

Ex-post survey on the consequences and perceptions about amalgamation. The case of two Swiss municipalities*

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In 2006, two municipalities located in the canton of Fribourg (Switzerland), La Tour-de-Trême and Bulle, amalgamated. In this study, we report on the evolution of citizen perceptions as well as try to better understand the reasons behind the respondents various positions concerning this new political and territorial entity. Five-hundred individuals were surveyed almost four years after the amalgamation came into effect. Our results show that if the amalgamation was voted again, it would be necessary to be particularly attentive to citizen access to municipal offices and to local service provisions, to citizen identification to their municipality as well as to the life of the local associations. Indeed, these are clearly important issues for small localities. Furthermore, citizens of the newly amalgamated municipality are mostly sensitive to access to municipal offices and to contact with local representatives. Improving the population's perceptions of these particular issues could lead to a 12 percentage point increase in support for the amalgamation.

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En 2006, dos municipios ubicados en el cantón de Friburgo (Suiza), La Tour-de-Trême y Bulle, fueron fusionados. En este estudio, observamos la evolución de la percepción del nuevo ente por sus ciudadanos, así como también intentamos conocer las razones por las que los encuestados toman posiciones diferentes ante esta nueva entidad política y territorial. Quinientos nuevos ciudadanos fueron censados después de la entrada en vigor de la fusión. Nuestros resultados muestran que si la fusión fuese votada de nuevo, sería necesario poner particular atención al acceso de los

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ciudadanos a las oficinas municipales y a la provisión de servicios locales, para la correcta identificación del ciudadano con su municipio, así como también a las asociaciones locales. De hecho, estas son cuestiones importantes para las pequeñas localidades. Además, los ciudadanos del municipio recién fusionado, se muestran más sensibles al acceso a los órganos municipales y al contacto directo con los representantes locales. Mejorar la percepción de la población en estos ámbitos, podría conducir a un aumento del 12 por ciento en apoyo a la fusión.

Key words: survey, hypothetical referendum , citizen perceptions, amalgamation, municipalities, Switzerland

JEL classification: C93, D72 and H77

1. INTRODUCTION

For the last 30 years, amalgamation has been a fashionable topic in Switzerland and, indeed, many municipalities amalgamated during this time period. This article deals with citizen perceptions of this major institutional change at the local level. The aim of our research is to better identify the elements that influence citizen support for an amalgamation and to define how the local governmental could act “to reassure” the population. Our study is innovative in the sense that it aims at discovering, *a posteriori*, citizen attitude. This means that instead of investigating the expectations and fears of individuals before an amalgamation comes into effect, we measured citizen thoughts and reactions towards an amalgamation once its effects have had time to make an impact.

The empirical material is provided by the case of two Swiss municipalities, namely La Tour-de-Trême and Bulle, almost four years after their amalgamation gave birth to the “new municipality” of Bulle¹. These localities are both located in the canton of Fribourg² which is the Swiss canton that has experienced the largest number of municipal mergers over the last decades.

¹ In Bulle, the amalgamation project got through without opposition but in La Tour-de-Trême, a three times smaller locality, the loss of identity expressed by certain opponents led to a referendum in September 2004. Finally, it failed with 56,25% of votes in favour of the amalgamation and a little more than two years later, the amalgamation de facto came into force in January 2006

² Swiss cantons are institutionally the equivalent of states or regions in other countries.

In our survey, citizens of the localities of Bulle and La Tour-de-Trême were presented with the hypothetical scenario that they could be asked, almost four years after the amalgamation took place, if they would agree or not that the amalgamation should be implemented again. Our basic premise was that, after the amalgamation, citizens who are satisfied by the evolution of the local situation would be more likely to vote “yes”, if they were given the opportunity to re-voice their opinion. We then modelled respondents answers using as explanatory variables the same factors as those previous studies related to the individual’s “fears and expectations” before amalgamation. A simple probit regression allowed us to quantitatively measure the effects of these variables on the probability that a respondent would vote “yes”. Some variables had a detrimental effect on this probability when respondents judged that the situation had deteriorated because of amalgamation. For example, those respondents who considered that access to municipal offices had worsened following amalgamation would rather vote “no”. Eventually the estimated model enabled us to predict the outcome of the vote if all opinions had been positive (e.g. if all respondents had deemed that access to offices was improved). By so doing we were able to identify key situational issues that could ease the acceptance of future amalgamations and quantify their impact.

The paper is organised as follows: section two briefly reviews the existing literature on citizen opinion of municipal amalgamation; section 3 presents how the survey was conducted and the main features of the questionnaire; section 4 presents descriptive survey results. It includes the answer to the hypothetical referendum question and respondent judgement about the evolution of the situation after the amalgamation; section 5 models the influence of various explanatory variables on the hypothetical vote; section 6 uses the estimated model to simulate the vote if certain key variables would convey positive judgments about the amalgamation instead of negative judgment. We conclude the paper with policy recommendations for future amalgamation projects based on our findings. Previous literature on citizens opinion about amalgamation

2. PREVIOUS LITERATURE ON CITIZENS OPINION ABOUT AMALGAMATION

Despite the fact that amalgamation is a common phenomenon, academic studies on this subject are rare and especially those that focus on citizen perceptions (for pre-amalgamation studies on population opinion in Switzerland: see Soguel & Léchet, 2007; Soguel & Chatagny, 2007; Soguel, Léchet, Beutler & Chatagny, 2006; Soguel & Beutler, 2006). Usu-

ally, analyses are based on economic approaches and concerns about “optimal size”, economies of scale or internalization of externalities (See: Andrews & Boyne, 2009; Boyne, 1995; Dafflon, 2003a; Dafflon, 2003b; King, 1996) and, from a more political perspective, about the impact of locality size on democratic practices (See: Martins, 1995; Ostrom, Tiebout, & Warren, 1961; Swianiewicz, 2002).

As far as the canton of Fribourg is concerned, the cantonal government applied active incentive policies to press municipalities to amalgamate. According to Dafflon (2003a, p. 7) “almost half of all municipalities have a population of less than 400 inhabitants”³. Too small municipalities are not capable of managing or efficiently managing the tasks to which they are assigned (e.g. the management of schools, administration and especially big structures for which wide economies of scale are expected, such as the water distribution system or the water-treatment plants). Bulle being the central city of the Gruyère region, the possibility of internalizing lots of negative externalities was identified. Dafflon (2003b) came up with the idea of a “strong nucleus” (*noyau fort*) concerning the region including Bulle and La Tour-de-Trême among other localities. It was considered a region where cross-locality exchanges are frequent and therefore, citizen preferences were likely to be relatively homogeneous. In this way, it was believed that amalgamation would not create too many negative changes or problems because the public services supplied by municipalities are quite similar (Soguel & Léchet, 2001).

All these studies offer a vision of amalgamation as a benefit to the municipalities in question. Some reports have been written concerning the “fears and the expectations” of citizens (Soguel & Beutler, 2006; Soguel, Léchet, Beutler & Chatagny, 2006; Soguel & Léchet, 2007). However, these reports analyse the phenomenon only before amalgamation takes place. There is no equivalent body of research investigating these elements after mergers are implemented.

Kushner and Siegel’s (2001; 2003; 2005) Canadian studies are the closest to the one we carried out. To the best of our knowledge, no other study has been led in Europe or in Switzerland. A large part of the literature focuses on citizen perceptions concerning public services supplied by local authorities in general (see in particular: Stipak, 1977) or about the impact of borders (Poel, 2000).

³ Original French text: « presque la moitié des communes comptent une population inférieure à 400 habitants »

3. SURVEY AND QUESTIONNAIRE

The survey was administrated via telephone to 500 citizens of the municipality of Bulle, including both localities of Bulle and La Tour-de-Trême. It took place almost four years after the amalgamation and lasted two months, between 19 October and 11 December 2009. We chose to perform computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) for various reasons. First, it is relatively inexpensive compared to personally-conducted interview surveys and yet it is still possible to take the commentaries of the interviewees into account when, for instance, someone does not understand the question properly or refuses to respond to the questionnaire. This last point enabled us to have a better answer rate compared to mail or web surveys and gave our sample a greater representativeness. We also had to produce a relatively short questionnaire because it is known that after more than twenty minutes “the average respondent often finds it tiresome to be kept on the telephone [...], especially when the topic does not interest her/him” (Lavrakas, 2008, p. 250). Indeed, our questionnaire was constituted of only twenty-four closed-ended questions with three semi-open sub-questions about the vote’s motivation. As a result the median duration of the interview was about ten minutes.

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The target population was voters from the two localities who had been living there since at least 2006 (year of the amalgamation). To contact them we had at our disposal the electoral rolls which gave us the exhaustive lists of our target population. The sample was separated into two subsamples (250 individuals per subsample): voters living in La Tour-de-Trême and voters living in Bulle. We divided our sample in this way because even if La Tour-de-Trême is much smaller than Bulle we were interested in comparing the survey results between the two localities. We selected the respondents randomly from the electoral rolls provided by the municipal government⁴. The answer rate, determined from those individuals who answered the phone, was 63.5%. The rate was significantly smaller in Bulle (60.2%) where the amalgamation was less an issue than in La Tour-de-Trême (67.2%)⁵.

⁴ Since the electoral rolls do not include the phone numbers, we had to search for them in the phone book. Unfortunately not all the voters appear in the phone book. Approximately 30% of the selected individuals were not registered in the phone book.

⁵ N=789. Significant difference according to the chi-square test.

Even though the answer rate was quite high, our sample is still not totally representative of the target population. Indeed, academics, large income individuals and middle-aged citizens are over-represented. This could be due to many reasons, including the fact that the interviewers were university students. Nonetheless, the sample has possibly quite the same structure as the population of politically active individuals. Thus it offers perhaps an even better representation of individuals who might have a previous interest in the issue of municipal amalgamation. This raises the question as to why it would be much better to have a representative sample, increasing the risk of “false opinions” (“*fausses opinions*”) by, according to Bourdieu (1984), falsely postulating that everyone has an opinion on everything. One could conclude, as Gaxie has, that: “the more the opinion polls question representative samples about abstracted issues from the scope of the representation, the more the fraction of interrogated individuals equipped to answer decreases, the more artefacts are multiplied and the more the obtained answers are just appearances of opinion”⁶ (1990, p. 111).

As for the design of the questionnaire, the core was a closed-ended question based on a hypothetical scenario. The hypothetical referendum question was: “if the amalgamation was to be redone and a vote now organized, what would be your vote?” The respondents were then given the following reply propositions: (a) “Yes to the amalgamation”; (b) “No to the amalgamation”; (c) “You wouldn’t go to vote”.

Before being asked the core question, respondents were prompted to judge if the situation had improved, deteriorated or remained unchanged since the amalgamation took place. To widen the reference scale, when the respondent answered “improved” or “declined” the investigator asked them to specify if it had improved/declined significantly or only somewhat⁷. They had to make this statement for each of the ten following situational items: (1) access to municipal offices and to local service provisions, (2) attractiveness of the municipality, (3) contact with the local representatives, (4) citizen identification with their municipality, (5) cost of local services, (6) population interest in local politics, (7) bur-

⁶ Original French text: « plus les sondages d’opinion interrogent des échantillons représentatifs sur les problématiques abstraites des champs de la représentation, plus la fraction de personnes interrogées armées pour répondre diminue, plus les artefacts se multiplient et plus les réponses obtenues ne sont que des apparences d’opinion ».

⁷ This formulation is inspired by the questionnaire used by Siegel and Kushner (2005).

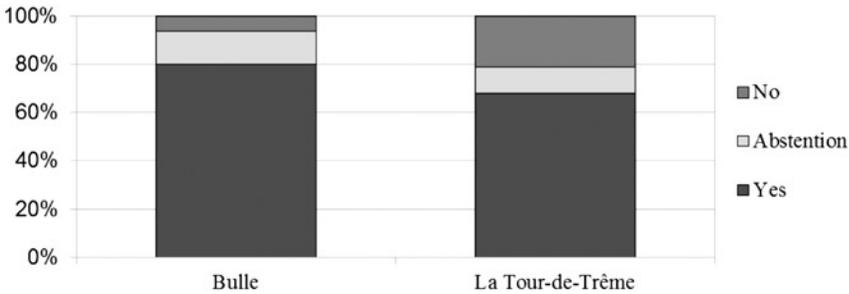
den of local taxes and levies, (8) weight of the municipality compared to the external environment, (9) overall quality of local service provisions and (10) life of the local associations⁸.

4. DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY RESULTS

4.1. ANSWER TO THE HYPOTHETICAL REFERENDUM QUESTION

As illustrated in Figure 1, 80.1% of survey respondents from the locality of Bulle said that they would still vote “yes” to the amalgamation compared to 68.0% in La Tour-de-Trême. The percentage of the respondents who would vote “no” amounted to 6.4% in Bulle compared to 21.2% in La Tour-de-Trême. The abstention rate would be slightly higher in the locality of Bulle (13.5% respectively 10.8%). The acceptance rate is significantly different between the two subsamples. However, a rather large majority exists in the two groups to support ex post the idea of an amalgamation between both localities.

Figure 1: Answer to the question about whether or not respondents would ex-post vote in favour of the amalgamation



N = 501; Significant difference according to the chi-square test)

4.2 JUDGMENT ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE SITUATION AFTER THE AMALGAMATION

Figure 2 presents the respondents’ judgement on the post-amalgamation evolution regarding ten considered issues. The evolution is deemed to having been positive regarding the issues located in the upper part of the table. The weight of the municipality, its attractiveness as well as the

⁸ Many of these items were adapted from Kushner & Siegel (2001); Soguel & Léchet (2007) and Stipak (1977).

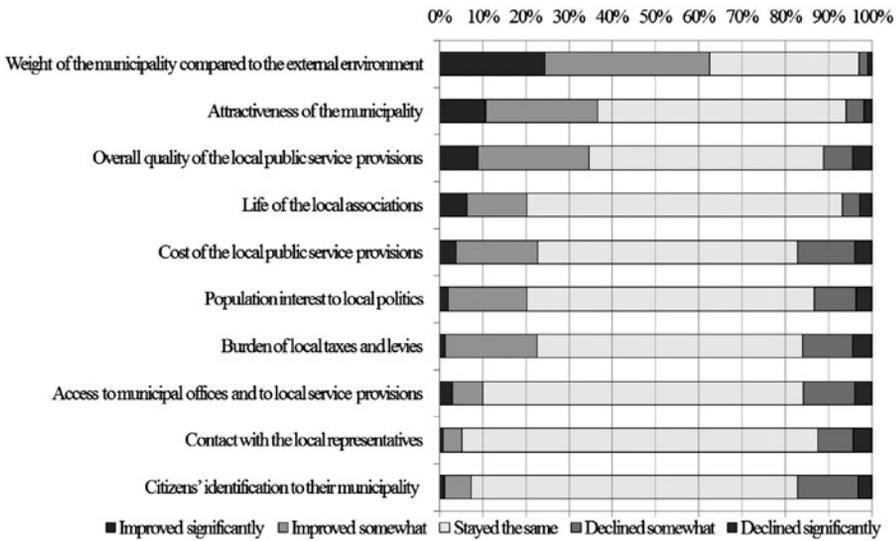
overall quality of the local service provisions are issues which the respondents rated as having evolved in a positive direction since amalgamation. These issues are those for which the average degree of satisfaction is the highest. They are precisely those for which people usually have strong expectations before the amalgamation is implemented (Soguel & Léchet, 2007; Soguel N., Léchet, Beutler, & Chatagny, 2006). However, many respondents did not observe any change. In all issues but the weight of the municipality compared to its external environment, more than 50% of the respondents considered that the situation had remained unchanged. This share is close to 80% when it comes to contact with the local representatives.

In the lower part of Table 2, the unfavourable opinions outweigh the favourable with the three lowest being: access to municipal offices and provision of local services, contact with the local representatives and citizen identification to their municipality. These issues are those for which the average degree of satisfaction is the lowest. They are also often a concern to citizens before amalgamation (Soguel & Beutler, 2006; Soguel N., Léchet, Beutler, & Chatagny, 2006).

In the afore-quoted Swiss studies carried out before amalgamation, the surveyed individuals often worried about the evolution of their tax burden. In our post-amalgamation survey, this phenomenon was not clearly observed. Indeed more than 33% of the respondents from La Tour-de-Trême reckoned that the situation had improved (significantly or somewhat). This response reflects the very fact that the tax rate was reduced for taxpayers in La Tour-de-Trême because of the amalgamation. On the other hand, only slightly more than 10% of the respondents from Bulle considered that their taxation situation had somewhat improved. In fact, the housing tax was reduced in Bulle. But this reduction only matters for the 40% of the municipality who are property owners. However, the two subsamples are pooled in Table 2. Therefore the average opinion is that the tax burden had rather decreased (improved) than increased (worsened or decline). Still, a large percentage of the population signalled to us their ignorance on the subject and the non-response rate was 10.4% for this particular issue.

In summary, the expectations and concerns often expressed prior to an amalgamation are quite comparable to evaluations given after the event has occurred and some time has passed.

Figure 2: Judgement on the post-amalgamation evolution regarding ten situational issues (items classified in decreasing order according to the satisfaction average)*



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The opinions degrees are coded as follows to compute the average degree of satisfaction (ADS): 5 = improved significantly and 1 = declined significantly.

Variables' details: Weight of the municipality compared to the external environment (N=455, ADS=2.83); Attractiveness of the municipality (N=493, ADS=2.39); Overall quality of the local public service provisions (N=484, ADS=2.28); Life of the local association (N=448, ADS=2.17); Cost of the local public services (N=428, ADS=2.05); Population interest in local politics (N=440, ADS=2.05); Burden of local taxes and levies (N=449, ADS=2.03); Access to municipal offices and to local public service provisions (N=455, ADS=1.93); Contact with the local representatives (N=465, ADS=1.89); Citizens' identification to their municipality (N=469, ADS=1.88).

5. MODELING THE IMPACT OF RESPONDANTS' OPINION ON THE HYPOTHETICAL VOTE

The dependent variable being binary ("yes"/"no") we use a probit model. The model to be estimated takes form:

$$\Pr(Yes = 1 | X) = \Phi(X' \beta)$$

where Pr denotes the probability of individuals answering «yes» to the hypothetical referendum question, and Φ is the cumulative distribution function of the standard normal distribution. X denotes the row vector

of explanatory variables, and β their corresponding coefficient vectors to be estimated using the standard maximum likelihood procedure. The explanatory variables X are the ten situational issues. Each of the ten variables is coded as follows: 5 in case the respondent deemed the situation regarding the issue had improved significantly and, at the other extreme of the scale, 1 in case the respondent deemed the situation had worsened (declined) significantly.

Table 1 presents the results of the estimation. Three different samples were considered and these led to the three different models. Model 1 is estimated using the whole set of observations, i.e. the respondents of both localities of La Tour-de-Trême and of Bulle. Thus Model 1 relates to the new amalgamated municipality. Model 2 is estimated using only the sub-sample of respondents from the locality of La Tour-de-Trême, whereas Model 3 is estimated using only the sub-sample from Bulle.

Looking at the whole sample (Model 1), we observe a positive and significant link between citizen voting behaviour and satisfaction about the evolution of the following issues: access to municipal offices, the attractiveness of the municipality, contact with local representatives, citizen identification to their municipality, burden of local taxes and levies, the weight of the municipality compared to the external environment as well as the local associations. Thus, the better the individual's opinion regarding the post-amalgamation development in any of these areas, the higher the probability that s/he would vote in favour of the amalgamation (or the lower the probability that s/he would reject it).

Considering the two subsamples allows us to differentiate the models. According to Model 2 for La Tour-de-Trême, access to municipal offices, citizen identification to the municipality and life of local associations have quantitatively the highest impact on the probability. By comparison, Model 3 for Bulle shows that two variables, attractiveness of the municipality and contact with local representatives, have the largest impact.

The subsamples reveal behavioural differences. Indeed, as for the locality of La Tour-de-Trême, a smaller entity and where debates were more lively, we see that identity issues (or attachment to a territory) such as access to municipal offices, citizen identification to their municipality as well as the evolution of local associations all have an impact on respondent voting behaviour. Were these particular issues perceived as having worsened, then the probability is stronger that respondents would be against the amalgamation. Comparatively, the respondents from Bulle seem more pragmatic as well as sensitive to the importance of the

Table 1: Estimated influence of the post-amalgamation perceived changes on the probability to hypothetically vote in favour of the amalgamation

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	New amalgamated municipality		Locality of La Tour-de-Trême		Locality of Bulle	
	Coefficient		Coefficient		Coefficient	
Access to municipal offices and to local service provisions	0.594**	(0.188)	0.652**	(0.225)	0.179	(0.506)
Attractiveness of the municipality	0.384*	(0.181)	0.228	(0.226)	1.498*	(0.688)
Contact with local representatives	0.550*	(0.227)	0.234	(0.263)	3.793*	(1.594)
Citizen identification to their municipality	0.467*	(0.245)	0.624*	(0.300)	-0.284	(0.703)
Cost of local services	0.158	(0.182)	0.002	(0.228)	0.749	(0.416)
Population interest in local politics	0.166	(0.182)	0.270	(0.251)	-0.079	(0.378)
Burden of local taxes and levies	0.422*	(0.184)	0.383	(0.223)	0.432	(0.435)
Weight of the municipality compared to the external environment	0.365*	(0.178)	0.315	(0.230)	0.717	(0.484)
Overall quality of local service provisions	-0.255	(0.170)	0.022	(0.220)	-0.840	(0.475)
Life of local associations	0.428*	(0.216)	0.544*	(0.266)	-0.154	(0.566)
Constant	10.987	(1.524)	10.818	(1.924)	18.436	(6.434)
<i>Nr of observations</i>	268		136		132	
<i>Pseudo R²</i>	0.4131		0.4574		0.4727	
<i>LR chi2(10)</i>	97.52		68.93		33.48	
<i>Prob > chi2</i>	0.0000		0.0000		0.0002	
<i>Log likelihood</i>	-69.270519		-40.893495		-18.673496	
	(4 th iteration)					

Standard error in brackets

** = Significance at 0.01 level, * = Significance at 0.05 level

attractiveness of the municipality and to the contact with local elected representatives. This might stem from the very strong demographic and economic expansion the municipality of Bulle underwent over the last decade⁹.

5.1. SIMULATIONS

The three estimated models allow us to simulate the effect of an improved governmental response to people's expectations. We thus predict what the acceptance rate of the hypothetical referendum would be if all respondents would have judged that the situation had significantly improved¹⁰. Actually, as we see in Figure 2, only a minority found this to be the case.

Table 2 presents the results of the simulation. The first row reports the acceptance rate simulated using each of the three models and considering the actual answer to the ten situational items. This is the baseline situation. The percentage is different from the one mentioned in Figure 1—first, because they are simulated ones and second, because not all respondents stated how the situation had changed regarding all of the situational issues. Only 268 individuals did so compared to the 501 that answered the hypothetical referendum question. Therefore, the simulation is based on 268 observations only (136 respondents from La Tour-de-Trême and 132 respondents from Bulle). The simulated acceptance rate based on the actual value of the situational variable is 83.95% for the newly amalgamated municipality, with 75.74% for La Tour-de-Trême and 92.44% for Bulle.

The following rows indicate the impact of a change in each situational items considered individually. For example, looking at access to municipal offices, the second row shows that the acceptance rate for the newly amalgamated municipality would be 96.41% if all respondents had considered that this specific situation had significantly improved. This is compared to 83.95% in the baseline situation where a large majority actually judged

⁹ The models presented here measure the influence of the individual's perceptions regarding the municipal situation. We also modelled the influence of the individual's personal characteristics on the probability to hypothetically vote in favour of the amalgamation. The results are not reported here. To summarise, the more that individuals feel they are part of the local life, the older or the better educated they are, or the more recently they have settled in the locality, the higher the probability they would hypothetically vote in favour of the amalgamation (Silberstein 2010).

¹⁰ This would mean that all these respondents would have answered 5 on a scale from 5 (improved significantly) to 1 (declined significantly).

that the situation had worsened. This means that if the government of the newly amalgamated municipality had taken all the necessary measures to ensure that every respondent would have deemed that access to municipal offices had significantly improved, then the acceptance rate would possibly be 12.45 percentage points higher than the referendum outcome based only on measures the government had actually taken.

We limited the simulations to those situational items that turned out to significantly affect the acceptance rate (see Table 1). Seven items were found to have a significant influence in Model 1, Table 2 reports the simulated results for these seven variables. The simulation was carried out for three variables in the case of La Tour-de-Trême, and for two variables in the case of Bulle.

Table 2: Simulation of the acceptance rate if all respondents had judged the situational issues had significantly improved after the amalgamation

	New amalga- mated munic- ipality		Locality of La Tour-de- Trême		Locality of Bulle	
	% ^a	Δpp ^b	% ^a	Δpp ^b	% ^a	Δpp ^b
Baseline situation	83.95		75.74		92.42	
Access to municipal offices and local public service provisions	96.41	12.45	94.38	18.64		
Citizen identification to their municipality	94.51	10.55	93.31	17.57		
Life of the local associations	93.22	9.26	90.21	14.47		
Contact with local representatives	95.75	11.79			100.00	7.58
Attractiveness of the municipality	91.37	7.41			98.48	6.06
Burden of local taxes and levies	92.87	8.91				
Weight of the municipality compared to the external environment	90.23	6.27				
Number of observations	268		136		132	

^a Simulated acceptance rate if the specific issue (variable) were deemed by the respondents to have significantly improved (predictions based on the estimated probit models). The acceptance rate is only simulated in case the variable affects significantly the probability to hypothetically vote in favour of the amalgamation.

^b Variation of acceptance rate in percentage points (pp)

The respondents in La Tour-de-Trême show the lowest acceptance rate. This may be because they have to travel longer distances to get to the municipal offices compared to before amalgamation. More than 27% of respondents cited a degradation of this specific situational issue (significantly or somewhat) since 2006. Table 2 demonstrates that, for La Tour-de-Trême, the increase in the acceptance rate would be large. The simulation points to a gain of almost 19 percentage points (+18.64) from the baseline situation (75.74%) to the hypothetical one (94.38%). Two other variables significantly impact the acceptance rate and have quite a big simulated effect: citizen identification to their municipality (+17.57 percentage points) and life of the local associations (+14.47).

For Bulle respondents, only two situational issues significantly affect the probability of hypothetically voting in favour of the amalgamation, namely the contact with local representatives and the attractiveness of the municipality. However, had all respondents judged that the situation had significantly improved, then the impact on the acceptance rate would be less compared to the above-mentioned variations for La Tour-de-Trême. Evidently, starting with a baseline acceptance rate of more than 92%, the simulated rate only increased by 7.58 and 6.06 percentage points.

For the newly amalgamated municipality overall, the most significant increases in support are caused by access to the municipal offices and contact with local representatives. Thus, improvement in just one of these issues has a great effect on the acceptance of the amalgamation and increases the probability of support by around 12 percentage points. An improved citizen identification to their municipality increases the acceptance rate by more than 10 percentage points. Nevertheless, for the local government, it is difficult to take concrete and direct measures to improve this particular issue as “identification” is a more abstract concept that involves a variety of different meanings and perceptions¹¹. Finally, the four other variables that are significant in our probit model (Model 1) can less dramatically influence the acceptance rate. In fact, if respondents were completely satisfied by the local life, the attractiveness of the municipality, the burden of local taxes and levies or the weight of the municipality compared to the external environment, there would be an increase in the acceptance rate of around 8%.

¹¹ On the debate about the many different meanings of the “identity” see Brubaker, 2001 and Avanza & Laferté, 2005.

6. CONCLUSION

The amalgamation of the two localities of Bulle and La Tour-de-Trême is well supported by the citizens. The survey that we conducted indicates that 80.1% of the respondents from the locality of Bulle would vote in favour of the amalgamation if a referendum had taken place four years after the amalgamation compared. The acceptance rate would be 68.0% among the respondents in La Tour-de-Trême. Although quite high, the acceptance rate is significantly different between the two subsamples.

To better understand citizen attitudes concerning the post-amalgamation situation, we asked ten questions about key issues. Respondents stated that some situational issues significantly improved after the amalgamation: the weight of the municipality compared to the external environment, the attractiveness of the municipality and the overall quality of local service provisions. Thus, in these areas there is not much the local government can do to improve citizen perception.

On the other hand, access to municipal offices, contact with local representatives and citizen identification to the municipality remain issues of interest. These specific areas are much more of a challenge as our results show that they are significantly and strongly related to the probability of hypothetically voting in favour of the amalgamation. Our simulations indicate that if all respondents would judge that the situation had significantly improved regarding any of these issues over the last four years, then the acceptance rate of the amalgamation would increase from around 83% to more than 94%.

In many cases, municipal amalgamations are not supported by the population. In Switzerland, the issue must legally be put to the referendum in most cantons. As a result many projects have been refused by voters. In order to avoid or reduce the risk of refusal local governments usually commit themselves on various issues, e.g. they promise that the quality of locally provided public services will be untouched or even improved while the cost of the provision would decrease allowing the tax burden to be reduced in turn.

Our survey shows that individuals are able, from a cognitive perspective, to point to post-amalgamation improvement or deterioration of the situation at the local level. The probit model we created demonstrates that in some cases these changes would significantly influence how satisfied people are, retrospectively, with the outcome of the amalgamation. Thus local governments should be especially vigilant in terms of keeping their pre-amalgamation word. As demonstrated by our findings, paying atten-

tion to two issues in particular is a relatively effective and easy way to widen the acceptance rate both before and after the amalgamation. The first issue is to improve access to municipal offices and the second is to guarantee contact with local representatives.

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