



EXPERIENCES FROM KV09



ARTICLES PUBLISHED BY THE
DAILY NEWSPAPER "POLITIKEN"

Disclaimer

This presentation does not necessarily reflect the views of the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy or the members of the Board of Directors.

Copyright

The writers of the articles own the copyright, and DIPD has been allowed to print them in this special version for the KV13 project by the daily newspaper "Politiken".

Further use or reprint of this material will require the permission of the writers as well as the newspaper.

Translation

Translated from Danish into English by Elisabeth Moltke.

Photographs

Cover: DIPD.

Production

Published October 2013

Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy

Jemtelandsgade 1

2300 Copenhagen S

Denmark

Tel: +45 38 40 28 00

Email: dipd@dipd.dk

Publication is available on:

www.dipd.dk

Contents

Foreword

1 Politicians do not pay enough attention to the people

By Christian Elmelund-Præstekær

2 The Mayor controls the power

By Christian Elmelund-Præstekær

3 The municipal election will not be about the Mayor only

By Christian Elmelund-Præstekær

4 Local lists – a dying political breed

By Jørgen Elklit and David Hopmann

5 Local patriots – where you live actually matters

By Ulrik Kjær

6 Time for local democracy to move up a gear

By Christian Elmelund-Præstekær

7 Municipal elections can be bloody

By Jørgen Elklit and Ulrik Kjær

Foreword

On November 19, the Danes will have the opportunity to elect representatives for 98 Municipal Councils and 5 Regional Councils. In doing so they participate in the formal Danish democracy at the lowest level of the system – with elections for the Parliament being the highest level.

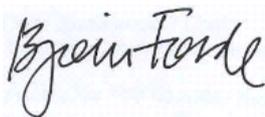
This year DIPD is using the opportunity of the municipal election to invite partners from most of the countries we are working in to ‘participate’ as observers, and hopefully to learn and be inspired. It is not the purpose of the study tour to convince delegates that the Danish system is the best in the world, or a system suited to the challenges facing countries as diverse as Bhutan and Bolivia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, to mention just a few. The major purpose is to share the Danish model with our colleagues, and then for them to discuss their experiences and decide what they can benefit from in their own environment.

Part of the study tour will be dedicated to experience the last days of the electoral campaign at the local community level, including the polling exercise and the counting of votes. Before this the delegates will be offered an introduction to the Danish political party and electoral system, and after the election they will participate in a lessons learned seminar.

This publication presents articles published in the daily newspaper “Politiken” some months before the elections. The articles are written by academics, who have been part of a major research project on the 2009 municipal elections. They address some of the key challenges for local level democracy in Denmark – the strong position of the mayor; the decrease in number of local lists as alternatives to political parties; what voters consider to be most important for their choice; to mention just a few issues.

We are thankful to the academics for allowing us to publish the articles in this way, for the benefit of our partners around the world.

We hope that these articles, together with the presentations in the ‘Democracy Seminar’, will help to raise important areas where Danish democracy needs to improve. We believe that it is important to be honest about strengths as well as weaknesses in the Danish democracy when we use it as a basis for inspiration to others.



Bjørn Førde

Director

November 2013

1 Politicians do not pay enough attention to the people

The general public rarely takes part in political debates on local political questions. Maybe because local politicians do not seem to care anyway. Between elections local politicians do not pay enough attention to voters. But come election time, politicians become very concerned with public opinion, although voters think that they rarely back up their words with action.

By Christian Elmelund-Præstekær

With the municipal elections coming up on November 19 we are in the midst of the most important season of local politics. But do we have something to celebrate? Comparing to the rest of the world we can be quite proud of the Danish democracy, both nationally and locally. However, this should not prevent a continuous concern for the Danish democracy, and the coming elections are a good opportunity to take stock of the general condition of the local public governance.

Democracy as a concept is ambiguous and not easily definable, but two overarching ideals are predominant in the theories of democracy. In a Danish context, these two ideals were famously debated by professors Alf Ross and Hal Koch in the aftermath of World War II. The two personalities highlighted the importance of **representation** and **deliberation** respectively:

Pertaining to the first perspective, the actual act of voting is deemed essential because democracy is seen as a means to select representatives to govern on behalf of the people. In this regard it is worrying that voter turn-out in the latest municipal election dropped to 65 per cent - an all-time low in 30 years. The drop in voter turn-out weakens the selection of representatives who then to a lesser extent reflect the general public. As a consequence, several municipalities have decided to make an extra effort to increase voter turn-out in the coming elections by for instance placing mobile polling booths at various educational institutions.

Pertaining to the second perspective of democracy, the political engagement of people in daily life is as important as voter turn-out on election day. Seen in this light democracy is not automatically home safe even if we manage to mobilize more voters on Election Day. To Hal Koch, democracy is a life form that feeds on deliberation amongst its citizens. Thus, a strong democracy reaches consensus through debating in such a way that there is no practical need for elections. It is difficult to measure the 'health' of this democratic life form, but on the basis of a range of questions presented to around 3000 participants in the latest municipal election study, it is possible to cast some light on the matter.

The starting point is a question of whether the people questioned have tried to influence members of the city council on a matter that was important to them at least one time in the four year election period of 2005-2009.. Although one in five gives a positive response to this question, the number is probably optimistic as people have a tendency to exaggerate their activity when answering this kind of survey questions. But on the other hand, people may have been involved in civic life in other ways which are not considered attempts to influence local politicians - for instance by volunteering for local sports associations and doing social work.

Citizens' opinion on the public debate on municipal affairs

	Agree	Disagree
There was ample opportunity to speak one's mind throughout the election campaign in my home municipality	44%	18%
The politicians in my municipality seemed sincerely interested in the views of the people	42%	23%
In general, local politicians show too little concern for voters' opinions	42%	28%
I know so little about what is going on in the city council that actually I ought not to vote	15%	69%

The relatively limited involvement in city council politics can hardly be seen as a democratic strength and there is room for improvement.

Taking a closer look at the involved citizens, one result in particular stands out – the preferred way of participation is direct contact with a member of the city council. Indirect forms of participation such as readers' letters-to-the-editor and petitions are less widely used. The good news in this result is that the distance between citizens and politicians is not insurmountable – apparently the active citizens feel that local politicians are approachable for dialogue.

Then what explains why voters do not engage themselves more in political life in between elections? It may be due to the fact that voters do not feel that participation matters. At least half of the voters believe that their chances to make their voices heard were good prior to the elections of 2009 and that politicians seemed sincerely interested in the opinion of the citizens. In addition, more than two thirds of the voters believe that they have sufficient insight into local politics to make an informed decision.

From the voters perspective, the problem rather seems to be that local politicians in general show too little concern for voters' opinions. Municipal elections always make room for public participation – and politicians listen but hardly ever embrace the views presented by voters.

It is difficult to present a clear conclusion on the state of local politics on the basis of the existing research; however, there is undoubtedly room for improvement – especially with regards to voter turn-out and civic participation in between elections. In this respect it is positive to note that the latest municipal election at least made it possible for the people to make its voice heard. The challenge for the politicians is to make voters feel that their voices not only heard but also taken into consideration and acted upon. In other words, politicians are not only to listen to the people, they are to practice what voters preach.

2 The Mayor controls the power

While the municipalities bravely stand their ground to ensure local self-government, council members fight to keep tight control with the mayor.

By Christian Elmelund-Præstekær

One of the objectives of the Danish municipalities is to ensure local influence on the implementation of public policy. The reason why municipalities are put in charge of e.g. public nursing homes, schools, roads and cultural centers is an aspiration to adjust public services to local conditions and public demands.

By way of adjusting national rules and regulations to unique local conditions; be it on the island of Læsø or in the city of Copenhagen, the municipalities are expected to create and preserve diversity around the country.

It is therefore crucial for local democracy that council members and local politicians are up to the task of running the municipality. It is also crucial that municipalities are capable of creating and making use of a political leeway in order for council members and their parties to customize policies that in one way or the other affect all Danes in their daily lives.

The most recent municipal election study has asked a representative sample of 3,336 voters to evaluate the extent to which their local council members have such political leeway.

Voters could agree or disagree with a range of statements on the subject. It was also possible to take a neutral stand.

The analysis reveals several interesting things. Firstly, it shows that four in five voters believe that city councils have a decisive effect as to whether the municipality is a good place to reside or not. This is an uplifting result for the local democracy, as it indicates that council members - for better or worse – are capable of leaving a mark on their municipality.

Next, a large majority of the voters believe that it does make a difference, who is in power in their municipality. This is also good democratic news, because it means that different parties have different visions for the municipalities and thereby give the people something to choose from on Election Day. In short: it pays off to turn up and cast your vote.

However, the analysis also demonstrates that the mayor is particularly important. This result highlights the distinct role of the mayor in municipal politics. In most municipalities the mayor is the only “professional” politician having a full time and paid job in the city council. Previous research shows that this fact gives the mayor a clear advantage with respect to setting the agenda and influencing the debates of the city council. Even though the mayor does not have strong formal powers as compared to the rest of the city council, we are a “mayor rule” rather than a “party rule” in Danish local politics.

Whether this is good or bad is a question of democratic taste. But there is no prospect for change on this since no initiatives are taken to alter the institutional framework of local government.

A clearer challenge for local democracy is the voters' lacking trust in the ability of politicians to keep their word. It appears that the voters are not convinced that politicians keep their election pledges. This may be caused by several factors. First and foremost it is difficult for voters to find out what exactly has been promised and what has been implemented. This could explain the relatively many "don't know" answers in the analysis.

Additionally, it may be difficult for municipal politicians to keep their promises due to the fact that many municipal policies are implemented on the basis of broad-based agreements with all having to nip and tuck here and there. Most likely, Danish local politicians consider the objective of political consensus more important than clear-cut political responsibility and measurable promises to the voters.

Finally, local politicians operate within a tight political and financial framework set by the national parliament and government. In recent years, the power of the national politicians has been criticized due to its potential to undermine local government; for instance it has become extremely difficult for a municipality to raise taxes and thus generate revenue and finance new political ideas.

Currently, the national government is planning to empower the National Board of Social Services to force municipalities to follow certain standards pertaining to the specialized area of social services. Leaving aside the political reasons for such measures, they limit - all things being equal - municipalities in differentiating themselves from one another.

This issue is reflected in our survey. More than half of the voters think that most city council decisions are pre-determined by national regulations. This illustrates the existence of a certain amount of skepticism towards the importance of local democracy.

Overall the survey shows that municipal self-government is alive and well with regards to the perception that local politics, and the mayor in particular, is important to the daily lives of the local communities.

However, voters also believe that municipalities are kept on a tight leash by national politics, which can hardly be seen as anything but a challenge to local self-government.

3 The municipal election will not be about the Mayor only

The media prefers to focus on leading candidates in the municipal elections. Voters, on the other hand, prefer politics.

By Christian Elmelund-Præstekær

Who is to lead the municipality of Horsens the next four years? Who will be the next mayor of the town of Næstved? And will Anker Boye succeed in winning four more years as chief executive in Odense?

The answers to these questions will only be known after the municipal elections on the 19th of November. From a strictly formal point of view, municipal elections are not about mayors, as we do not have direct mayoral elections in Denmark. Still, the question of who is to become mayor remains an essential issue in the election campaigns around the country.

In fact it is so essential that former municipal elections have been termed 'presidential' with leading candidates of two parties campaigning against one another.

The alleged 'presidentialization' of Danish local politics is generally considered to be negative and 'un-Danish' development. Especially two critical arguments appeared over and over again in public debate in the issue.

The first argument claims that both 'presidential parties' and 'presidential candidates' achieve an unfair surplus of votes because essentially the election campaign is only about them. The second argument criticises the media for focusing too much on the mayoral candidates of the two largest parties.

With regards to the first argument, recent municipal election research is worth noticing. This research project investigates if the lion's share of votes is captured by the 'presidential candidates' and if votes are piled around these candidates at the expense of other candidates.

In order to evaluate different aspects of the presidentialization thesis it is relevant to distinguish between three different kinds of measurements of the concentration of votes cast on few candidates. One may examine:

[a] the share of personal votes cast on one of the front runners of the different parties in a particular municipality;

[b] because there is a distinct element of 'duelling' in the presidentialization argument, it is useful to restrict the analysis to include only the front runners of the two largest parties. In most cases, it is only these candidates who run 'presidential' campaigns;

[c] finally, one may also examine the popularity of possible 'City Kings' by further restricting the analysis to focus entirely on the front runner of the largest party.

Judged by these three measurements there is little support for the presidentialization thesis. In the elections of 2009 it turns out that front runners win a total of 37 per cent

of the votes in the 98 municipal elections. If one looks at the duelling between the front runners of the two largest parties, their total vote share amounts to 23 per cent across the municipalities. Finally, the front runner of the largest party wins around 15 per cent of the votes in the different municipalities.

Considering that an average of 92 candidates ran for election in each municipality, these figures may seem quite high. It is beyond doubt that the front runners, not least those from the largest parties, take a significant share of the votes. On the other hand, they indeed leave room for others, as more than 60 per cent of the votes are cast on lower ranking candidates or on party lists.

However, it is difficult to assess these results out of context. As the core idea of presidentialization argument is that voters to an ever increasing extent concentrate on two or very few contenders to power, it is important to observe the developments of the different measurements over time.

Interestingly, hardly anything has changed since the 2001 election; in fact, there is a minor decline of 5 per cent points in all three indexes of voter concentration. Hence, voting behaviour has not been presidentialized throughout the last decade.

Until now, actual media coverage of mayoral candidates compared to other candidates for city councils has not been studied, but research shows that 42 per cent of voters believed that the election campaigns of their home municipality was by and large about mayoral candidates. This indicates that there is something to the media argument in the presidentialization debate.

The question is, whether media attention on a few mayoral candidates is a good or a bad thing - democratically speaking. There is no certain answer to this, but according to the voters there is no need to worry. 42 per cent state that they want the electoral campaigns in their municipality to concentrate on the two or few candidates who stand a chance to become mayor. As such, there is a certain balance between voter demand and media supply when it comes to coverage of candidates to local public office.

The fact that the average number of parties in the municipal councils has increased from five to six parties since 2001, tells us that the two to three mayoral parties have not dominated municipal politics entirely. The room for political diversity has in fact improved over time and thus the smaller parties' concerns over media and voter attention on a few mayoral candidates are overstated.

Moreover, one might argue that even if the media focus on the duel between mayoral candidates, it may actually have the positive democratic effect of making people aware of municipal elections and encourage them to make up their minds and take a stand.

It is also important to note media attention not automatically translates into vote for the very visible mayoral candidates. If that had been the case, the three measures of voter concentration most likely would have increased rather than decreased over the years. In this light, maybe all parties are actually gaining from media focus on a few central municipal election candidates.

4 Local lists - a dying political breed

The future does not look bright for local electoral lists. This has become clear following the municipal reform, where the number of municipalities declined from 271 to 98.

By Jørgen Elklit and David Hopmann

With the structural reform of 2007, the number of Danish municipalities declined from 271 to 98.

Hence, one of the key topics for discussion in connection with the reform concerned the issue of whether larger municipal entities would result in reduced local democracy. It was argued that especially the locally rooted and non-partisan electoral lists – a characteristic feature of municipal elections – would be put under pressure.

In a larger perspective, however, the local electoral lists were under pressure even before the structural reform. At the local elections in the 1970-1997 period, such electoral lists in total usually received around 8 to 9 per cent of the national vote. And in 1997, they received 8.2 per cent. Since then it started to go downhill: In 2002 these lists received 7.5 per cent of the votes; in 2005 it was down to 6.7 per cent and then eventually 4.4 per cent in 2009.

The group of local lists make up a colourful patchwork, consisting of:

- (1) Genuine local lists, which means lists that stand for election to gain support to achieve something good for a particular municipality, a particular locality, or a particular issue of local significance.
- (2) Lists that at best are to be seen as 'stunts' for individuals to have their name on the ballot, and
- (3) Lists that represent political parties that for the time being are not eligible to stand as candidates in parliamentary elections and where local driving forces would like to flag the party's existence even though chances for election to the municipal council are modest.

In 2009, belonging to this last category in particular were the Christian Democrats, but also 'Retsforbundet' (a party supporting the ideas of Henry George) and the communists flagged themselves in a few localities. It is of course open to discussion if lists of this category should be considered local lists.

Regardless of the type, there are remarkable differences in size and significance of these lists in the various municipalities. In 2009, seven municipalities noted a minimum of 20 per cent voter support for local rolls, and in an additional 13 municipalities the support was around 10-20 per cent.

In these 20 municipalities local lists constituted - and still constitute - a decisive factor in local politics. At the other end of the scale, we find 11 municipalities entirely without local list representation. Hence, we are dealing with a significant variation in the presence of local electoral lists and the voter support for these in 2009.

Among the 20 municipalities with the highest voter support for local lists we see three distinctive groupings. First, there are the **island municipalities** such as Læsø, Samsø, Langeland etc. Second, there is the group of so-called **peripheral municipalities** of Denmark including among others Norddjurs and Guldborgsund.

The third and final group comprises some of the Copenhagen **metropolitan area municipalities** such as Rudersdal, Hvidovre, Allerød and more.

The above are for the most part fairly small municipalities, and our analyses also confirm existing research proving that the only identifiable significant correlation is that of municipality size and voter support: The smaller the municipality, the greater the support for local electoral lists.

As the critics stated at the time of the municipality structure reform, local electoral lists in larger municipalities face more difficult conditions than those in smaller municipalities. The reform created significantly larger municipalities than previously, meaning that a key condition for success for a local list disappeared – that it is standing for election in a small municipality.

Setting aside the general image of municipality size being a key factor for the prospects of local lists, we also find specific explanations in the individual municipalities as well as individual explanations among voters.

In this regard one explanation to the success of certain local electoral lists – including perseverance through several elections – is of course the dedication of key persons of the individual electoral lists. In addition, particular conditions in the municipality in question may pave the way for decent voter support and a concrete result for certain lists.

As a unique phenomenon in the municipal landscape, we find **Slesvigsk Parti** which has its roots in the German minority in Southern Jutland. After a few elections with decreasing voter support in the four municipalities where the party stands for election, the situation has now improved markedly for Slesvigsk Parti throughout the last two municipal elections.

Interestingly, Sydslesvigsk Vælgerforening (South Schleswig Voter's Association), SSW, the party of the Danish minority in Northern Germany, has also experienced remarkably good results in the latest election in Schleswig-Holstein. Both parties have special roots in the Danish-German borderlands and are thus to be considered all but ordinary local electoral lists.

The difference between the development in general and the special features of particular municipalities underline in particular that local electoral lists are what the name says they are: local. Hence, the explanations to their ups and downs are also to be found locally.

Still, neither individual driving forces nor the special situation for Slesvigsk Parti will alter the overall conclusion:

The future does not look bright for local electoral lists and one might expect a further decline in voter support for local lists in the elections in November 2013.

This conclusion does not mean that some lists in some municipalities might not do well or even better than in 2009. But when this happens, it will rather be the remarkable exception from a general tendency which is best characterized as a downward spiral.

5 Local patriots – where you live actually matters

Lessons learnt from 2009 prove that it is by no means without significance where local candidates reside.

By Ulrik Kjær

We need to have more women on our list of candidates for election. And we need more people from smaller communities in the larger municipalities. And by the way, does anyone know of someone under the age of 30 who might be persuaded to run? We need to find some who are not only teachers or farmers.

And hey, once again we are not particularly multi-cultural – ought we not to include a ‘new Dane’?

There are many considerations to make when the local party organizations are to compose the lists of candidates for the municipal elections.

Needless to say, one needs to find candidates who agree on party politics, candidates who are doing well in political debating, and candidates who possess a passion for politics. But there is also the necessity to have an eye for ‘the look’ of the candidates – gender, age, ethnicity, profession, geographical affiliation, etc. In order to have something to choose from, several political parties seek to present voters with ‘a broad-based list’ of candidates. This is also done partly in order for the municipal council not to be entirely made up of middle-aged middle class men.

But who are the people that voters would like to see as members of the municipal council? Are we concerned with whether the councils are composed to reflect the population; and if so, which features are deemed most important?

At the most recent local election in Denmark in 2009, we conducted a survey among a number of members of the public regarding their preferences for council reflection of age, gender and geographical affiliation.

The results indicate that a large number of voters consider it to be important that the people elected for the municipal councils reside in various places within the municipality. Gender composition is also of concern to some, although fewer, as about half of the people questioned consider gender representation important. The same goes with regard to age, where half of the people asked find that the age-spread of members of the municipal council should reflect that of the population in general. On the other hand, this also means that there are as many people that have no particular interest in council members’ age and gender.

Still, the fact that equal representation is welcomed does not necessarily mean that people themselves are willing to do something about the state of affairs. Although a more balanced representation is preferred, it does not necessarily lead people to vote for a particular candidate of an under-represented category. That is to say that to many voters it is also important how well a candidate pursues a certain policy, and not the least for which party a particular candidates runs.

After the 2009 elections, we interviewed a number of voters on the significance of various features of the candidate they had cast a personal vote on (75 per cent had cast a personal vote on a candidate). It turns out that only a little more than one in 10 voter had let themselves be influenced by the age of a candidate and the same goes for gender. The residency of the candidate, however, played an important part to about every third voter. Again, geography seems to be more important than gender and age.

The 'look' of the candidate, thus, is far from being the only decisive factor when people are to cast their votes. In fact, approximately 2 out of 3 voters claim the ability of the candidate to play the political game to be of significance; and 3 out of 4 have indicated that political position was influential to their choice of personal candidate.

Are such convictions among voters then decisive for who is elected? Well, it is interesting to note that the priority of voters given to geographical affiliation appears to have paved the way for some success to candidates of smaller communities.

If we look at the municipalities that were 'amalgamated' as a result of the latest Danish reform of the municipalities, nearly 45 per cent of the population here live in the smallest municipalities. But during the 2009 municipal election, the candidates from these smallest municipalities managed to win 51 per cent of the seats in the municipality councils in 66 of the 'amalgamated' municipalities.

Opposite to this, we still have the issue of age and gender where the image of the many middle-aged men persists. In the 2009 elections, 32 per cent of the elected council members were women and despite this being an increase of 5 percentage points there is still some way to go up to the 51 per cent that women constitute of the general population. Youth and elderly are also having a hard time against the middle-aged; while the 35-64 year-olds only constitute 53 per cent of the population, they take up 80 per cent of the council seats. Following this, youth (under 35) only take up 11 per cent of the seats and the elderly 9, while in fact the groups constitute 26 per cent and 21 per cent of the voter population respectively.

Voter attention and aspirations for candidate composition thus appears to be of significance. Whether the decisive factor for voters in this year's municipal election is geography, age, gender, ethnicity, education, profession or something completely different, remains yet to be seen.

6 Time for local democracy to gear up

Nothing indicates that it will be an easy task to get more people to vote in the municipal elections this year. The question is: can politicians lure voters into the voting booth?

By Christian Elmelund-Præstekær

Every now and then local politics is accused for being a dull affair.

However, the total annual municipal budget of nearly 450 billion kroner (approx. 80 billion USD) is far from petty, and the municipalities play a key role in the everyday life of all Danes.

Not only are the municipalities responsible for an array of welfare services and benefits; the municipalities also maintain most roads; they produce district heating and run cultural centers and libraries, to name a few municipal duties.

That is why local politics is important. And that is why the municipal elections play a key role, not only for local politicians but also for the management of several public regulations, benefits and services that influence the everyday life of just about all Danes. Still, the latest municipal election survey conducted among 3,336 voters shows that Danes are considerably less interested in local politics than in national politics.

Other indicators also bear witness to the fact that local politics plays a secondary role to politics in Parliament.

First, voter turn-out for municipal elections is remarkably lower than for parliamentary elections.

In 2009, 65.8 per cent of voters took part in municipal elections while two years later an entire 87.7 per cent took part in parliamentary elections. Normally, the difference in voter turn-out in the two types of elections is slightly less; still, the numbers send a clear message: Less people feel motivated to exercise their democratic rights in municipal elections than in parliamentary elections.

Second, only 21 per cent of voters in the municipal election survey indicated that they were 'very interested' in the 2009 election campaign. Another 43 percent indicated they were 'moderately interested' while the rest were only 'little' or 'not at all' interested in the campaign.

Hence, 64 per cent have at least some interest for this particular election campaign.

In order to assess whether this is a particularly large or small proportion it is illustrative to compare the interest in municipal elections with the interest in politics in general. An entire 74 per cent of the survey participants indicate that they are 'rather' or 'very interested' in politics. Thus, roughly put, 10 per cent of voters are interested in politics, though not in municipal elections.

The share of voters that claimed to be interested in the municipal elections campaign prior to the 2009 elections, curiously enough matches the share that ended up voting in this election. This indicates that there is a positive correlation between election campaign interest and voter turn-out. Those who vote are more interested than arm-

chair voters. Or to put it the other way around: Those interested participate in larger numbers than those not interested.

This is not a surprising result; however, it underscores the democratic significance of the alleged dullness of local politics.

One might be tempted to conclude that the major structural reform of 2006 as well as a still tighter national grip of municipal finance instigated by the two latest governments, has put a lid on the voters' interest in local politics.

At least the new larger municipalities have been accused of generating a larger distance between voters and the elected politicians; just as the strict budget agreements between the government and Local Government Denmark have been criticized for restraining local self-government. In a situation where local self-government is no longer particularly local and shackled by the government, one might imagine voters to lessen their interest in local politics.

This, however, is not the case.

For several years, local politics has played secondary role to national politics. Just as in 2009, there were about twice as many voters primarily interested in national politics compared to voters who were primarily interested in local politics in 2005 and 1993.

The structural reform and the tightened financial framework for the municipalities might have had democratic consequences; yet nothing indicates that the developments in the most recent years have had an impact on voters' interest in local politics. This interest has remained stable at a low level for decades.

The question then is whether it is possible to increase the interest in local politics in the upcoming election? It is presumably unrealistic to make local politics as interesting or even more interesting than national politics. It is after all Parliament that decides the overall framework within which the municipalities operate.

However, this should not prevent neither parties nor media from trying to engage more voters. For example, local parties could highlight their diversities through advertisement of clear-cut political goals that demonstrate how one party differs from the other.

This would make it clear to the voters that it does in fact matter who wins the elections, which then may motivate voters to follow the campaign and make them participate in the actual election.

7 Municipal elections can be bloody

Municipal elections are something very special. Blue and red parties mix blood in new ways and enter into the most peculiar alliances. Why is this the case?

By Jørgen Elklit and Ulrik Kjær

It is often said that political parties and lists in the municipalities come together in alliances that are very different from the conventional political divides in Parliament. In addition, it is also often seen that quite comprehensive agreements occur where almost the entire political spectrum agrees on the appointment of the mayor.

This does not mean, however, that an orderly process can be taken for granted. In fact, following the 2009 local elections in Denmark, in one of every ten municipalities, the process of constitution for executive office – i.e. the formation of the coalition behind the municipality's executive - was so ugly that the National Association of Municipalities and the Ministry of the Interior found it necessary to publish a leaflet encouraging 'decent behaviour' among local politicians after the elections.

Whether local politicians are inclined to listen to this recommendation and whether we will see more un-dramatic processes this year than in 2009, no-one knows. Neither will we know if this time around we will again see that in one fifth of the municipalities all parties represented will choose to enter into an all-comprehensive agreement on constitution for executive office.

But which parties usually team up together? When analysing the patterns of cooperation in connection with municipal elections, it is important to note that in fact there are two rounds, where 'teams' are to be chosen.

The first round is about the nomination of candidates, where parties can choose to enter into 'electoral alliances'. The alliances are allocated as many seats as the total number of votes justifies. It may then be so fortunate that the alliance receives a mandate (in rare cases even two) more than the individual parties would have won if they had been running on their own. Mandates are subsequently distributed within the election alliance, and since no party suffers disadvantages – a party may even be strengthened – compared to what might otherwise have been the case, all should in fact be quite happy.

The second round is about the formation of coalitions for executive office, when in particular the appointment of the mayor is at stake. Most often a comprehensive deal is struck, including not only the appointment of the mayor, but also the other pieces of the puzzle. This includes in particular the allocation of positions as chairmen of key committees (and perhaps positions as paid board members outside the city council).

In order to assess if the parties coming together in the municipal political game are the same as in the national parliament, it is necessary to be familiar with the composition of alliances in the parliament. Despite the recent declaration of the Prime Minister that bloc thinking in national politics is dead, it still makes sense to talk about a **center-left bloc** (often termed the 'red bloc') and a **liberal bloc** (often termed the 'blue bloc'). So

on the red side of the field we have Enhedslisten, SF, Socialdemokratiet and Radikale Venstre – and on the blue side we find Liberal Alliance, Venstre, Konservative and Dansk Folkeparti.

The table below illustrates how the parties entered into different electoral alliances in the municipal elections in 2009. It shows clearly that by and large most parties have left the door open to ally with 'their own kind'. In some places, the Social Liberals still acts like a centrist party, whereas an alliance with both left and right-wing parties is a rare phenomenon (only one per cent of all alliances).

Parties included in electoral alliances and appointments for office

	Percentage of all electoral alliances	Percentage of all agreements on appointments for office
Combinations of ABFØ *	49	25
Combinations of CIOV+B *	7	3
Mixture of AFØ and CIOV	1	63
Combinations of CIOV *	40	9
Combinations of local electoral lists	3	0
Total	100	100

* Plus any local electoral lists

- A** Socialdemokratiet – Social Democrats
- B** Radikale Venstre – Social Liberal Party
- C** Konservative – Conservatives
- F** Socialistisk Folkeparti – Socialist People's Party
- I** Liberal Alliance – Liberal Alliance
- O** Dansk Folkeparti – Danish People's Party
- V** Venstre – Liberal Party
- Ø** Enhedslisten – Red-Green Alliance

Furthermore, the table also shows that the patterns for agreements on constitution for executive office are quite different. The situation after the 2009 elections actually paints a picture where in more than six of ten municipalities, agreements on constitution for office were made by both left-leaning and right-leaning parties.

Hence, while local parties are extremely loyal to their fellow parties in Parliament when entering into electoral alliances, it is different when it comes to constitution for local office. Here they are entirely open to collaboration with parties with which they would not have collaborated in a parliamentary context.

Still, while the two rounds are very different, they are also interconnected. Before the elections, some parties are busy downplaying their electoral alliances as only 'a technical issue'. But is it really that simple?

Looking at the electoral alliances of 2009, it turns out that 80 per cent of the 257 electoral alliances also stood together throughout the constitution for office: Either all the elected parties of the alliance were included in the agreement on municipal appointments for office, or they all decided not to be part of an agreement.

So although an engagement does not always result in a wedding, the conclusion here is that electoral alliances are very often the first step towards coalition formation after the elections.