

Corbett, Jack and Veenendaal, Wouter (2018). *Democracy in small states: Persisting against all odds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. London: Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-1987-9671-8. 256pp. hbk. £65.00stg.

Editor's Note: The three reviews of this book appearing here were presented at its launch, held at the Centre for Small State Studies, Queen Mary's University of London, UK, on 18th October 2018.

The book provides a thorough analysis of a neglected field in political science, small state studies and international relations. I purposefully include international relations due to the wide scope of this research encompassing all parts of the world.

This book is theoretically rich. The authors provide a comprehensive overview of the established literature and use it to examine their cases. At the same time, they engage in theory-building.

I would also argue that the book is radical. It offers a powerful challenge to the existing precepts of democratisation theory. The authors do so by arguing that small states are exceptional and that is not enough to study or collect information about formal institutional setups and rules. They challenge the standard theoretical explanations that economic growth, cultural diversity, colonial legacy and institutional design, the presence of an institutionalized party system and geographic location have explanatory power when it comes to explaining why small states are more democratic than large states. These variables, according to the authors, explain neither the democratic successes nor failures, according to the findings.

The traditional small state literature generally claims that small states face inherent structural problems in relation to their size. Small states are not able to overcome these structural problems but they can compensate for them. If they acknowledge their limitations, they can adopt particular measures to compensate for their weaknesses and can actually become quite successful. The authors challenge previous findings that structure, formal structure, determines democracy. At the same time, they are in line with an argument of traditional small state literature that a structural variable, size, is an important factor in explaining policy-making in small states.

They engage in theory-building by asking: *How do domestic politics actually work in small states?* and by providing a thorough and empirically based answer to this question. The authors present relevant data, both old and new, within their area of study, while combining it with their own findings. Their empirical work is very impressive. We are talking about 39 cases (39 small states) and more than 250 interviews from 29 of these states.

The book also challenges the relevance of some existing datasets. Datasets often do not include small states and if they include small states they often only scrape the surface, and, for instance, do not provide sufficient evidence for claims on the state of corruption in small states.

I also find the emphasis on everyday politics in small states particularly relevant. Most of previous studies have not focused on everyday political practices in small states. The authors demonstrate that everyday political practices in small states can be remarkably similar and highly reliant on informal dynamics and the personal characteristics of elites. They show that informal, personality-driven politics is the key to understanding how small states' function.

The outcome is a detailed study on how intensely informal, localized, and personality-driven politics works in practice.

I think that it is fair to say that the key word of the book is ‘personalism’. I find the authors’ definition or the framework of analysis of personalism to be very useful. They identify six types of hyper-personalistic politics. These six types provide a solid theoretical framework to study domestic politics in small states. They show how formal decision-making channels are often sidestepped in small states and replaced by informal decision-making or political processes politics. I find them very relevant in the cases of the small states which I have studied over the years.

In order to continue in this direction and take small state studies even further, to yet another level, it would be very interesting to combine the new theory presented in this book and its findings with the work of Peter Katzenstein on democratic corporatism in seven small European states. Katzenstein’s concept of domestic corporatism lays out how small European states have internally limited economic, political and social instability in order to respond to changes in the international economy. Katzenstein argues that small states need two things: They have a need for fast-paced change and flexible adaption (which is secured through short decision-making chains and corporatist, consensual decision-making); and they have a need to socialize risk by developing a comprehensive welfare state and active labour market policies. In other words, Katzenstein convincingly makes the case for how small states can buffer from within. I think that combining this personalism approach to Katzenstein’s concept of democratic corporatism would make another interesting study.

It would also be highly interesting to combine the personalism approach to the more recent work on the special characteristics of small public administrations. Small public administrations are often said to be characterised by informality, flexibility and the autonomy of officials operating according to guidelines rather than fixed instructions. The small size of the bureaucracy is said to allow for smooth and efficient decision-making. Officials tend to know each other and a certain trust seem to be built within a small public administration. Decisions are often taken in informal meetings or over the telephone. I think that the personalism framework presented in this book and its findings provide an ideal opportunity to examine how small public administrations work in practice and it highlights their impact on democracy and good governance in small states.

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Jack Corbett and Wouter Veenendaal's book has two general and interconnected questions at its core: (1) Why are small states more democratic than large ones?; and (2) How does domestic politics actually work in small states? (p. 4). Readers who are familiar with the theories of democracy might question whether there is still something new to be said about democracy, while readers who are unfamiliar with the idiosyncrasies of small state politics may begin with the question: why small states, and what can they teach us about democratisation? However, Corbett and Veenendaal's book offers plenty of good arguments as to why small states matter and how they lend themselves to being near-perfect laboratories for examining the main theories of democratisation. For one, these small states are far less studied: much of what we know (in terms of the origins, the causes, and the persistence of democracy) derives from the democratic experiences of larger states. Small states are often left out of the dominant narratives; however, including them brings important empirical and theoretical gains. Small states tend to be more democratic than larger states, and this fact helps countervail the narratives of democratic reversal and authoritarian endurance worldwide. Furthermore, it seems to be case, as the authors argue and try to demonstrate, that the standard theoretical explanations for democratisation – economic growth, cultural diversity, colonial legacy and institutional design, the presence of an institutionalized party system, and geographic location – do not appear to have explanatory power in small state units.

The book is purposefully written so that each chapter tackles one of the main theories from the democratisation canon and then the final chapter proposes a new theory of democratisation based on the empirical analysis made in the preceding pages. The analytical strategy employed throughout the chapters is clear and straightforward, and the methodological caveats are thoroughly discussed. Seeking to tackle the two central questions of the book, the authors proceed in two steps. First, they perform a statistical analysis to explore the correlation between the key factors put forward by the literature and the likelihood of democracy in both larger states and smaller states. Second, they discuss the statistical results, demonstrate why each of the statistically tested theoretical accounts fails to explain the propensity for democracy in small states, and finally, sort out the main features of functioning democracy in small states. The authors draw on data from more than 250 interviews conducted in 28 countries spanning across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and the Pacific; these are complemented by a wide range of documents, such as newspaper articles, diaries, biographies and autobiographies and records of parliamentary debates.

The book is ground-breaking and opens research avenues in at least two directions. On the one hand, it advances a theory of small state personalism (pp. 9-10, chapter 8) that can be tested in other geographies. Pushing this exercise forward would require testing where each of the cases included in the book fit in terms of the proposed theory of personalism. On the other hand, the authors implicitly treat smallness as a mediating or intervening factor. For instance, they argue that it is not institutional design that matters for democratisation in small states, but rather the interaction between size and democratic norms and traditions (p. 85). They also state that it is not economic performance that matters, but rather how elites use economic resources and narrate the stories of their performance and craft internal cohesion (p. 121). These are illustrations of other, similar arguments used in the book; and they underline how smallness interacts with key factors expected to explain democratisation. The nature and implications of this interaction is something that perhaps could have been theorised further in the concluding chapter. This is one of the book's most interesting findings.

A book as innovative and provocative as this one also raises important questions. First, given the huge variation that exists in the universe of small states, there are some challenges for theory-building, as some arguments seem to apply better to some cases than others (e.g.

geographic location factors have stronger explanatory power in small states situated in Europe and the Caribbean than in Africa or Asia; personalism has helped some democracies prosper while others have experienced undemocratic developments). Second, though informal politics seems to prevail in smaller jurisdictions, formal institutions remain relevant. In fact, even though world democratic indexes have their imperfections and fail to capture more informal political dynamics, they actually suggest that small states have more democratic formal institutions when compared to larger states. Therefore, this somehow suggests that maybe there is something distinct about the origins and development of formal political institutions in small states, and inspecting this further can potentially give us new insights on the prospects of democratisation in small states and beyond.

Overall, this book represents a major contribution to knowledge, as it is the first global analysis of politics and democracy in small states. Moreover, it brings together a wide variety of data that is beautifully related and integrated into an original and coherent work. The book is thus of interest not only to scholars and students of democratisation and small state politics, but also to a larger audience interested in the dynamics of politics in small states in more practical terms.

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I am very pleased to see this book in print, and for multiple reasons. It is a comprehensive assessment of democratisation practices in small states, reviewing no less than 39 countries with a cut off population of one million residents. It has taken eight years to produce, and is based not just on quantitative statistics (which are often hard to find) but also on some 250 interviews with key respondents (who are often not that hard to find). Regression analysis is accompanied by juicy quotations from politicians and academics: a rare treat in the literature. And the writing style is reader-friendly and attractive: academic and solid without being either arcane or jingoistic.

The authors look closely at cultural diversity, institutional design, political parties, geography and small size – with a focus on each of these per chapter – and essentially conclude that none of these parameters really explains why small states tend to be democratic, or to maintain democratic institutions. Additionally, the authors suggest that the one dominant characteristic of small states that impacts on democratic practice and processes is the “ultra-personal” and excessive personalisation of politics.

This book is inspiring, and although self-admitted ‘outsiders’ to the realm of small state politics, the two authors are to be thanked wholeheartedly for doing a great service to scholars of small states by exposing still more of the goings on of small jurisdictions through their research endeavour. I am confident that there is yet so much more to understand: Corbett and Veenendaal confirm that small states are hardly the simple and quaint units that they are sometimes claimed to be.

The book is provocative, and I would like to suggest five questions that emerge directly from a close reading of the text.

First, most small states operate as two-party democracies. At any point in time, one political party enjoys majority representation in the legislature. This situation is different from larger democratic states (with the exception of the United States) where coalitions and alliance building are essential to form a government and pass legislation. The situation is also quite different from what pertains in the very smallest polities where an absolute monarchy or tribal chieftainship trump political parties, if the latter exist at all. In two-party, ‘winner-takes-all’ situations, there is no separation between executive and legislature; and the judiciary is typically appointed by the same majoritarian government. Hence, the canon of the ‘division of powers’ cannot operate.

Second, majoritarian party rule breeds ‘the power of incumbency’: with a tight control of and over the apparatus of government and the distribution of any ensuing state largesse, political parties, and their leaders, can remain in power in small states for very long periods. And yet, sooner or later, such governments lose power: the erstwhile opposition becomes the government, and vice versa. How can one explain such altercations?

Third, in an age of globalisation and the largest ever recorded migrations of human beings across borders and regions, what is the impact of pluri-culturalism on the fabric of small societies and polities? Will small jurisdictions converge with the more rational and bureaucratic practices of their larger cousins? Or will an inner circle stick resolutely to the principles and processes of the small scale syndrome?

Fourth, the book makes a lot of the power of patronage and the difficult of withholding public goods, not just from those who would vote for you, but also those who the politician

would know from multiple role contexts: school, church, sport, neighbourhood, work. If such is the case, it is always worth asking: is the extent and depth of patronage any different in small states than larger ones? Would the practice be simply more difficult to hide in small jurisdictions?

Fifth and lastly, with near autocratic governments in place, and the resulting stifled role of oppositions, should we be surprised to find out that one expression of resistance to state rule becomes the pursuit of secession and the escape from the clutches of the state itself? From Bougainville to Chuuk, from New Caledonia to Nevis, components of larger states hope to emulate the successful breakaways of Anguilla (from St Kitts-Nevis) and Tuvalu (from Kiribati) and continue to explore this 'ultimate' and tantalising option.

Democracy in small states is the latest addition to the comparative small state literature by the young and formidable duo of Corbett and Veenendaal. I am expecting more and similarly exciting small state scholarship from these academics.

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