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# Does Smallness Enhance Power-Sharing? Explaining Suriname's Multiethnic Democracy

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**ABSTRACT** Pointing to a number of informal dynamics in small societies that are supposed to enhance cooperation and consensus, traditional studies on power-sharing posit that small states are ‘most likely’ candidates for stable, multiethnic democracy. These assumptions are, however, challenged by the case study literature on small states which highlights a variety of informal patterns that undermine democratic governance. Addressing this contradiction, the present paper provides an in-depth analysis of power-sharing politics in Suriname, a small, culturally heterogeneous country in South America that initially figured as a prominent case in consociational theory. The analysis reveals that the smallness of Suriname strongly affects and shapes the nature of democracy in the country. On the one hand, clientelism ensures that members of each ethnic group included in power-sharing arrangements have access to state resources and services, thus providing a large measure of political stability. On the other hand, clientelism undermines the functioning of multiethnic democracy by a host of negative side effects, among which economic and social dependency of citizens, executive dominance and authoritarian politics, endemic corruption that goes largely unpunished, and state predation by elites. The upshot is that whereas power-sharing arrangements in small societies might indeed be facilitated by a small population size, there is a heavy price to pay in terms of the quality of democracy.

## Introduction

Conventional wisdom in comparative politics posits that democratic consolidation is less likely to succeed in ethnically divided societies. While some scholars are categorically pessimistic about the prospects of multiethnic democracy (Horowitz, 1985; Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972), others argue that it can only work under specific institutional arrangements (Elkins & Sides, 2007; Lijphart, 1977; Reilly, 2001). Arend Lijphart famously observed how consociational, power-sharing institutions facilitated democratic rule in several segmented European states, and subsequently applied this framework to non-Western countries such as India, Lebanon, and South Africa (1996, 1998). These attempts at ‘conceptual traveling’ (Sartori, 1970) have drawn profound criticism, either because they involved the stretching of some of the core parameters of consociationalism (Lustick,

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1997) or because of their empirical failure to create democratic regimes in plural societies such as Afghanistan, Burundi, Cyprus, Iraq and Lebanon. Yet despite these deficiencies, power-sharing continues to be regarded as the foremost—if not only—path to democratic rule in ethnically heterogeneous societies (Binningsbø, 2013; Bormann et al., 2019).

While the academic literature on power-sharing initially chiefly emphasized the importance of formal rules and institutions, there has always been an awareness that cultural traditions and informal dynamics are important as well. The focus on informal institutions and rules is part of a relatively new trend in comparative politics (Azari & Smith, 2012; Grzymala-Busse, 2010; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Lauth, 2000), but consociational theory has always stressed the significance of informal dynamics, often subsumed under the umbrella term of ‘elite accommodation’ (Daalder, 1974). Yet as this term suggests, analyses of the informal conditions of power-sharing have essentially remained limited to the level of political elites, while informal dynamics that structure the interactions between citizens and politicians have never really been taken into account. As a result, the influence of the most common manifestation of informal politics – patron-client linkages – on power-sharing arrangements has been under-researched.

Relating to these informal dynamics, one particular dimension of power-sharing that has been largely forgotten pertains to Lijphart’s assertion that consociational arrangements are more likely to emerge and succeed in smaller societies (1977, pp. 65–70; cf. Bogaards, 1998; Daalder, 1974, pp. 610–611). According to Lijphart:

[s]mall size has both *direct* and *indirect* effects on the probability that consociational democracy will be established and will be successful: it directly enhances a spirit of cooperativeness and accommodation, and it indirectly increases the chances of consociational democracy by reducing the burdens of decision-making and thus rendering the country easier to govern. (1977, p. 65)

The supposed link between smallness and consociational democracy is thus based on a perceived set of informal dynamics in small societies that are claimed to facilitate or stimulate democratic development. This claim is, however, in direct contrast with recent empirical studies of democracy in small states, which reveal that many of these countries combine a formally democratic framework with a set of democracy-undermining informal dynamics (Baldacchino, 2012; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018; Veenendaal, 2014a). As a result, it is unclear to what extent informal political dynamics in small polities actually facilitate or enhance power-sharing arrangements.

Most small states with populations under 1 million<sup>1</sup> have homogenous populations and majoritarian systems, meaning that these presumptions are hard to examine empirically. Yet one exemplary case that, coincidentally, also figured in Lijphart’s early works is the Republic of Suriname, a small Caribbean country located on the South American continent (1977, pp. 181–197). With a population of only 590,000, Suriname is a markedly heterogeneous society, comprising five or six different ethnic and cultural groups which each traditionally are represented by their own political parties. Suriname inherited the Dutch political institutions that were established in the colonial era, and chose to retain these after the attainment of independence in 1975. While a military dictatorship in the 1980s temporarily abrogated democratic rule, upon the return of democracy these institutions were marginally reformed, seemingly reviving the tradition of power-sharing politics. Yet while Surinamese politics and society have often been praised for the absence of ethnic tensions, conflict or

violence—thereby ostensibly facilitating democratic rule—the case study literature on Surinamese politics also points to pervasive clientelism, corruption, and state predation (Dew, 1994; Hoefte, 2014; Ramsoedh, 2016; 2018; Singh, 2014). As a result, both the favourable and unfavourable size-related circumstances for multiethnic democracy appear to be present in the country.

Addressing these divergent literatures, this article seeks to study empirically how smallness affects the operation and functioning of multiethnic democracy. Based on an in-depth analysis of Suriname, the article posits that social proximity, clientelism, and other types of informal politics that are produced by smallness strongly affect and shape power-sharing dynamics in small societies. On the one hand, clientelism ensures that members of each group included in the power-sharing arrangement have access to state resources and services, thus providing some measure of political stability. On the other hand, clientelism undermines the functioning of multiethnic democracy by a host of negative side effects, among which economic and social dependency of citizens, executive dominance and autocratic politics, endemic corruption that goes largely unpunished, and state predation by elites. The upshot is that while multiethnic democracy in Suriname nominally survives, the tendency to power concentration and other dynamics of small state politics entail that there may be very little power-sharing in practice, and certainly not of the type envisioned by consociational scholars.

### **Theory: State Size and Power-Sharing Arrangements**

Conventional wisdom in comparative politics posits that societies with profound ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions are more likely to experience domestic conflicts, instability, and authoritarian rule. According to Robert Dahl, cultural diversity has more serious consequences for political stability than other cleavages such as class, since it directly relates to people's fundamental identities (1971, p. 108). More recent empirical analyses nuance these findings in several important ways, for example by demonstrating that certain types of divisions have more deleterious consequences than others (Akdede, 2010; Gerring, Hoffman, & Zarecki, 2018), by disputing the causal mechanism between diversity and democracy (Jensen & Skaaning, 2012), or by claiming that the number of societal groups is crucial (Reilly, 2000). Yet only very few studies find that diversity has no (negative) effect on democracy whatsoever (but see Fish & Brooks, 2004; Fish & Kroenig, 2006).

The threat diverse societies pose to democracy stems from political mobilization on the basis of ethnic, cultural or linguistic identities, leading to the emergence of parties that exclusively represent and cater to one particular population segment (Chandra, 2005; Horowitz, 1993; Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972). This politicization of cultural and ethnic identities in turn presents a profound problem for democracy, because, as Horowitz argues: '[a]gain and again in divided societies, there is a tendency to conflate inclusion in the government with inclusion in the community and exclusion from the government with exclusion from the community' (1993, p. 18; cf. Ishiyama, 2009). It is not surprising, therefore, that collaboration between representatives of the main segmental groups is commonly regarded as the only solution to this predicament. Whereas power-sharing arrangements could take many forms and shapes, Lijphart's institutional benchmarks for consociational democracy have remained prominent in the field. Specifically, Lijphart identifies 1) grand coalitions including all major cultural segments, 2) minority vetoes, 3)

proportionalism, and 4) segmental autonomy as institutional conditions for democratic governance in plural societies (1977).

Early studies of consociational democracy in the 1960s and 1970s observed that such arrangements could exclusively be found in smaller European democracies like Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (Daalder, 1974; Lehmbruch, 1968; Lijphart, 1977). Going as far as to proclaim consociationalism as ‘the privilege of small states’, Hans Daalder zooms in on the effect of external threats in explaining why elites of small states are more likely to cooperate (1974). According to this view, the international vulnerability of small states entails that preserving domestic unity is of crucial importance for the survival of the state, compelling elites to engage in power-sharing. In the words of Lijphart, ‘political leaders will tend to draw together and their followers are also more likely to approve of intersegmental cooperation in the face of grave external threats’ (1977, p. 66). But while the threat of great power conflict on the European continent might indeed have induced Austrian, Belgian, Dutch and Swiss elites to cooperate, such rivalries can have the opposite effect when domestic political groupings are closely aligned with different external powers. The difficulty of establishing power-sharing arrangements in small societies like Cyprus, Lebanon, and Northern Ireland underscores this point (McGarry & O’Leary, 2006; Salamey, 2009).

In addition to external threats, Lijphart and others also highlight some domestic factors of small societies that facilitate elite cooperation. The key argument here is that political elites of smaller societies are more interconnected and cohesive, leading to an atmosphere of ‘mutual goodwill’ and a decreased tendency to view politics as a zero-sum game (Bogaards, 1998; Lijphart, 1977, pp. 65–66). In contrast to the aforementioned formal institutional benchmarks, this argument explicitly relates to informal political dynamics in smaller societies that supposedly stimulate elite accommodation and cooperation. Similar arguments have been used by Peter Katzenstein to explain the economic performance of small states (1985), and also appear in studies that seek to explain the statistical correlation between population size and democracy (Anckar, 2002; Diamond & Tsalik, 1999; Srebrnik, 2004). In small states that have profound cultural or ethnic divisions, the social ties between elites are thus supposed to facilitate or contribute to collaboration and democratic governance.

Seeking to emulate the success of the Western European protagonists of consociationalism, the framework has later been adopted, applied, and tested in a great variety of settings, among which small countries like Burundi, Cyprus, Fiji, Lebanon, Mauritius, and Northern Ireland. The fate of these experiments has been mixed at best, suggesting that the hypothesized democracy-conducive informal dynamics of smaller societies were mostly absent or ineffective in these settings. The relationship between formal and informal political has recently come to the forefront of comparative politics (Azari & Smith, 2012; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Levitsky & Murillo, 2009), with various studies explaining how formal and informal structures can be complementary, reinforcing, or conflicting. Especially in small, cohesive societies in which interpersonal relationships strongly affect and shape political developments, informal politics can be expected to have a significant influence on the functioning and performance of formal institutions and structures (Veenendaal, 2018). But as the next section will discuss, there is little agreement about the extent to which informal dynamics in small states actually facilitate or undermine democratic governance.

*Informal Politics in Small States*

While population or state size often figures as a background or control variable in comparative politics, analyses of scale effects have never been at the heart of the discipline (Gerring & Veenendaal, forthcoming). In their classic volume *Size & Democracy* (1973), Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte discuss and empirically analyze a variety of size effects, and ultimately come to the conclusion that there is a trade-off between the benefits and downsides of smallness. Departing from the observation that virtually all small states have democratic regimes, other studies have primarily highlighted the democracy-stimulating features of small societies (Anckar, 2010; Diamond & Tsaliik, 1999; Ott, 2000). These publications point to similar dynamics as highlighted by consociational scholars, among which a more homogenous, cohesive, and consensual society, greater opportunities for communication between leaders and citizens, and increased political awareness, efficacy, and participation among citizens. Ultimately, these features are supposed to enhance the quality of political representation, thereby contributing to the overall legitimacy of democratic governance (Anckar, 2002).

The greater social intimacy and interconnectedness of smaller jurisdictions is empirically supported by case studies on individual small states and territories, but these publications tend to emphasize different effects on democratic governance. In the first place, the closeness between citizens and elites, and the lack of attitudinal diversity among the population are observed to produce a tendency to personalistic politics, and diminished ideological or programmatic competition (Sutton, 2007; Veenendaal, 2014b). In small societies, personal relations have a considerable influence on political affairs. While the consociational literature assumes that close-knit societies generate more consensual politics, in practice the personalized political environment of small settings is found to create political polarization due to sharp personal antagonism, conflicts and rivalries (Baldacchino, 2012; Richards, 1982).

Second, and related to the prevalence of personalized politics, is the observation that small states tend to have very dominant executives, in which power is concentrated in the hands of one or a few individuals (Sutton, 2007). Due to the lack of multiple political factions and interests, small societies can be susceptible to a 'tyranny of the majority', meaning that the political opposition tends to be weak, sidelined, or even victimized (Baldacchino, 2012). Furthermore, the lack of (human) resources in small states decreases the quality and performance of institutions like parliament, the media, and the civil service, which enhances the power of government vis-à-vis these institutions. Unsurprisingly, power concentration often translates into dominant or autocratic leadership styles, and many small states around the globe – Antigua and Barbuda, Malta, Samoa, and Seychelles are just some examples – have had political leaders who for decades dominated the political arena of their countries.

Last but not least is the observation that the closeness between citizens and politicians frequently translates into conflicts of interest, patron-client linkages, and corruption (Sutton, 2007). Whereas patron-client linkages can be observed in both large and small societies, for a number of reasons smallness can not only be seen as conducive to clientelism, but can also be assumed to modify the manifestation of clientelistic relationships in a number of ways (Crespin & Finocchiaro, 2013; Veenendaal, 2019). In the first place, while direct and unfettered access to politicians is theorized to enhance representation and responsiveness, it also stimulates particularistic exchanges between citizens and public officials. Private and professional relations in small societies tend to become blurred, creating



formidable pressure on politicians to bestow family members, friends, and acquaintances with benefits and services. Politicians' electoral dependence on a relatively small number of votes also strengthens the position of clients vis-à-vis their patrons, further raising these pressures. While the literature on clientelism tends to portray clients as occupying a weak and dependent position vis-à-vis their patrons, in small societies the situation may be reversed (Veenendaal, 2019). Finally, as a result of social intimacy, both clients and patrons have additional opportunities to monitor the actions and behavior of their counterparts, and can therefore control to what extent clientelistic obligations are actually met (cf. Medina & Stokes, 2007, pp. 76–77).

While most small states have homogenous populations, a number of them – including Belize, Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, Montenegro, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname – can be classified as plural societies.<sup>2</sup> As in homogenous small states, democracy survives in these settings, and in Belize, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago it remarkably does so in a majoritarian, winner-take-all institutional framework (Lowe, 2013; Meighoo, 2008). Power-sharing arrangements have been implemented in Fiji, Mauritius, and Suriname, but with very mixed effects: while Mauritius is often heralded as an exemplary multiethnic democracy, democratic rule was abolished in Fiji after a series of coups in the 2000s, and Suriname experienced a military dictatorship in the 1980s, after which democracy was restored. In the present paper, the latter case – which figured in Lijphart's *Democracy in Plural Societies* (1977) – is examined in detail to see how smallness and the informal political dynamics it produces influence the development and functioning of multiethnic democracy.

### **Suriname: Revisiting a Classic Case of Consociational Democracy**

Being culturally part of the Caribbean but located on the Atlantic coast of the South American continent, Suriname is a small republic that attained independence from the Netherlands in 1975. Despite its population of only 590,000, Suriname's society comprises a remarkable variety of different cultural and ethnic groups, most of which were brought to the country by Dutch colonial rulers. Approximately 4% of the population is made up of native Amerindian tribes, who primarily inhabit the densely forested interior of the country. According to the most recent census of 2012, the main other groups inhabiting Suriname are East Indians (known as Hindostanis—27.4%), Maroons (21.7%),<sup>3</sup> Creoles (15.7%), Javanese (13.7%), and a small but growing group of Chinese (1.5%). An additional 13.4% of the population identified as 'mixed', and this group has been growing over the past years (Marchand, 2014). Most Surinamese live on the relatively narrow coastal strip (half of whom in the capital city of Paramaribo), while the interior is very sparsely populated due to the presence of a dense rainforest.

Similar to other small states around the world, Suriname by and large adopted the political-institutional framework of its former colonial power. As in the Netherlands, elections are conducted under a proportional system of List PR, resulting in a multi-party system with many political parties represented in parliament. In contrast to the Netherlands, however, Suriname is subdivided into ten electoral districts which each elect a number of MPs to the 51-member *De Nationale Assemblée*, Suriname's unicameral parliament.<sup>4</sup> Suriname initially had a parliamentary system of government with a ceremonial presidency, but after the return of democracy in the 1980s a hybrid or mixed republican system was adopted, with a more powerful executive president who is elected by and from among



the members of parliament.<sup>5</sup> While the political institutions of Suriname still contain an emphasis on proportionality and coalition governments, the enhanced powers of the presidency, the absence of an agreed right for segments to be included in the coalition, and the lack of minority vetoes and segmental autonomy entail that its political system cannot be classified as fully consociational (Singh, 2014).

The first Surinamese political parties were established in the late 1940s and primarily catered to different ethnic groups, with the NPS<sup>6</sup> representing Creoles, the VHP<sup>7</sup> catering to Hindostanis, and the KTPI<sup>8</sup> representing the Javanese segment (Sedney, 1997, pp. 19–22; Ramsoedh, 2018, pp. 76–77). Proportional elections in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in a multi-party system, compelling parties to form multi-ethnic coalitions. This resulted in a political arrangement known as *verbroederingspolitiek* ('fraternization politics') between NPS-leader Pengel and VHP-leader Lachmon, which lasted from 1958 until 1967 (Sedney, 1997, p. 31). While the decade of *verbroederingspolitiek* appears to be very much in line with consociational thinking, various scholars assert that the Creole-Hindostani alliance was in fact a marriage of convenience in which political leaders used their position in government to advance the economic, social, and political emancipation of their own ethnic group (Ramsoedh, 2018, pp. 109–111).

Mounting fears of Hindostani dominance contributed to calls for independence among Creole parties, which eventually resulted in the termination of multi-ethnic coalitions in 1973. In a climate of rising ethnic tensions and under an almost exclusively Creole government led by new NPS-leader Henck Arron, Suriname attained independence in 1975.<sup>9</sup> Intensifying tensions between ethnic groups, economic stagnation, and flagrant corruption created the pretext for a military coup in 1980 (known as the Sergeants' Coup), after which a military regime under the leadership of Desi Bouterse took power (Dew, 1994; Ramsoedh, 2018). In line with consociational thinking, the termination of power-sharing in multiethnic coalitions thus indirectly also resulted in the collapse of Surinamese democracy.

The military takeover was initially welcomed with quite some enthusiasm, not least because of Bouterse's vow to bring an end to ethnic politics and advance an agenda of pan-ethnic Surinamese nationalism instead. However, within a few years the regime had become implicated in gross human rights violations,<sup>10</sup> narcotics trafficking, enduring economic decline, and the outbreak of a civil war between the Surinamese military and a Maroon insurgency group called the Jungle Commando. Together, these factors and the international isolation they produced forced Bouterse to embark on a process of liberalization, leading to the drafting of a new constitution and the organization of democratic elections in 1987. This vote produced a landslide victory for the traditional ethnic parties and their leaders, who had jointly formed an electoral combination called the Front for Democracy and Development (Dew, 1994; Sedney, 1997). The 1990s and 2000s saw successive victories of the Front, leading to a series of multiethnic coalition governments headed by Ronald Venetiaan (NPS).

This second period of multiethnic coalition governments came to an abrupt end in 2010, when Bouterse's National Democratic Party (NDP)<sup>11</sup> won elections, leading to the former dictator's ascension to the presidency. Five years later, in 2015, the NDP further increased its margin of victory, becoming the first Surinamese party ever to obtain a majority of parliamentary seats on its own. The return of the former military strongman as head of state is controversial not just because of the notorious legacy of Bouterse's regime, but also because it abrogates the pattern of multiethnic coalition formation that had become the hallmark of Surinamese democracy. While Bouterse's NDP presents itself as the only pan-

ethnic party in the country—and indeed fields candidates from all different segments of the population—among Hindostani and Javanese groups the party is broadly regarded as a representative of Creoles (Blanksma, 2006). The effect of Bouterse's presidency on Surinamese democracy remains open for discussion, but his rule certainly does put an end to the logic of multiethnic power-sharing that characterized democracy in the country.

As this brief overview of Surinamese political history reveals, cooperation between different ethnic parties has been a key feature of Surinamese politics. While it can be questioned whether the country was ever truly consociational, multiethnic coalitions certainly contributed to the survival of the democratic political system. At the same time, case studies on Suriname point to a variety of democracy-undermining dynamics, among which autocratic leadership, corruption, patron-client linkages, and state predation (Dew, 1994; Hoeft, 2014; Ramsoedh, 2016; Singh, 2014). To address this paradox, and to investigate how smallness has affected Suriname's tradition of multiethnic politics, one month of fieldwork was conducted in the country in February-March 2018, during which two types of data were gathered. In the first place, twenty-one semi-structured interviews were held with politicians, journalists, academics, and NGO representatives, who were selected with the aim to obtain variation in professional and political views.<sup>12</sup> Second, I joined three individual Surinamese MPs from different parties<sup>13</sup> during events at which they engaged with voters in their districts, among which house visits, consultation hours, and party meetings. The 'shadowing' of these politicians (cf. Fenno, 1978) has given me great insights into the content, dynamics, and nature of interactions between politicians and citizens.<sup>14</sup> Finally, a content analysis of secondary literature, (online) newspaper articles, and official documents was carried out for the purpose of triangulation.

In the following sections of this paper, I will use excerpts from the data that I collected in Suriname to illustrate or support the analysis. All of the interviews were conducted in Dutch, but for the purpose of the analysis, quotes have been translated to English. While respondents obviously have different opinions, perspectives, and political convictions, all of the presented findings reflect the information I received from a (wide) majority of informants, cross-checked with other data sources.

### **How Smallness Affects Surinamese Politics**

To investigate how smallness and informal politics have influenced power-sharing in Suriname, this section sequentially discusses some core features of Surinamese politics. Attention is first paid to three characteristics of Surinamese politics that are a consequence of the smallness of the country, being a) direct connections between citizens and politicians, b) patron-client linkages, and c) power concentration and executive dominance. Subsequently, the link between these features and the Surinamese tradition of power-sharing is discussed.

#### *Representation: Personalism and Ethnic Voting*

As in other small societies, relations between citizens and politicians in Suriname are characterized by constant direct contact and reciprocal communication (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). Given the small dimensions of the country, politicians are bound to run into their constituents wherever they go, and they know many of their constituents personally. As the leader of one of the larger Surinamese parties indicated during an interview, this feature significantly expands the (expected) role and tasks of politicians:

I think that the role of politicians is much more comprehensive in a small society. In addition to political tasks, you also have a social responsibility and a religious task. You have a task where especially in times of crisis, people want their leader to be close to them. People look at their leader to provide some protection and attention.

This expanded expectation of the representative role performed by politicians entails that representatives spend most of their time on interactions with voters, and new means of digital communication such as Facebook and WhatsApp further increase their accessibility. Asked about the proportion of time he spent on contacts with voters, one MP remarked:

A lot of time, a lot of time, yes. I spend about two or three hours a day only to answer [WhatsApp] messages. If I have not looked at my phone for an hour, there will be a hundred new messages.

The cellphone numbers of Surinamese politicians are widely known and openly listed on the website of the national parliament, as a result of which any citizen can reach out to a politician at any given point in time. In comparison to large countries in which there is a strong physical and psychological distance between the rulers and the ruled, Surinamese politicians are incredibly accessible to their constituents.

It is important to point out that this contact between voters and politicians is initiated from both sides. While politicians obviously reach out to voters during campaign periods, also in regular times they make sure to create ample opportunities for direct interactions with voters. Most common among these occasions are house visits in candidates' districts, consultation hours in parliament, and attending important social events such as weddings, birthdays, and funerals. As I witnessed while attending such events, interactions between politicians and voters are quite colloquial and informal, and also included gossiping or chitchatting about everyday matters. In the end, however, the purpose of direct contact with politicians is mostly to receive some benefit, handout or service, and some citizens are quite blunt in asking for this. During interviews, politicians indicated not only that direct interactions and exchanges with voters were expected from them, but also that they regarded them as a key component of being a good representative.

In terms of political orientations and voting behavior, direct contact entails that the personal characteristics of political candidates are much more important than political ideas, party programs, or agendas. As a result, the smallness of Suriname creates a situation in which citizens vote for a candidate they know personally, irrespective of their political platform or ideas. As one prominent politician explains:

In Suriname we don't work with programs, with what your party program looks like. Here, people look at the face. Who is it? Somohardjo, Bouterse, Santokhi, or Brunswijk.

Given the ethnic fragmentation of Surinamese society, people commonly vote for a candidate from their own ethnic group. While official figures are lacking, the matching of census data and election results per electoral district clearly indicates that voting remains largely based on ethnic identifications (Ramadhin, 2016). The focus on ethnicity further accentuates the absence of ideology or substantive politics in Suriname, and thereby contributes to

personalistic politics. While all political parties present programs and manifestoes in advance to elections, these are very similar and remain vague about proposed policies. As a Surinamese journalist remarked:

All election programs are not substantive anyway, they are actually almost copy-pasted from each other. Everyone says “we are going to do something about the civil service, and about ...” But they don’t say how, of course. ( ... ) It all remains vagueness and generalities; anyone can say this.

The traditional Surinamese parties all have ethnic roots, and while some are trying to expand their electoral base by appealing to other constituencies, the success of this so far remains undetermined. Bouterse’s NDP—which in 2015 obtained a majority of parliamentary seats and again formed the government—explicitly brands itself as a multiethnic party, and indeed contains representatives from all ethnic groups. According to most observers, however, this party cleverly fields candidates from specific ethnic backgrounds in specific districts, meaning that most NDP supporters still vote along ethnic lines (Ramsoedh, 2016). As one Surinamese academic commented:

They put a Hindostani candidate in a Hindostani neighborhood, a Javanese in a Javanese neighborhood, and a Creole in a Creole neighborhood. Let them try to field a Maroon in Saramacca – that will come to nothing. So this notion of “look, we are multiethnic” is fake.

Because the smallness of Suriname induces people to vote for a candidate they know and favor personally, smallness indirectly contributes to the endurance of ethnic-oriented voting. Since ideologies and political platforms are inconsequential in small states (Veenendaal, 2014b), Suriname’s smallness arguably prohibits any shift towards a more program-based, non-ethnic type of voting behavior.

#### *Clientelism: Wheelbarrows and Vitamin R*

Despite the prevailing ethnic divisions, the smallness of Suriname produces a densely networked society, in which citizens constantly use their personal relationships to obtain certain benefits and services. A common term in this regard is the *kruiwagen* (wheelbarrow), which refers to citizens’ use of a (higher-ranked) personal acquaintance to get something done. As one politician indicates:

Connections are very important in this country. Things you need to get done ( ... ) require the use of a wheelbarrow, the right contacts. In Suriname it is all about vitamin R ( ... ) – relationships.

Obviously, politicians are the most obvious ‘wheelbarrows’ voters have at their disposal, and as discussed in the previous section, the smallness of Suriname enables voters to directly demand favors from their representatives. Because politicians often also have a personal or private relation with constituents, such requests can put formidable pressure on politicians. As one government minister explained during an interview:

People constantly approach you to make an exception for them. And because we are all family ( ... ), we should help each other ( ... ). But this gives people the freedom to approach politicians and ask to make an exception from general rules. And as a politician or administrator, it takes a strong person to not make these exceptions.

In contrast to larger societies where clientelistic exchanges occur on the basis of complex and hierarchical party organizations, the smallness of Suriname eliminates the need for such intermediaries, and also enhances the power of clients vis-à-vis patrons. While the literature on clientelism in larger countries tends to portray clients as weak and dependent, in small societies clients have a much more powerful position. As a high-ranking former politician mentioned:

My biggest personal problem is patronage. I used to think that I could escape it. But when you are in politics, you realize that it is not just a bad habit of the politicians, but that people also take part in it. They demand it, I have experienced that in my work. And you cannot completely disconnect yourself from it.

Corroborating this perspective, many politicians underlined the need to help their constituents due to widespread poverty and malfunctioning institutions. As in other Caribbean states (Duncan & Woods, 2007), patron-client linkages perform a crucial redistributive function in Suriname, and help to mitigate extreme poverty. An MP imitated the requests she received from poor voters as follows:

I worked for you during elections, so you will give me a house. You will give me a job, even if it is a license to drive a bus or to open a carwash. You will give me a piece of land ( ... ), because right now I still live with my mother and I don't have anything. You need to pay for my health care, because I cannot pay the doctor.

Of course, assisting voters is not always grounded in altruistic intentions, and as in other clientelistic systems, politicians exploit the economic and social dependency of voters for electoral gain. As a journalist explained, these strategies are particularly effective in the underdeveloped interior districts (Brokopondo and Sipaliwini) where most Amerindian and Maroon voters live:

The president recently went to the interior – Amerindian territory – where he distributed chicken bolts and some other things. The whole village received packages; well that means that these people are inclined to vote for you.

Yet while poorer voters can be bought off with food packages or smaller handouts, the most coveted benefit that politicians can provide to more affluent voters is a public sector job. Already in anticipation of elections politicians promise voters employment in the administration, and once voted into office, redeeming such promises is a key priority. In the memory of a former minister and contemporary leader of an opposition party:

When we entered the government, I saw that the board meeting basically changed into an employment agency – everybody brought CVs of neighbors, relatives, you name it.

Current ministers whom I interviewed also indicated that they constantly received requests for jobs. As one minister indicated, citizens even ask ministers to lobby with other ministries on their behalf:

This happens the whole day. I was just on the phone with a person I know; nothing related to my ministry. But the person says “ok, talk to your colleague for me, another minister.” And for that minister, it is the same. I had already two of these cases today before I even entered my office.

As in most other small states, public sector-patronage has created a vastly oversized civil service in Suriname, which as a result of partisan appointments also contains many underqualified staff members who been selected on the basis of political loyalty rather than capacities. And because there are too many employees, many bureaucrats do not have any work to do and are even asked to stay home – becoming so-called *spookambtenaren* (‘ghost officers’). These employees evidently constitute a huge drain on public resources:

If you know how many of them are what we call ghost officers – it is unimaginable. And of course it is related to political parties; people have received these positions. (...) So they are sitting at home, just hanging around, but receiving a government salary.

As in other small states, the closeness and direct contacts between Surinamese citizens and politicians therefore primarily translate into clientelistic exchanges (Veenendaal, 2014a). Citizens expect politicians to perform functions that far exceed their formal political occupation, significantly expanding the representative role. Most MPs indicated that they regard citizens’ use of informal networks to obtain state services objectionable, but also largely unavoidable:

It is quite improper actually, that we have to approach ministers for a street or a bridge, or whatever – a house. These are just things that must be dealt with by the administration.

Since a wide majority of Surinamese voters chiefly expect leaders from within their own ethnic group to fulfil this representative role, the smallness and ensuing prevalence of patron-client linkages can also be deemed to sustain the importance of ethnicity in Surinamese politics, and the lack of a transition to more substantive or program-oriented forms of contestation. On the other hand, clientelism not only mitigates extreme poverty in Suriname, but also provides a crucial representative link between Surinamese citizens and public officials (Kitschelt, 2000).

#### *Domination: Power Concentration and the Pervasiveness of Government*

The consequence of ubiquitous patron-client linkages is that many citizens are financially and socially dependent on their connections with politicians. While Surinamese voters can exert considerable pressure on politicians when asking for benefits or services, in the end their dependence on patronage creates a highly unequal relation between citizens and politicians, and limits the capacity of voters to hold their representatives accountable for their actions in office (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). This passive role of citizens translates into

a lack of political participation apart from voting, and the weakness of intra-party democracy. In the words of a Surinamese academic:

The lack of intra-party democracy makes the leaders supremely powerful, and party members are insufficiently assertive. The people do not adequately formulate and pursue their interests, mainly as a result of the patronage system that has developed.

Within Surinamese parties power is concentrated in the hands of political leaders, who often remain the figurehead of their parties for decades on end, and do not tolerate any substantial participation or criticism from party members (Ramsøedh, 2016). Key Surinamese politicians such as Desi Bouterse, Ronnie Brunswijk or Paul Somohardjo have been active in politics since the 1980s, and have obtained vast powers due to their exploitation of extensive patronage networks. As the leader of a smaller party remarks, the submissive role of citizens undermines the functioning of democracy:

The political sense of Surinamese people is that elections are the only moment of democracy. And this is also reinforced by the attitude of both coalition and opposition politicians; they feel that once a government is elected, it is simply there for five years. Then you just have to deal with it.

The smallness of Suriname in various ways further exacerbates the power of the government, which controls virtually all resources and is the largest employer in the country, as about two thirds of the workforce is either directly or indirectly employed by government (Ramsøedh, 2016, p. 33). Smallness and the ensuing close connections and lack of political anonymity also entail that the government has a strong presence in people's private lives, and in the words of one interviewed politician, 'in Suriname even the smallest grain of sand is political.' As the next section will demonstrate, the exceptional power of the state produces strong incentives for political parties to join the government, because only in this capacity they can meaningfully provide the benefits and services that constituents are asking for.

Now that three core features of Surinamese politics that result from the smallness of the country have been discussed, the next sections will discuss how these political characteristics have informed the tradition of power-sharing in Surinamese politics.

### **Elite Cooperation and Accommodation in Suriname**

Since the initiation of party politics in the 1950s, cooperation between parties catering to different ethnic groups has been a central feature of Surinamese politics. The proportional electoral system rarely produces a parliamentary majority for a single party, and even when the supposedly pan-ethnic NDP managed to obtain such a majority in the 2015 election, it formed a coalition with two minor parties that cater to Javanese and Maroon groups. The absence of programmatic politics in Suriname entails that in principle, any combination of parties can form the government. According to Hans Ramsøedh:

The objective of every party is not to translate the party program into policy but rather to become a part of the power center as rapidly as possible. Cooperation between



parties is not based on overlap between programs but is entered into if the right opportunity presents itself. Hence, pragmatic coalitions are one of the rules of the political game in Suriname. (Ramsoedh, 2016, p. 33)

This opportunistic nature of government formation makes Surinamese politics quite unpredictable, and also untransparent. Politicians and political parties attack each other during election campaigns, but when election results are known a very complex and elaborate bargaining process between political leaders ensues, the results of which are by no means foreseeable. In this process, political leaders experience strong pressures from constituents to join the government, because a failure to do so would exclude specific ethnic groups from access to state resources. According to a minister in the contemporary Bouterse government:

It [coalition formation] is very opportunistic. Parties want to enter government at all costs, and if you are in the government you have the greatest influence. But there is no structure, it is unpredictable.

While coalition formation in Suriname is therefore a very opaque and capricious process, it definitely has translated into cooperation and power-sharing between parties representing different ethnic groups. The aforementioned lack of alteration in party leadership entails that leaders of Surinamese political parties know each other very well, corroborating Lijphart's conjecture that political leaders of small societies are more interconnected. At the same time, relations between political leaders can be very hostile and antagonistic, and cooperation does not seem to be grounded in a perceived obligation or need to diminish ethnic tensions, but rather stems from a desire to enjoy the spoils that come with office. In the words of a Surinamese journalist who covered multiple coalition formation processes:

It is a jostle, a horse trading. First, it is about the money-making ministries, starting with Public Works. This is a great prize, because it involves projects with millions, and you can give them to your friends. Then negotiations will focus on TCT [transport, communication, and tourism], and this cake will be divided. "You put this person here, you this one here." Then, ambassador posts, other ministries, this and that. And you understand that the more parties involved, the more complicated this distribution becomes.

As this quote underscores, government formation negotiations generally center on the distribution of important posts, which in turn enable politicians and parties to allocate resources to their constituents. Because the significance of portfolios and sectors differs per ethnic group, some ministries have traditionally been dominated by specific ethnic parties. Since Javanese people are overrepresented in agriculture, the ministries of agriculture and land and forest management have commonly been in the hands of Javanese politicians. In similar fashion, the ministry of justice has been dominated by Hindostani politicians due to the employment of many Hindostanis in legal professions, and the ministry of regional development has been administered by Maroon politicians, because most Maroons live in interior regions where this ministry funds projects. The administration of a ministry also gives politicians the prerogative to employ members of their own group, as one of the party leaders I interviewed indicated:

The ministries have generally always been the property of the party which had a minister there. And because it is so much based on ethnicity, what do you get? In one ministry you have only people of Indian heritage, and in another ministry only people of Indonesian descent.

In sum, power-sharing in Suriname occurs on the basis of highly pragmatic considerations, in which the access of different ethnic groups to state resources is of paramount importance, putting a strong premium on participation in multiethnic coalition governments. The pervasiveness of clientelism, which in turn can primarily be explained on the basis of the smallness of the country, therefore provides the main rationale for power-sharing in Suriname.

While each group's continued access to state resources has certainly mitigated ethnic tensions, these dynamics also produce a number of negative side effects in addition to clientelism. Since the goal of most Surinamese political parties is to ensure that its supporters have access to state services and benefits, parties and their leaders tend to regard the state as a prize that can be allocated in order to boost the party's electoral standing. As such,

The government has ( ... ) become a domain that is colonized by parties to favor their own supporters. We can thus regard parties in the center of power as colonizers of the state. (Ramsoedh, 2016, p. 33)

State capture or predation is a common feature of politics in developing countries (Grzymala-Busse, 2008; Thies, 2009), but the multiethnic nature of politics in Suriname appears to create extra incentives to engage in this behavior, primarily because peoples' ethnic identities still largely supersede their national identification (Marchand, 2014, pp. 358–359). As a result, ethnic groups remain very much focused on deriving at least a same amount of rewards as others do. State predation by elites also entails that the boundary between state, government and ruling party becomes blurred, meaning that supposedly neutral or impartial public institutions are dominated or subjugated by the party or parties in power (Ramsoedh, 2016).

Yet in addition to the allocation of state resources to voters, politicians and parties also use their management of the state to satisfy or attract wealthy donors, businesses, and even criminal organizations, thereby contributing to endemic corruption. The maintenance of patron-client linkages is extremely costly, and in the absence of campaign finance laws most political parties rely on wealthy sponsors for financial assistance, who in turn demand favors, concessions, or privileged access once a party is elected into office. The pressure coming from these sponsors to join the government is perhaps even greater than that of constituents, as one MP explains:

Two terms in opposition is fatal, because party finances are for a large part based on contributions. And you will not have any financiers or sponsors when they have the idea that you cannot enter government.

Various politicians indicated that the pressure from sponsors can force parties to collaborate even with their archrivals. At the time of writing, various interviewees pointed out that the Hindostani VHP was under particularly strong pressure to rejoin the government

ranks, if necessary even with its archrivals, the NDP. According to a politician from a third party:

For the VHP it would be disastrous if they once more end up in opposition, because then everyone will walk away; they will just join the NDP in order to get their permits. There you truly see the pressure.

Intriguingly therefore, clientelism and corruption constitute strong rationales for power-sharing in Suriname, as parties have to satisfy and cater to both voters and sponsors. The previous president of Suriname, Ronald Venetiaan, repeatedly referred to the latter group as ‘tarantula’s’; powerful players who, operating from behind the scenes, have the capacity to control the actions of elected politicians. Corruption has always occurred in Suriname, and virtually all parties have had their share of scandals. Again, this can be related to the smallness of the country, and the overlapping connections between politicians, civil servants, and citizens, which frequently create conflicts of interest. In addition to corrupt exchanges with sponsors, the previous and current Bouterse administrations have also been accused of maintaining links with transnational crime groups, and drugs cartels in particular (cf. Farah & Babineau, 2017). Bouterse’s son Dino has repeatedly been implicated in narcotics trafficking, and in 1999 Bouterse himself was convicted for cocaine smuggling by a Dutch court.

### **Stability and the Future of Surinamese Democracy**

Despite pervasive clientelism, dominant leadership, rampant corruption and state predation, Surinamese democracy survives in the sense that continuously free and fair elections produce persistent alternation in power. While Suriname has experienced both civil war and an authoritarian regime in the 1980s, since the return to multiparty democracy there has been no violence between ethnic groups. The main explanation for this feat seems to be that the Surinamese system in a sense ‘works’ for all its consumers. As a result of their intimate connections with politicians and continuing patron-client exchanges, citizens have continuous access to state resources, and extreme poverty is limited. Most importantly, the inclusion of all ethnic segments in the government ensures that in principle, no groups or citizens are excluded from these exchanges. For politicians the system works because it provides them with near total control of the state apparatus, while the lack of institutional checks and a critical public also enables them to engage in corrupt practices and self-enrichment.

For many observers, the 2010 election of former dictator Bouterse as president represented a vital threat to the survival of Surinamese democracy. It is widely believed that Bouterse’s decision to seek the presidency was motivated by the looming criminal investigation of the 1982 December murders, and as president he has indeed taken various actions to block or frustrate the criminal procedures against him (Evers & Van Maele, 2012). In contrast to his military regime of the 1980s, however, as president Bouterse has not abolished democratic institutions, and elections in Suriname continue to be evaluated as free and fair. In comparison to the pre-2010 period characterized by large multiethnic coalitions, the main change has been that executive power is now almost exclusively in the hands of a single party, putting an end to the tradition of power-sharing in Surinamese politics. This however does not seem to imply a turn towards authoritarianism, but instead (for the

moment) appears to make Suriname more similar to other Caribbean countries with single-party governments.

In the long run, however, the stability of the Surinamese system can be questioned. Economically, ubiquitous patron-client linkages function as an enormous drain on state resources, especially regarding the vastly oversized public service. Suriname's debt to GDP ratio is at 65%, and has been increasing rapidly over the past years. But perhaps an even bigger threat to the stability of Suriname are the environmental costs of corruption and state predation. Deals between politicians and gold mining companies have resulted in the exploitation resources in the interior, and the degradation of Suriname's pristine rain-forest. Many rivers are contaminated with mercury that is being used to mine gold, threatening both animals and humans residing here. Corruption therefore also creates environmental costs that in the long run could threaten the stability of Suriname.

## **Conclusion**

The broader literature on consociational democracy and power-sharing posits that such arrangements are more likely to succeed in smaller societies due to the presence of several favorable informal dynamics that stimulate cooperation and consensus. In contrast, the case study literature on small states indicates that smallness produces a variety of informal mechanisms that undermine democracy, among which clientelism, personalistic politics, and executive domination. This article has largely corroborated the findings of the latter literature, as all of these features can indeed be observed in Suriname, and certainly weaken the quality of Surinamese democracy. At the same time, the absence of ideological politics and the close connections and clientelistic exchanges between citizens and politicians do constitute the main explanation for the stability and survival of the democratic regime in Suriname. While informal dynamics have therefore certainly contributed to the maintenance of power-sharing arrangements in Suriname, these dynamics are quite dissimilar from those that Lijphart and other consociational scholars had in mind.

The relatively harmonious and stable nature of Suriname's multiethnic society and political system is a source of pride for its inhabitants, and has also attracted the attention of scholars. Given the challenges associated with democratic development in plural societies in other parts of the world, this achievement should certainly not be underestimated. Even in the Caribbean, other multiethnic societies like Belize, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago have experienced much more hostility and violence between ethnic groups than Suriname. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that these countries contain only two main ethnic groups and have majoritarian systems, producing single party governments dominated by one ethnic party. With the exception of the military regime of the 1980s and the current Bouterse government, in Suriname power-sharing in coalition governments has always been the norm, enabling all ethnic groups to partake in the spoils of government.

In the end, however, the findings of this article suggest that smallness has a stronger impact on the operation of democracy than the number of ethnic groups. In the first place, other plural countries such as Belize, Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, Montenegro, and Trinidad and Tobago also maintain nominally democratic regimes, regardless of the degree of ethnic fragmentation (Freedom House, 2018). The formal institutional frameworks of these countries are quite divergent, with many of them remarkably sustaining multiethnic democracy under a majoritarian framework. However, case study publications on these countries reveal that informal political dynamics are highly comparable (Lowe, 2013; Meighoo,

2008; Vernon, 2013), and are in fact also very similar to those of culturally homogenous small states (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018). This suggests that the smallness of these countries – and the informal politics it produces – carries more explanatory power for regime outcomes than formal institutions or the balance of power between different groups. In other words, cultural and ethnic diversity do not seem to have the same democracy-undermining consequences that have often been observed in larger countries. Instead, the informal political dynamics of small states produce a stable political system that can be assessed in two very distinct ways. On the one hand, the survival of stable democratic institutions in multiethnic small states is a remarkable accomplishment that unquestionably exceeds the experience of many larger segmented societies. On the other hand, the quality of democracy is to such an extent weakened by the prevailing informal dynamics that this positive feat can sometimes hardly be recognized anymore.

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### Notes

1. There is ample discussion in the literature about the definition of ‘small states’, but ultimately any cut-off point to separate small from large states is arbitrary (cf. Crowards, 2002). For the purpose of the present study, a threshold of 1 million citizens is used.
2. In addition, two small states in the Pacific –Solomon Islands and Vanuatu – are hyper-fragmented societies with over twenty different cultural and linguistic segments.
3. Maroons are people of African descent who escaped from slavery and formed settlements in Suriname’s interior. In Suriname six different Maroon groups can be identified, of which the Saramaccans and Ndyuka (or Aukan people) are the largest.
4. The demographically largest district (Paramaribo) elects seventeen members, while the smallest district (Coronie) elects only two. Within each district seats are allocated on a proportional basis.
5. A similar type of hybrid system can be observed in Botswana and South Africa.
6. *Nationale Partij Suriname* (National Party of Suriname).
7. *Verenigde Hindoestaanse Partij* (United Hindostani Party), later *Vooruitstrevende Hervormingspartij* (Progressive Reform Party).
8. *Kerukunan Tulodo Pranatan Inggil* (Party for National Unity and Solidarity).
9. In the period leading up to and immediately after independence, about 70.000 Surinamese (approximately 25% of the population) migrated to the Netherlands, signaling their lack of confidence in an independent Suriname.
10. Most notoriously among these were the so-called ‘December murders’ (*Decembermoorden*) of 1982, during which fifteen prominent critics of the regime were kidnapped, tortured, and executed.
11. *Nationale Democratische Partij*.
12. A complete list of interview respondents can be found in the Appendix of this article.

13. This included one MP from ABOP (a Maroon party), one from the NPS (a Creole party), and one from the VHP (a Hindostani party).
14. Given the smallness and high levels of political sensitivity in Suriname, I have decided not to disclose the names of these politicians.

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