

# Democratization

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# Clientelism in small states: how smallness influences patron–client networks in the Caribbean and the Pacific

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## ABSTRACT

Studies of clientelism increasingly focus on the brokers, networks and party machines that make clientelism work in mass democracies. This article highlights the different forms clientelistic politics can take by looking at small, rather than large, democracies in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Countries in both regions experience considerable clientelistic politics, but without the same dependence on brokers, networks and party machines. Based on extensive fieldwork in 15 different Caribbean and Pacific small states, resulting in over 200 interviews, we uncover how clientelism is practised in these hitherto neglected cases. We find that the size of these states contributes to the emergence of clientelistic relations based on (1) the ‘face-to-face’ connections and overlapping role relations between citizens and politicians, (2) politicians’ electoral dependence on a very small number of votes, and (3) enhanced opportunities for monitoring and controlling clientelistic exchanges. Smallness is furthermore found to limit, albeit not entirely dispense with, the need for brokers, networks and party machines, and to amplify the power of clients vis-à-vis their patrons, altering the nature and dynamics of clientelism in important ways. In a final section we discuss how clientelism contributes to other dominant trends in small state politics: personalism and executive domination.

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**KEYWORDS** Clientelism; small states; Caribbean; Pacific Islands; personalistic politics

## Introduction

Contemporary academic studies of clientelism and patronage primarily investigate large states where hierarchical party machines produce and sustain intricate networks of patrons, brokers, and clients.<sup>1</sup> In such mass societies there are hardly any opportunities for direct face-to-face contact between patrons and clients, as a result of which intermediary agents and party structures have to monitor the continued political loyalty of citizens and to make sure that the clientelistic ‘machine’ remains intact. While this image of clientelism has now come to dominate the field, in small settings the nature of patron–client networks is markedly different. Small societies were initially central to the study of clientelism, with anthropological and sociological studies primarily

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focused on smaller Mediterranean societies such as Malta or southern Italian villages where patrons and clients directly engage and communicate with each other.<sup>2</sup> But comparativists now mostly focus on larger countries, despite the fact that small states are much more likely to be democratic,<sup>3</sup> and as a result these cases tend to be excluded or ignored.<sup>4</sup> The ongoing presence of clientelism and high Freedom House scores in these cases presents us with a puzzle about the way patron–client networks operate in small settings. By uncovering these practices we contribute to the literature on the varieties of clientelism by highlighting the importance of a hitherto neglected factor: state size.

This article examines the influence of smallness on the origins, characteristics, and effects of patron–client linkages in the two world regions that house most of the world’s small states and microstates: the Caribbean and the Pacific. We focus on the 11 Caribbean and 11 Pacific states with less than 1 million inhabitants, which are listed in Table 1.<sup>5</sup> As this table reveals, our 22 cases have a diverse mixture of constitutional frameworks, levels of economic development and to a lesser extent colonial legacies. However, they share three common features: (1) small size; (2) high Freedom House scores; and (3) the presence of clientelist politics.<sup>6</sup> By looking at the operation of clientelism across the two regions, we aim to investigate the ways in which smallness influences the development and operation of clientelist politics. Explaining the similarities of informal, clientelist practices across the two regions is our core aim in this article.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, state size (or smallness) is not the only factor

**Table 1.** Background information on the Caribbean and Pacific states.

	Population <sup>a</sup>	GDP per capita <sup>a</sup>	Colonial power	Independence	Regime <sup>b</sup>	Constitution
<i>Caribbean</i>						
St. Kitts and Nevis	53.000	\$28,000	Britain	1983	Democracy	Parliamentary
Dominica	74.000	\$11,000	Britain	1978	Democracy	Parliamentary
Antigua and Barbuda	96.000	\$26,000	Britain	1981	Democracy	Parliamentary
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	102.000	\$12,000	Britain	1979	Democracy	Parliamentary
Grenada	112.000	\$15,000	Britain	1974	Democracy	Parliamentary
St. Lucia	166.000	\$14,000	Britain	1979	Democracy	Parliamentary
Barbados	293.000	\$19,000	Britain	1966	Democracy	Parliamentary
Bahamas	333.000	\$32,000	Britain	1973	Democracy	Parliamentary
Belize	386.000	\$8000	Britain	1981	Democracy	Parliamentary
Suriname	598.000	\$15,000	The Netherlands	1975	Democracy	Hybrid
Guyana	741.000	\$8000	Britain	1966	Democracy	Hybrid
<i>Pacific</i>						
Nauru	10.000	\$12,000	Australia	1968	Democracy	Hybrid
Tuvalu	11.000	\$4000	Britain	1978	Democracy	Parliamentary
Palau	22.000	\$15,000	United States	1994	Democracy	Presidential
Marshall Islands	76.000	\$4000	United States	1986	Democracy	Hybrid
Federated States of Micronesia	104.000	\$3000	United States	1986	Democracy	Presidential
Tonga	106.000	\$6000	Never colonized	–	Democracy	Monarchical
Kiribati	109.000	\$2000	Britain	1979	Democracy	Hybrid
Samoa	201.000	\$6000	New Zealand	1962	Democracy	Parliamentary
Vanuatu	288.000	\$3000	Britain and France	1980	Democracy	Parliamentary
Solomon Islands	660.000	\$2000	Britain	1978	Democracy	Parliamentary
Fiji	926.000	\$10,000	Britain	1970	Hybrid	Parliamentary

<sup>a</sup>Data retrieved from the CIA World Factbook (2019).

<sup>b</sup>Based on Freedom House’s Freedom in the World Survey (2019). Countries classified as “democracy” have a ranking of “free” in the Freedom House dataset, those classified as “hybrid” have a ranking of “partly free”.

that explains the prevalence of clientelistic politics in Caribbean and Pacific countries, and we acknowledge the likelihood of equifinality in causal effects that can explain this outcome. While we cannot discuss all of the causal factors that may or may not have produced a tendency to clientelistic politics in this article, our aim is to focus on the effects of size on the presence and nature of patron–client linkages in the two regions.

We find that what unites these otherwise rather diverse states is a tendency towards hyper-personal politics.<sup>8</sup> Because of their small populations, Caribbean and Pacific politicians have direct interactions with their constituents, leading to a blurred boundary between public and private spheres. Personal, face-to-face connections also influence voting behaviour. As a consequence, ideologies and political platforms play a very limited role in small state politics. Perhaps counterintuitively, however, in practice politics tends to be quite polarized, with individual leaders struggling to control state resources. As we will show in this analysis, this hyper-personal political context is conducive to specific types of clientelistic exchanges.<sup>9</sup>

To advance these arguments, we combine the rich case study literature on individual countries and interview material that we gathered during different stages of field research in 15 Caribbean and Pacific island states.<sup>10</sup> This fieldwork mostly consisted of interviews with political elites, as well as a content analysis of relevant primary and secondary sources. Our material is largely qualitative and defies the types of sampling conventions common to positivist social science, but when analysed comparatively it offers insights that could not be obtained via other means. To enhance the reliability of our findings, we first identified the common patterns emerging from our interviews, and subsequently triangulated these findings with the outcomes of the content analysis. Based on this material, we do not aim to prove a correlation between state size and clientelism – we accept that the well-documented experience of the small states of the Pacific and Caribbean in particular demonstrates that it exists – but instead seek to understand *how* smallness has shaped the practice of patronage and clientelism in these settings. Based on our findings, we argue that hyper-personalism and social intimacy affect clientelism in three ways: (1) they reduce the need for brokers and other intermediaries, (2) they enhance the power of clients vis-à-vis their patrons, while they (3) also enhance patrons' opportunities for monitoring the behaviour (i.e. compliance) of clients.

Throughout the following analysis we employ interview quotes to illustrate the primary points we are arguing. Our findings indicate that patron–client linkages can be regarded as a core feature of Caribbean and Pacific politics, which on the one hand explains the enviable records of democracy and stability in these regions, but also their authoritarian features, contributing to widespread disaffection, disenchantment and cynicism with democratic institutions. While focusing primarily on the (many) commonalities between clientelism and patronage in the Caribbean and Pacific, the article also highlights some important differences between these two regions. Most importantly, Caribbean politics is characterized by stable two-party systems, single-party governments, and a winner-take-all dynamics that results in the concentration of power in the hands of the executive.<sup>11</sup> In the Pacific, by contrast, the absence of parties or the presence of highly fluid and fragmented multi-party systems tends to produce instability. While we recognize that these differences might influence the operation of clientelism in important ways, our aim in this article is to explain how smallness has contributed to a similar form of clientelism across the two regions.

We start off by providing a brief synopsis of the political history of both the Caribbean and the Pacific, after which we discuss the dynamics of clientelism by subsequently highlighting the characteristics of networks, resources, and control. Finally, we discuss some idiosyncratic features of politics in both regions, and show how these can be related to smallness and patron–client linkages.

## Political developments and democratization

To provide some historical background, this section offers a brief synopsis of the colonial history, independence and democratization, and post-independence dynamics in the Caribbean and Pacific.

### *The Caribbean*

In comparison to other world regions and the other parts of the American continent, the Caribbean islands were colonized at a much earlier point in time, meaning that their colonial experience was lengthier than the Pacific.<sup>12</sup> Due to their size and accessibility, the first plantation societies were created on smaller West Indian islands. After most of the native Amerindian populations had been annihilated by European colonizers, enslaved Africans were imported to work on the plantations. Most Caribbean societies were thus created by colonialism, in the sense that there was only a very limited ‘native’ society or population that survived the impact of colonialism. Contemporary Caribbean societies are therefore primarily the result of (forced) migration flows that occurred under colonial rule.<sup>13</sup> As a result, and due to the small dimensions of most island colonies in the West Indies, colonial rule was also more intense, in the sense that in comparison to larger, mainland territories colonialism directly influenced all aspects of life. According to many authors, the upshot of this greater penetration of colonialism and the creolized populations it produced is that Caribbean societies are generally more ‘westernized’ than post-colonial societies in other parts of the world.<sup>14</sup>

Most of the European colonial powers in the Caribbean administered their colonies on the basis of institutional blueprints that originated in the metropole. Yet while the domestic political institutions of larger European countries like France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom became increasingly more democratic and inclusive over time, in the Caribbean colonies these institutions were primarily employed to exploit and oppress the nonwhite population, while only a very small group of affluent white merchants and plantation owners (the ‘plantocracy’) exerted political influence. It could therefore be argued that Caribbean populations have primarily experienced Western institutions in an authoritarian, exclusionary, and oppressive way, since Caribbean colonies were essentially ruled by authoritarian regimes until the extension of the franchise in the 1940s. The combination of Western political institutions and authoritarian rule is at the root of post-colonial political development in the region, which is marked by a unique blend of formally democratic institutions and a profoundly authoritarian informal political culture.<sup>15</sup>

The colonial plantation system also provided the foundation for contemporary clientelist networks in the region. Both before and after the abolition of slavery, an entrenched system of patronage directed the flow of resources from colonial administrators to plantation owners and (enslaved) workers.<sup>16</sup> It is hardly a surprise, therefore, that patron–client linkages constituted the foundation of relations between citizens and

politicians after the introduction of universal suffrage and the onset of party politics. According to Donald Peters, “[w]hat leaders [in the Eastern Caribbean] have done is essentially replace the ‘European colonialist’ with the ‘local colonialist’ – only the color of these individual leaders has changed”.<sup>17</sup>

The origins of contemporary Caribbean politics can be found in the 1930s, which saw the emergence of trade unions in many Caribbean colonies, many of which transformed into political parties when universal suffrage was introduced a decade later. Most of these trade unions were spearheaded by a charismatic political leader, who played a crucial role in the political emancipation of the black working class, and swiftly took control of most of the political arena. Political figures like Vere Bird in Antigua and Barbuda, Lynden Pindling in the Bahamas, Grantley Adams in Barbados, Eric Gairy in Grenada, and Robert Bradshaw in St. Kitts and Nevis thus rapidly gained influential and powerful positions, in part because of the absence of a credible political opposition. The leadership style of these politicians was generally autocratic, and patron–client networks contributed to their accumulation of vast powers.

### ***The Pacific***

Compared with the Caribbean, one of the defining characteristics of small states in the Pacific is that they were colonized relatively late by Europeans. Archaeologists and linguists believe that the first wave of original settlers arrived on the island of New Guinea 40–50,000 years ago. The vast Austronesian migration from west to east across the Pacific Ocean began between 2000 and 1000 BC, with New Zealand settled only as recently as AD 1200–1300. Portuguese and Spanish explorers first navigated the Pacific Ocean in the 1500s while Britain’s James Cook undertook the first of his three voyages in 1768. But, for much of the region, colonization did not begin in earnest until the 1800s, while Niue was colonized as late as 1900. And so, while it persists in some islands, for most colonialism lasted little more than a century. Moreover, in most cases, colonial rule had little influence beyond administrative capitals, in part because of the archipelagic nature of many Pacific states, the distance from the colonial metropolises and the limited wealth available in the islands.

This relatively late and – compared to regions like the Caribbean – thin veneer of colonialism has shaped an academic and policy discussion dominated by questions about ‘modernity’, including assessment of its penetration and reach. As a result, scholars have been interested in describing whether political practice in the Pacific is a new and distinct form of politics that reflects the prevailing post-colonial context, defined by the twin processes of modernist development and democratization, or whether politics is a continuation of an older, pre-modern or traditional practice that has persisted into the present.

Anthropology and anthropologists have heavily influenced how the patterns and practices of politics are understood in the Pacific.<sup>18</sup> The classic attempt to establish a typology of political types in the Pacific is Marshall Sahlins’ differentiation between the achieved leadership of the Melanesian “Big Man” and the ascribed leadership of the Polynesian “Chief”.<sup>19</sup> While subsequent work has contested the geographical distinction – achieved leadership is apparent in Polynesia and ascribed in Melanesia – and the explicit evolutionary interpretation – for Sahlins’, ascribed leadership was more evolved – apparent in his ‘abstracted sociological typology’, it remains the seminal reference in subsequent scholarship. In relation to contemporary politics, the

claim is that clientelism and executive domination in the region represents a continuation of these past practices. Like the Caribbean, many Pacific countries had long-serving independence leaders who completely dominated all aspects of political, economic and social life.<sup>20</sup> In most countries politics has since become more fractured but the highly personalistic and clientelistic practices have remained.

The main alternative to this understanding of political practices in the Pacific as neo-traditional norms is advanced by scholars working from a rational choice perspective. Wood, for example, argues that weak governance and state capacity causes voters to search for personal and localized benefits from their politicians, and this comes at the expense of national governance.<sup>21</sup> The result is a 'trap' in which poor governance drives clientelism but clientelism also contributes to poor governance. In this view, neo-traditional language and labels like 'Big Man' mask deeper structural causes that have their root in the political economy of underdevelopment. In turn, this can explain why electoral systems rarely work the same in small states as they do in large ones;<sup>22</sup> that party systems are weakly institutionalized;<sup>23</sup> and that politics is highly patriarchal.<sup>24</sup>

### The nature of clientelism and patronage

While the previous section as well as Table 1 highlighted some important differences between historical and colonial legacies of the Caribbean and the Pacific, it is important to point out that the wide majority of our cases share an Anglo-American colonial legacy, as a result of which most small states in these regions operate single-member district (or first-past-the-post) electoral systems. In terms of size effects, this entails that in addition to having small national populations, most of our cases – including those with a proportional electoral system – also have (extremely) small electoral districts. Whereas the average population size of districts in the United States is above 700,000, and in the United Kingdom about 70,000, in small states this figure is typically below 10,000 (and in some cases even below 1000). Based on our primary and secondary data, we contend that the small national population and small district size both stimulate the development of clientelistic politics, and that it may be hard – and beyond the scope of this article – to empirically distinguish between effects at the national level and effects at the district level. For this reason, when discussing size effects it should be kept in mind that this refers to the combination of small national populations and small electoral districts.<sup>25</sup>

By emphasizing the explanatory power of demographics and size, our comparison therefore challenges accounts of clientelism that see cultural or historical factors as the only determining these forms of politics. To structure our analysis we draw on the framework presented by Aspinall and Berenschot in their introduction to this special issue.<sup>26</sup> They argue that in order to understand variation in patronage democracies, we need to pay attention to (a) the structure of clientelistic networks, (b) the resources employed in clientelistic exchanges, and (c) the control over these resources. We discuss each of these dimensions in turn.

### Networks

The smallness of Caribbean and Pacific societies produces a remarkable closeness between citizens and politicians, reflected in direct personal communication and



face-to-face contacts. Unlike larger societies, citizens and politicians personally interact on a day-to-day basis, and continuously meet each other in restaurants, supermarkets, churches, or at the beach. In the academic literature, this closeness is often regarded as a positive feature of political life that is supposed to produce leader responsiveness and a higher quality of political representation.<sup>27</sup> In practice, however, such interactions primarily stimulate the development of patron–client linkages, as citizens use their access to politicians to demand personal favours. As one politician in St. Kitts and Nevis remarked during an interview, personal contacts with citizens can put great pressures on politicians:

People feel that as a politician, as their representative, you become their friend, you become in many respects a figure that they can turn to if they have difficulties. And it's not always money. Oftentimes, if they are having a problem of some kind, you become the priest, you become the doctor, you become the lawyer, you become the brother, you become the confidant, you become someone in the community that people look to. And that obviously can be difficult, because it creates immense pressure.<sup>28</sup>

As this quote underscores, in contrast to larger countries in which patron–client linkages are established, fostered, and maintained by means of brokers, party organizations, or other intermediaries, the smallness of Caribbean and Pacific island countries entails that these exchanges tend to happen on a very personal, ‘face-to-face’ basis. While the conceptual framework presented by Aspinall and Berenschot in the introduction to this special issue draws a distinction between institutionalized and non-institutionalized broker–politician and broker–voter relations, the irrelevance of brokers in most Caribbean and Pacific small states means that these countries cannot be categorized on these dimensions. Historically, traditional chiefs have played this role in some Pacific states, but their influence is commonly believed to be declining.

Depending on the electoral system and district magnitude, most constituencies in Caribbean and Pacific countries only have a few thousand voters. This is a highly significant difference with other patronage democracies like Brazil, India, or Indonesia, in which districts can have millions of voters. Given the smallness of Caribbean and Pacific electoral districts, politicians often have overlapping private and professional relations with their constituents, whom they might also know because they are family members, friends, neighbours, members of the same church, or because they went to school together. These so-called multiple role relationships strongly increase the social pressure on politicians to provide their supporters with material benefits.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the smallness of electoral districts means that a handful of votes are often decisive in determining election results, which further incentivizes politicians to personally attract hesitant voters by offering them favours or largesse. Aware of the greater political value of their votes, Caribbean and Pacific citizens can be very aggressive and direct in making demands to their political representatives to reward them for their vote. While much of the clientelism literature portrays clients as weak and dependent on their patrons, the small size of Caribbean and Pacific societies means that these roles can be reversed, with clients exercising considerable pressure on their patrons to ‘deliver’. In comparison to larger countries, clientelism in small societies is therefore likely to be more demand- than supply driven, underlining the agency and power of individual clients.<sup>30</sup>

As discussed in the introduction, Caribbean small states are characterized by stable patterns of party competition, while in the Pacific parties tend to be weak, fractured, or



absent altogether. Yet due to the fact that politics in both regions is hyper-personal in nature, parties do not tend to play a very important role in establishing and maintaining patron–client networks.<sup>31</sup> Despite the longer durability of parties in the Caribbean, in both regions parties have very shallow organizational structures, and primarily serve as political vehicles of individual leaders. What is important for many politicians is that they are seen to be *personally* accessible and generous. During election campaigns parties organize rallies and activities, which usually draw a high turnout and enthusiastic crowds. Informally, these meetings offer politicians an opportunity to see which families and individuals show up to support them, and might therefore be rewarded when the party makes it into office. For voters, attending such meetings and actively showing support for the party is a strategy to demonstrate their political allegiance and loyalty, in anticipation of potential future benefits.

### Resources

When it comes to the type of resources that are allocated to voters as part of patron–client exchanges, a distinction can be made between public and private resources, and individual and collective benefits. As various authors have underscored, in both Caribbean and Pacific countries patron–client linkages fulfil a crucial redistributive function, and in the absence of a social welfare system play a key role in alleviating poverty.<sup>32</sup> According to Duncan and Woods, in the Caribbean “[t]he post-colonial state developed from an entrenched system of patronage administered through the welfare state that improved the lives of the poor”.<sup>33</sup> Yet while clientelism can be construed as playing a positive role in reducing poverty, ‘spoils’ are unequally allocated, with a clear distinction between the ‘haves’ (i.e. supporters of the person in power) and ‘have nots’ (those who support the opposition). Alternation in power ensures that these roles will almost certainly be reversed at some point in the future, but the profound inequality inevitably stimulates divisions, polarization, and hostility between groups.

As our data and individual country studies of Caribbean and Pacific states highlight, a wide range of goods, services, and other benefits may be allocated by politicians to voters as part of a clientelistic exchange. This could range from straightforward vote-buying to paying electricity bills, refrigerators, a license to study abroad, or a public tender assignment. The smallness of electoral districts in Caribbean and Pacific countries means that a handful of votes can make the difference between winning and losing an election. As a result, to a greater extent than in large countries, there are incentives for politicians to allocate targeted benefits to individual voters. Because the political affiliations of most voters are known or can be guessed based on their familial and social connections, politicians generally know which voters belong to their core group of supporters and which voters are staunch adherents of the opposition. As a result, they can quite precisely estimate which voters might be open to a clientelistic exchange or even to sell their vote. Smallness can therefore be expected to stimulate vote-buying, and although hard data are lacking, interview respondents in both the Caribbean and Pacific broadly acknowledged that vote-buying is prevalent in all countries.

As will be highlighted in the next section, public sector jobs are among the most valuable resources that politicians can offer to voters. But while public resources are important elements of patron–client exchanges, many powerful Caribbean and Pacific leaders have amassed vast private wealth, offering them also the opportunity

to employ private resources in attracting and rewarding supporters. However, the success of these strategies is debatable, in part because the demand-driven nature of clientelistic exchanges in small states means that voters will take largesse from every candidate and vote for who they want.

In addition to gifts, in the Pacific candidates have to provide transport, fuel, food and accommodation for themselves and their support teams, as well as spending money on posters and media advertising.<sup>34</sup> Campaigning often begins with voter registration, which can be both costly and strategically important.<sup>35</sup> On Election Day, voters need to be transported to polling booths and they generally expect to be fed. Kiribati's electoral system provides for two rounds of voting, meaning that some politicians have to fight their campaign twice. After elections, legal challenges are also relatively common: candidates with deep pockets can settle out of court or risk losing all of what they have spent.

Estimates vary but in 2011–2012 the most commonly quoted figure, across the Pacific region was between USD\$20,000 and \$40,000 to finance a campaign.<sup>36</sup> However, it is important to note that some politicians, especially those with a high profile, from urban areas, or from small constituencies, claim to have spent hardly any money at all. Conversely, we have also been quoted figures well in excess of that number, echoing long-serving Palauan politician and three-time unsuccessful presidential candidate Roman Tmetuchl's claim that a "candidate for a major office needs about half a million dollars to be able to feed the people so that they will vote for him".<sup>37</sup> Costs also vary over time. Former Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Sir Peter Kenilorea writes that his election unopposed in 1976 cost him SI\$30 for a motorized canoe to collect nominator's signatures. On leaving politics he reflected that:

Solomon Islands politics and the culture itself is such that whatever material possessions I appeared to have were deemed to be the property of everyone else. My constituents seemed to know intuitively when my fortnightly pay was due and came around very soon after the money went into my bank account. ... However, to cease being generous to my constituents could have caused the end of my political career, given the prevailing communal political environment and practices.<sup>38</sup>

More recently, many Pacific states have instituted Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) – discretionary slush funds for sitting MPs – that essentially place public resources in private hands. Of the small states we canvass here Solomon Islands has gone furthest with this practice.<sup>39</sup> CDFs are contentious due to the perception that they facilitate corruption and divert much-needed funds from the (already weak) state.<sup>40</sup> But they are popular with MPs as being able to spend public money privately reduces the need for them to reach into their own pockets to furnish personalized constituent requests.

## **Control**

The third comparative dimension that is identified in the introduction to this special issue relates to the control of state resources, and the capacity to allocate these resources to (potential) clients. Caribbean and Pacific governments – and prime ministers or presidents in particular – have an extremely powerful position in both the political and societal arenas, which in many ways appears to be at odds with widely shared notions of liberal democracy. As in other small island societies, Caribbean and Pacific governments either directly or indirectly influence employment, while the

private sectors of many countries are relatively weak and underdeveloped.<sup>41</sup> This means that public sector jobs – which can be strictly controlled by the government – are the most valuable resources that politicians can distribute to voters. According to Hans Ramssoedh, in Suriname:

[t]he government is the largest direct and indirect employer. (...) In the current situation, due to clientelism and patronage, almost 60 to 70 per cent of the Surinamese labor force (188,000 in 2013) are civil servants working for semipublic companies.<sup>42</sup>

Because power is concentrated in the hands of single, individual political leaders, control over state resources is much more centralized than in other (new) democracies. Individual leaders have the capacity to determine which benefit or good is distributed to which individual or group, and because political affiliations of single individuals are easily retraced, politicians can easily see which individuals are loyal supporters and which ones not. As one academic on St. Kitts and Nevis remarked during an interview:

If someone goes to a minister and says: “Minister, I would like to buy a piece of land to build a house or to do some farming”. That minister might say “Ok, let me think about it”. What will happen, not probably but what will happen, is that the minister will find out who that person who wants to get the land is related to. What is their political affiliation? How many people in the family or in that genealogical stream are members of my party or the other party?<sup>43</sup>

The strongly centralized control over public resources entails that clientelistic networks form a single pyramid, in which there is hardly any fragmentation in terms of the actors and institutions controlling resources. In short, therefore, in one way or another virtually all public resources in most Caribbean countries are controlled by a single person: the head of government or prime minister.

One consequence of extremely centralized control in the Caribbean is that political opponents tend to be punished, harassed, or victimized. The absence of political anonymity that results from the smallness of Caribbean societies entails that most politicians not only know their own supporters personally, but are also able to identify and single out voters who are known to vote for the opposition. Throughout the Caribbean, it has been common for politicians to take revenge on opposition leaders and their voters, either by denying them access to public goods and services or even by explicitly threatening and intimidating them. The most obvious and often-used strategy to punish opposition supporters is by firing them from public sector jobs, which in most Caribbean countries constitute the majority of the total job market. In Guyana, for example,

There has been a certain callousness by the new government in dealing with some professionals of the former administration (...). In most cases the competence of these officials was not questioned; their political loyalty was suspect.<sup>44</sup>

The harassment of opposition supporters, which is much more explicit in the Caribbean than in other parts of the world, introduces a venomous element to patron-client linkages, which contributes to the divisiveness and social tensions in Caribbean societies.

In the Pacific control is much more fragmented with a strong generational pattern. The independence leaders are remembered as the “strong” generation who forged unity and consensus the “Pacific Way”.<sup>45</sup> They were also often head of the first political parties who enjoyed extended periods in office. As a result, many of the region’s politicians treated their countries as personal ‘fiefdoms’ due to their extensive influence over nearly all aspects of social, economic, and political life:

Some Pacific leaders have been able to operate governments as personal fiefdoms, because of the limited countervailing forces, such as media, non-government research, and the extent to which auditors and ombudsman, police and even judges were coopted or crushed by ruling parties. Shining examples stand out, but the number of instances where governments strangled investigative journalism, got rid of honest auditors, appointed cronies as ombudsman or judges, let alone ministers with enormous discretionary powers, illustrates the fragility of government and the value of those leaders of integrity who do not succumb.<sup>46</sup>

In recent decades, this stability had given way in many countries to periods of hyper-fragmentation in which leaders and governments rapidly rise and fall. Indeed, this often occurs between elections due to successful ‘no-confidence’ motions. For example, there have been 16 governments in Tuvalu since independence, 6 of which have been toppled as a result of successful no-confidence motions.<sup>47</sup> One explanation for the increased fragmentation is that two-party systems, which are common in the Caribbean, have not been a strong feature of democratic politics in the contemporary Pacific.

The difficulties of holding together a fractured coalition have become a common challenge for regional politicians, increasing the perception of corruption. Specifically, the strategic use of ministerial portfolios or indeed cash bribes by prospective Prime Ministers to win the support of parliamentary colleagues is linked to the prevalence of clientelist practices because many MPs see the formation of government as an opportunity to recoup the money spent on their previous election campaign, or indeed fill their coffers in anticipation of the next one. The extent of these practices was illustrated recently in Vanuatu where some 14 politicians, a quarter of the parliament, were convicted of bribery in 2015, leading to their ejection from Parliament and jail terms.<sup>48</sup> This type of punishment may herald a shift in the norms of appropriate conduct for MPs, at least in Vanuatu. Elsewhere, however, as evidenced by recent developments in Nauru, these practices appear to be on the rise.<sup>49</sup>

## **Consequences of personal patron–client networks**

As the previous sections have already demonstrated, Caribbean and Pacific politics comprise a remarkable blend of democratic representation and hyper-personalism. In the following sections, we discuss how clientelism and smallness can be related to two additional features of democratic politics in both regions: (1) the tendency for personal rather than substantive or ideological forms of political competition, and (2) the dominance of the political executive vis-à-vis other societal and political institutions. These two dynamics should not necessarily be regarded as either causes or consequences of clientelistic politics, but instead can be thought of as mutually reinforcing dynamics that in the long run can be linked to clientelism through a bi-directional causal relationship. In combination, clientelism, personalistic politics, and executive dominance constitute the foundation of Caribbean and Pacific political systems.

### ***Hyper-personal politics***

In virtually all Caribbean and Pacific countries, politics primarily revolves around individual political leaders and the relations and interaction between them. Given the hyper-personal nature of politics, these politicians often occupy extremely powerful positions within their respective political parties or groupings, the political arena,

and society at large. Unlike in small Pacific states, elections in the Anglophone Caribbean are commonly contested by political parties, and in line with Duverger's law the first-past-the-post electoral system tends to produce stable two-party systems. Yet while party competition may therefore appear to resemble the British or American pattern of party politics, in fact political parties are strongly dominated by individual leaders. Many of them have been active in their countries' politics for decades on end, which is also reflected in remarkably lengthy terms in office. Writing about party politics in Antigua and Barbuda, Henry, for example, asserts that:

The formal organizational structure of parties notwithstanding, the political parties are held together by an informal pattern of personalized loyalties to maximum leaders, past or present.<sup>50</sup>

After winning control over their party, politicians' electoral competition with other party leaders (mostly only one) habitually occurs on the basis of personal attacks and promises to voters, while it is very uncommon for political leaders to formulate specific ideological perspectives or concrete policy proposals in the campaign period. While political parties often have names and labels 'Labour' or 'Progressive' that appear to suggest some ideological orientation, in practice it is very hard to identify the ideological standpoints or substantive political differences between parties. In Dominica, for example,

None of the parties espouse a clear national economic, political, and social ideology, and their only role seems to be to compete with each other for management of the state apparatus.<sup>51</sup>

Party politics in the Pacific has become more fragmented, but a similar tendency towards the domination of single leaders was common at independence. And, there are exceptions to the hyper-fragmentation trend discussed above – long-serving contemporary leaders include Tuilaepa Aiono Sailele Malielegaoi in Samoa; Tommy Remengesau Jr in Palau; Baron Waqa in Nauru; and former coup leader Frank Bainimarama in Fiji – but by and large they serve to illustrate the extent to which the rest of the region suffers from a deficit of centralized leadership. The lack of centralized leadership has not decreased personalism, however. If anything it has increased it, as this quote by a former Marshallese politician illustrates:

Your constituents don't expect you to only be their senator in the parliament. They also expect you to be a counsellor in a marriage fight, a psychologist in a suicide attempt, to bankroll a first birthday party or a wedding or a funeral. And this is not just in the Marshalls, it is true of all the parts of the Pacific.<sup>52</sup>

In the absence of ideological or programmatic forms of competition, voting behaviour in both regions is often based on voters' personal connections with politicians, the traditional political affiliation of their families, or because of anticipated benefits that people expect in return for their votes. In culturally segmented countries such as Belize, Guyana, Suriname, Fiji and Trinidad and Tobago, ethnicity is often the driving factor of voting behaviour. Writing about Suriname, Hans Ramsdoedh argues that:

An important characteristic of Surinamese politics since the 1940s is the absence of traditional political divisions into left/right as well as progressive/conservative. Instead, as a result of the segmented character of Surinamese society, institutional politics are based on ethnic mobilization and identification.<sup>53</sup>

While cultural homo- or heterogeneity is often assumed to profoundly affect politics and democratic development, in the Caribbean its effects actually seem to be

minimal, as the practical conduct of politics in culturally plural societies does not differ markedly from that in mono-cultural settings. Just like in homogenous Caribbean countries, political parties in Belize, Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad are spearheaded by individual political leaders who dominate the entire political system and appear to have a rock-solid group of supporters.

The end-result of hyper-personalism is that individual leaders can obtain very powerful political positions, resulting in autocratic ruling styles. While elections in both regions are generally free and fair, and most of the requirements of formal democracy are met, in practice the political system therefore functions in markedly different ways than in larger states. Writing about St. Kitts and Nevis, the smallest sovereign state in the Caribbean, Griffin explains that:

A combination of small size, relatively low level of development, and charismatic leadership has often subordinated the importance of issues to that of personalities. Patron-client relationships have tended to augment the stature of these personalities.<sup>54</sup>

As studies in other parts of the world also demonstrate, personalistic instead of substantive forms of competition increase the likelihood of patron–client linkages. In conclusion therefore, the presence of a formally democratic institutional framework obscures the illiberal features of Caribbean and Pacific politics.

### ***Executive dominance***

The combination of hyper-personal politics, extreme forms of polarization, and widespread patron–client networks also produces an environment in which the government assumes a dominant role vis-à-vis other societal and political institutions. This is particularly true for Caribbean countries, where an election victory quite literally translates into a winner-take-all situation in the sense that the government elected into office can habitually rule without constraints or checks posed by other institutions. Institutions like parliament, the media, the civil service, or the judiciary are mostly either too weakly organized or insufficiently financed to fully exercise their function as a balance to executive power, or – as a result of profound political polarization – are in fact under the influence of the government in power. Executive dominance not only contributes to authoritarian politics, but also entails that small state governments are generally very unresponsive to their constituents. As various authors have asserted, despite the proximity between citizens and politicians that result from the small size, the participation of Caribbean citizens in the political systems of their countries is remarkably limited, and often restricted to casting a vote once in every four or five years.<sup>55</sup> In his assessment of Guyana’s political system, Lowe, for example, argues that:

The two main parties in Guyana have always acted independently of their followers. Guyanese (even those who are formal members of parties) concede most of the political decision-making space to their political leaders. Mass opposition to multi-party agreements is not part of the political practice.<sup>56</sup>

This lack of political inclusiveness and input from ordinary citizens entails that Caribbean politics lacks transparency, a situation which is exacerbated by the weakness of the news media and the lack of an informed debate about substantive political issues. In many countries, the absence of transparency enables politicians to misuse public funds for personal gains, or to obscure private and public interests. Albaugh and Rolinson, for example, characterize the executive in Belize as:

[a] government that makes decisions without any system of consultation, that has no checks and balances, that hands out spoils of power to itself, that operates in secret, that tightly controls the media, and that is involved in blatant corruption.<sup>57</sup>

As in other majoritarian systems, appointments in the civil service are regularly made on the basis of political allegiance. In the Caribbean, widespread political patronage entails that jobs in the public administration are allocated to political supporters. This phenomenon undermines the efficiency and quality of the civil service, in the first place because political loyalty instead of qualifications and skills determines who gets appointed to a public sector job and who does not, and in the second place because a change in office commonly translates into an overhaul of the entire bureaucracy, draining it of experienced employees.

In sum, the key characteristics of politics in the post-colonial Caribbean – personalism and executive dominance – both reflect and contribute to a political environment that is conducive to a certain type of face-to-face clientelism. The situation is slightly different in the Pacific. Like the Caribbean, the executive is said to enjoy unparalleled dominance over other institutions, including the media and civil society. This is particularly true in countries like Samoa, that have stable parties. However, the absence of strong party systems in most of the regions means that in many countries the executive is fragmented due to the constant maneuvering of politicians for ministerial posts in particular. These posts provide the same opportunities for patronage as in the Caribbean but the tendency towards centralization in the hands of a single individual is not as acute in most Pacific states. What's more, because many Pacific states are archipelagoes, the state has limited reach beyond capital cities. This makes centralized leadership more difficult to implement, affording backbench MPs a significant role as the link between outer islands and the capital. Aside from CDFs discussed above, another tactic has been to provide politicians with additional salaries and privileges (i.e. a government funded vehicle) that can be used to benefit their supporters. In Samoa, the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) created "Associate Minister" positions to ensure the support of backbench MPs when it held a weaker parliamentary majority. This practice has been relaxed in recent years (the HRPP won 47 out of 50 seats at the 2016 election) but it does illustrate the different ways in which personalized coalitions can be effectively knit together, with the prevalence of clientelist politics explaining both why they are created and persist in a variety of forms.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to examine the influence of smallness on the characteristics and effects of clientelistic linkages in Caribbean and Pacific small states. While recognizing that clientelism may be explained by a combination of causal effects, our analysis reveals that state size not only contributes to the pervasiveness of patron–client linkages in these two regions, but also produces a very distinct type of clientelistic politics. In comparison to other countries and world regions in which patron–client linkages are commonplace, small Caribbean and Pacific societies produce a form of clientelism that has a very direct and personal character. While the 22 countries surveyed as part of this analysis have diverse constitutional structures, levels of economic development, and to a lesser extent colonial legacies, we find that clientelism and patronage function in largely similar ways, suggesting that the small population size of these countries strongly affects the nature of patron–client linkages.



We argue that smallness can explain these similarities because it has three distinct effects on the nature of clientelism: Firstly, direct connections between citizens and politicians limit the need for brokers or complex and hierarchical party ‘machines’, because most of the exchanges occur on a very personal, face-to-face level. Second, the power of clients vis-à-vis patrons seems to be enhanced by smallness, as politicians are electorally dependent on a smaller number of voters. Caribbean and Pacific citizens can exert enormous pressure on politicians to provide them with goods and services, meaning that particularistic exchanges appear to be as much client- as patron-driven. Finally, due to the closeness, social intimacy, and lack of political anonymity, options for controlling and monitoring clientelistic exchanges are enhanced, giving both patrons and clients greater opportunities to monitor whether their counterpart(s) actually fulfil their clientelistic commitments. This ability is limited by the secrecy of the ballot box, but the small size of constituencies means that when the results are announced candidates are able to fairly easily determine which areas, and by association families, supported them. Taken together, these patterns create a type of patron–client linkage that is very different from the complex, hierarchical, and mediated type of clientelism that can be observed in mass societies, and that has come to dominate the academic literature.

Traditional accounts of clientelism and patronage in both the Caribbean and the Pacific tend to foreground historical and cultural factors, seeking to explain clientelism either as a legacy of the colonial plantation system (Caribbean) or as part of the traditional cultural heritage (Pacific). By showing that patron–client linkages in these regions operate in largely similar ways, this analysis challenges both accounts, instead highlighting the explanatory power of state size – the key factor that countries in these two regions share. Our argument is further buttressed by the observation that clientelism produces broadly similar effects in the two regions. In theory, smallness should lead to a more organic form of political representation – citizens literally know their local member personally and can usually produce their mobile phone number if asked – that is unheard of in other parts of the world. In practice, we find that in both the Caribbean and the Pacific, patron–client linkages are combined with strongly personalistic, non-ideological forms of competition and that the executive assumes a supremely powerful position vis-à-vis other actors and institutions. The Caribbean and Pacific stand out for their remarkable records of democracy and political stability, but in practice these informal features entail that politics in the two regions is also markedly different to larger democratic states.

While this article’s analysis is limited to Caribbean and Pacific small states, we hypothesize that the findings are equally applicable to small states in other world regions, such as Africa or Europe. Given that these other cases have a similar population size, the three effects of smallness that we identified in this analysis should apply to those cases as well. At the same time, there are some important differences between the small states in these regions and those in the Caribbean and the Pacific, as most European small states, for example, do not have a history of colonization, operate proportional rather than majoritarian electoral systems, and have much higher levels of economic development. However, the literature on these cases appears to indicate that clientelism here operates in similar ways. Existing publications on patron–client linkages in countries as diverse as Cyprus, Iceland, Malta, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe all point to a more or less similar pattern,<sup>58</sup> tentatively suggesting that smallness can indeed be regarded as a key explanatory factor of clientelism in these settings. While more

comparative research on these cases is required in order to confirm this conjecture, this analysis has contributed to the existing literature on the varieties of clientelism by highlighting the effects of a hitherto neglected factor: state size.

## Notes

1. Scott, *Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia*; Stokes, *Perverse Accountability*; Auyero, "From the Client's Point of View."
2. Boissevain, *Saints and Fireworks*; Eisenstadt and Lemarchand, *Political Clientelism*; Schmidt et al., *Friends, Followers and Factions*.
3. Corbett and Veenendaal, *Democracy in Small States*.
4. Veenendaal and Corbett, "Why Small States Offer Important Answers to Large Questions."
5. While the size of states can be measured on the basis of various indicators, population is almost always the variable of theoretical interest. Any threshold to separate small states from other states is arbitrary, but we apply the conventional cut-off point of 1 million inhabitants.
6. Sutton, "Democracy in the Commonwealth Caribbean"; Reilly, "Social Choice in the South Seas." The largest countries in these regions (Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti in the Caribbean and Fiji in the Pacific) forming the (partial) exceptions.
7. Barrow-Giles, "Democracy at Work"; Duncan and Hassel, "How Pervasive is Clientelist Politics in the Pacific"; Hinds, "Beyond Formal Democracy"; Wood, "The Clientelism Trap in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea."
8. Corbett and Veenendaal, *Democracy in Small States*.
9. See also Veenendaal, "How Smallness Fosters Clientelism"; Veenendaal, "Does Smallness Enhance Power-Sharing?"
10. A complete list of interviews can be found in Appendix.
11. Ryan, *Winner Takes All*.
12. Payne, "Westminster Adapted."
13. Baldacchino, "Bursting the Bubble."
14. Duncan and Woods, "What About Us?"; Payne, "Westminster Adapted"; Sutton "Democracy in the Commonwealth Caribbean."
15. Barrow-Giles, "Democracy at Work"; Hinds "Beyond Formal Democracy"; Payne, "Westminster Adapted"; Peters, *The Democratic System in the Eastern Caribbean*; Sutton, "Democracy in the Commonwealth Caribbean"; Veenendaal, *Politics and Democracy in Microstates*.
16. Duncan and Woods, "What About Us?" 210–13.
17. Peters, *The Democratic System in the Eastern Caribbean*, 26.
18. For a review see Watson-Gegeo and Feinberg, *Leadership and Change in the Western Pacific*.
19. Sahlins, "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief."
20. Corbett, *Being Political*.
21. Wood, "The Clientelism Trap in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea"; Duncan and Hassel, "How Pervasive is Clientelist Politics in the Pacific."
22. Levine and Roberts, "The Constitutional Structures and Electoral Systems of Pacific Island States."
23. Rich, Morgan, and Hambly, *Political Parties in the Pacific Islands*.
24. Fraenkel, "The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation in Pacific Parliaments"; and Baker "Great Expectations."
25. The argument also applies to the few small states with proportional electoral systems; the median population size of Surinamese and Guyanese electoral districts is also below 10,000.
26. Aspinall and Berenschot, "How Clientelism Varies."
27. Diamond and Tsalik, "Size and Democracy."
28. Author interview.
29. Ott, *Small is Democratic*.
30. Cf. Auyero, "From the Client's Point of View."
31. Corbett and Veenendaal, *Democracy in Small States*.
32. Duncan and Woods, "What About Us?"; Sutton "Democracy in the Commonwealth Caribbean"; Duncan and Hassel, "How Pervasive is Clientelist Politics in the Pacific."
33. Duncan and Woods, "What About Us?" 211.

34. These two paragraphs are drawn from Corbett, *Being Political*, with permission.
35. For a discussion on voter registration in Marshall Islands see Fraenkel, “Strategic Registration from Metropolis to Periphery.”
36. Corbett, *Being Political*.
37. Tmetuchl, “The Bai and the Chief in Palau,” 14.
38. Kenilorea, *Tell As It Is*, 203; 299.
39. Fraenkel, “The Atrophied State.”
40. Wood, “The Clientelism Trap in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.”
41. Baldacchino, “Bursting the Bubble.”
42. Ramsoedh, “Democracy and Political Culture in Suriname,” 33.
43. Author interview.
44. Griffith, “Political Change, Democracy, and Human Rights in Guyana.”
45. Crocombe, *The Pacific Way*.
46. Crocombe, *The South Pacific*, 643.
47. Corbett, “Democratic Innovations and the Challenge of Parliamentary Oversight in a Small State.”
48. Forsyth and Batley, “What the Political Corruption Scandal of 2015 Reveals.”
49. Firth, “Australia’s Detention Centre and the Erosion of Democracy in Nauru.”
50. Henry, “Political Accumulation and Authoritarianism in the Caribbean,” 3.
51. Babb, *Political Party and Campaign Financing in Dominica*, 2.
52. Author interview.
53. Ramsoedh, “Democracy and Political Culture in Suriname,” 32.
54. Griffin, “The Opposition and Policy Making in the Caribbean,” 233.
55. Duncan and Woods, “What About Us?”; Peters, “The Democratic System in the Eastern Caribbean.”
56. Lowe, “Examining Lijphart’s Favourable Factors,” 373.
57. Albaugh and Rolison, *Democracy and Ethnicity in Belize*, 5.
58. Faustmann, “Rusfeti and Political Patronage in the Republic of Cyprus”; Mitchell, “Corruption and Clientelism in a ‘Systemless System’”; Seibert, *Comrades, Clients, and Cousins*.

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**Appendix. Interview dataset**

Country	Year	Politicians	Non-politicians	Total
Antigua and Barbuda	2018	8	4	12
Barbados	2018	3	7	10
Federated States of Micronesia	2011	4	–	4
Fiji	2011	16	–	16
Kiribati	2013	8	6	14
Marshall Islands	2011	6	–	6
Nauru	2013	6	–	6
Palau	2011	11	12	23
Samoa	2011, 2013	25	2	27
Solomon Islands	2011	15	–	15
St. Kitts and Nevis	2010	8	5	13
Suriname	2018	13	8	21
Tonga	2011	3	–	3
Tuvalu	2011, 2014	5	5	10
Vanuatu	2011, 2018	18	5	23
Total		149	54	203