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When Things Get Personal: How Informal and Personalized Politics Produce Regime Stability in Small States

Wouter Veenendaal*

Wouter Veenendaal, Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

*Corresponding author. Email: w.p.veenendaal@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

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Abstract

The personalization of politics, the decline of political parties and the weakening of political institutions in large democracies are considered to produce instability and to undermine democratic governance. Yet despite having extremely informal and personalized systems with non-ideological parties, small states around the world maintain significantly higher levels of democracy and regime stability than large ones. This article addresses this paradox by offering a systematic literature review of 167 case study publications on personalization and informal politics in 46 small states. The analysis reveals that personalized relations between political elites translate into either fragmentation or power concentration, while pervasive patron–client linkages structure the interaction between citizens and politicians. Despite the obvious downsides of these dynamics for democratic governance, the small state system is functional in the sense that it fulfils the needs of both citizens and politicians, which explains why small states have succeeded in maintaining their political stability.

Keywords: informal politics; democratization; political stability; patron–client linkages; personalization; small states

In recent decades, a wide variety of publications have proclaimed that the quality of democracy in Western countries is in decline, or even that democracy is in crisis (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Hay 2007; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Webb 2007). As empirical indications of this trend, scholars point to declining turnout rates (Gray and Caul 2000), declining party membership figures (Mair et al. 2012), dwindling social capital (Putnam 1995) and the increasing personalization of politics (McAllister 2007; Poguntke and Webb 2005), which in combination are supposed to weaken the functioning and performance of democratic institutions. In developing or new democracies, similar phenomena are considered to stymie democratic transitions and to produce endemic political instability (Bielasiak 2002; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006; Van de Walle 2003). In response to such observations, there has

been an increase in academic attention for informal institutions and informal politics, which complement or even replace the malfunctioning or superficial formal political structures (Azari and Smith 2012; Hale 2011; Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Lauth 2000; Levitsky and Murillo 2009). In combination, these literatures assert that the shift from institutionalized forms of political competition to more personalized and informal types of politics has negative repercussions for both political stability and the quality of democracy.

As a result of their limited population size, small states' governance is characterized by highly personalized politics, the predominance of informal relations and the weakness of formal institutional frameworks (Baldacchino 2012; Corbett 2015; Corbett and Veenendaal 2018). Yet despite pervasive personalism and informality, the 46 small states with fewer than 1.5 million inhabitants maintain impressive records of both democratic governance and political stability (Freedom House 2017; World Bank 2017).¹ As Table 1 shows, small states have both significantly more democratic *and* more stable political systems than larger ones.

Apparently defying the conventional wisdom that informality and personalization translate into illiberalism and instability, small states constitute an intriguing paradox for contemporary scholarship on the effects of political personalization on institutional performance. Combining formally democratic and stable institutions with a political environment that is marked by informality and personalization, small states offer some crucial insights into the consequences of informal politics on democratic governance and may therefore potentially serve as prototypical cases for larger democracies that currently appear to be experiencing a trend towards similar political dynamics. So far, small states have, however, largely been ignored by comparative political scholarship (Veenendaal and Corbett 2014), despite their obvious relevance to debates about democratic transition and consolidation, as well as about the impact of informal relations on institutional and governance performance.

By inquiring how informal relations and personalized politics affect democratic governance and political stability in small states, this article aims to highlight the analytical significance of these under-studied cases to ongoing debates about institutional erosion and the personalization of politics in both old and new democracies. Following the classic work of Robert Dahl (1971), democracy is defined as a system in which there is meaningful competition for the highest

Table 1. Democracy and Political Stability in Small States

	N	Average Freedom House score (2017)	Average score on Worldwide Governance Indicator of Stability-Nonviolence (2017)
Small states (<1.5 million)	46	4.39	0.5530
Large states (>1.5 million)	147	7.37	-0.2720
All states	193	6.67	-0.0763

Source: Freedom House (2017), World Bank (2017).

Notes: Freedom House and the Worldwide Governance Indicators project are the only two data sets on democracy and stability that also include the smallest states in the world. Freedom House scores range from 2 (most free) to 14 (least free), while scores on the Worldwide Governance Indicator of Stability-Nonviolence range from -2.5 (least stable) to 2.5 (most stable) (Freedom House 2017; World Bank 2017). For both variables, the difference between small and large states is statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.

political functions, and no groups are excluded from participating in this competition. Stability is defined as the absence of major political and social crises, violence, regime breakdown or state failure (Goldstone et al. 2010). The article starts with a review of the existing literature on political personalization and the characteristics of informal politics in both old and new larger democracies. Subsequently, a second theoretical section briefly discusses the scholarly literature on the characteristics of politics and democracy in small states, paying specific attention to the political effects of demography and state size.

In the analytical sections of this article, the nature and characteristics of informal and personalized politics in small states are examined in detail. This analysis is carried out on the basis of an original systematic literature review of 167 case study publications on all 46 small states with fewer than 1.5 million inhabitants.² A systematic literature review is a fruitful research method to analyse and synthesize existing literature, out of which new analytical frameworks, hypotheses or theories may emerge (Booth et al. 2012; Fink 2014; Tranfield et al. 2003). Systematic literature reviews are particularly useful in fragmented or compartmentalized research fields where existing publications focusing on similar phenomena have not (yet) been integrated into comprehensive analyses or theories. This is certainly true for the existing case study literature on small states.

In order to select sources, I made use of the best practices as described by Arlene Fink (2014). This started with a simple Google Scholar search on the basis of the names of each of the 46 cases and keywords such as *politics*, *governance* and *democracy*. I subsequently checked each of the resulting entries for relevance for the purpose of this analysis. In this regard, all selected case study publications were screened for information on: (a) relations between politicians at the elite level, and (b) relations between politicians and voters at the mass level. Finally, for those studies that I considered useful, I used the snowball method to search for publications that cited or were cited by the study.

Most of the publications that I retrieved and that were included in this analysis can be found in regional or area studies journals that are often not on the radar of comparative politics scholars, such as the *New West Indian Guide*, the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* and the *Journal of Pacific History*. In some cases the authors are residents of the countries they examine, but many publications were written by specialists of, for example, Caribbean or Pacific politics.³ The great majority of works included in the sample have been published in the 21st century, but some informative older books and articles were also incorporated. In general, these publications tend to be highly idiosyncratic in nature, meaning that findings are rarely connected to broader debates or theories in comparative politics. Yet, whereas informal politics is notoriously hard to study (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 733; cf. Lauth 2000), the case study literature on individual small states provides very rich and highly detailed information on informal political dynamics in individual small states, making it an excellent source for the purpose of this analysis.

The end result of this systematic literature review is an original analytical framework by means of which politics in small states can be understood. The analysis confirms that politics in virtually all small states is highly personal and informal in nature. However, two explanations can be found for the fact that most

small states have been able to remain both democratic and politically stable in the face of these dynamics. In the first place, while personalized forms of competition at the elite level may result in either power concentration or continuous infighting and fragmentation, elite relations in small states are almost never ideologically driven, and therefore generally do not jeopardize overall regime stability. Second, the case study literature on small states reveals that pervasive patron–client linkages create stable patterns of interaction between citizens and politicians in small states. While such linkages may undermine the quality of political representation, they also ensure the continuing participation of citizens in political affairs, and therefore play an important role in generating political stability (cf. Kitschelt 2000). The combination of these dynamics means that, despite its obvious limitations, the small state political system is functional in the sense that it serves the interests of both politicians and citizens.

Political personalization and institutional erosion in larger democracies

While the number and proportion of democratic regimes in the world has grown strongly in recent decades, scholars increasingly consider that the oldest democracies are in a state of crisis (Dalton 2004; Mair 2013; Pharr and Putnam 2000). In the first place, some academics point to rapidly decreasing levels of trust in democratic institutions such as parliaments, governments and political parties (Dalton 2004; Dogan 2005). As a potential manifestation of declining trust, citizens' involvement and participation in politics has dropped concomitantly (Blais and Rubenson 2013; Mair et al. 2012). Related to these trends, several scholars have highlighted how the linkages between voters and politicians have weakened, as voters increasingly withdraw into their private lives and political officeholders become progressively dependent on state structures and funding (Katz and Mair 1995; Mair 2013; Van Biezen 2004). Finally, more recently attention has shifted to the rise of populist parties and politicians in virtually all Western democracies, and their effects on institutionalized parties and party systems (Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2007). According to many scholars, the rise of such movements reflects a broader trend towards the personalization or presidentialization of politics, as a part of which the personal characteristics of politicians are becoming ever more important than party platforms, ideological orientations or substantive policy proposals (McAllister 2007; Poguntke and Webb 2005).

Combined, all of these trends can be seen as representing a shift away from stable and predictable (i.e. institutionalized) political dynamics towards a more ad hoc, informal and unstable political environment. In response, there has been increasing scholarly attention for so-called informal institutions, which according to Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky (2004: 727) can be defined as 'socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels'. Informal institutions can assume an accommodative, complementary, substitutive or conflicting role vis-à-vis formal institutional frameworks, and which role they play depends on their mutual congruence as well as their relative powers (Lauth 2000). If informal and formal institutions are conflicting, and formal institutions are weak or superficial, the legitimacy of these structures will decline and the risk of political instability and

conflicts can be expected to grow. In their analysis of variation in the strength and enforcement of political institutions, Steven Levitsky and María Victoria Murillo (2009) underscore that the behaviour of political actors will diverge from the formal institutional rules if they expect that these rules will not be enforced, thereby increasing political instability and unpredictability. While most publications on informal politics focus on new democracies, contemporary trends in advanced democracies have also been explained as a shift from formal to more informal types of politics.

The most common manifestation of informal politics are patron–client relationships, which can be observed around the world, and in many political systems function as the key linkage mechanism between citizens and politicians (Hicken 2011; Kitschelt 2000; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Piattoni 2001). Although the relationship between democracy and clientelism remains a topic of debate, most scholars would agree that patron–client linkages undermine the quality of democracy because they produce an imbalanced allocation of state resources to citizens, and because they enhance and perpetuate the socioeconomic dependence of citizens on politicians and the state (Stokes 2005).⁴ In similar fashion, the relationship between clientelism and political stability remains ambiguous, but the iterative nature of patron–client interactions has repeatedly been linked to higher levels of regime stability (Arriola 2009; cf. Scott 1972: 100). However, clientelism is notoriously hard to study empirically (Hicken 2011: 194), and so far no systematic comparative analyses of clientelism in small states have been conducted. In this light, findings and observations coming out of the case study literature on individual small states offer the most promising source of information about patron–client networks in these cases.

Informality and personalized politics in small states

With only a handful of exceptions, the world's 46 small states with fewer than 1.5 million inhabitants all maintain a democratic political system (Anckar 2010; Diamond and Tsalik 1999; Srebrnik 2004). Many of these small states – especially those in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific – actually form part of Samuel Huntington's 'Third Wave', but are rarely identified as such because most comparative studies exclude them on the basis of their diminutive size (Veenendaal and Corbett 2014). In contrast to many larger Third Wave cases, however, virtually all newly democratizing small states have retained their democratic institutions; Fiji is the only one that has reverted to a semi-authoritarian regime. Most other small states have adopted (or even carbon-copied) the formal political institutions of their former colonial and metropolitan powers, producing a strong inclination towards 'institutional fidelity' (Sutton 2007). As a result, when looking at their formal political structures, it can be concluded that small states tend to have both remarkably democratic and remarkably stable political systems.

But this is only one side of the story. The case study literature on small (island) states in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and the Pacific demonstrates that small states – by virtue of their diminutive size – tend to have very informal and personalized politics (Larmour 1994; Peters 1992; Seibert 1999; Veenendaal 2014). In small societies, 'everybody knows everybody' (Corbett 2015): citizens and

politicians are likely to maintain personal relations and to engage with each other in multiple societal roles and settings (Ott 2000). In the political domain, the overlap between professional and private roles entails that political relations are personalized, while personal relations at the societal level tend to be politicized. As a consequence of this blurred boundary between private and professional spheres, informal and personal networks have a strong effect on politics and political decision-making (Farrugia 1993). In small states, politicians are elected because of who they are rather than what they stand for, resulting in a virtual absence of ideological divisions, programmatic forms of contestation or informed debates about policy proposals. The upshot of the prevalence of informal and personalized politics is that formal institutions cannot play an autonomous role in the political system, undermining their functioning and legitimacy (Veenendaal 2014).

The tendency towards personal instead of ideological or programmatic forms of contestation in smaller communities has also been observed in quantitative studies, especially those focusing on local government (Dahl and Tufte 1973; Oliver et al. 2012; Oppenheimer 1996). In their impressive study of the characteristics of local government in the US, J. Eric Oliver and his coauthors (2012: ch. 4) find that instead of the ideology-driven and partisan nature of national US politics, governance in small municipalities focuses on the personal connections between citizens and public officials. These authors also corroborate Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte's finding (1973: 65, 87–88) that personal connections between voters and politicians contribute to higher levels of political participation, a conclusion that is also drawn by a recent study of local government in European countries (Denters et al. 2014). Viewed from this perspective, informal and personalized politics can indeed be supposed to stimulate democratic development.

On the level of nation states, the survival of formally democratic institutions in small countries certainly appears to bolster the conjecture that profound informality and social intimacy contribute, or in any case do not obstruct, democratic governance in these cases. Various scholars have claimed that the increased proximity, face-to-face relations and direct contacts between citizens and politicians are, in fact, the root cause of democratic governance in small states (Anckar 2002, 2010; Diamond and Tsalik 1999; Srebrnik 2004). In other words, this would mean that the prevalent informal dynamics in small states accommodate or even strengthen the performance of formal democratic institutions. Again, however, the case study literature tends to point to a different conclusion. In many small states, personalized politics result primarily in extreme political polarization, excessive executive dominance and ubiquitous patron–client networks (Baldacchino 2012; Erk and Veenendaal 2014). Some scholars even go so far as to suggest that democratic political institutions function as a façade, beyond which a much more illiberal political culture can be detected (Peters 1992). According to this perspective, the survival of formal democracy in small states may be a product of factors other than small size, such as colonial history or international politics (Masala 2004; Veenendaal 2015).

Regardless of the influence of informal politics on the quality of democracy, however, political systems of small states are remarkably stable through time. This is not only evidenced by the fact that their institutional structures are rarely

changed or reformed, but also by the virtual absence of major social and political crises, political violence or state failure in small states (Congdon Fors 2014; Raleigh and Hegre 2009). Even the poorest small states, such as São Tomé and Príncipe in Africa, and the most culturally fragmented ones, such as Vanuatu in the Pacific, tend to maintain stable political regimes. It apparently follows that the informal and personalized political dynamics in these countries somehow produce high levels of regime stability. After a brief presentation of some descriptive statistics coming out of the systematic literature review, in the analytical sections of this article the specific characteristics and effects of informality and personalization in small states will be discussed on the basis of the findings of these case study publications. This analysis will be split in two sections. The first section discusses the features of elite relations in small states, while the second analytical section zooms in on the nature of the relationship between politicians and voters. In both sections, quotes from publications analysed as part of the systematic literature review are presented to illustrate or underscore the analytical narrative.

The systematic literature review: some descriptive statistics

In Table 2, an overview has been provided of all publications included in the systematic literature review. The table lists the number of publications included for each individual small state, and in subsequent columns indicates how many of these publications make reference to personalistic, non-ideological politics as well as patron–client linkages. Based on these scores, the last column indicates to what extent the publications included for each case confirm the general patterns highlighted in this article, indicating which percentage of publications refer to personalistic and/or clientelistic politics. The bottom row of the table reveals that both personalism and clientelism were highlighted in a majority of the publications included, but that personalism was much more commonly observed than patron–client linkages. On average, however, personalism and clientelism were discussed in over 68% of the total source material, confirming that these are indeed perceived or reported as prevalent and widespread political dynamics in small states.

However, the table also points to some interesting discrepancies between individual cases. In the first place, the figures show that in some small states personalism and clientelism were observed in only half of all publications included, and that in two small states (*Estonia and Iceland*, both highlighted in italics), a minority of publications made reference to these patterns, indicating that these are potentially outlier cases. Second, the table reveals that the publications on some small states made much more reference to personalism than clientelism (e.g. Bhutan and the Maldives), while the opposite pattern can be observed for other cases (e.g. Cyprus and Malta). The total number of publications included for each case is so small, however, that no firm conclusions should be drawn on this basis. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that individual case study publications have different foci, meaning that some of them might not discuss political features (such as personalism or clientelism) that in fact can be or have been observed in the small state under investigation. Obviously, the perspective of each author is different, and figures in the table might very well shift if more publications were included in the sample.

Table 2. Overview of Publications Included in the Systematic Literature Review

Country	Publications	Personalism	Clientelism	Match
Andorra	3	2	1	50%
Antigua and Barbuda	2	2	2	100%
Bahamas	3	3	2	84%
Bahrain	2	1	1	50%
Barbados	3	2	2	67%
Belize	6	4	5	75%
Bhutan	6	5	1	50%
Brunei	4	4	1	63%
Cape Verde	5	4	4	80%
Comoros	4	4	2	75%
Cyprus	6	3	5	67%
Djibouti	4	3	1	50%
Dominica	3	3	2	83%
Equatorial Guinea	4	3	1	50%
<i>Estonia</i>	4	2	1	38%
Fiji	7	5	4	64%
Grenada	3	3	3	100%
Guyana	4	3	3	75%
<i>Iceland</i>	6	3	2	42%
Kiribati	3	3	2	84%
Liechtenstein	4	3	1	50%
Luxembourg	3	2	1	50%
Maldives	4	4	1	63%
Malta	6	2	6	67%
Marshall Islands	3	3	1	67%
Micronesia, Fed. St. of	3	3	2	83%
Monaco	2	2	0	50%
Montenegro	5	4	3	70%
Nauru	3	3	1	67%
Palau	3	2	2	67%
Samoa	4	4	2	75%
San Marino	2	2	1	75%
São Tomé and Príncipe	4	3	4	88%
Seychelles	4	3	2	63%
Solomon Islands	6	6	4	83%
St Kitts and Nevis	3	2	2	67%
St Lucia	2	1	2	75%
St Vincent-Grenadines	2	1	2	75%
Suriname	5	4	5	90%
Timor-Leste	3	3	1	67%
Tonga	3	3	1	67%
Trinidad and Tobago	3	1	2	50%
Tuvalu	3	3	2	84%
Vanuatu	5	5	4	90%
Total	167	131 (78.4%)	97 (58.1%)	68.3%

Analysis: elite relations in small states

With the exception of several microstates in the Pacific, political competition in small states tends to revolve around political parties. However, virtually all case study publications reveal that these parties have very weak ideologies and political platforms. In practice, therefore, the substantive differences between political parties tend to be extremely limited. In the Caribbean small state of Dominica, for example: ‘There are no significant ideological or ethnic cleavages among the

existing parties, of which there are currently four ... None of the parties espouse a clear national economic, political and social ideology ... None of the parties appear seized of a role larger than competing with each other for efficient management of the state apparatus' (Babb 2005: 2).

Instead of ideologies or substantive policies, political parties in small states primarily focus on their respective political leaders, and in many cases parties are basically established and preserved by individual politicians as vehicles to pursue their political ambitions. In such contexts, party labels and organizations obscure the fact that competition is essentially personality-driven in nature. In the African island nation of Comoros, for example: 'Political parties themselves are inherently weak. Though they have a national ambition, they tend to be entrenched in the native region of the party leader and are rarely active outside of the election period. Financially they are largely funded by the party leader and his network of friends' (Baker 2009: 226). In the European microstate of Monaco, political groupings play a comparable role: 'The political movements, although existing and active, have nothing in common with party organizations in neighboring countries, where an organized structure, a government program, and the conquest of power are objectives' (Grinda 2007: 72).

Remarkably, the case study material on small states reveals that personalization either translates into political fragmentation or power concentration, with little middle ground between these extremes. In many small states, the personalized nature of competition produces continuous conflicts and rivalries between individual politicians. Within political parties, power struggles between political leaders often result in split-offs and the formation of new political groupings. In Cape Verde: 'Personality conflicts spawn the emergence of new parties. Power struggles within the MpD [Movimento para a Democracia] produced breakaway factions and spin-off parties. The PAICV [Partido Africano da Independência de Cabo Verde] remained more coherent but saw internal tensions rise between the old guard from the days of the liberation struggle and younger party officials' (Meyns 2002: 160–161).

The personalization of politics therefore frequently translates into a seemingly unstable political environment where the electoral fortunes of parties are closely bound to the fate of their respective leaders. In the small South American country of Suriname:

Political parties do not have a clear-cut ideological background but largely display the character of organized interest groups. They are organized within the existing ethnic boundaries around political personalities who appeal to the masses. This is also the weakness of these parties. Personal feuds often lead to secession and the founding of new parties, which explains why the Surinamese political spectrum is very fragmented. (Ramsøedh 2016: 32)

Political fragmentation as a result of personal conflicts and rivalries between politicians is, however, most apparent in the Pacific, where party organizations are weak or non-existent. In those countries that do have political parties, the absence of substantive politics produces constantly shifting alliances, as in the Solomon Islands:

Political parties exist but are not bound by ideology and are fluid and fractious. For example, the Solomon Islands Democratic Party was the largest

party in parliament following the 2010 elections, yet internal tensions caused it to split and it currently has MPs in both government and opposition. Similarly, 17 MPs changed their political affiliation during the campaign period prior to, or in the days immediately following, the 2010 election. (Corbett and Wood 2013: 322)

In those Pacific states in which parties are lacking altogether, the situation is essentially similar. In Nauru, the world's smallest state, recurrent dynamics have been: 'The personalization of politics ... the absence of political parties that advanced any real economic and social agendas, weak politicians, and the need for leaders to weld together complex coalitions of individuals. Such coalitions often fragmented as personal loyalties changed and elections produced new politicians' (Connell 2006: 57). As this quote suggests, personalization affects both intra- and inter-party relationships. While the significance of personal relationships limits the stability and internal cohesion of parties, it also affects the stability of government coalitions and political alliances. In Tuvalu, for instance, where political parties also do not exist: 'Personal connections, including those from school and work, as well as longstanding disputes and rivalries, influence how coalitions rise and fall, as does the allocation of ministerial portfolios' (Corbett and Fraenkel 2016: 356).

But also in countries that do have political parties, personal relationships have a profound influence on the emergence and durability of political alliances. In the Caribbean island nation of Grenada, for example: 'Electoral politics ... has been characterized by marriages of convenience, party fragmentation and reconfiguration, the criss-crossing of political elites among parties, the emergence of a multi-party system, declining voter turnout, absence of a parliamentary opposition, bridging of ideological divides and most recently the re-alignment to a two-party system in 2003' (Grenade 2004: 14).

Yet while personalization in most cases translates into fragmentation and instability, there are also myriad examples of situations in which it leads to power concentration in the hands of single political leaders. In many small states, political leaders have remarkably long terms in office, especially when they are not bound by term limits. If political leaders succeed in warding off potential rivals, establishing dominance within their political parties and securing recurrent re-election into government, they can easily come to dominate the entire political arena. Examples of such dominating political leaders in small states abound, from Dom Mintoff in Malta to Walter Lini in Vanuatu, and from France-Albert René in the Seychelles to Vere Bird in Antigua and Barbuda. A case in point is provided by the rule of Lynden Pindling in the Bahamas, where: 'The achievement of independence in 1973 was the strongest and most monumental achievement under the Pindling government. The historical legacy of this moment gave the political party much longevity, as a result of which Pindling and the party were constantly reelected until 1992' (Lee 2012: 66).

Whereas political fragmentation could pose problems for stability, power concentration can bring negative repercussions for democratic governance. The absence of ideological challengers and the prevalence of patron-client networks (to be discussed in the following section) create strong incumbency effects, and the leadership styles of many powerful small state leaders becomes more authoritarian

as their time in office endures. A case in point is Samoa in the Pacific, where politics is dominated by the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) and its leaders: 'If the stability gained over the past 25 years indicated anything, it is that HRPP rule can have positive implications for Samoa. However, this should be attended by a warning: the price of stability may be greater government control of Samoan society' (Iati 2013: 463).

In sum, therefore, the takeaway is that irrespective of the presence or absence of political parties, and regardless of whether power is concentrated or dispersed, elite relations and political competition in small states tend to be intensely personalized. As the literature on personalistic politics suggests, in many cases personalization results in political instability, characterized by constant split-offs, rapidly shifting political alliances and frequent changes of government. The important point, however, is that this instability rarely threatens the survival of democratic regimes. An illustrious example of this state of affairs is provided by the African small state of São Tomé and Príncipe, where: 'Programmatic issues hardly played a role in the continuing power struggles, except with regard to constitutional matters, and these in turn have primarily had to do with supremacy in the power struggle ... The political instability has not threatened the system, however, since politicians share a basic consensus that it serves their interests' (Seibert 1999: 243).

Indeed, a key feature of personalized politics in small states is that the permanently fluctuating nature of political alliances also ensures frequent alternation in office. As a result, while inherently unstable, this personalized system also ensures that every member of the political elite can – at least in theory – become part of the ruling coalition, and thereby enjoy the spoils of government. And even in small states that are ruled by dominant leaders for protracted periods of time, elections will eventually bring another party and political elite to power.

Analysis: relations between voters and politicians in small states

One of the key benefits of small societies highlighted in the literature is that the limited dimensions facilitate direct communication between politicians and citizens, supposedly enhancing the quality of representation. The case study literature confirms that citizens of small states and their political representatives have constant face-to-face contact, but it refutes the notion that this strengthens representation (Veenendaal 2013). If anything, publications on small states highlight that citizens tend to be rather passive and submissive vis-à-vis political elites, as in Guyana: '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' (Lowe 2013: 373).

According to many sources, the primary reason for this quite obedient attitude towards politics among voters is that many of them are socially and economically dependent on their political leaders. As a result of the limited population size and stronger social connections in small states, politicians generally know which individuals support them and which ones support their opponents, meaning that political anonymity is lacking. Once elected into office, politicians therefore also know which citizens they can reward for their support, and which ones they can ignore or even punish. In the Middle American small state of Belize, therefore:

‘What to outsiders appears as a politically interested electorate firmly endowed with democratic norms, under a closer cultural explanation turns out to be a population held in the grip of political parties, suspended permanently in a state of dependency’ (Nowotny 2007: 11).

While patron–client linkages can be found in political systems around the world, the case study material shows that direct and personal contacts and the absence of programmatic politics create a strong tendency towards clientelistic networks in small states. In other words: ‘Montenegro’s size allows incumbents to rather easily establish and maintain clientelistic networks’ (Vukovic 2015: 79). Whereas the higher access to politicians theoretically enables voters to question their representatives and voice their demands on substantive issues, in practice this contact is primarily used to ask for political favours. This is, for example, traditionally the case in Iceland, where: ‘Modern parties emerged ... during the interbellum as class parties with a strong clientelist orientation. Access to clientelist resources was to a considerable extent controlled by the parties but individual MPs played a key role with the clientele on a face-to-face basis’ (Indridason and Kristinsson 2015: 566).

The closeness between citizens and politicians not only enhances the accessibility of politicians; it also enables politicians to have a much greater influence on the private lives of citizens. In turn, this means that societies of many small states are remarkably politicized, in the sense that political affiliations strongly determine social interactions in the private sphere. An example is provided by Malta, where: ‘Amongst themselves, the Maltese develop an intricate knowledge of the partisan affiliations and loyalties of friends, family, and acquaintances, effectively mapping a network of potential influence, patronage, and obligation’ (Baldacchino 2002: 198).

Since government controls most jobs and is often the only professionally organized institution, politicians in power can exert political control over supposedly impartial institutions like the media, the judiciary and the private sector. In the African small state of Djibouti, for example, ‘In everyday life, patron–client relations structure social interaction. Citizens – from prostitutes to business investors – require patronage and hence the protection of those who are at the top of the citizenship ladder. Business cannot operate smoothly unless it is protected by a patron’ (Bezabeh 2011: 600).

In this context in which there is no political anonymity, ideological demarcations are absent, and patron–client linkages are ubiquitous, elections habitually translate into an intergroup struggle for access to state resources and jobs. Being the largest employer, the state is regarded as the greatest prize to be won, and because politics and the state are omnipresent in society, it matters a great deal to individual voters which parties and politicians are in power. In Suriname,

[T]he government is the largest direct and indirect employer. The government has therefore 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. In the current situation, due to clientelism and patronage, almost 60 to 70 per cent of the Surinamese labor force ... are civil servants working for semipublic companies. (Ramssoedh 2016: 33)

And because election results can be of crucial importance to the well-being of individual citizens, many small states are remarkably polarized. In most small states, political divisions are mirrored in society, and political affiliations have a strong impact on private relations between individual citizens. Douglas Midgett accurately makes this point for the Caribbean small state of St Lucia:

These are not only small societies, but they are ones in which party politics has attained a paramountcy where many citizens' livelihoods may be profoundly affected by the outcome of elections. That is, should one's party lose an election and one's support have been open and vigorous, numerous opportunities may be closed that would have been available if the results were reversed. The consequence of this crucial aspect of electoral outcomes is inter-party antagonism often so acerbic that any compromise in parliament is impossible and social relations within communities, and even within families, may be poisoned. (Midgett 1998: 2)

While many scholars have assumed that the absence of ideological divisions should make small societies more consensual, in fact the opposite is true. Case study publications on small states around the world speak of 'tribal' politics, and in many countries there seems to be little room for independent or impartial institutions and voices. The paradox, of course, is that this competition has no substantive foundation and is exclusively focused on control of the state apparatus. As Kirk Meighoo points out for the case of Trinidad and Tobago:

There is an appreciation of the intellectual emptiness of politics of Trinidad and Tobago. Ethnic groups are politically mobilized, without ethnic demands, partly because there are no creative ideas, movements, or visions forwarded that can inspire or win the confidence of a large cross-section of society. The only aim of a party is to win office. Political ideas are virtually non-existent. Parties rarely, if ever, issue position papers, not even for small intellectual audiences. Ethnic mobilization is simply the default mode. (Meighoo 2008: 122)

While particularistic forms of representation are not necessarily less democratic than substantive ones (Kitschelt 2000), the pervasiveness of patron–client linkages in small states does create economic inefficiency, an oversized and ineffective public service, and the unequal treatment of societal groups by the state. In addition, it can augment the tendency to concentrate power because citizens are economically and socially dependent on their political leaders. In Vanuatu in the South Pacific, there is: 'an emphasis on personality over policy, a tendency toward consensus and bloc voting, a desire for short-term gain over long-term commitment to a vision for the nation, and the use of patronage and exploitation of kinship by "big men" in their quest for support' (Rousseau 2012: 102).

Yet despite all the well-known limitations of clientelism and patronage, a key and underestimated benefit of these linkages is the political stability they provide (Arriola 2009). Clientelistic exchanges mean that citizens can enjoy some of the spoils of government, and in poorer small states that have no social security, clientelistic goods provide for a crucial measure of economic redistribution and

welfare. Because of their dependence on state resources and services, citizens are highly unlikely to challenge the political elite as long as they are assured of a steady income by means of clientelistic exchanges. The virtual absence of programmatic politics furthermore entails that there are also no ideological movements or initiatives to change or overthrow the political regime, which also contributes to political stability. Even in small states with high measures of ethnic, linguistic or religious fragmentation, patron–client linkages provide a strong measure of political stability, and culturally plural small states also do not appear to be less stable or democratic than homogeneous ones (Corbett and Veenendaal 2018).

In sum, therefore, informality and face-to-face relations between citizens and elites can be said to contribute to regime stability. While clientelism creates tribalistic and profoundly polarized societies in some small states (e.g. Malta, the Seychelles or the Caribbean islands), this polarization rarely translates into regime crises or outright violence. The preservation of free and fair elections ensures that the opposition and its supporters always have a chance to gain office and access to state resources.

Conclusion

Contemporary publications on political developments in advanced Western democracies emphasize the supposedly negative impact of informal politics and personalization on the quality of democracy and political stability. Based on this literature, the main question addressed in this article is why small states have succeeded in remaining both democratic and stable in the face of widespread informality and personalism. In light of the broader exclusion of small states from comparative politics, and the recognized difficulties of studying informal political dynamics, a systematic literature review of 167 case study publications on 46 small states was carried out. While most of these publications are highly idiosyncratic in nature, they provide great insights into the specific informal characteristics of individual small states, making them excellent data sources for this analysis. By connecting the findings of these hitherto compartmentalized studies, this article has constructed a novel analytical framework to understand political dynamics in small states.

Despite the many economic, historical, cultural and institutional differences between the 46 small states covered in this article, the publications that were studied as part of the literature review point to a number of striking similarities relating to their political environments. Concerning relations between politicians at the elite level, the analysis points to: (1) the absence of programmatic and substantive politics, leading to (2) strongly person-oriented forms of competition and cooperation between politicians, which results in (3) either power concentration or political fragmentation. Regarding the relations between citizens and politicians, the surveyed publications reveal: (4) ubiquitous patron–client linkages between citizens and politicians, which occur in the context of strongly (5) politicized and (6) polarized societies. Together, these six characteristics create a political system that is functional in the sense that it meets the needs of both politicians and citizens, and therefore provides for a strong measure of stability while maintaining

formal democratic rules and procedures. As Donald Peters (1992: 187) concludes in his publication on the Caribbean small states: 'The political model of the Eastern Caribbean works, not because it is repressive or liberal, but because the political leaders and the people seem to have reached a mutual understanding of what the limitations of the model are.'

On the basis of the systematic literature review conducted in this article, a new analytical framework for studying politics and democracy in small states has been created. While many authors have identified the characteristics and dynamics of this framework in the individual small states or clusters of small states that they analysed in case study publications, it is my conviction that this framework is in fact applicable to small states around the world, because the dynamics discussed in this article appear in a great majority of analysed publications. Area studies scholars of the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean or Pacific have often treated the political dynamics they observed as idiosyncratic, 'cultural' aspects that are particular to those regions. In fact, however, there may not be so many differences between the more structural characteristics of politics in African, Caribbean, European and Pacific small states.

While this study was restricted to the group of sovereign states, the analytical model can also be extended to non-sovereign territories or small subnational jurisdictions, although this depends, of course, on the relative strength of the metropolitan or national administration. The smallest sovereign states have fewer inhabitants than average municipalities in large countries, and size effects are no less pertinent at the level of local politics (Denters et al. 2014). In similar fashion, the effects of smallness are also visible in publications on small non-sovereign territories that retain constitutional links with a larger metropolitan power (Baldacchino 2010; Clegg and Killingray 2012; Veenendaal 2016). However, due to the presence of a larger national administration, in such jurisdictions politicians' capacity to create and maintain clientelistic networks may be restricted. In addition, local elections are often contested by the same parties that operate on the larger national level, and which therefore mostly do have substantive ideologies and platforms.

However, the results of this analysis are not only relevant for small jurisdictions. Informality and personalization are increasingly witnessed in large countries, and in this respect small states could be regarded as prototypical cases that have already been experiencing such dynamics for a longer period of time. Yet in contrast to the assumptions and predictions of the dominant literature, in the face of pervasive informality and personalization, small states have remained both democratic and stable. On the basis of the analysis provided in this article, two explanations for this paradox can be provided. In the first place, the experience of the 46 small states reveals that in contrast to dominant suppositions and the experience of many larger new democracies, informality and personalization generally do not translate into political volatility or government collapses. In fact, in many small states informality allows political leaders to obtain vast powers, which they could never have acquired on the basis of formal institutions alone. Although this concentration of power sometimes results in dominant or even repressive leadership, in virtually all cases formal democratic institutions survive, and many of these countries have extremely stable political regimes. In contrast to the assumptions of

the literature, informality and personalization in small states do not necessarily create political instability.

Second, and more important, even in cases where personalization does produce fragmentation and recurrent political turbulence, this rarely affects the overall stability or formally democratic nature of the political regime. In this respect, the article points to an important discrepancy between regime (or ‘macro’) stability and political (or ‘micro’) stability, and the need to disentangle these two concepts (cf. Dowding and Kimber 1983). Continuous infighting and government collapses in small states of course undermine the capacity of administrations to formulate and implement long-term policies, but they almost never affect political freedoms or civil liberties in a negative way. In fact, fragmentation sometimes even seems to aid democracy because it prevents power concentration and guarantees the independent or impartial functioning of institutions such as the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the media. The important lesson for larger democracies is that even if personalism and institutional erosion lead to more fragmented, fluctuating or turbulent politics, this does not automatically have a negative impact on the survival of democracy.

The rise of populist parties and politicians in Western democracies – culminating with the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016 – reinforces fears that democracy is in crisis or under serious threat (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). In a recent book titled *How Democracies Die* (2018), Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, for instance, argue that the main consequence of rising polarization and populism in the US is that the ‘guardrails’ of American democracy break down, potentially paving the way for authoritarian leadership. In contrast to such forecasts, the present analysis has shown that in small states where personalization, polarization and particularistic leadership are already ubiquitous features of politics, democratic regimes still survive, even if everyday political dynamics may be quite distant from democratic ideals. In this sense, the experience of small states teaches us that institutional erosion and personalization do not necessarily translate into authoritarian politics, but may signal a transition to an alternative – perhaps substandard – type of democracy instead. Furthermore, in the case of small states this system has proven to be remarkably stable and resilient, even in the absence of powerful institutional structures.

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Notes

1 See a complete list of small states in the online supplementary information.

2 This translates into an average of 3.63 publications for each individual small state. While there is much more case study material for some small states (e.g. Fiji) than others (e.g. St Vincent and the Grenadines), for all small states a minimum of two publications have been included in the analysis. For small states with

a relatively large number of case study publications, the ones that are most relevant to the topic of this analysis have been selected.

3 The perspectives of these ‘outsider’ authors were not significantly different from those of local or ‘insider’ authors, as both groups of authors point to similar political dynamics in small states.

4 In addition, patron–client networks are often regarded as economically inefficient, but this has no direct repercussions for democratic governance.

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