

As can be seen, both the academic literature and the evaluation studies determine the challenges the administrations have in citizen participation processes. Whilst most of the literature and documents do not focus exclusively on referendums, the findings can be applied to referendums. Generally, administrations seem to view citizen participation as positive and a chance. However, they have also experienced challenges and negative aspects. These can be summarized as follows: regulatory challenges like the very general regulation on referendums in North Rhine-Westphalia (Kost, 2010; Kösters, 2005), administrative challenges like the lack of financial or (knowledgeable) personnel resources (Kersting & Schneider, 2016; Nelle & Ertelt, 2019; Vetter, 2018), and communication challenges like the necessity to stay neutral throughout the process and the need to explain the process understandably for the citizens (Gabriel & Quast, 2007; Perry & Hackenbroch, 2017; Wiegandt & Lobeck, 2020). Further challenges have not been determined in the academic literature and the evaluation reports, but more challenges may be identified throughout the research. The challenges are summarized in Figure 2 below.

*Figure 2: Overview of the challenges*
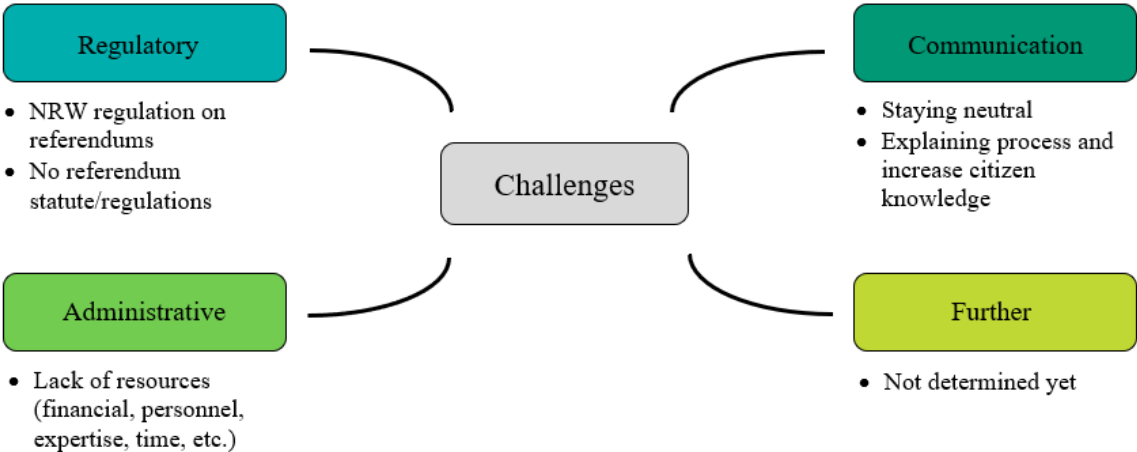
2.3 The expectations

The challenges the municipalities experience in the organization of referendums can also differ between municipalities as certain features of the municipalities influence them. This part focuses on the features that can potentially explain the differences in the amount and nature of the challenges in organizing referendums between municipalities and how these features are expected to influence the municipal challenges.

*2.3.1 Municipal size*

One of the features determined to be an essential factor regarding the challenges related to the organization of referendums is the size of the local administration. The discussion about the ideal size of municipalities regarding the effectiveness of governance dates back to Aristotle (Denters, Goldsmith, Ladner, Mouritzen, & Rose, 2014; Ladner & Bühlmann, 2007), and since then, the arguments have not changed. On the one hand, there is the view that a municipality must be bigger to be efficient and autonomous enough to provide the citizens with the goods and services they need and request. The reason for that is that the economies of scale make the provision of public services more efficient in larger municipalities (Ladner & Bühlmann, 2007; Reingewertz & Serritzlew, 2019). On the other hand, it is argued that municipal administrations should be smaller to fit the local demand and enable accountable citizenship because the relationship between politicians, citizens, and the administration is much closer in smaller municipalities (Denters et al., 2014; Ladner & Bühlmann, 2007). Therefore, a trade-off between efficiency and democracy is created (Reingewertz & Serritzlew, 2019).

In the 1970s, a wave of amalgamation reforms spread throughout Europe and other Western states based on the argument that bigger administrations are more efficient and capable while reducing costs (Ladner, 2002; Tavares, 2018). Examples of countries where these reforms occurred are Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Finland, the United Kingdom, and the Federal Republic of Germany (Loughlin, Hendriks, & Lidström, 2011; Swianiewicz, Gendźwiłł, & Zardi, 2017). In Germany, these reforms happened at two points in time. In the Western Länder, they occurred in the 1970s, and since then, municipal territorial reforms have been rare and mostly voluntary. In the Eastern Länder, the territorial reforms only happened after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification in the early 1990s (Ebinger, Kuhlmann, & Bogumil, 2019; Wollmann, 2010). So, the "old" and the "new" German states have experienced amalgamation reforms. When discussing the effects of territorial reforms on administrative efficiency and democratic effects, the literature is divided. As the interest of this

research is municipal experience with referendums, the democratic effects will be disregarded at this point because they concern the citizens more than the administrations but still, it is noteworthy that this debate is even more belligerent than the one about cost efficiency (Reingewertz & Serritzlew, 2019). Concerning the (cost) efficiency, the scholarly debate is continuously ongoing and argumentative. The core of the debate is whether the economies of scale exist because there is a tentative agreement that if such economies of scale exist, then the provision of local public services is costlier for smaller municipalities (Reingewertz & Serritzlew, 2019). Further, while some scholars find that municipal amalgamations led to cost reductions (Blesse & Baskaran, 2016; Reingewertz, 2012), other scholars refute these findings (Allers & Geertsema, 2016; Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, Serritzlew, & Treisman, 2016). This shows that although the debate about cost efficiency is still ongoing, there are indications that bigger municipalities have advantages over smaller ones in this regard.

Furthermore, efficiency relates not only to costs but also to time and other resources like personnel, organizational capabilities, expertise, and networks (Manzoor, 2014; Peters & Pierre, 2016). These efficiency measures are, of course, related to costs, and as Parr (2002) finds, there are advantages beyond the economies of scale in amalgamations. The economies of scope and complexity are related to the economies of scale. Economies of scope describe the additionally gained capacity from sharing economic objectives and interests in one place and this is also applicable to resources like time or personnel. Similarly, economies of complexity reflect the organizational arrangements, which can also be applied to other costs beyond monetary costs (Herrschel, 2014; Parr, 2002). As bigger municipalities also have bigger administrations, the employees there are more specialized and thus might need less time and encounter fewer challenges in organizing referendums. While smaller municipalities can be more efficient in specialized areas (Holzer et al., 2009), this does not apply to referendums because these are not part of the daily business. Because the size of the local administrations depends on and reflects the population size of the municipalities (Fliedner, 2017), the municipal size is considered to be an important feature for the analysis of the differences between the municipalities. This results in the first research hypothesis:

*H1: The bigger the municipalities are, the fewer challenges they face in the organization of referendums.*

## 2.3.2. Referendum experience

Another feature that is believed to influence the differences in the amount and nature of the challenges in organizing referendums between municipalities is the experience they have with referendums. The arguments here are also general ones in the context of public administration and governance: feedback and learning. Since the 1970s and 1980s, the focus has not only been on implementation as the key governance function of public administration, but feedback and learning have also become central to good governing. Learning is now an active part of administrations and "the bureaucracy should be seen as the major source of memory in the public sector" (Peters & Pierre, 2016, p. 151). Through the evaluation and utilization of the administration´s performance in policy areas and other regards, the municipal practices are increased and challenges decreased. In addition, repeated experience with occasions like referendums will increase the municipal performance and the employees´ knowledge about internal and external processes and problems (Bogumil & Jann, 2009; Vetter et al., 2013). There are different types of bureaucrats working in the public sector and while some officials like the Statesmen have more altruistic motives in serving the public than others, they ultimately all profit from the evaluation of past processes as it makes their job in the future easier (de Vries, 2016).

The evaluation of the referendum organization should look similar to the evaluation of public policies. The previously mentioned evaluation reports show that participation processes are often evaluated internally and shared with the public. However, the analysis of the evaluation reports has shown that they usually focus more on the analysis of the beginning of the citizen participation and the timeframe as well as on all stakeholders involved in the process, which means there are shortcomings regarding in-depth analyses of the local administrations as actors (cf. Gabriel & Quast, 2007; Nelle & Ertelt, 2019; Perry & Hackenbroch, 2017; Vetter, 2018; Wiegandt & Lobeck, 2020). This demonstrates the research gap once more and shows the importance of administrative evaluations. These evaluations generally focus on the effectiveness, the efficiency, and the involved stakeholders, leading to valuable insights for the municipality on achieving the best potential effect at the lowest possible cost of resources (de Vries, 2016; Vetter et al., 2013). Administrative evaluations are often conducted in policy areas like environmental protection, urban growth management, and open space protection (Bengston, Fletcher, & Nelson, 2004; Liu, de Jong, & Huang, 2016). Yet, these evaluations do not necessarily lead to better policy outcomes or improvements in the administrations' efforts, as Kuhlmann, Bogumil, and Grohs (2008) find in their evaluation of the administrative modernization of German local governments.

Still, based on the reviewed literature, the expectation is that the more referendums the municipalities and the officials have had, the more experience they have gained during the processes, and the fewer challenges they face because they will have more knowledge and feedback about the process and the necessary resources for a successful completion. Therefore, the second hypothesis is the following:

*H2: The more experience the municipalities have with the organization of referendums, the fewer challenges they face.*

### 2.3.3 Experience of other municipalities

In like manner are the expectations stated in the third hypothesis. The underlying assumption is that the municipalities are connected and exchange experiences. Especially in the government districts, the municipalities work together in different policy areas and exchange ideas about good practices and problems. However, another source of information and inspiration can also be bigger municipalities. There are formal and informal structures for the municipalities to work together and exchange experiences. The formal structures are the so-called intermunicipal cooperation (IMC), also known as interlocal cooperation. IMCs can be mandated by a higher authority or voluntary because municipalities believe the cooperation's benefits will exceed the costs. The cooperation in specific policy areas is supposed to reduce the transaction costs and increase the local and regional benefits, but it is crucial to notice that the local benefits will only become available through participation, whereas regional benefits also benefit municipalities that do not participate which could create a free-rider problem (Allers & De Greef, 2018; Klok, Boogers, Denters, & Sanders, 2018). Typical policy areas of IMC are urban planning and environment; social policies and care; education, culture, and sports; tourism; transport and infrastructure; and management and administration (Klok, Boogers, et al., 2018, p. 164). Research has further shown that especially smaller municipalities are more convinced of the local benefits of intermunicipal cooperation as reasons for that are the greater importance of collaboration for smaller municipalities and the reduced possibility of the free-rider problem at the local level given (Klok, Denters, Boogers, & Sanders, 2018).

Nonetheless, municipalities can also cooperate informally through the exchange of information and experiences. This becomes particularly important when considering that big municipalities are often role models or sources of information for other municipalities (Cidell, 2015; Lintz, 2016). Interestingly, Bel and Warner (2015) establish that informal cooperation is less common in Europe than in the US. However, the authors also explain that this phenomenon

is studied less in Europe, leading to less empirical evidence. Still, informal collaboration and local networks exist in Europe as well. These collaborations and networks are established through informal contacts like emails and phone calls between the administrative officials of the municipalities in question. These contacts are strengthened by reciprocated actions and based on shared values, beliefs, and experiences (Blair & Janousek, 2013). The problem with informal collaboration is that it is often not documented because it is unofficial and often unwritten, which also explains the lack of empirical data. Blair and Janousek (2013) establish that there are two types of informal mechanisms: mutual aid and common understanding. In mutual aid, the involved municipalities guarantee the provision of resources for a shared goal, and in common understanding, the municipalities exchange specific information or services based on an undefined or implied agreement. Mechanisms that border on formal but are based on informal structures and agreements are association and consortium (Blair & Janousek, 2013). However, all of these mechanisms focus on collaboration in typical local policy areas, not the exchange of experiences about rare events like referendums. Therefore, these mechanisms can only be applied to a certain extent to analyzing municipal collaboration in the organization of referendums. Nevertheless, they offer important insights into informal intermunicipal cooperation and communication.

In the German case, intermunicipal cooperation often occurs in the context of waste management, wastewater management, and the tourism sector, to state a few examples (Bergholz, 2018; Blaeschke & Haug, 2018). These are policy areas where municipalities can evidently profit from cooperation because it results in lower transaction costs, higher local and/or regional benefits, or both. This is reflected in Bergholz's (2018) finding that municipalities are likely to start IMCs when they share preferences in a policy area or when their neighbors have especially strong interests in this area (large municipalities). Although (smaller) municipalities then have the option to free ride, they do not tend to do it and instead start or join IMCs. One reason for that is that smaller municipalities benefit more from the cooperation (Blaeschke & Haug, 2018). Therefore, formal cooperation between municipalities in Germany is important; particularly the smaller municipalities have an interest in it. This could be reflected in the informal cooperation and exchange concerning local referendums too. Bigger municipalities have likely already experienced referendums and have learned from their experiences which can be seen in referendum regulations and processes, which is why smaller municipalities use these experiences to orientate themselves, particularly when they have not yet experienced a referendum  (cf. Wiegandt & Lobeck, 2020). Officials of unexperienced, smaller municipalities might also contact officials from other municipalities of the same size

with questions, but the research gap on informal cooperation between German municipalities does not allow for a conclusive statement on this, especially because elections and referendums are not areas of formal intermunicipal cooperation.

Consequently, based on previous research, the expectation is that municipalities also exchange their knowledge and experiences concerning referendums, mainly through informal mechanisms. So, municipalities confronted with a referendum for the first time could profit from other municipalities´ experiences with referendums and thus encounter fewer challenges in organizing their first referendum. This analysis focuses on the experience of municipalities belonging to the same governing district because these neighboring municipalities are frequently already engaged in IMCs. Hypothesis three a) is stated accordingly:

*H3a: The more experience the neighboring municipalities have with the organization of referendums, the fewer challenges the municipalities face.*

Similarly, municipalities in particular profit from the experience of bigger municipalities because they are more often confronted with the organization of a referendum and they are expected to be well equipped for this organization (cf. hypothesis 1) which hence makes their experiences very valuable for other municipalities, regardless of the size of these municipalities. Therefore, hypothesis three b) is as follows:

*H3b: The more experience big municipalities have with the organization of referendums, the fewer challenges other municipalities face.*

*2.3.4 Election combination*
The last hypothesis focuses less on the municipalities and more on an organizational feature of the referendums, namely the combination of the referendum with a local, state, federal, or European election. The combination does not mean that the referendum and an election are turned into one, but that the referendum and election are scheduled on the same date. The underlying assumption is that combining the referendum with an election decreases the challenges for municipalities. Because although there will still be additional costs and maybe problems, the combined election date reduces the efforts for organizing the polling stations and personnel. It is believed that the parallel processes and the reduced resources necessary will lead to lesser challenges related to the organization of referendums.

Compared to private organizations, public administrations have little influence over their financial resources because they depend on collective revenues like taxes. Therefore,

municipal officials are expected to find creative and innovative solutions for the problem at hand while implementing policies and regulations (de Vries, 2016). As Peters and Pierre say: "Decision-making is action, not debate" (Peters & Pierre, 2016, p. 60). This does not only apply to making the most out of limited funds but also to other resources. Priorities, resources, and challenges must be weighed against each other in all policy areas and across these areas to not exceed the financial and resource budget. The results of the implementation processes consequently depend very much on the skills and experience of the public administrations, making them key actors. One creative solution in the case of referendum organization could be the combination of the referendum with an election because it could decrease the necessary resources and challenges in the key tasks of public administration: goal-selection, resource mobilization (refers here also to the mobilization of citizens), implementation, and feedback, evaluation, and learning (Levi-Faur, 2012; Peters & Pierre, 2016).

If the municipalities fail to find ways to eliminate challenges they encounter in the organization of referendums, a governance failure could occur. This failure might not be the fault of the administration; still, local politics and the citizens will probably blame the administration because, ultimately the municipality has failed to fulfill its job of delivering public services in the sense of organizing a referendum (Peters, 2015; Peters & Pierre, 2016). For example, one challenge for a municipality could be to communicate the entire referendum process so well to the citizens that enough citizens participate in the referendum, making it legitimate. Otherwise, the referendum could potentially fail because of low voter turnout. The combination of the referendum with a regularly scheduled election could, to stay with this example, be the creative solution to overcome this and other challenges. In this case, the municipality would regularly communicate with citizens regarding the election, raise referendum awareness, use established frameworks, and keep the additional costs low. As the timeline of a referendum from the proceeding to the election is relatively short and regular elections are not scheduled often enough in this timeline, municipalities do not always have the chance to combine both. This is, of course, acknowledged in the research. Nonetheless, it is believed that, when possible, the combination of the election date of the referendum with another election would benefit the municipalities. Not only because it could decrease challenges and costs but also because it could increase the democratic legitimacy of the referendum outcome through the possibly higher voter turnout. Following this reasoning, the last research hypothesis is established:

*H4: The combination of the referendum with other elections leads to fewer challenges in the organization of referendums.*

The graphic below, Figure 3, is created based on the five established hypotheses. All variables (municipal size, referendum experience, neighbors experience, big municipalities´ experience, election combination) are expected to decrease the amount and nature of challenges municipalities face in organizing referendums.

*Figure 3: Causal path diagram*
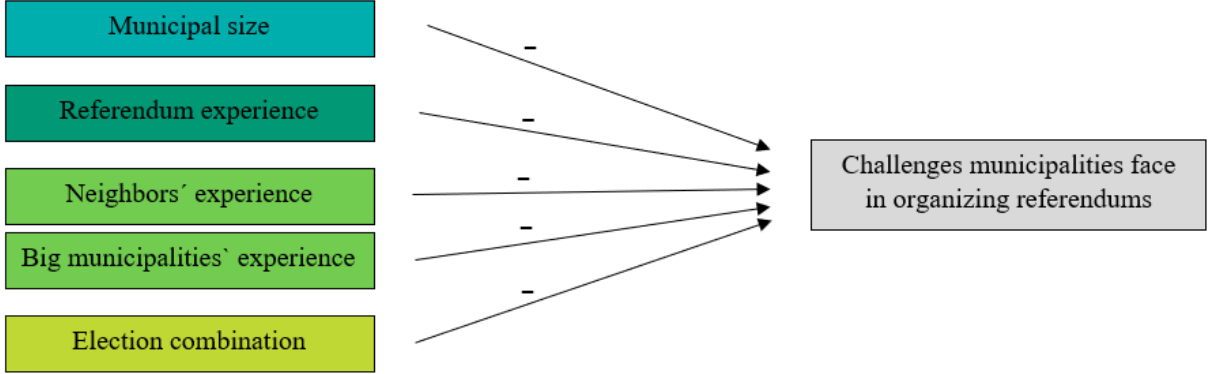


## 3. Methodology

This part describes the methodology of the research. The research design and the case selection are outlined as well as the conceptualization and operationalization of the variables. Moreover, the data collection and analysis are described. Lastly, it is reflected on the validity and reliability of the research.

3.1 Research design and case selection

To answer the explanatory research question, the following research design is applied. The author will use qualitative primary and secondary data as well as interviews with administration officials to identify whether there are challenges for the local administrations and, secondly, recognize what these challenges are. The primary and secondary data will be gathered through desk research and consist of evaluation studies of referendums and other forms of citizen participation at the local level in Germany. The chosen research method combines content analysis and interviews to identify the possible challenges. The use of descriptive qualitative data is suitable because the observations are gathered without the author's intervention and after the referendums occurred. Through this, it will become apparent if this analysis supports the expectations based on the theoretical framework. Thus, this research is pre-structured.

Due to this narrowed scope of the qualitative data and the setting and period of analysis, the research design includes a rather small number of cases. As mentioned previously, the case selection is narrowed down to ten municipalities in North Rhine-Westphalia using non-probability sampling. There are several reasons for only focusing on this state during the analysis. For one, all states in Germany have slightly different rules and regulations concerning referendums, making analyzing across states difficult. Challenges identified in one state might be nonexistent in another state due to differing regulations. North Rhine-Westphalia in particular is a suitable state for the analysis because in comparison to the other states, many referendums have been organized there, but not as many as in Bavaria or Baden-Wuerttemberg[8]. On average, a municipality experiences a proceeding every 13 years (Rehmet et al., 2020). Hence, some but not all municipalities have experienced a referendum, but they have not yet become experts in it. In addition, NRW has an average proportion of inadmissible citizen petitions compared to the other states in Germany (Rehmet et al., 2020). This is substantial because it indicates that there are average regulations (e.g., collection period of signatures, quorum of signatures for petitions, or exclusion of topics) for citizen decisions and referendums in North Rhine-Westphalia as compared to the other states. In Germany, larger cities have an above-average frequency of petitions for citizens and council referendums. Hence, it is important to ensure that cities are included in the research, but at the same time, they should not be overrepresented. NRW offers many municipalities of diverse sizes as potential cases and a good representation of the different sizes is ensured through the self-selection of the researcher. For these reasons, North Rhine-Westphalia is a typical case for this analysis of organizational challenges related to referendums in Germany and it ensures that the analysis results can be generalized for all German states, at least to a certain extent (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

The decision for the non-probability sampling of NRW and the ten municipalities has some advantages and disadvantages. As the representativeness of the results from NRW is promoted by the design of a typical case, this has to be done for the selected municipalities too. Self-selecting the ten municipalities further ensures the representativeness of the results, but it is nevertheless a small N study, which generally influences the generalizability of the research outcomes. However, the advantage of the small number of cases is that it allows for more details

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[8] In North Rhine-Westphalia there were 854 proceedings for citizen petitions and referendums between 1956 and 2019 resulting in 268 referendums. In Bavaria there were 3.157 proceedings and 1.963 referendums, in Baden-Württemberg 992 proceedings and 462 referendums. In the other German states there were between 11 and 516 proceedings and 2 to 293 referendums (Rehmet et al., 2020).

and depth in the research which is the purpose of it. The interview data thus allows for identifying the challenges and comparisons between the municipalities and ultimately detecting the causal mechanisms between the independent and dependent variables. This eliminates the threat of reverse causality (Babbie, 2016; De Vaus, 2001). So, whereas including more municipalities in the research would increase the representativeness and generalizability of the findings, having a small number of cases is appropriate for the intended research and its design because this thesis aims to explore the potential challenges of local administrations and explain them and this research design allows for that.

3.2 Conceptualization and operationalization

In the following, the elements of the research question are defined, conceptualized, and operationalized. The units of analysis in this research are the local administrations of municipalities in Germany. Due to the scope of the research, the units of observation will be narrowed down to selected municipalities in North Rhine-Westphalia. The dependent variable are the challenges the municipalities face in organizing referendums and the measurement level of the variable is categorical because either the local administrations do not encounter any challenges in the organization of referendums or there are challenges in which case these challenges can be grouped into categories like regulatory, administrative, or communication challenges. The independent variables are the municipal size, the referendum experience, the neighbors´ experience, the big municipalities´ experience, and the election combination. The measurement level of the first four variables is categorical while the fifth independent variable is ordinal. The setting of the analysis is North Rhine-Westphalia in 2021/2022. However, the period of the analysis is 2018-2022 to ensure that more municipalities can be analyzed.

The dependent variable "challenges municipalities face in organizing referendums" needs to be conceptualized for this research. In general, challenges describe "the situation of being faced with something that needs great mental or physical effort to be done successfully and therefore tests a person's ability" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021); simply put, challenges make a job difficult. But in this research, challenges are conceptualized as obstacles the local administrations encounter in the process of the organization of the referendums. These challenges can, for example, be related to the regulations of referendums or communication with citizens. Therefore, these challenges can potentially fall in three out of four dimensions de Vries (2016, p. 68) identified for local governments: contextual, structural, and institutional conditions. The contextual conditions are the conditions surrounding the referendum, the

structural conditions are the potential conflicts with higher levels of governance due to the proceedings of the referendum, and the institutional conditions refer to internal challenges of the local administrations. In general, these challenges are related to the two main objectives of the local administration, namely the service delivery and the provision of a forum for citizen input (de Vries, 2016).

Again, the dependent variable – challenges municipalities face in organizing referendums – is conceptualized as obstacles for the local administrations. Based on the preliminary document study, three aspects of the concept have been identified: regulatory, administrative, and communication challenges. However, further aspects will likely be recognized throughout the conduction of the interviews. During the interviews, it will be determined whether the municipalities experience any challenges and, if so, how the different challenges can be categorized. Thus, the variable is categorical. For the further course of the analysis, it will be identified which aspects of the different challenge categories are stated in the interviews, and these aspects are then analyzed. Furthermore, it will be analyzed how the different factors represented through the independent variables influence the appearance of challenges in the organization of referendums.

The first independent variable, "municipal size", is conceptualized based on one aspect, the municipality's population size, and categorized into three categories: small town (population below 20.000), middle town (population between 20.000 and 100.000), and city (population over 100.000)[9]. Other aspects which can be used to describe the municipal size, like the area or budget size of the municipalities, are not relevant in this research because the size of the local administrations is relative to the population size (Fliedner, 2017). The categorical variable will thus be operationalized using the official data of the North Rhine-Westphalian government as of June 2021 (Landesbetrieb IT.NRW, 2022). This ensures the comparability of the municipalities and allows for their categorization.

The second independent variable, "referendum experience", describes whether a municipality has previously dealt with referendums before the timeframe of analysis, 2018-2021. Therefore, the variable is conceptualized using this definition. The variable will be operationalized using the referendum database and interview questions will be dedicated to this topic too. Possible outcomes are that a municipality does not have any previous experience with referendums or has previous experience ranging between the registration of the referendum and the signature collection to the completion of multiple referendums. Because of this range of

possible answers, the variable is categorical. The interviews will only provide a complete picture of this variable's aspects, as they allow for more depth than the database.

The third independent variable, "neighbors´ experience", defines whether the neighboring municipalities have any experience in organizing referendums. For that reason, the variable needs to be conceptualized. The neighboring municipalities are narrowed down to municipalities within the same district because they might work together in other policy areas and operate under one district election officer in local, state, federal, and European elections. Although it is likely that the municipalities also exchange experiences across district borders, they have closer working relations with the other municipalities within their district due to the nature of the German federal governmental system. The variable will be operationalized using the referendum database and interview questions. The information that will be gathered from the referendum database will focus solely on the neighboring municipalities within the district. In contrast, the interview questions will have a broader focus to allow for the discussion of cross-district experience exchange.

The fourth independent variable, "big municipalities´ experience", characterizes the experience big municipalities have with the organization of referendums. As "big municipalities" is a vague concept, it needs to be conceptualized further. In this research, municipalities are defined as big when they have a population of over 100.000 people. This is commonly the threshold for determining a municipality as a city (Statista, 2022). In North Rhine-Westphalia, 30 municipalities are therefore cities. Due to this large number of big municipalities, special attention is paid to the ones with the most referendums and those that are geographically the closest to the analyzed municipality. The reasons for that are that the cities with the most experience are likely more interesting and valuable sources for other municipalities than cities with less experience. Similarly, the geographical closeness is related to the argument concerning the third independent variable. It is expected that municipalities with questions likelier turn to close municipalities than to municipalities from another region of NRW. Nonetheless, the operationalization ensures that no big municipality is excluded from the analysis. This variable, too, is operationalized using the referendum database and interview questions. The referendum database will be used to determine the cities´ experience with referendums, while the interviews will determine to which city the other municipalities came with their questions. This ensures that all big municipalities and their experiences will be taken into account in the analysis.

The last independent variable, "election combination", focuses on whether or not the referendum, because of which the municipality was selected, was combined with another election like a local, state, federal, or European election. Thus, election is conceptualized as any of the four mentioned elections, and combination means that the elections were carried out on the same date using the same resources, e.g., election workers. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the referendum and any combined election are still two separate entities. The variable is operationalized in a twofold manner. The analysis of the dates of the referendums will determine if the referendums were combined with a regularly scheduled election. The interviews will figure out why or why not the referendum was combined with another election. Besides the obvious explanation that no other election was scheduled in the referendum timeframe, the interviews might determine other reasons.

## 3.3 Data collection

The proposed research method is a combination of document analysis and interviews. Whilst the academic literature puts the research into its theoretical context, the evaluation studies of referendums and citizen participation at the local level in Germany are used for the document analysis, and the findings are then used for the preparation of the interviews. These articles and studies have been selected based on the criterion that the documents focus on Germany and ideally on North Rhine-Westphalia. As has been established, there are not many evaluation studies exclusively focusing on referendums which is why the second criterion is that the documents have to at least focus on citizen participation. Lastly, the evaluation studies have to be written in an academic style in order to be able to adequately compare the findings of the academic literature and the evaluations with each other. The documents have been collected using a combination of systematic search and the snowball method, which allows for a broad range of information and counters biases that could occur using only one method.

The interviews have been conducted only with administrative staff from municipalities with experience with referendums. During the interviews, ethical obligations were applied. The interviews were semi-structured to confirm or contradict the previously determined challenges while also leaving room for elaboration (see interview questionnaire Appendix A). They were conducted via the phone or an online meeting. Moreover, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. In a second step, the interviews were coded to identify the relevant data for the analysis. For the interviews, ten municipalities were selected and two interviews per municipality were planned to increase the reliability of the findings resulting in

twenty planned interviews in total. These interviews were carried out with the administrative staff responsible for organizing elections and referendums in the selected municipalities. In each municipality and depending on the size of the municipality and its administration, there are at least one official and one deputy official in charge of elections and referendums, and these officials were the interview partners. They were identified through the organigrams of the selected municipalities and then contacted for potential interviews.

The interview municipalities were selected based on the *Datenbank Bürgerbegehren* (2022). This database gives an overview of the referendums, their topics, outcomes, and the location of the referendum. Hence, it is a suitable basis for selecting the municipalities, and based on a preliminary search 32 municipalities are identified. For this, the following selection criteria were applied: The municipalities need to be in North Rhine-Westphalia, the referendums should be in the period of 2018 to 2021, the topic areas should be diverse to ensure the representativeness of the findings, and the referendums have to be concluded. The last criterion describes the fact that the referendums have to be concluded with an election about the referendum topic. The outcomes can either be as desired or not as desired by the initiators, as well as that the referendum failed due to low turnout, but for this research, it is important that the election situation existed. Often referendums are inadmissible, withdrawn, or circumvented by a municipal resolution which means that the administrations do not have a complete experience with the organization of referendums. Therefore, these municipalities are not included in this research. Out of this preliminary selection, ten municipalities were selected and the selection criterion for narrowing down is the size of the municipalities. To analyze whether the size of the municipality influences the organizational challenges, municipalities of different sizes have to be included in the analysis. To somewhat reflect the distribution of the different municipal sizes in NRW, two cities, four middle towns, and four small towns[9] were selected for the analysis and interviews. The towns were then narrowed down further by the referendum date with a preference for more recent referendums so that the interview participants´ information is still recent, as well as previous referendum experience and election combination. This establishes the table below[10] (see Table 1). Out of the ten selected municipalities, seven have previous experience with referendums. The information about the

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[9] In this research the towns and cities are defined as follows: A city has a population of more than 100.000, a middle town has a population between 20.000 and 100.000, and a small town has a population below 20.000. NRW has 30 cities with a population of more than 100.000 (Statista, 2022).

[10] Sources: (Gemeinde Hövelhof, 2022; Gemeinde Kirchlengern, 2022; Gemeinde Schermbeck, 2022; Landesbetrieb IT.NRW, 2022; Mehr Demokratie e.V., 2022; Stadt Bad Münstereifel, 2022; Stadt Bonn, 2022; Stadt Dülmen, 2022; Stadt Halle Westfalen, 2022; Stadt Mülheim an der Ruhr, 2022; Stadt Schloß Holte-Stukenbrock, 2022; Stadt Werne, 2022)

variation factors "neighbors´ experience" and "big municipalities´ experience" shows that while there are minor differences in the amount of experience the neighbors and close cities of the selected municipalities have, overall, they are all very similar (cf. the more elaborate version of the table in Appendix B). Lastly, three selected municipalities have experience combining a referendum with a regularly scheduled election. Thus, the established dataset for this research is as diverse as possible while including all relevant factors.

*Table 1: The selected municipalities*

| | Previous experience[11] | Experience of others | | Election combination[12] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cities (2)** | | Neighbors´ experience | Close cities´ experience | |
| Bonn 2020 | 2x | | Köln (0) Düsseldorf (3) | - |
| Mülheim a. d. R. 2018 | 3x | | Duisburg (3) Oberhausen (2) Essen (6) Düsseldorf (3) | - |
| **Middle towns (4)** | | | | |
| Werne 2021 | 1x | 4 out of 9 neighboring municipalities | Dortmund (0) Hamm (2) | - |
| Halle (Westf.) 2021 | - | 6 out of 12 neighboring municipalities | Bielefeld (1) Münster (6) | Federal election 2021 |
| Dülmen 2020 | 1x | 4 out of 10 neighboring municipalities | Münster (6) Dortmund (0) | Local election 2020 |
| Schloß Holte-Stukenbrock 2019 | 1x | 5 out of 12 neighboring municipalities | Bielefeld (1) Münster (6) | - |
| **Small towns (4)** | | | | |
| Bad Münstereifel 2021 | - | 3 out of 10 neighboring municipalities | Bonn (3) Köln (0) | - |
| Hövelhof 2020 | - | 4 out of 9 neighboring municipalities | Bielefeld (1) Hamm (2) | Federal election 2021 |
| Schermbeck 2020 | 1x | 4 out of 12 neighboring municipalities | Düsseldorf (3) Dortmund (0) | - |
| Kirchlengern 2019 | 1x | 4 out of 8 neighboring municipalities | Bielefeld (1) Paderborn (4) | - |

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[11] Determined based on the reported experiences on the municipal websites; not counting the referendum on which basis the municipalities were selected.
[12] Determined based on the date of the referendum.

3.4 Data analysis

The data collected during the interviews provide different insights into the challenges municipalities encounter in the organization of referendums and what factors influence these. These findings are identified and analyzed using a codebook (cf. Appendix C) and the program Atlas.ti. The codebook consists of 10 code groups and 56 codes in total. Some of the codes were added in the process of coding, but the majority of the codebook was established before coding based on the interview transcripts, theoretical background, and literature review. Therefore, most of the codes are theory and prior research driven while the minority is data driven (Ruona, 2005). This already shows that the theoretical expectations match the qualitative data well and that the data itself also created new insights.

The code groups reflect general information about the referendums in the different municipalities as well as the interview questions developed to gather information regarding the hypotheses. The first two code groups, *Referendum_topic* (five codes*)* and *Referendum_initiator* (two codes), are used when an interviewee describes the topic and background of the referendum and who initiated said referendum. The following code group, *Referendum_experience*, contains nine codes and was used when the interviewees described how they felt about the referendum experience. This was the code group where the most codes were added throughout coding because the interviewees had very different experiences and impressions about the process ranging from stressed and challenged to good experiences. The next code group, *Referendum_additional work* (six codes), focuses more specifically on one aspect of the experience, the additional work, and is used when the interviewees described in which areas they experienced additional work. The fifth code group (*Referendum_election*, four codes) contains all of the interviewees´ information about the referendum election. In like manner, the next code group, "*Experience external parties*", consists of seven codes and is used in the context when the interviewees talked about asking external parties for help or about their experiences with referendums. The following code group, *Challenges resources* (six codes), focuses on the administrations´ resources and areas in which these challenges occurred. Further, the eighth code group, "*Legal bases*", concentrates on the regulatory framework of the referendums and was another code group where more codes were added throughout the coding process. Ultimately, this group contains eight codes. The following code group, *Communication* (four codes), defines any challenge related to communicating with citizens about the referendums. The last code group, "*Biggest challenge*", consists of five challenges and summarizes the area which the interviewees identified as the most challenging. The density of the codes ranges from zero to fifteen across the different codes (cf. Appendix D).

The codes and code groups are used in the next steps to test the hypotheses and answer the research question. For this, the codes and code groups relevant for the dependent and independent variables are grouped together to create several indices in order to allow for easier comparison across and within the different code groups. For this purpose, an average result was calculated for each municipality. Further, indices were created for four code groups: *Referendum_experience, Referendum_additional work, Challenges resources, Legal bases.* In each of these code groups, two indices were created to reflect the two sides of each code group. For the indices, the relevant codes were added and then divided by the number of codes of the index (see Appendix E). Consequently, the following indices were created: Good experience, challenging experience, no additional work, additional work, resources well equipped, resource challenges, adequate legal bases, and inadequate legal bases. To test the different hypotheses, these indices of the different municipalities are added as necessary for the categories of each hypothesis and then divided by the number of municipalities. The same procedure is followed for the other codes relevant for the analysis, namely the easy and hard communication codes as well as the biggest challenge codes.

3.5 Validity and reliability

To ensure that the measurement of the variables correctly reflects the concepts, it needs to be ensured that firstly all aspects of the concepts are included in the research and, secondly, that the concept's operationalization accurately reflects all aspects (cf. Babbie, 2016). This particularly concerns content validity. The content validity is ensured because the concepts are measured twice, once through the document analysis and once through the interviews, ensuring that all types of challenges are included within the concept of challenges. Nonetheless, it is likely that despite this twofold method of ensuring the validity, not all aspects of the concepts will be identified and covered in this research. This will be considered throughout the analysis, but it still decreases the validity.

In contrast to the validity, the reliability of the proposed research is higher, but some issues need to be considered. Focusing on the document analysis, reliability is ensured; however, reliability issues arise concerning the interviews. Measurement unreliability can be generated by both, the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewer´s occurrence may differ in the interviews; thus, the interviewees might be influenced by this. Although there is no definite protection against the effect of the interviewer´s subjectivity (Babbie, 2016, p. 147), the issue is counterbalanced by the fact that the same interviewer will perform all interviews

and that these interviews are semi-structured. Similarly, the reliability of the interviewees' answers is not guaranteed as they might be different at another point in time, but again the semi-structured interviews are intended to counter-balance this effect somewhat. Furthermore, the reliability is likewise increased because interviewing two employees per municipality makes the findings more reliable.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Since the data in this research is directly collected from individuals, specifically from the officials of the municipalities, some ethical issues need to be considered. The participation of the individuals must be completely voluntary, their privacy has to be respected, and the individuals need to fully understand the research, what is involved in it, and their rights. Moreover, the confidentiality of the collected data should be respected, and the participants have to give their verbal informed consent before the data collection in the form of interview questions begins (Babbie, 2016). In addition, the participants were also asked if they would consent to the interview being recorded in order to transcribe the conversation anonymously and pseudonymize the data. Correspondingly, all participants were assured that the recorded audio and transcripts would be securely stored and that their data would not be accessible to anyone except the researcher. Furthermore, the independent Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management, and Social Sciences Ethics Committee of the University of Twente approved the request (reference number: 220108) for the data collection method in March 2022. After the interviews, the participants were again informed about their privacy rights and that they could stop participating and retract their answers anytime. Lastly, the participants were offered to receive a report presenting the study´s results after completion of the research so that they could benefit from their participation and the results as well.

4. Results

In this chapter, the results of the gathered and analyzed data are presented and subsequently used to either accept or reject the previously stated expectations concerning the differences in the amount and nature of challenges in the organization of referendums the municipalities encounter. For this, the challenges are first described, and then the hypotheses are tested.

4.1 Characteristics of the referendums

Firstly, the characteristics of the concerned referendums are discussed. In total, fifteen interviews were conducted between April 4 and May 30, 2022, with the administrative staff of eight municipalities. Two of the previously selected municipalities were unavailable for interviews. Moreover, in some municipalities, only one person was available and knowledgeable enough for an interview, whereas in one municipality, even three people were willing to share their experiences. The interviews ranged between 28 and 45 minutes, depending on how communicative and detailed the interviewees were. However, the interview length did not determine its quality and amount of valuable information.

Ultimately, people from two cities, three middle and three small towns were interviewed and shared important insights. In these interviews, the interviewees primarily focused on the latest referendum in their municipality, although some also talked about their previous experiences. In five of the eight municipalities, the referendums were initiated by citizens and three municipalities had referendums initiated by the local council. Further, the referendum topics across the municipalities were diverse, ranging from cultural, economic, and traffic projects to projects concerning public social and educational institutions and public infrastructure and utilities. Out of the different referendum topics, those concerning public social and educational institutions and traffic projects prevailed. This shows that the selected municipalities experienced a great variety of referendum topics ranging from the question about the location of a refugee shelter to the question about whether a new sauna should be built at the local swimming pool and hence expresses the intended diversity of the municipalities.

*Figure 4: Descriptive statistics referendums*
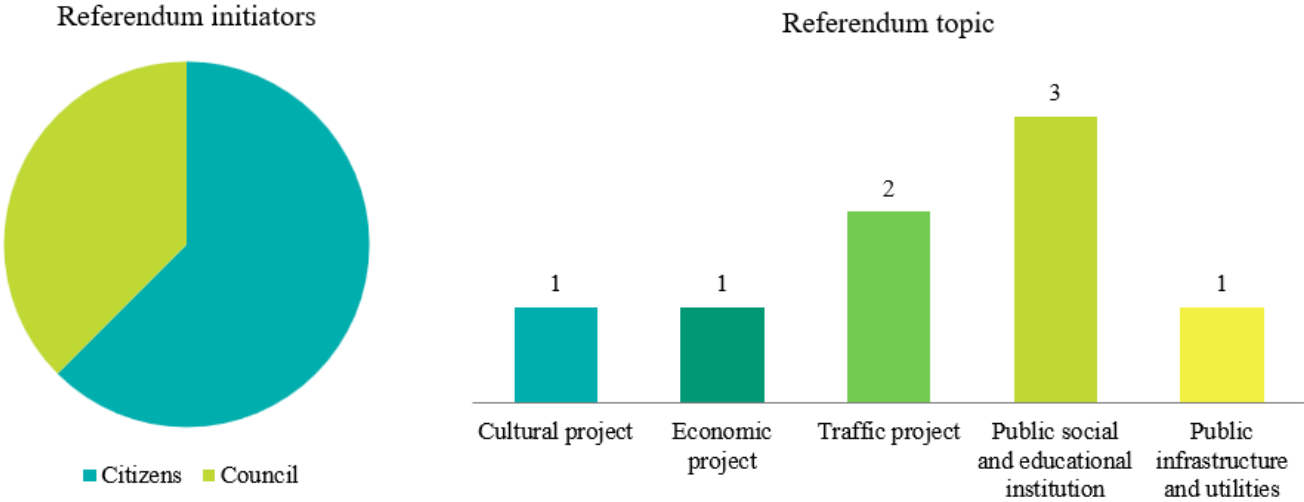
4.2 The challenges of the local administrations

Before discussing which factors explain the differences in the nature and amount of the challenges between municipalities, the challenges identified by the interviews are considered. Different challenges were identified based on the academic literature in the theory part, and as the challenges the municipalities face comprise the dependent variable, it is interesting to see what the interviewees think about the challenges they experienced. The challenges identified based on the work of other authors were grouped into three categories: Regulatory, communication, and administrative (see Figure 2). During the interviews, different questions aimed at finding whether the identified challenges of these three categories were also encountered in the selected municipalities. Moreover, there were interview questions aiming to identify further challenges that were not identified in the theoretical part.

*Regulatory challenges*

Concerning the regulatory challenges, two types of challenges were identified. Firstly, any challenges related to the very general and thus maybe lacking North Rhine-Westphalian regulation on referendums, and secondly, that municipalities have no referendum statute or regulations (Kost, 2010). These challenges were mentioned in the interviews to a certain extent too. The very general regulation on referendums (Bürgerentscheid DVO 2004) was often an interview topic. The code "legal bases (inadequate)" was stated by eight out of fifteen people and frequently used connected to the administrations´ task to inform the voters in an appropriate manner about the referendum and the different opinions about it within the municipality (cf. Paragraf 4, BürgerentscheidDVO, 2004), e.g., the voting booklet. *"Unfortunately, the BürgerentscheidDVO 2004 alone is not sufficient to carry out a referendum properly or to create the voting booklet"* (Interviewee AP) as told by interviewee AP. Others shared this sentiment. At the same time, the vagueness of the regulatory framework was also appreciated by some interviewees: *"Because the legal framework is not as tightly defined as with elections, you can organize and carry out a referendum more freely with your own statutes and adapted to your own circumstances. The general conditions are sufficient"* (Interviewee JR). Reasonings like this one explain why the code "legal bases (adequate)" was used seven times when coding. Be that as it may, creating the voting booklet was certainly identified as a challenge in the interviews. Two codes were dedicated to this. The code focusing on positive aspects of the legal framework in relation to the voting booklet was used twice, whereas the code measuring the negative aspects was used six times. Interviewees denote that the lack of

requirements for the voting booklet and its design led them to contact other municipalities with their questions.

Focusing on the municipal referendum statute, the interviews show that all analyzed municipalities already had a referendum statute. Therefore, this was not a challenge. However, the interviews also show that at least six of the selected municipalities needed to update their referendum statute because it was outdated and not in accordance with the latest legal framework. Hence, the challenge in relation to the municipal referendum statute was more to update the statute in accordance with the current regulation while making it work for the own municipality too. Conversely, the municipalities that had to update their statutes used this as a chance. *"I think we have adhered to the model of the Association of Towns and Municipalities and I think we also have informed us about one or another municipality that is currently also holding a referendum" (Interviewee CB).* As updating the referendum statute based on the regulatory framework alone was complicated due to its vagueness, the administrations used their resources and connections to make it easier for them, as demonstrated in the quote by interviewee CB. That the municipalities struggled with the legal challenges is also visible because of the fact that eight of the fifteen interviewees identified their biggest challenge as a legal one. The interviewed municipal employees said they felt the pressure to do everything correctly, particularly because as one interviewee said citizens today also read the regulations and check if everything is carried out correctly. However, at this point in the interviews, another legal challenge was mentioned several times: to create the voting slip in a legally secure manner. Since the administrations are responsible for the voting slips of the referendum themselves and many of them were already struggling with the regulatory framework, this is not surprising, but it was not stated in the examined academic works.

In brief, as anticipated in the conceptualization of the challenges related to referendums, local administrations struggled with the vagueness of the regulatory framework. Based on this, further challenges occur, like the lack of regulation and information about the voting booklet or concerning the design of the voting slips. These particular challenges were not anticipated based on the theory part. Furthermore, the found challenge of previous works, that municipalities do not have a referendum statute is not supported by the data. All interviewed municipalities had a referendum statute, but most of them needed to update it and struggled with it. This shows that the administrations have evolved in recent years, but nonetheless, they need to update their referendum statutes regularly to match their wants and needs as well as current regulations, however vague they may be.

*Communication challenges*

In like manner, the main communication challenges determined in the theory part were the necessity to stay neutral during the referendum process and to explain the process to the citizens and hence increase their knowledge in order to increase the election turnout and reduce the margin of error in the election (Gabriel & Quast, 2007; Perry & Hackenbroch, 2017; Wiegandt & Lobeck, 2020). These topics were mentioned during the interviews too. Yet, as all of the interviewees discussed, the necessity to stay neutral was not a challenge for them because that is their job and they already had experience with it because of other elections.

*"The clear task of the electoral office is the organization and implementation of a referendum. As with elections, we are committed to neutrality here" (Interviewee GL).*

The interviewees described that staying neutral throughout the process was easy for them because they were the organizers of the referendum and other departments of the administration or the mayors were presenting their respective opinions in public, for example, in the voting booklet. So, there is a clear separation between the electoral office and any political or administrative point of view. This allows the people working in the electoral offices of the municipalities to focus more on explaining the process to the citizens. Questions about this potential challenge received mixed responses from the interviewees. Eleven times the interviewees´ responses could be coded as that communicating the process with citizens was easy, while seven times it was coded to be "hard". Thus, this means that for some interviewees the communication with the citizens was both easy and hard. Interviewees describing the communication as easy said: "*There were relatively few questions and these could be clarified in short discussions. In most cases, there were content-related questions, […], some questions were asked about whether there is an obligation to vote or whether it is voluntary" (Interviewee JR)*. Further, the communication with citizens was simplified by the voting booklets, leaflets, and the local press. All these means educated citizens about the referendum's organizational aspects, content, and differing opinions.

When the communication with the citizens was expressed as hard, this was mainly related to formulated referendum question and how to communicate this question with the citizens. As interviewee RT explained: *"I found it incredibly difficult to explain as much as necessary and as much as possible to the citizens. So finding the balance so as not to give too much but also enough information so that the citizen can make a decision" (Interviewee RT)*. Hence, explaining the referendum content proved to be challenging for some of the local administrations because they feared to overwhelm the citizens with too much information and

details. Although the local administrations are not directly responsible for the election turnout, a well-informed citizenry likely participates more in the election than citizens who have never heard about the referendum. Ultimately, this also affects the referendum's validity because a particular turnout is necessary to make it valid.

Nonetheless, the category communication was not too challenging for the municipalities. This is also reflected by the fact that only two interviewees have stated a communication challenge as their biggest challenge. In these two instances giving the citizens the necessary information to have a good base for their decision-making was the biggest challenge. Given these points, it can be summarized that it was no challenge for the employees of the local administrations to stay neutral throughout the referendum but communicating the content of the referendum with the citizens was hard for some.

*Administrative challenges*

Similar to the regulatory and communication challenges, administrative challenges were established in the theory part based on the work of other authors. Central here was the lack of resources, so financial, personnel, expertise, and time, to explain any administrative challenge the municipalities could encounter (Fuhrmann & Brunn, 2016; Kersting & Schneider, 2016; Nelle & Ertelt, 2019; Vetter, 2018). The data of the interviews confirm this. One-third of the interviewees said they were well-equipped resource-wise for the referendum, and still, most of them stated that some resources were lacking during the referendum organization. The most challenging resources to provide were the finances, the personnel, and the time necessary to organize the referendum. The resource "expertise" was brought up rarely in the interviews, only by two people. But overall, referendums are challenging resource-wise for the administrations because the electoral office or the responsible department have to organize the referendum on top of their daily tasks. This means that either the daily tasks are neglected during the referendum process or the employees work much overtime. The Covid pandemic influenced this too. The people working in the local administrations still needed to catch up with their tasks, fewer people could work in the offices, people were sick, and some products were more expensive due to the pandemic, or some products such as hygienic products now needed to be included in the referendum budget. Furthermore, external partners like printers were also restricted by Covid, and delivery times were delayed. This influenced the referendum budget because some municipalities needed to order their voting booklets and slips from the more expensive printers to make the referendum timeline work.

For these reasons, most interviewees said that the referendum in their municipality led to additional work for them. Again, this primarily concerns the personnel and the finances of the administrations, but the voting booklet, the statute, and problems with external service providers led to additional work for the employees as well.

*"The organization and implementation of a referendum requires a high level of human and time resources and voluntary work. The monetary expense (e.g., material costs) is around 100,000.00 Euros in a [middle town]. In addition, there are still considerable personnel costs (overtime and additional work)" (Interviewee IV).*

This quote reaffirms that mainly the personnel and the financial aspect prove to be challenging for the municipalities. In turn, specifically, the challenge of having the necessary personnel for the referendum reduces the personnel in other important departments during the period of the referendum. This also means that after the referendum, the municipalities need some time to evaluate the referendum process and catch up with the work of other areas or departments. The financial challenges should not be disregarded either. The municipalities must bear costs like 100.000 Euros. Interviewee CW said: *"It costs a mid-five-digit range only for the shipping and printing [of the voting slips], but the Council decides that and if it is important to the Council that the citizens have decision-making authority, then the money must be made available" (Interviewee CW).* This shows that the other two referendum actors, local politicians and citizens, do not necessarily care about the financial hardships the organization of a referendum creates for the local administration, and it also shows that the municipalities then have to find a way to organize the referendum, despite their resource shortcomings. That this is challenging for the local administrations is further reflected by the fact that nine times the biggest challenge of an interviewee could be defined as administrative. These range from the lack of personnel to the lack of time compared to regular elections and how the lack of time influences other resources like personnel.

In short, the anticipated administrative challenges were on the one hand confirmed by the interviews, and on the other hand it was determined that these challenges were very demanding for the municipalities. The expected lack of resources challenged the local administrations. Particularly the lack of personnel, time, and financial means proved to be challenging, whereas interviewees rarely mentioned the lack of expertise in the local administrations. Therefore, the main administrative challenges are the lack of financial, personnel, and time resources.

*Further challenges*

Lastly, further challenges were not identified in the revision of the academic works, but the interviews show that the local administrations frequently had a problem that can be grouped in another category. Multiple times interviewees reported that finding the necessary volunteer personnel for the election of the referendum was challenging. This could also be grouped in the category of administrative challenges, but as it does not concern the administrations' personnel, it is better to group this into another category. Likewise, because it focuses only on the election part of the referendum process and the three other categories cover the entire referendum process. Although this challenge was mentioned exclusively by interviewees working for city administrations, this is a challenge that is relevant for all municipalities. In comparison to the other challenges, it might seem minor, but it is still something that creates problems for the municipalities. Therefore, it is included in the updated figure of the challenges, Figure 5, below. This figure summarizes the local administrations´ challenges identified through the interviews and the confirmed expectations based on the academic articles and evaluation studies.

In summary, the confirmed expectations are the challenges related to the NRW regulation on referendums, the lack of resources, and explaining the process and increasing citizen knowledge (written in italic in Figure 5). The expected challenge of having no referendum statute changed based on the interviews to the challenge of updating the outdated existing municipal referendum statute and all other challenges included in Figure 5 are determined based on the interviews.

*Figure 5: Overview of the challenges as identified through the interviews*
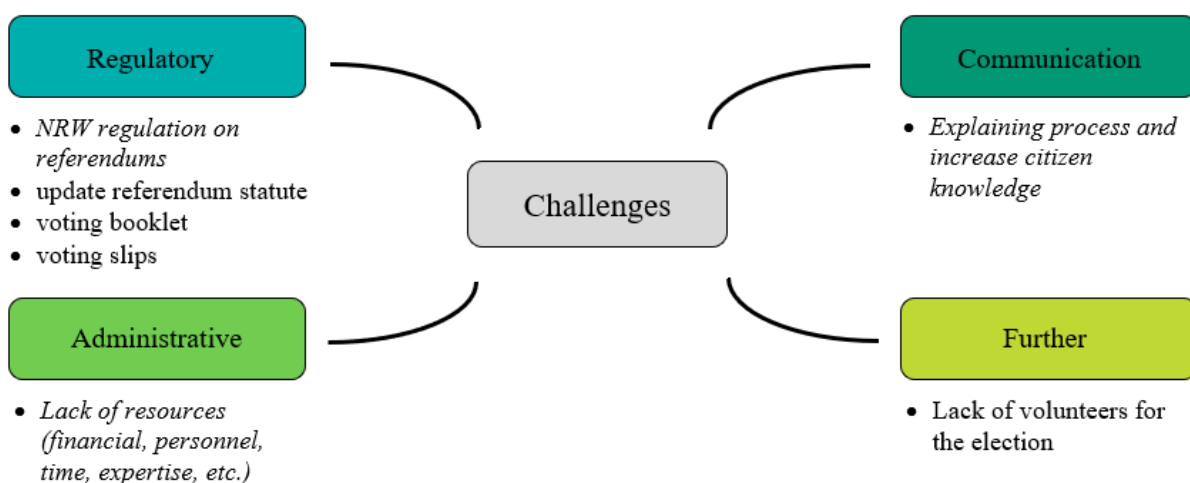
4.3 The influence of municipal size

The second part of the results focuses on the hypotheses. The first hypothesis states the expectation that bigger municipalities encounter fewer challenges in the organization of referendums. This is based on the arguments of the municipal amalgamation reforms of the 1970s and later years, namely that bigger municipalities are more efficient than smaller municipalities. This efficiency is related to municipalities' costs, time, and resources to organize referendums (cf. Peters & Pierre, 2016). The graph below (see Figure 6) describes the challenges and experiences of the differently sized municipalities during the preparation and organization of their respective referendum. As is visible, there are differences between the cities and the middle and small towns. The interviewees from the smaller municipalities describe the referendum experience as challenging more often than interviewees from the cities. This is particularly connected to the resources "personnel" and "time" and these two resources are often linked. Concerning the resource "time", the administrators of municipalities of all sizes agree that time is a challenge when faced with a referendum. The short organization timeline of three months (GO NRW, 1994) and the relative unexpectedness of the referendum compared to normal elections make the organization stressful for the local administrations, regardless of the size of the municipality. However, more challenges arise when this stressful timeline is linked with a lack of personnel.

*Figure 6: Referendum challenges by municipal size*
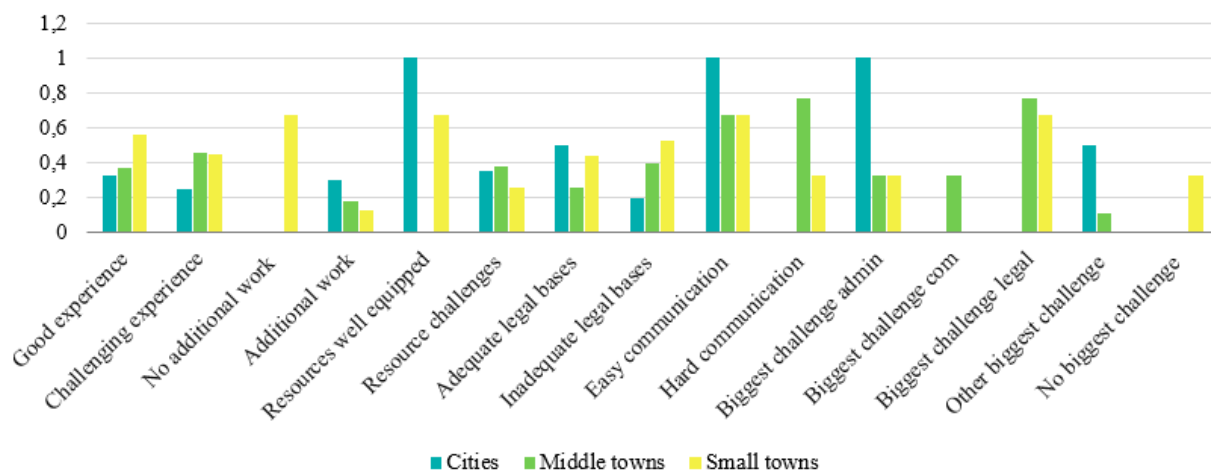


Note: The values of the indices are derived from adding the code count average of the group of selected municipalities and then dividing it by the number of codes of the index.

In smaller municipalities, there is often only one person responsible for the organization of referendums and elections, and this person is usually either also in charge of other areas or working half days. The organization of the referendum comes on top of the normal workload and is obviously time-sensitive. This means that the people responsible for the organization of

the referendum either do much overtime or they put their regular tasks aside. After the referendum, they can catch up with these tasks which means that the work overload does not end with the referendum. The smaller municipalities tackled this combined challenge of a lack of the resources time and personnel by assigning the referendum tasks as cross-departmental extra work. Cities, of course, have challenges associated with time and personnel too. One of the interviewees from the cities said that in terms of personnel during such irregularly occurring tasks, the administration would always use external personnel to a certain extent since the challenge of organizing the referendum cannot be met with the available workforce of the city. This shows that, as became evident during the interviews, the small and middle towns find the issues of the resources time and personnel more challenging. Whilst the smaller municipalities deal with the increased workload by working overtime and reducing their usual tasks, the cities use external personnel to manage the increased workload because of the referendum.

Moreover, another resource that was more often encountered in smaller municipalities during the coding is the financial resource. This is interesting because the costs of the referendum should correspond to the municipality's size. While this was also reported during the interviews, interviewees from smaller municipalities more often discussed challenges related to financial issues than the interviewees from cities. Nevertheless, the interviewees from the smaller municipalities had better experiences with the referendum. This means that the people from the middle and especially the small towns more often recounted their experience with this tool of democracy as good and interesting.

*"I think that the institution of referendums is actually a good thing for these things where citizens can decide. Sometimes I wish it was used more often" (Interviewee DV).*

That the organization of referendums can be more challenging for smaller municipalities is also reflected in the other bars of the graph in Figure 6. Interviewees from small and middle towns struggled with the legal bases of referendums and issues related to these like the voting booklet and the communication with the citizens were more challenging for them. This is also mirrored by the fact that the interviewees from the smaller municipalities most often said that their biggest challenge was a legal one. But, in turn, the respondents from cities also described challenges. They encountered challenges in particular related to the resources like personnel or time, but compared to the smaller municipalities, they also stated that their municipalities were well equipped for the referendums. Furthermore, the legal bases were mostly adequate for them, and communicating with the citizens was easy. That cities have different challenges than small and middle towns is also evident in their identified biggest challenge. The cities did not struggle

with the legal issues surrounding the referendum or the citizen communication, but their biggest challenges were administrative or other ones. As respondent KI from a city said, their biggest challenge was *"to recruit enough volunteers for the voting committees!" (Interviewee KI)*, which means that they struggle to find people to help them with the polling stations and count the votes (cf. Figure 5). Reasons for this are that the cities need many volunteers more than smaller municipalities, but they lack the personal relationships people in smaller municipalities have which help in the acquisition of volunteers. The NRW Ministry of the Interior has also noticed this in recent years ("NRW-Städte locken Wahlhelfer mit Keksen und Tombola," 2017). This shows that the cities have very different challenges than the towns. They might have good legal and communication resources due to the size of their administration, but instead, they encounter challenges pertaining to the size of their electorate.

In addition, these findings also reflect the trade-off between efficiency and democracy visible in amalgamation reforms to a certain extent (Reingewertz & Serritzlew, 2019). The smaller municipalities might not be as efficient as the cities are, but their administrative staff enjoys the referendum itself as a democratic tool much more than people working for cities. The reasons for this were not discussed during the interviews, but the interviewees from small municipalities might have been so positive about their referendum experience and the democratic tool referendum because they are closer to the citizens. Yet, this can only be assumed as the lack of data does not allow for a conclusion. Nevertheless, this is also visible in Figure 7, which summarizes the overall referendum experience of the municipalities by their size. As can be seen in the averages of the different indices, the cities experienced the least challenges compared to the other municipal sizes, and the referendum experience was much more effortless for them than challenging. The smaller municipalities, the middle and small towns, encountered challenges and the middle towns found the experience not very effortless. However, the graph also shows once more that the small towns, despite their challenges, still had very good experiences with their referendums and that their average for an effortless experience is higher than the one of cities.

*Figure 7: Overall referendum experience by municipal size*
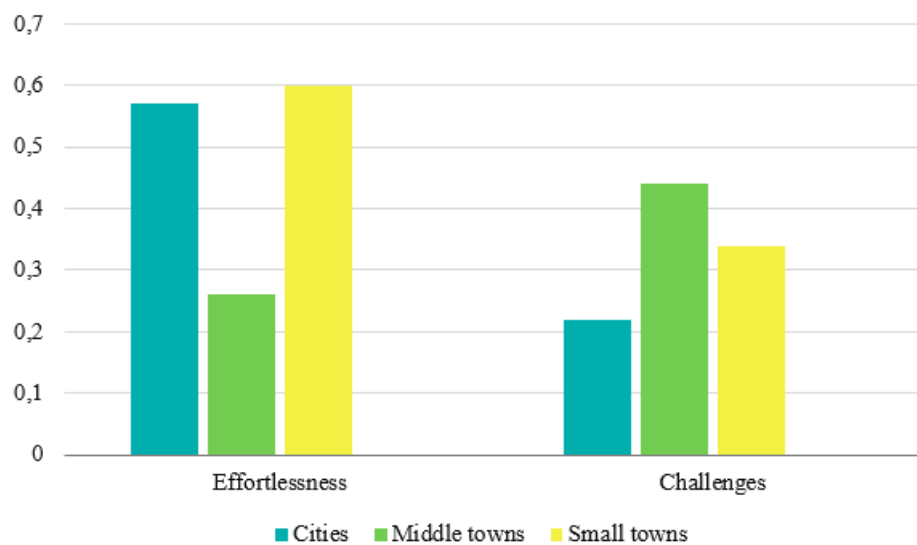


Note: Effortlessness = indices good experience + no additional work + resources well
equipped + adequate legal bases + easy communication divided by five
Challenges = indices challenging experience + additional work + resource challenges +
inadequate legal bases + hard communication divided by five

On the whole, the data shows that the expectation stated in the first hypothesis, that bigger municipalities encounter fewer challenges in the referendum organization, can be confirmed. Even though cities also have challenges with the organization of referendums, they differ from the challenges smaller municipalities have, and they have fewer challenges as well. Interestingly, the small towns had a very positive and effortless referendum experience and possible reasons for that are explained. Another possible explanation for this phenomenon is that only one person was interviewed in two of the three small towns. The fact that only one opinion for these two municipalities is available might have skewed the data somewhat. Thus, this is seen as more of an outlier experience than the norm for small towns. The data as well as the quotes from the interviews clearly show that cities encountered fewer challenges in the organization of referendums. This becomes more evident when comparing the cities with the average of the middle and small towns. The cities had a better and less challenging referendum experience than the towns in this comparison.

4.4 The influence of referendum experience

The second hypothesis focuses on the experience the selected municipalities have with referendums. It is expected that more experience leads to fewer challenges. Based on Peters and Pierre (2016), it is anticipated that the municipalities with referendum experience are better prepared for the next referendum due to internal feedback and learning processes. The

encountered challenges will be listed and analyzed to avoid these challenges in the future. The intuitive expectation of doing it better next time was confirmed in the interviews too:

*"The effort was incredibly high. With the first referendum. There was nothing. Zero. We basically did everything ourselves. […] With the second referendum, […], it was a lot easier"* *(Interviewee DV).*

This quote shows that the first referendum challenges a municipality particularly. Structures need to be established, expertise must be gained, and everything has to be legally sound. Hence, this was sometimes overwhelming for the administrative staff as they said during the interviews: *"[My colleague] and I have always said we don't even know where the tip of the iceberg is, because we didn't know what work we still had to do"* (Interviewee CB). While the interviewees from municipalities without referendum experience agreed that they could use their election expertise to a certain extent, a referendum still differs from an election. It starts with the legal differences and ends with the time factor of having a much shorter period to organize everything. To gain the necessary expertise to be able to organize the referendum, the employees of the local administrations thus need to familiarize themselves with the legal framework while at the same time starting with the first tasks of the referendum, like formulating the question in case this has not been done yet by the referendum initiators. Further, the cost estimation for the initiated change through the referendum has to be made, and explanations have to be given to the citizens to inform them about the referendum topic and the potential change it could lead to. Hence, many departments of the local administrations are busy preparing the first steps of the referendum. This takes time and expertise in different areas because several departments are responsible for these steps. Having referendum experience does not influence the cost estimation because different departments are responsible for different referendum topics, but all the other first tasks like the question formulation or the initial citizen communication could become less challenging with experience. Besides, during the second referendum, the employees of the municipalities might only need to go over the legal framework instead of familiarizing themselves with it for the first time. This reduces the challenges local administrations can face in the organization of referendums.

The importance of experience for having fewer challenges is reflected in a graph, too. Figure 8 shows that the municipalities without any referendum experience found the organization challenging compared to municipalities with previous experience. In particular, they struggle with the necessary resources and exceptionally with the referendums´ legal bases and frameworks. Further, they identify their biggest challenge as a legal challenge. In

comparison, municipalities with referendum experience view the experience as less challenging and find the legal bases much more adequate. Still, this does not mean that municipalities with experience do not encounter any challenges when organizing their second or third referendum. They still struggle with their resources, though they more often think they are well equipped and they certainly have additional work because of the referendum. But their experience leads to advantages in other potential challenge areas like communication. Municipalities with no or one referendum experience find aspects of the citizen communication easy while other aspects are hard, making it balanced. In comparison, the municipalities with two or more referendum experiences found the citizen communication easy and did not encounter any challenges related to it.

*Figure 8: Referendum challenges by municipal experience*
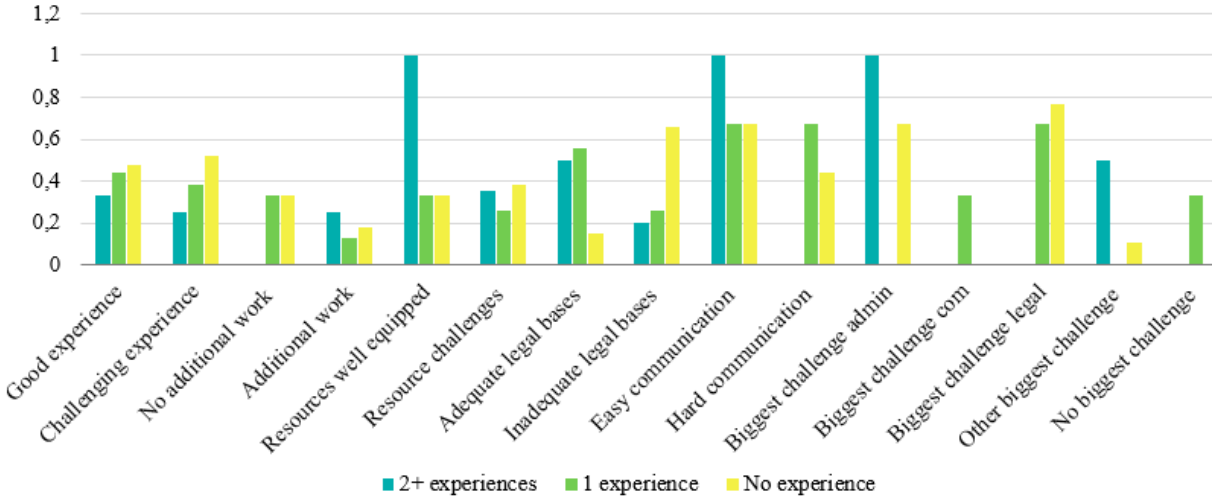


Note: The values of the indices are derived from adding the code count average of the group of selected municipalities and then dividing it by the number of codes of the index.

Noticeably, the bars of the municipalities with one previous referendum experience are often not in the middle between the municipalities with more than two experiences and the ones without experience. Rather, the municipalities with one previous experience are mostly close with either of the other two municipal groups. One explanation for this is that the first referendum of these municipalities was some time ago, and hence some challenges are still there whereas others are eliminated because of previously established structures. For example, the general legal framework is known and the knowledge about it only needs to be brushed up, but this does not mean that the biggest challenge for these municipalities will not be a legal one. Further, the necessary resources might still be challenging because they can only be reduced to a certain extent and the citizen communication is also hard because communication channels have changed in recent years and new channels such as websites or social media need to be

established. But these are only a few potential explanations for this phenomenon and other unknown factors can still influence this. Yet, this again demonstrates the importance of referendum experience and shows that more recent experience is preferable to reduce the amount of challenges.

*Figure 9: Overall referendum experience by municipal experience*
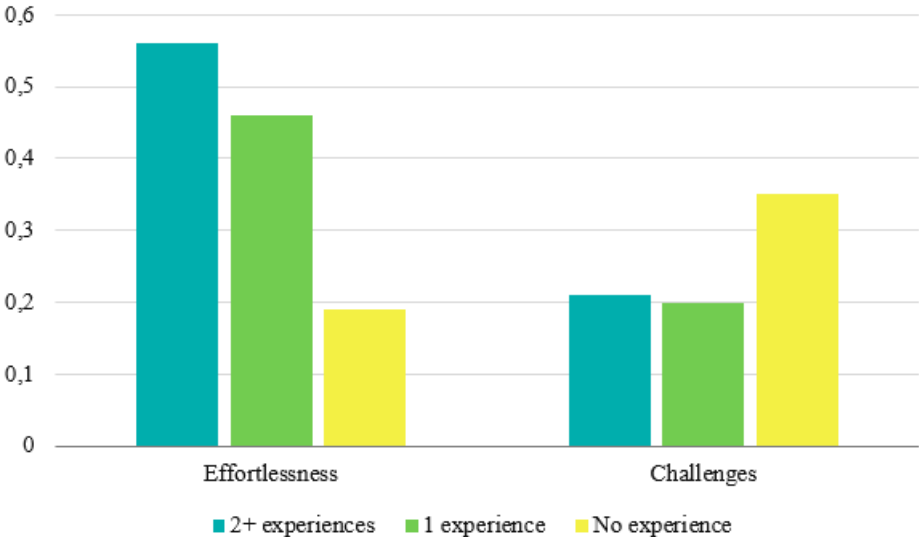


Note: Effortlessness = indices good experience + no additional work + resources well equipped + adequate legal bases + easy communication divided by five
Challenges = indices challenging experience + additional work + resource challenges + inadequate legal bases + hard communication divided by five

Figure 9 summarizes the referendum experience by the municipal size of Figure 8 and it presents the discussed points well. There are apparent differences in the amount of challenges municipalities with and without referendum experience had. Further, the more referendum experience the municipalities have, the more effortless was the process for them. Additionally, this aggregated version of the data shows that the municipalities with one past referendum overall are closer in their experience to the more experienced municipalities than to the ones without any experience. While this is not the case when looking at each individual challenge, as explained in the previous paragraph, generally speaking, it is a fact. Given the discussed points and findings, the second hypothesis can be confirmed. Municipalities experience fewer challenges the more experience they have with the organization of referendums. Although the municipalities without previous referendum experience could transfer some of their knowledge from the organization of elections, challenges occurred specifically related to the legal framework as observable in Figure 8. It is particularly noticeable that the more experience a municipality has with referendums, the less they experience the referendum organization as challenging because they become better equipped for handling a referendum (see Figure 9).

Interviewee GL summarizes this: *"The experience from previous referendums was very helpful. The more often the organization is carried out, the more natural the processes become and sources of error can be minimized" (Interviewee GL).* Remarkably, the employees of local administrations without referendum experience remembered their experience as good the most often. This feeling steadily decreased as the local administration employees' referendum experience increased. One reason for this might be that the first experience is, although stressful, exciting, and interesting, whereas more experience might make the entire process more routine.

4.5 The influence of other municipalities' experience and external party contact

The next two hypotheses, hypotheses 3a and 3b, are built on the theoretical expectation of (informal) intermunicipal cooperation and that municipalities learn from each other´s experiences. It is expected that the municipalities confronted with a referendum talk to other municipalities about their experiences and how they overcame certain challenges the municipalities might be struggling with. In this case, the focus is especially on neighboring and bigger municipalities. The assumptions are that, on the one hand, neighboring municipalities are already in close contact due to cooperation in other areas and thus, are the first choice when looking for help and expertise; and on the other hand, big municipalities have to deal more often with referendums and have more resources and hence, they may offer valuable insights for struggling or overwhelmed municipalities.

Out of the eight interviewed municipalities, six were in contact with other municipalities or external parties during the organization of their referendum to learn from their experience or receive advice (see Figure 10). Only two municipalities did not contact other municipalities or external parties; interestingly, these are bigger municipalities with previous referendum experience. This reaffirms the confirmation of the first two hypotheses. The reasons for not contacting other municipalities or external parties were given by Interviewee IV:

*"Every municipality has to go its own way here. The legal framework is clearly regulated. A statute provides additional regulations at the municipal level. Support from external third parties is not seen here" (Interviewee IV).*

Compared to this statement, the other six municipalities contacted other municipalities and external parties like the municipal supervision authority, specialist lawyers, and experts for the referendum topic. The following two quotes describe what was echoed often during the

interviews. The municipalities either contacted neighboring municipalities or systematically searched for municipalities with the most recent referendum experience.

*"What we did was we asked where there had been referendums recently. For example, how did you design your voting booklets? Not in terms of content, but simply in terms of design. What did that look like? And that's what we've used as an orientation"* (Interviewee DV).

*"Well, I don't think we asked other municipalities, but we did some research on the internet and checked whether there had been any referendums. How did they phrase the question? What explanation did they give on the voting slip? That was more our way. Here in [in our district] we didn't have such precedents and if we did, some of them were a long time ago, so you couldn't really build on them"* (Interviewee CW).

*Figure 10: Municipal contact with external parties*
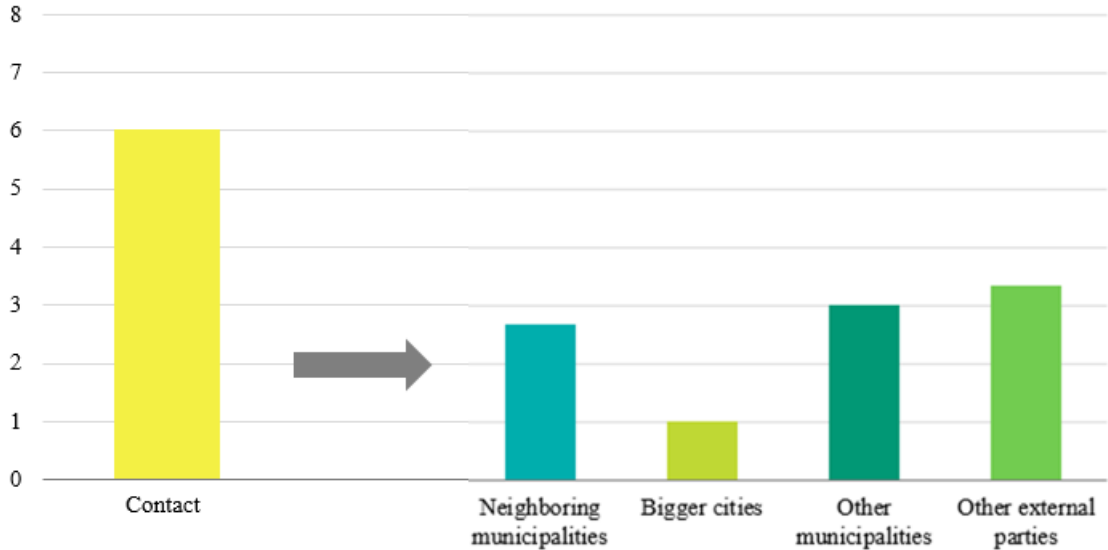


This is also evident in the graph above (see Figure 10). Municipalities in contact with others most often contacted external parties like the municipal supervision authority. This was done in more than three municipalities. As these numbers are based on the coding of the interviews and the number of people who mentioned which external parties they contacted, the numbers are not always round. In terms of contacted external parties, other, non-neighboring municipalities are also favored over neighboring municipalities, and the reason for that is that their experience is more recent. Still, neighboring municipalities proved to be valuable contacts for the interviewed municipalities and the interviewees used the intermunicipal help to resolve the challenges. During the interviews, it was not explicitly discussed if this intermunicipal

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cooperation was formal or informal, but it was implied, as evident in the two quotes above, that it was informal because the interviewees used the municipalities´ websites for their research and contacted the people responsible for the referendum with questions. This exchange of experience was not official and thus informal. Concerning hypothesis 3b, only one of the smaller municipalities asked a big municipality for help in order to profit from their experience. The municipality had done this "*because we simply assumed that a large municipality has a good legal system that has checked it [e.g., all legal formalities] out*" *(Interviewee AU).* Hence, the municipality assumed, in accordance with the previously stated expectations, that the city had the experience and, more importantly, the resources to make their referendum legally sound. Indeed, the municipalities most often contacted other municipalities and parties about legal challenges. These challenges ranged from challenges concerning the legal bases of referendums to the phrasing of the referendum question and the design of the voting booklet and slip. This is expressed in the previous quotes, too. In particular, creating the voting booklet proved to be challenging for municipalities and the exchange of knowledge and designs with experienced municipalities was very valuable for them.

*Figure 11: Referendum challenges by external party contact*
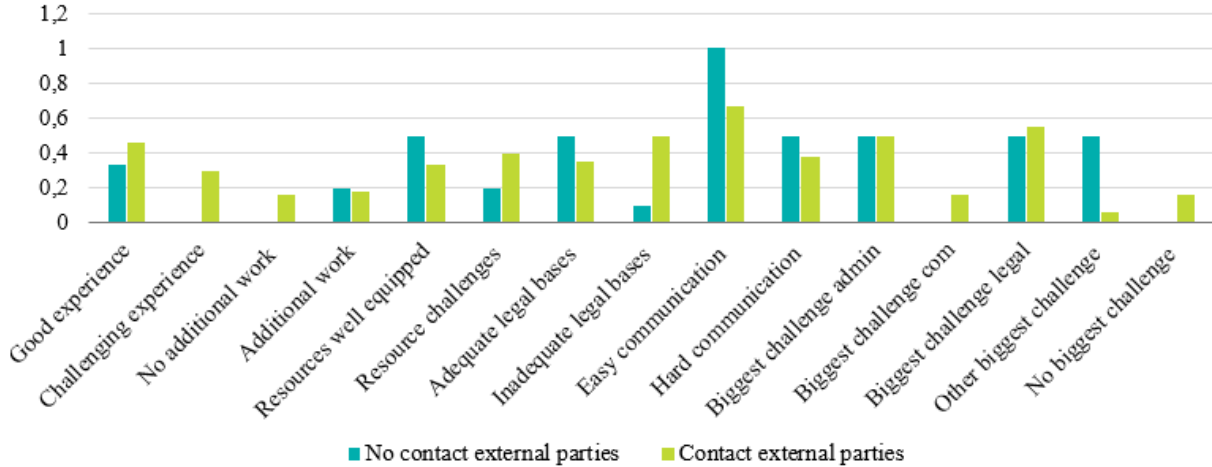


Note: The values of the indices are derived from adding the code count average of the group of selected municipalities and then dividing it by the number of codes of the index.

The graph in Figure 11 shows that the municipalities that did not contact others, either municipalities or external parties, because of their administration´s size and experience with referendums have also encountered fewer challenges related to their referendum. Compared to the municipalities that contacted others, they thought they were better equipped resource-wise, they struggled less with the legal framework and did not experience the referendum organization as challenging. Nonetheless, they also had challenges related to the legal bases, the citizen communication, and their resources. Still, municipalities that contacted others had

their reasons for it. As explained, they particularly struggled with everything related to the legal bases, but they were also challenged because of their limited resources like personnel and time. Therefore, contacting other parties might be a sign of inexperience or related to the size of the municipality. For these municipalities asking for help, the exchange with others with expertise in this was appreciated because they profited immensely from it, reducing their challenges.

*Figure 12: Referendum experience by external party contact*
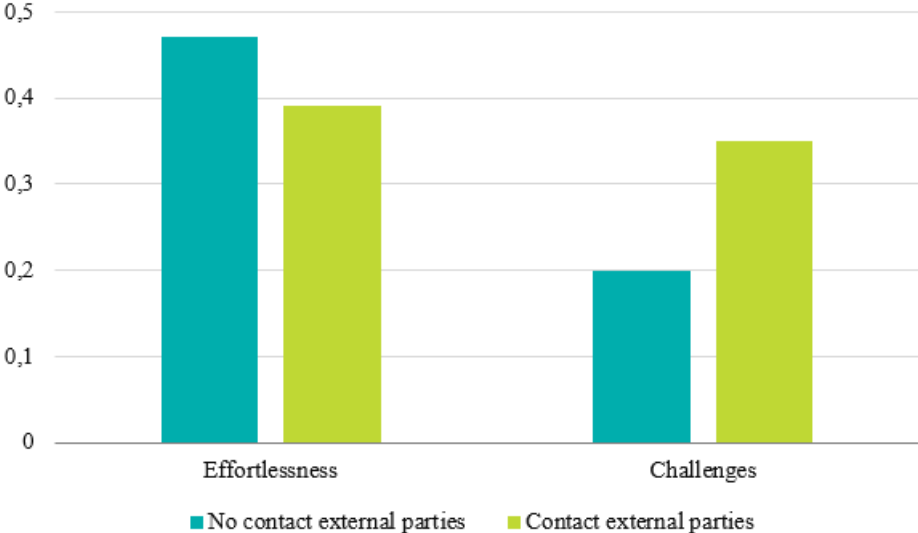


Note: Effortlessness = indices good experience + no additional work + resources well equipped + adequate legal bases + easy communication divided by five
Challenges = indices challenging experience + additional work + resource challenges + inadequate legal bases + hard communication divided by five

Moreover, Figure 12 confirms the findings of Figure 11. Generally, the municipalities that did not contact any external parties had fewer challenges and the organization of the referendum was easier for them. Although the municipalities that contacted external parties overall also had an effortless experience, they encountered nearly twice as many challenges as those without external party contact, which is the reason why they contacted the external parties. These contacts helped them reduce some of the challenges they encountered, but ultimately the experience was rather challenging for them. This means, on the one hand, that the municipalities without external party contact had the least challenging experience and that is the reason why they did not contact any external party; on the other hand, the data of the interviews show that the municipalities that did contact external parties were able to reduce their challenges because of this contact. So, while external party contact was unnecessary for the two bigger municipalities with referendum experience, the other struggling municipalities have benefitted from it.

To summarize, the expectations of hypotheses 3a and 3b can be partially confirmed. Municipalities profit from others´ experiences but are more systematic in searching for these other parties than assumed. Instead of contacting the neighboring and big municipalities with experience, they search for the municipalities and external parties most valuable to them. This is either the case because these have the most recent referendum experience or, linked to the external parties, they offer the needed expertise. Nevertheless, bigger and neighboring municipalities were contacted as well and their insights were appreciated and valuable. Overall, the fact that six out of eight interviewed municipalities contacted external parties also supports this and shows that the municipalities found ways to eradicate challenges they struggled with through the means of (informal) intermunicipal cooperation and other external parties.

4.6 The influence of election combination

The last hypothesis focuses on the organizational aspect of the referendum. The assumption is that the combination of the referendum with a generally scheduled election, if possible, is preferable because it leads to fewer challenges with the organization of the referendum. The idea is that the municipalities profit from the parallel structures and have fewer challenges related to their resources. Although this assumption seems reasonable, in reality, the municipalities refuted it vehemently. According to them, the election combination was much more challenging than having the referendum election alone, and municipalities that did not combine the referendum election with another election because it was not possible did not see any advantage in the election combination. All fifteen interviewees said they would prefer a single election for the referendum because of the disadvantages of a combined election (cf. Figure 13).

Further, a point that was not discussed in the theoretical expectations but came up often during the interviews is the preference of the local administrations for having only postal votes in the referendum election. For the administrations, this has many advantages. They need fewer voluntary personnel and resources for the election because there are no polling stations and in smaller municipalities the administrative staff is often enough to count the votes; thus, no volunteers are needed. This also reduces the costs of the municipalities. Therefore, municipalities often have a passage in their referendum statute that referendum elections will be organized via postal votes, which is why this topic was discussed often during the interviews. Five officials mentioned that their municipality had such a postal vote passage in their

referendum statute, and one official explained that his local administration had wished for a postal election.

But this is not possible when the referendum election is combined with another election because these cannot be organized allowing only postal votes, which is why this topic was discussed significantly less by people from municipalities with a combined election, namely only once. One reason why interviewees prefer the referendum election to be single is the advantages of a postal vote. In like manner to the postal vote, a single election reduces the workload of the local administrations to a certain extent as the double structures of a combined election challenge the employees of the administrations and further reduce their available work time. While the combined election has some advantages, it challenges the personnel of the administrations in terms of time and their expertise due to the differing legal frameworks of the elections. Another reason the local administrators prefer a single election is that the election combination does not reduce the costs of the administration.

*Figure 13: Election combination advantages and disadvantages by election type*
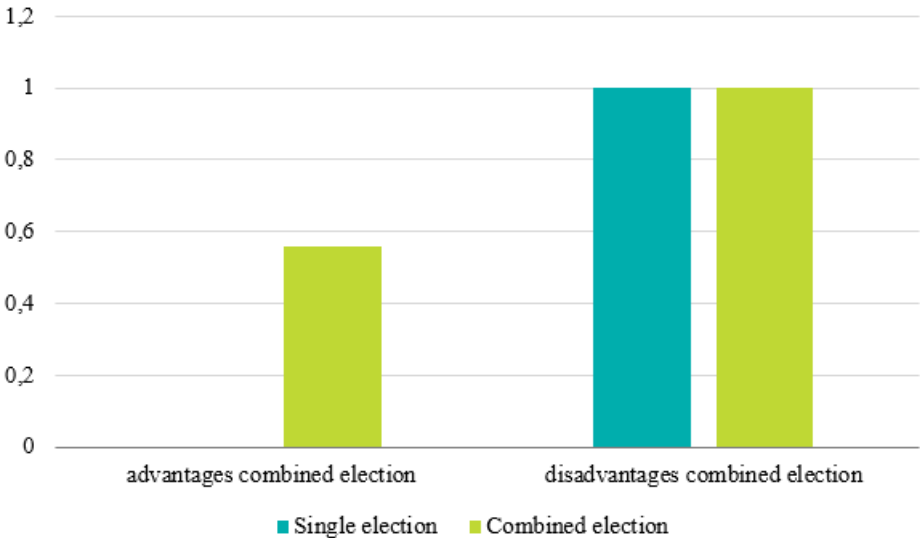


Note: The values of the indices are derived from adding the code count average of the group of selected municipalities and then dividing it by the number of codes of the index.

*"No, the reimbursement costs, we received significantly fewer reimbursement costs than we would otherwise have received, because we let it take place at the same time [e.g., the referendum with an election]. For the taxpayer as a whole, it may have been a bit cheaper, but now for [our town], that is to say for us in isolation, it was more expensive because we only received half the reimbursement" (Interviewee AU).*

As stated in the quote, the municipalities do not profit cost-wise from the election combination and are thus, next to other reasons, reluctant to combine the referendum election with another election. A further reason against the election combination is the confusion it creates for the voters. Firstly, the electorate of the referendum often differs from the electorate of the other election in terms of voting age and eligibility[7]. This creates "*a special challenge for the election workers. In rare cases, the voters seemed to have been overwhelmed by the large number of ballot papers and documents*" (Interviewee NE). The interviewees often gave the example of the federal election 2021, which in Berlin was combined with a referendum and where many challenges occurred and things went wrong (Heidtmann, 2021). They do not want to experience this in their own municipality. And indeed, mistakes also happened in municipalities where elections were combined: "*And that's what we saw when we were counting in the evening, that sometimes a ballot paper from the referendum was in the envelope of the federal election and vice versa. So maybe there's another disadvantage why you shouldn't combine it with an election. This is very complicated for the citizens and they basically invalidate their vote*" (Interviewee CB).

Yet, municipalities that combined the referendum election with another election also saw advantages, especially from a political point of view. The main argument for combining the referendum with other elections is the higher turnout.

"*The only advantage, and that's why it's the way it is, one can say openly, is the political perspective. The advantage is that you naturally have a very high quorum. There was a high turnout because it was linked to the election, which has the highest turnout in Germany [e.g., the federal election]. I guess if we would have made a pure postal voting out of it or had done that on another, separate date we would have had a completely different voting quorum, although the result might have been the same*" (Interviewee AU).

Besides the political advantage, the election combination is also beneficial for the voters who have no experience with postal voting or prefer to vote in person. As explained, without the combination with another election, the referendum election is often organized via postal voting which inevitably leads to problems. Suddenly, the entire electorate is expected to vote via postal voting and although the amount of voting via postal votes has risen with each election in Germany in recent years (cf. Der Bundeswahlleiter, 2021), these numbers vary between about a third and a half of the electorate. When 100 percent of the electorate has to vote via postal voting, the error rate is likely to be high. "*There are always people who get it wrong. That was the case with every election*" (Interviewee DV), as Interviewee DV says. He further explains

that there are always people refusing to sign the affirmation in lieu of an oath or who do it wrongly. These people thus can profit from the in-person voting possible during election combinations (or in municipalities with in-person voting for referendum elections). The only other argument for the election combination stated in the interviews by two people is that no extra volunteers needed to be recruited because they were already recruited for the general election.

*Figure 14: Referendum challenges by election type*
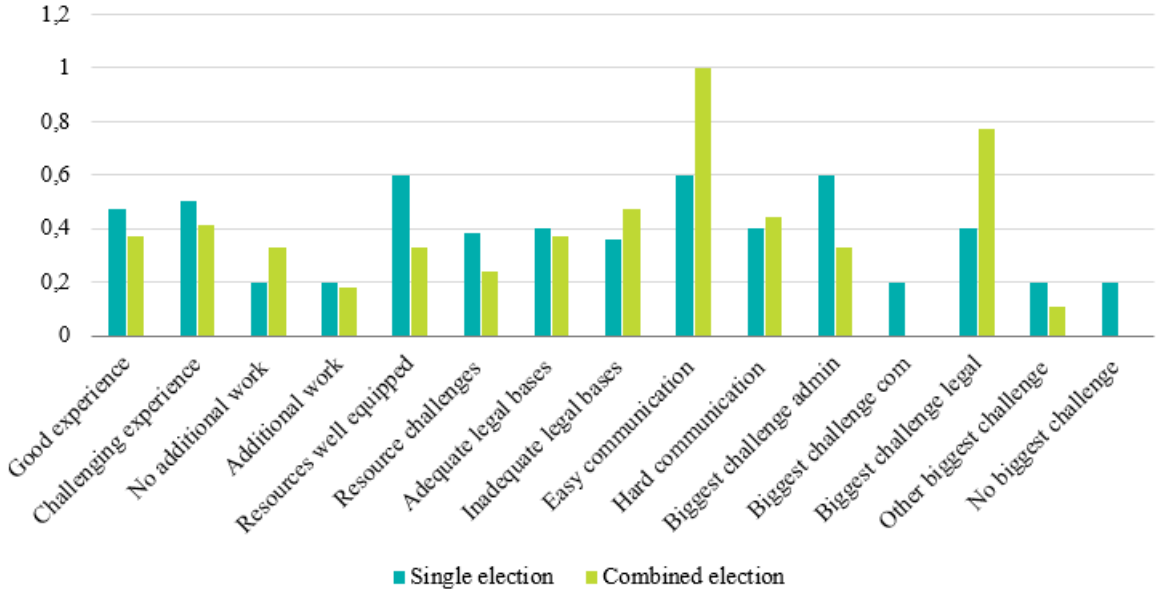


Note: The values of the indices are derived from adding the code count average of the group of selected municipalities and then dividing it by the number of codes of the index.

When comparing the challenges of the municipalities that combined the referendum election with the municipalities with a single election, it is evident that these few election combination advantages also influenced their challenges (cf. Figure 14). Municipalities that combined the referendum election with another election had a less challenging experience than municipalities with a single election, and they also had less work and fewer challenges related to their resources. Nevertheless, the election combination led to more challenges than a single election in other areas like the legal framework and the citizen communication. Reasons for that are the different electorates and the confusion the combined election creates among the citizens. On the one hand, the citizen communication was very easy for the local administrations that combined the election, but on the other hand, they also struggled more with it than administrations with a single election. This reflects the challenge of communicating two different elections understandably with the citizens.

*Figure 15: Referendum experience by election type*
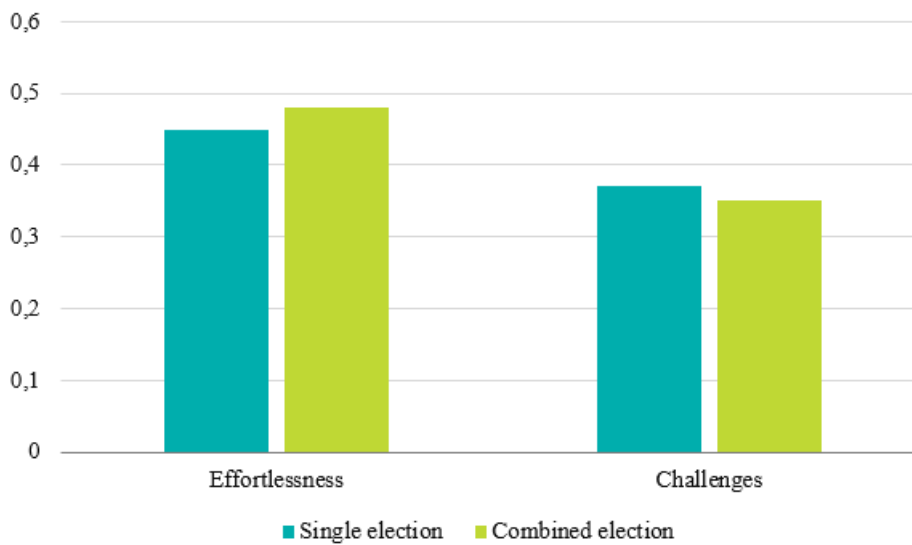


Note: Effortlessness = indices good experience + no additional work + resources well equipped + adequate legal bases + easy communication divided by five
Challenges = indices challenging experience + additional work + resource challenges + inadequate legal bases + hard communication divided by five

The aggregated referendum experience (see Figure 15) shows that too. The municipalities with a combined election had fewer challenges and referendum organization was easier for them than for the municipalities having a single election for the referendum. However, compared to the findings of the other hypotheses, the differences between the two groups of this hypothesis, the municipalities with a single election and the ones with a combined election, are small. This reflects the findings discussed in the paragraphs above. Even though generally, there seem to be almost no differences between the two election versions concerning the amount of challenges and effortlessness in the organization of the referendum, there are differences in the nature of challenges the municipalities experience in the organization of either election version. Hence, all in all, the last hypothesis about the election combination has to be rejected. While there are advantages of combining the referendum election with another, generally scheduled election and the municipalities have fewer challenges in many areas too; it became apparent during the interviews and through the stated disadvantages that the combination of the elections does not decrease the organizational challenges of the municipalities. The clear preference for a single election among the interviewees speaks for itself. Although biases of the interviewees may influence this preference because Figure 15 shows that municipalities with combined elections faced fewer challenges, the consensus of the interviewees on this topic speaks for itself and one has to keep in mind that the interviews only give a small impression and of course do not cover everything.

In summary, the interviews' data confirm the first two hypotheses, hypotheses 3a and 3b are partially confirmed, and the last hypothesis is rejected. This means that the size of the municipality and the referendum experience they have reduce the challenges they face in the organization of referendums. However, the experience of neighboring and big municipalities only reduces the challenges of municipalities to a certain extent. As the results show, other municipalities with more recent referendum experience or third parties are actually the more valuable sources in case of questions and support for the municipalities facing challenges. Lastly, the interviewees rejected the hypothesis that combining the referendum election with another election leads to fewer challenges in the organization of referendums. Although they see advantages and the results show that in some areas, they encounter fewer challenges, on the whole, the disadvantages of the election combination outweigh these.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

This final chapter will answer the stated research question by discussing the findings of the interviews and the analysis of the five formulated hypotheses. Thereafter it explains the possible implications of this research. Besides the main results, this chapter also aims to deliberate the limitations of this research to encourage other scholars for further research to fill the current research gap by further enhancing the understanding of the influence the organization of referendums has on local administrations.

This thesis aimed to explain the differences in the amount and nature of challenges in organizing referendums between municipalities. In addressing this, the research aimed to find out whether the size of a municipality, the referendum experience of a municipality, the referendum experience of neighboring municipalities or big municipalities, and the combination of the referendum with another election influence the amount and nature of the challenges the municipalities face while organizing referendums. To test this, five hypotheses were formulated and analyzed. For the analysis, eight municipalities from North Rhine-Westphalia with a referendum between 2018 and 2021 and conforming with the different factors like municipal size or election combination were selected, and fifteen semi-structured interviews with officials of the municipalities´ administrations were conducted. The interviewees were the officials responsible for the organization of the referendum and they offered valuable insights about their experience for the research because they gave insights

beyond the questions about the challenges expected based on past research. The interviews were then coded and the results were used to confirm or reject the formulated hypotheses.

A first result of this research is that the challenges the municipalities face in the organization of referendums confirm the theoretical expectations largely as most of the stated assumptions were met. Still, further challenges were determined. The identified challenges can be grouped into four categories: regulatory, communication, administrative, and further challenges. The regulatory challenges are related to the NRW regulation on referendums, updating the municipal referendum statute, and designing the voting booklet and the voting slip. The communication challenges are explaining the process to the citizens and hence increasing the citizens' knowledge about the procedure and the referendum topic. The administrative challenges are comprised of the lack of resources. These resources include the finances, personnel, time, and expertise of the local administrations and their employees. In comparison, the last category, "further challenges", focuses on challenges related to the election of the referendum, specifically the lack of necessary volunteers for the election day. Some municipalities said that this was their biggest challenge during the organization of the referendum, but a challenge like this was not expected based on the theoretical framework. Further challenges not anticipated based on the revision of existing research are the challenges the local administrations faced in designing the voting booklet and the voting slip. However, based on the work of other scholars, one challenge was expected that was not confirmed in the interviews, and that is that the administrations´ employees struggle with staying neutral during the referendum process when they also have, as part of the administration, a specific opinion about the referendum topic. All in all, though, the interviews show that the municipalities encounter many of the expected challenges.

Concerning the influence of the municipal size on the challenges, the analysis shows that bigger municipalities face fewer and different challenges than smaller ones. Therefore, hypothesis one is confirmed by the data. This means first of all that bigger municipalities seem to be more effective in organizing referendums (Denters et al., 2014; Ladner & Bühlmann, 2007; Reingewertz & Serritzlew, 2019). This mainly concerns challenges related to the legal framework of referendums as the cities faced fewer challenges linked to this than the small and middle towns. The cities were much better at dealing with the legal bases and thought they were much more adequate than the smaller municipalities. Moreover, they thought they were well-equipped resource-wise as well while the other municipalities did not think so. Nevertheless, all municipalities share the administrative challenges of having too little personnel and time

during the organization of their referendum. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the smaller municipalities experienced the referendum more often as good which reinforces Denters et al.´s (2014) argument that in smaller municipalities, the relationship between the citizens, the administration, and the politicians is closer than in cities which makes the referendum experience better for the administration. In effect, this creates the trade-off between efficiency and democracy in the cities and smaller municipalities (Reingewertz & Serritzlew, 2019). Furthermore, this supports the argument of the first hypothesis while adding a new dimension to it. Smaller municipalities might have certain advantages in organizing referendums due to their size. Nonetheless, big municipalities face fewer challenges during the organization of referendums.

The second hypothesis focused on the influence the amount of referendum experience has on the challenges the municipalities face. Existing research shows that feedback and learning are nowadays core mechanisms of public administration (Peters & Pierre, 2016). However, there is a research gap concerning the local administrations' performance. Often the focus is on the political actors and the citizens in referendum evaluation reports (cf. Gabriel & Quast, 2007; Nelle & Ertelt, 2019; Perry & Hackenbroch, 2017; Vetter, 2018; Wiegandt & Lobeck, 2020). Still, this research assumed that the local administrations also review their referendum experience to learn from it. More referendum experience is thus expected to lead to fewer challenges due to the learning process. The data confirm this hypothesis. The more experience the municipalities have with referendums, the less challenging the experience is for them. Furthermore, they are better-equipped resource-wise, the legal framework is easier to understand and implement, and the communication with the citizens is easier for them. Still, the municipalities without referendum experience profit from their election experience because of the similarities. Thus, they can transfer some of the knowledge to reduce the challenges. Nevertheless, referendums are not the same as normal elections, and the more experience the municipalities have with referendums, the better. As one interviewee said, more experience reduces the sources of error and makes the process more natural.

Two hypotheses were formulated regarding the effect other municipalities´ experience has on challenges that municipalities face. The first of these two hypotheses focuses on the influence of neighboring municipalities' experiences, while the second concentrates on big municipalities. These expectations are based on the theories of intermunicipal cooperation. IMCs can have many different forms, but as elections are not a typical policy area of intermunicipal cooperation, the cooperation is informal, and reciprocation is not expected (Bel

& Warner, 2015; Blair & Janousek, 2013; Klok, Boogers, et al., 2018; Klok, Denters, et al., 2018). If municipalities ask other municipalities about their referendum experience, this is voluntary and unofficial; it supports colleagues across municipal borders because this is not intended officially and legally. Yet, the analysis shows that many municipalities appreciate the exchange with other municipalities and external parties. Seventy-five percent of the municipalities contacted external parties and other municipalities with challenges or questions about their referendum. Still, hypotheses 3a and 3b can only be partially confirmed because although municipalities profit from others´ experiences, they select these external parties more systematically than expected. Instead of contacting the municipalities closest to them, they choose the ones with the most recent experience or the external parties with the relevant expertise for the referendum topic or a certain challenge. While neighboring municipalities are still valuable support sources, only one municipality contacted a city with questions. Therefore, the theoretical expectations about IMC in referendums are fulfilled, but the cooperation partners differ from the expectations.

The last hypothesis concentrated on the combination of the referendum with other elections. It is expected that the combination of the referendum election with other, generally scheduled elections leads to fewer challenges in the organization of referendums. The expectation is based on municipalities' limited resources and that local administrations must find ways to make the most out of them to avoid a governance failure (Peters & Pierre, 2016). Hence, having two elections on the same date could decrease challenges and resources because the same structures are being used. While this makes sense in theory, the analyzed data from the interviews suggested otherwise, leading to the rejection of the hypothesis. The interviewees strongly indicated that they do not prefer to combine the elections because it makes everything more stressful for them, and they do not see any advantages to an election combination. Instead, they prefer to organize the referendum election via a postal vote because this reduces the local administrations´ challenges and necessary resources. Yet, the analysis also shows that there are indeed a few advantages to the election combination despite what the interviewees said. Those municipalities that combined their elections had fewer challenges linked to their resources and experienced the referendum as less challenging. This shows that not all was as bad as the interviewees thought. But even though this is the case, the municipalities having a single election for their referendum had fewer challenges with the citizen communication and the regulatory framework than the municipalities with a combined election. Henceforth, the hypothesis is rejected despite some advantages of a combined election.

To conclude, the answer to the established research question is that the municipal size, the referendum experience, the support of external parties, and the combination of the election date explain differences in the amount and nature of challenges between municipalities in organizing referendums. The analysis shows apparent differences between the municipalities when they are grouped into their respective groups corresponding to the hypotheses. Therefore, the above stated factors influence the challenges the municipalities experience. This answer is not unexpected because the results mostly confirm the expectations regarding these factors as stated based on the work of other scholars, although not all hypotheses were confirmed (fully). The conclusion of this research is hence that there is an effect of the variables on the challenges the municipalities face in organizing referendums, but it is not always as expected.

Thereupon, this research generated interesting and valuable insights into the referendum experiences of local administrations in North-Rhine Westphalia. These findings not only fill the research gap about local administrations as referendum actors in the scholarly literature, but they also show the importance of the administrations in the referendum process. They are responsible for doing it right; otherwise, the referendum will not work and might become invalid. While this is common knowledge, the focus of scholars has typically been on the other referendum actors, citizens and politicians. Hence, this research adds the findings about the administrations as referendum actors to the scholarly debate, but it also identifies further or updated challenges the local administrations potentially face in the organization of referendums. One example is the theoretical expectation based on the work of Andreas Kost (2010) that many municipalities do not have a referendum statute. This research shows that the municipalities have a referendum statute, but it needs to be updated to suit the demands of all referendum actors. Consequently, this research adds many important insights to the academic debate about local referendums in Germany.

Furthermore, the findings have practical implications for policy makers. The municipalities' main challenges have been identified as well as the factors influencing them. While some challenges, like the lack of financial resources, cannot be easily reduced, others can be resolved, like the regulatory challenges linked to the voting booklet and voting slip. For example, more information, templates, and instructions about how to design the voting booklet could be provided to reduce the challenges related to it. However, this cannot be done at the municipal level and would have to be regulated at the state level. This will make organizing referendums easier for the local administrations, and it would even the playing field between them so that the differences in the amount and nature of the organizational challenges of

referendums would be reduced. Or the Association of Towns and Municipalities NRW could offer templates for the municipalities as well as other supporting documents. These could be designed and written with the help of municipalities using the factors identified in this research as selection criteria for the municipalities. Another reform option for the policy makers would be to establish formal intermunicipal cooperation for referendums and elections in their districts. This would allow them to design templates for the voting booklet together and help with other challenges like regulatory challenges, citizen communication, or getting enough volunteers for the election. Generally, it would be an exchange about the administrations' lessons from their referendum experience. This is one of the main lessons to take from this research. While more official guidelines and support at the state level would help the municipalities in reducing the challenges they encounter when organizing referendums, more exchange between the municipalities at the local level would be beneficial for the administrations facing a referendum and it would be easy for policy makers to set up a forum for this. Thus, this is an evident recommendation for policy makers.

*Limitations*

So, this study contributes not only to supporting and contradicting existing theories but also to the discussions at the societal level. However, despite this study's new insights, a few reservations apply. Therefore, the results must be interpreted with caution because several limitations should be considered.

First, the selection of eight municipalities is relatively small because of the scope of this thesis. Including more municipalities in the analysis would, conversely, better show the differences in the challenges between the municipalities. Additionally, more units of analysis would make the sampling more accurate, and hence, the results would be more representative of all municipalities in North-Rhine Westphalia. Furthermore, including more municipalities in the analysis would show whether the results of some municipalities in this research could be considered to be outliers as some results were unexpected.

The second limitation is also related to the time and scope of this thesis. Due to this, five possible explanatory factors were included in the analysis, but more factors likely influence the differences in the amount and nature of the challenges in organizing referendums between municipalities. These factors could be related to the topic of the referendums or to the other actors of a referendum, the initiators, the citizens, and the local politicians. Depending on how these different groups of people interact with each other and the local administration and the

complexity of the referendum topic, it is probable that additional challenges for the administrations emerge. Similarly, the factors included in the analysis could be studied on a smaller level. To explain, the size of the municipality could be analyzed by focusing on the size of its population as well as on the number of people in the administration responsible for the referendum. One would expect these two numbers to be in relation to each other, but they do not have to be. Another example is the experience of the municipalities. This explanatory factor could be sharpened by including the referendum experience of the responsible officials in the analysis, as this influences the challenges too.

Lastly, the employed research design also leads to some limitations. The interviews offer interesting insights into the referendum experience of the employees of local administrations. But in order to compare these subjective experiences with each other, the qualitative data was transformed into quantitative data through the construction of the indices. It is possible that this transformation led to a loss of significant information or that this information has been somewhat devalued because of the index creation. Therefore, grouping the different codes together into several categories to create the indices can be debated because it might have misconstrued the data or been biased. Moreover, the basis of the qualitative data, the semi-structured interviews, can be a source of bias. This bias could derive from both the researcher as well as the interviewees (Diefenbach, 2009), but this bias could then be reinforced by the transformation into quantitative data in categories.

*Suggestions for future research*

The results and the limitations of this research lead to some suggestions and considerations for further research. While the results clearly indicate that the chosen explanatory factors influence the difference in the amount and nature of the challenges in organizing referendums between municipalities, including more factors in the analysis could offer more depth to the findings and make the results more representative. These factors could focus on the differences between in-person and postal elections or be more detailed on the accompanying tasks of referendums like the voting booklet and the formulation of the referendum question. This would add more information about these topics which were only briefly touched upon in this research. The same counts for including more municipalities in the study as it would make the findings more valid. Future research should thus consider including more possible factors, municipalities, or maybe even both. This could also be done using different methods like a survey or by including the other referendum actors as units of analysis. Likewise, these research designs could increase the validity and representativeness of the findings. At the same time, this research has already

somewhat filled the research gap about the challenges municipalities face when organizing referendums by identifying that the size of the municipality, its referendum experience, the support of external parties, and the way the election day is organized influence these challenges. This is very valuable for studies and discussions about referendums and future research can therefore build on this and add a further dimension to it. By doing this, future research will further fill the research gap about local administrations as actors in referendums, but equally important, it will also inform the public about the essential role municipalities have in referendums and hence make society more understanding of the challenges that come up in the referendum process.

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# 7. Appendix

Appendix A: Interview questions for the municipal employees

| Topic | Questions in English | Questions in German |
|---|---|---|
| The referendum | 1. Could you briefly summarize the referendum and its topic? Who has initiated the referendum? | 1. Könnten Sie den Bürgerentscheid und das Thema kurz zusammenfassen? Wer hat den Bürgerentscheid initiiert? |
| | 2. How was the referendum experience for you? | 2. Wie war die Erfahrung des Bürgerentscheids für Sie? |
| | 3. Were there any difficulties or additional work caused by the (last) referendum? | 3. Gab es Schwierigkeiten oder Mehraufwand durch den (letzten) Bürgerentscheid? |
| | 4. Did you combine the referendum vote with a regular election on one date? | 4. Haben Sie die Abstimmung des Bürgerentscheids mit einer regulären Wahl an einem Datum kombiniert? |
| | *If yes, then:* 5. a) Do you think that combining voting with elections was more convenient for you? *If no, then:* 5. b) Do you think combining the vote with an election would have been more convenient for you? | *Wenn ja, dann:* 5. a) Denken Sie, dass dieses Zusammenlegen der Abstimmung mit der Wahl für Sie praktischer war? *Wenn nein, dann:* 5. b) Denken Sie, dass ein Zusammenlegen der Abstimmung mit einer Wahl für Sie praktischer gewesen wäre? |
| The experiences | 6. Do you already have experience in organizing referendums? | 6. Haben Sie bereits Erfahrung mit der Organisation von Bürgerentscheiden? |
| | *If yes, then:* 7.a) Was this experience helpful for the organization? *If no, then:* 7.b) Would more experience have helped with the organization? | *Wenn ja, dann:* 7.a) War diese Erfahrung bei der Organisation hilfreich? *Wenn nein, dann:* 7.b) Wäre mehr Erfahrung bei der Organisation hilfreich gewesen? |
| | 8. Have you asked external parties (e.g. consultants, other municipalities) for support with the organization? *If yes, which?* | 8. Haben Sie Externe (z.B. Berater, andere Kommunen) um Unterstützung bei der Organisation gebeten? *Wenn ja, welche?* |
| | *If yes, then:* 9. a) Did this exchange help you organize your referendum? *If no, then:* | *Wenn ja, dann:* 9. a) Hat Ihnen dieser Austausch bei der Organisation Ihres Bürgerentscheids geholfen? *Wenn nein, dann:* |

| | 9.b) Would this external support have helped you? | 9. b) Hätte Ihnen diese externe Unterstützung geholfen? |
|---|---|---|
| The challenges | 10. Do you think your municipality was well equipped in terms of resources (e.g. staff, expertise, etc.) for the organization of the referendum? | 10. Glauben Sie, dass Ihre Gemeinde hinsichtlich der Ressourcen (z. B. Personal, Fachwissen usw.) für die Organisation des Bürgerentscheides gut ausgestattet war? |
| | 11. Has the referendum led to challenges in the administration with regard to (lack of) resources (e.g. financial resources, staff, expertise, time)? | 11. Hat der Bürgerentscheid zu Herausforderungen in der Verwaltung bezüglich der (mangelnden) Ressourcen (z. B. finanzielle Mittel, Personal, Expertise, Zeit) geführt? |
| | 12. Did you have any additional/other administrative challenges? | 12. Gab es bei Ihnen zusätzliche/andere administrative Herausforderungen? |
| The legal bases | 13. In your opinion, was the legal basis (Bürgerentscheid DVO 2004) sufficient or was something missing (e.g. information regarding the voting booklet)? | 13. War die rechtliche Grundlage (Bürgerentscheid DVO 2004) Ihrer Meinung nach ausreichend oder fehlte Ihnen etwas (z.B. Informationen bezüglich Abstimmungsheft)? |
| | 14. Did you create a statute for the implementation of the referendum or did you already have one?<br><br>*If a new statute, then:*<br>a. Did you use the statutes of other municipalities as a basis when drawing up your statute? | 14. Haben Sie für den Bürgerentscheid eine Satzung zur Durchführung erstellt oder hatten Sie bereits eine?<br><br>*Wenn erst seit kurzem eine Satzung, dann:*<br>a. Haben Sie sich bei der Erstellung der Satzung an Satzungen von anderen Kommunen orientiert? |
| | 15. Have you encountered any additional/other legal challenges? | 15. Sind bei Ihnen zusätzliche/andere legale Herausforderungen aufgetreten? |
| Communication | 16. Was it difficult for you to communicate the process and the background of the referendum with the citizens in a way that was easy for them to understand? Especially when considering that as many citizens as possible have to vote? | 16. War es schwierig für Sie den Ablauf und die Hintergründe des Bürgerentscheids einfach verständlich mit den Bürger*innen zu kommunizieren? Auch, wenn man bedenkt das möglichst viele Bürger*innen abstimmen müssen? |
| | *If yes, then:*<br>17. a) Why exactly was it difficult?<br><br>*If no, then:*<br>17. b) Why was it not difficult? | *Wenn ja, dann:*<br>17. a) Warum genau war es schwierig?<br><br>*Wenn nein, dann:*<br>17. b) Warum war es nicht schwierig? |

| | 18. As an administration, you may have had an opinion/point of view on the subject of the referendum. Was it difficult for you to manage the balancing act between general, neutral communication and communicating your point of view to the citizens? | 18. Bezüglich des Themas des Bürgerentscheids hatten Sie als Verwaltung vielleicht eine Meinung/einen Standpunkt. War es schwierig für Sie den Spagat zwischen der allgemeinen, neutralen Kommunikation und der Kommunikation Ihres Standpunkts mit den Bürger*innen zu schaffen? |
|---|---|---|
| | 19. Have you experienced further/other communication challenges? | 19. Haben Sie weitere/andere Kommunikationsherausforderungen erlebt? |
| Concluding question | 20. What was the biggest challenge for you in organizing the referendum? | 20. Was war für Sie die größte Herausforderung bei der Organisation des Referendums? |
| | 21. Is there anything else on the subject of referendums that has not been addressed yet but is important to you? | 21. Gibt es noch etwas zum Thema Bürgerentscheide, dass bis jetzt nicht angesprochen wurde, Ihnen aber wichtig ist? |

Appendix B: The selected municipalities (elaborate version)

| | Previous experience[11] | Experience of others | | Election combination[12] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cities (2)** | | **Neighbors´ experience** | **Close cities´ experience** | |
| Bonn 2020 | 2x | | Köln (0) Düsseldorf (3) | - |
| Mülheim a. d. R. 2018 | 3x | | Duisburg (3) Oberhausen (2) Essen (6) Düsseldorf (3) | - |
| **Middle towns (4)** | | | | |
| Werne 2021 | 1x | Schwerte (2) Holzwickede (1) Lünen (1) Unna (1) <br><br> Of 9 neighboring municipalities | Dortmund (0) Hamm (2) | - |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Halle (Westf.) 2021 | - | Versmold (3) Rietberg (2) Schloß Holte-Stukenbrock (2) Gütersloh (1) Rheda-Wiedenbrück (1) Steinhagen (1) <br><br> Of 12 neighboring municipalities | Bielefeld (1) Münster (6) | Federal election 2021 |
| Dülmen 2020 | 1x | Coesfeld (2) Nottuln (2) Havixbeck (1) Olfen (1) <br><br> Of 10 neighboring municipalities | Münster (6) Dortmund (0) | Local election 2020 |
| Schloß Holte-Stukenbrock 2019 | 1x | Versmold (3) Rietberg (2) Gütersloh (1) Rheda-Wiedenbrück (1) Steinhagen (1) <br><br> Of 12 neighboring municipalities | Bielefeld (1) Münster (6) | - |
| **Small towns (4)** | | | | |
| Bad Münstereifel 2021 | - | Zülpich (2) Euskirchen (1) Hellenthal (1) <br><br> Of 10 neighboring municipalities | Bonn (3) Köln (0) | - |
| Hövelhof 2020 | - | Paderborn (4) Altenbeken (2) Büren (1) Delbrück (1) <br><br> Of 9 neighboring municipalities | Bielefeld (1) Hamm (2) | Federal election 2021 |
| Schermbeck 2020 | 1x | Dinslaken (1) Hamminkeln (1) Rheinberg (1) Voerde (1) <br><br> Of 12 neighboring municipalities | Düsseldorf (3) Dortmund (0) | - |
| Kirchlengern 2019 | 1x | Enger (2) Bünde (1) Herford (1) Spenge (1) <br><br> Of 8 neighboring municipalities | Bielefeld (1) Paderborn (4) | - |

Appendix C: Codebook

1. **Referendum_topic**: When an interviewee describes the topic and background of the referendum.

| Code | When to use |
|---|---|
| Referendum_topic (economic project) | When the referendum can be categorized as concerning an economic project |
| Referendum_topic (traffic project) | When the referendum can be categorized as concerning a traffic project |
| Referendum_topic (public social and educational institution) | When the referendum can be categorized as concerning a public social and educational institution |
| Referendum_topic (public infrastructure and utilities) | When the referendum can be categorized as concerning public infrastructure and utilities |
| Referendum_topic (cultural project) | When the referendum can be categorized as concerning a cultural project |

2. **Referendum_initiator**: Who initiated the referendum process

| Code | When to use |
|---|---|
| Referendum_initiator (citizens) | When the referendum is initiated by citizens |
| Referendum_initiator (council) | When the referendum is initiated by the local council |

3. **Referendum_experience**: The codes to describe how the interviewees felt about the referendum experience

| Code | When to use |
|---|---|
| Referendum_experience (new) | When the municipality has experienced its first referendum |
| Referendum_experience (knowledge advantage) | When the interviewee says that previous experience has been or would have been useful |
| Referendum_experience (unfamiliar) | When the interviewee describes the referendum experience as something new for them in their line of work |
| Referendum_experience (challenging) | When the interviewee describes the referendum experience as challenging |
| Referendum_experience (short term) | When the interviewee describes the referendum experience as short term |
| Referendum_experience (good) | When the interviewee describes the referendum experience as good |
| Referendum_experience (additional work) | When the interviewee describes the referendum experience as additional work |
| Referendum_experience (stressful) | When the interviewee describes the referendum experience as stressful |
| Referendum_experience (interesting) | When the interviewee describes the referendum experience as interesting |

4. **Referendum_additional work**: Describes whether the municipalities and local administrations experienced any difficulties and additional work due to the referendum(s)

| Code | When to use |
| --- | --- |
| Referendum_additional work (personnel) | When the interviewee describes that additional work was required from the personnel or not enough (voluntary) personnel was available |
| Referendum_additional work (finances) | When the interviewee describes that the municipality was confronted with additional (unexpected) expenditures due to the referendum |
| Referendum_additional work (external service providers) | When the interviewee describes that the administration experienced additional work or difficulties because of problems related to external service providers |
| Referendum_additional work (statute) | When the interviewee describes any additional work related to the local referendum statute |
| Referendum_additional work (voting booklet) | When the interviewee describes any additional work related to the creation of the voting booklet |
| Referendum_additional work (none) | When the interviewee describes that there was no additional work or difficulties related to the referendum |

5. Referendum_election: Defines the interviewee´s information about the election

| Code | When to use |
| --- | --- |
| Referendum_election (date combination) | When the selected municipality combined the election date of the referendum with a regularly scheduled election |
| Referendum_election (date combination advantage) | When the interviewee talks about whether and how the combined election date has been or would have been advantageous |
| Referendum_election (date combination disadvantage) | When the interviewee talks about whether and how the combination of the elections has been or would have been disadvantageous |
| Referendum_election (postal vote) | When the interviewee talks about the referendum election and if it has been a postal vote |

6. **Experience external parties**: When the interviewee describes if external parties were asked for support with the organization of the referendum

| Code | When to use |
| --- | --- |
| Experience external parties (contact) | When the interviewee says that the selected municipality has been in contact with external parties about the referendum |

| Experience external parties (neighboring municipalities) | When the interviewee mentions that they talked to local administrators from neighboring communities about their experience with referendums |
|---|---|
| Experience external parties (bigger cities) | When the interviewee mentions that they talked to bigger cities from NRW about their experience with referendums |
| Experience external parties (other municipalities) | When the interviewee says that they talked to other, non-neighboring municipalities |
| Experience external parties (other external parties) | When the interviewee mentions that other, non-local administration parties were asked for support |
| Experience external parties (helpful) | When the interviewee says that the support of external parties has been or would have been helpful |
| Experience external parties (support) | When the interviewee describes how the external parties were supporting them |

7. **Challenges resources**: Defines any challenge related to the administration´s resources

| Code | When to use |
|---|---|
| Challenges resources (well equipped) | When the interviewee says that their municipality was well equipped in terms of resources for the organization of the referendum |
| Challenges resources (administration) | When the interviewee says that there were challenges in their administration related to their resources |
| Challenges resources (personnel) | When the administrative challenges are related to the personnel |
| Challenges resources (expertise) | When the administrative challenges are related to the expertise of the personnel |
| Challenges resources (time) | When the administrative challenges are related to time issues |
| Challenges resources (financial) | When the administrative challenges are related to financial issues |

8. **Legal bases**: Defines any challenges related to the legal bases of referendums

| Code | When to use |
|---|---|
| Legal bases (adequate) | When the interviewee describes the legal bases as adequate and sufficient |
| Legal bases (inadequate) | When the legal bases were inadequate and not sufficient according to the interviewee |
| Legal bases (voting booklet positive) | When the interviewee talks positively about the legal bases concerning the voting booklet |

| | |
|---|---|
| Legal bases (voting booklet negative) | When the interviewee talks negatively about the legal bases concerning the voting booklet |
| Legal bases (existing statute) | When the municipality already had a local statute for referendums |
| Legal bases (existing statute_updated) | When the municipality updated the existing local statute for referendums |
| Legal bases (new statute) | When the municipality designed a new statute for referendums |
| Legal bases (statute_external sources) | When the municipality used external sources as inspiration for their new/updated statute for referendums |

9. **Communication**: Defines any challenges related to the communication with citizens about the referendum

| Code | When to use |
|---|---|
| Communication (citizens_easy) | When the interviewee talks about how the communication about the referendum with the citizens was easy |
| Communication (citizens_hard) | When the interviewee talks about how the communication about the referendum with the citizens was hard and/or challenging |
| Communication (administration view) | When the interviewee talks about communicating the administration's point of view |
| Communication (personal view) | When the interviewee talks about the communication of their personal point of view |

10. **Biggest challenge**: The biggest challenge of organizing a referendum according to the interviewee

| Code | When to use |
|---|---|
| Biggest challenge (legal) | When the biggest challenge is identified as a legal challenge |
| Biggest challenge (administrative) | When the biggest challenge is identified as an administrative challenge |
| Biggest challenge (communication) | When the biggest challenge is identified as a communication challenge |
| Biggest challenge (other) | When the biggest challenge does not belong to either category |
| Biggest challenge (none) | When the interviewee does not identify a biggest challenge |

Appendix D: Density of the codes



| Code | Value |
|---|---|
| Referendum_topic (cultural project) | 1 |
| Referendum_topic (economic project) | 1 |
| Referendum_topic (traffic project) | 2 |
| Referendum_topic (public infrastructure and utilities) | 1 |
| Referendum_topic (public social and educational…) | 3 |
| Referendum_initiator (citizens) | 5 |
| Referendum_initiator (council) | 3 |
| Referendum_experience (additional work) | 13 |
| Referendum_experience (challenging) | 4 |
| Referendum_experience (good) | 2 |
| Referendum_experience (interesting) | 4 |
| Referendum_experience (knowledge advantage) | 13 |
| Referendum_experience (new) | 5 |
| Referendum_experience (short term) | 4 |
| Referendum_experience (stressful) | 5 |
| Referendum_experience (unfamiliar) | 5 |
| Referendum_additional work (none) | 1 |
| Referendum_additional work (finances) | 4 |
| Referendum_additional work (personnel) | 6 |
| Referendum_additional work (statute) | 1 |
| Referendum_additional work (voting booklet) | 3 |
| Referendum_additional work (external service providers) | 2 |
| Referendum_election (date combination) | 6 |
| Referendum_election (date combination advantage) | 4 |
| Referendum_election (date combination disadvantage) | 15 |
| Referendum_election (postal vote) | 6 |
| Experience external parties (contact) | 11 |
| Experience external parties (helpful) | 10 |
| Experience external parties (support) | 10 |
| Experience external parties (neighboring municipalities) | 5 |
| Experience external parties (bigger cities) | 3 |
| Experience external parties (other municipalities) | 6 |
| Experience external parties (other external parties) | 7 |
| Challenges resources (well equipped) | 5 |
| Challenges resources (administration) | 4 |
| Challenges resources (expertise) | 2 |
| Challenges resources (financial) | 8 |
| Challenges resources (personnel) | 8 |
| Challenges resources (time) | 7 |
| Legal bases (adequate) | 7 |
| Legal bases (inadequate) | 8 |
| Legal bases (existing statute) | 6 |
| Legal bases (existing statute_updated) | 11 |
| Legal bases (new statute) | 0 |
| Legal bases (statute_external sources) | 6 |
| Legal bases (voting booklet positive) | 2 |
| Legal bases (voting booklet negative) | 6 |
| Communication (citizens_easy) | 11 |
| Communication (citizens_hard) | 7 |
| Communication (administration view) | 12 |
| Communication (personal view) | 7 |
| Biggest challenge (administrative) | 9 |
| Biggest challenge (communication) | 2 |
| Biggest challenge (legal) | 8 |
| Biggest challenge (other) | 3 |
| Biggest challenge (none) | 1 |

Appendix E: Creation of the indices

| 1. Referendum experience | |
|---|---|
| *Good experience* | *Challenging experience* |
| - Referendum_experience (knowledge advantage) <br> - Referendum_experience (good) <br> - Referendum_experience (interesting) | - Referendum_experience (new) <br> - Referendum_experience (unfamiliar) <br> - Referendum_experience (challenging) <br> - Referendum_experience (short term) <br> - Referendum_experience (additional work) <br> - Referendum_experience (stressful) |
| 2. Referendum additional work | |
| *No additional work* | *Additional work* |
| - Referendum_additional work (none) | - Referendum_additional work (personnel) <br> - Referendum_additional work (finances) <br> - Referendum_additional work (external service providers) <br> - Referendum_additional work (statute) <br> - Referendum_additional work (voting booklet) |
| 3. Challenges resources | |
| *Resources well equipped* | *Resource challenges* |
| - Challenges resources (well equipped) | - Challenges resources (administration) <br> - Challenges resources (personnel) <br> - Challenges resources (expertise) <br> - Challenges resources (time) <br> - Challenges resources (financial) |
| 4. Legal bases | |
| *Adequate legal bases* | *Inadequate legal bases* |
| - Legal bases (adequate) <br> - Legal bases (existing statute) <br> - Legal bases (voting booklet positive) | - Legal bases (inadequate) <br> - Legal bases (voting booklet negative) <br> - Legal bases (existing statute_updated) <br> - Legal bases (new statute) <br> - Legal bases (statute_external sources) |