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How does population size influence administrative performance? Evidence from Malta, Samoa, and Suriname

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Abstract

Public administration scholars pay increasing attention to the role of context as a pathway to genuinely comparative analysis. Specifically, they focus on the economic, institutional and socio-cultural conditions in which administration takes place. Population size is an overlooked contextual factor despite the fact that existing studies often make implicit, positive assumptions about the effects of smallness on administrative performance. We investigate these assumptions by focusing on small, rather than large states across three dimensions: representativeness, transparency and service delivery. Drawing on unique qualitative data from three small states from different continents, Malta, Samoa and Suriname, we find that contra implicit assumptions, small population size does not have the overwhelmingly positive effects that much of the literature assumes. Rather, smallness tends to undermine legal-rational decision making and to facilitate patronage-based service delivery. These findings indicate that the contextual turn in public administration needs to pay more attention to the way population size shapes bureaucratic practice in all states, large and small.

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Small states, representative bureaucracy, transparency, public service delivery, developing countries, comparative case studies

Introduction

Research in comparative public administration and governance pays increasing attention to the role of context (Elgin and Carter, 2019; Flom, 2020; Ongaro et al., 2021). The argument that context matters can be traced as far back as Robert Dahl's (1947) claim that public administration should be studied in a comparative perspective (see also Bertelli et al., 2020; Van der Wal et al., 2021). Context often refers to a variety of factors beyond the direct control of public managers or policy-makers, including the economic, institutional or socio-cultural conditions in which public administration takes place. This article adds to this growing literature but also extends it in important ways. Our guiding research question is how population size, an understudied contextual factor, affects administrative performance, that is, how and how well public administration functions.

Our main contribution is to highlight that the population size of the state is a key contextual factor that shapes outcomes in much the same way as economy, institutions or culture. The effects of size are an implicit feature of much public administration scholarship in terms of organizational size (Downs, 1967; Jung, 2013) or the size of subnational units (Andrews et al., 2006; Charron et al., 2013), but at the national level the impact of population size is understudied (but see Jugl, 2019). This article aims to make the complex and often disguised effects of population size more explicit. In doing so it argues that population size has particular relevance for key debates about the merits of decentralization and devolution (Kuhlmann and Wayenberg, 2016; Treisman, 2007) and the challenges of public administration in developing countries (Bertelli et al., 2020). Since size effects can be studied globally, and either alongside or independent of levels of economic development, a focus on population size also allows us to compare between OECD countries and other parts of the world, which has long been a blind spot for the discipline (for an exception see Corbett et al., 2021).

Our secondary argument is that implicit assumptions about size effects in the existing literature provide an overly positive image of the functioning of public administration in small settings. To illustrate this, we investigate the paradoxical effects of population size on three dimensions of administrative performance: bureaucratic representativeness, transparency, and the allocation of public services. We focus on these three dimensions of administrative performance because, as we will show, large parts of the academic literature in public administration as well as the decentralization literature imply that smaller units favor these performance aspects. However, based on the three cases studied in our paper, we demonstrate that the empirical foundation for these assumptions is remarkably thin. After presenting the main arguments of the academic literature, the article explores how size affects bureaucratic performance in three most different small states: Malta, Suriname and Samoa. Qualitative insights from these three democracies identify patronage as an adverse effect of small population size that is largely overlooked in the

public administration and governance literature. This finding has implications for the study of scale in public administration and in the context of decentralization.

Arguments and assumptions in the literature

In this section we interrogate implicit assumptions about how the population size of a jurisdiction impacts its performance to illustrate our broader claim that it should be treated as an important contextual variable. We find that the literature on public administration contains strong arguments about the influence of population size on administrative performance, which are, however, rarely studied empirically. We consider three examples related to different dimensions of administrative performance, which broadly reflect the ‘input’, ‘throughput’ and ‘output’ components of the bureaucratic system (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017: 15; Walker et al., 2010). On the ‘input’ side, we look at the effects of population size on the recruitment of civil servants and the extent to which they are representative of the broader population. When it comes to ‘throughput’, we look at the degree to which size influences bureaucratic transparency. On the ‘output’ side, we examine the effects of population size on the production and allocation of public services.

Representativeness

The literature on representative bureaucracy (Bishu and Kennedy, 2020; Ding et al., 2021; Kennedy, 2014; Riccucci and Van Ryzin, 2017) is based on the idea that public servants who are similar to the populations they serve, for example in terms of gender, ethnicity or social class, (‘passive representation’) will achieve more targeted and more equitable outputs (‘active representation’) and spark trust and better collaboration among citizens or service users (‘symbolic representation’). Representativeness is an end in itself and as such a key dimension of administrative performance, but it also constitutes a prerequisite for other facets of performance such as efficiency and effectiveness. This literature has identified certain characteristics of individual bureaucrats, organizations, and public services that affect passive and active representation (Ding et al., 2021). However, there is no systematic research on the cross-country or cross-cultural variation of passive, sociodemographic representativeness and its determinants, nor on the effect of population size on representativeness. Ding et al. (2021: 1013–14) show that most existing studies are located in the US context (77% of studies reviewed by Bishu and Kennedy, 2020) or in other ethnically diverse states in Western Europe. Ding et al. (2021: 1014) make the assumption that context - the diversity of the population - matters and, implicitly, that representative bureaucracy may be easier to achieve in small and homogeneous states.

For passive representation, one may expect a mechanical effect of scale that mirrors arguments on scale and *political* representativeness. Under the assumption that small states and societies tend to be more homogeneous than larger ones (Dahl and Tufte, 1973), it should be easier for politicians, and also for bureaucrats, in small states to faithfully represent the (less diverse) sociodemographic characteristics of their constituents, for example in terms of ethnic or language groups, and their interests. While supporting evidence exists for political leaders (Gerring and Veenendaal, 2020: 115-16), ideas about

size and passive representation in administration remain largely unexplored. In a rare discussion of decentralization and passive representation, [Moloney \(2008\)](#) expects that decentralization is positively related with the share of female civil servants at subnational level but does not clarify the causal mechanisms nor find evidence for this effect.

One may also expect that small size fosters active representation. Smallness is often said to facilitate direct contact and interaction between politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens, which will facilitate the exchange of information, signaling of citizen preferences and ultimately, tailored public service provision ([Keiser, 2010](#)), which we discuss below. What also matters for active representation is the internal context and administrative setting, for example discretion and formalization ([Ding et al., 2021](#); [Keiser, 2010](#); [Kennedy, 2014](#)). Discretion is a necessary condition for bureaucrats to turn socio-demographic similarity or shared values with a certain user group into actions in their favor. Bureaucracies in smaller states are often assumed to be less specialized and formalized and to leave more room for discretion to individual bureaucrats ([Sarapuu and Randma-Liiv, 2020](#)), which should facilitate the translation of passive into active representation. The stratification between street-level, frontline tasks on the one hand and management tasks on the other is much less clear and roles more blurred in small jurisdictions than in larger settings such as the US. This lower stratification should translate into more direct personal discretion and access to street-level information for top-level managers and allow, in turn, for stronger active representation in smaller units.

Transparency

The literature on public sector transparency has grown significantly over recent years ([Cucciniello et al., 2017](#); [Mabillard and Zumofen, 2017](#)). A key reason is that transparency, “the availability of information about an organization or process” ([Bauhr et al., 2020: 497](#)), is an important value in itself and typically associated with other positive performance dimensions, including public service provision. The absence of corruption is commonly regarded as a core feature of transparent government, and in the academic literature these two concepts are strongly intertwined (e.g., [Kolstad and Wiig, 2009](#)). The long-standing expectation is that enhancing transparency will increase trust in government, reduce corruption and improve financial performance. The key, transparency advocates argue, is allowing citizens to *see* inside systems ([Hood, 2006](#); [Osborne, 2004](#)); as citizens and auditors gain greater knowledge and access to information about how decisions are made, they are able to more effectively hold governments to account for their actions (e.g. see [Lagunes and Pocasangre, 2019](#) on Freedom of Information). In turn, greater scrutiny should motivate decision-makers to act with greater honesty. Bauhr et al. (2020: 497) summarize what should be a virtuous cycle:

Transparency reduces information asymmetries between principals (i.e., the public) and agents (i.e., the government) and allows the former to monitor the latter. Theoretically, this makes corruption less likely because agents become more likely to act according to rules and regulations as the risk of getting caught increases. Furthermore, transparency makes it easier

for principals to detect the abuses that still take place, and if necessary, demand accountability. In the long run, more honest and efficient incumbents may assume public office.

While these are ahistorical and acultural assumptions, the lack of evidence about when and how transparency works, and for whom, has led to a growing call to more systematically investigate the ways in which contextual conditions, including institutional settings but also the political economy, shape transparency outcomes (e.g. recent studies by Bauhr et al., 2020; Roelofs, 2019). But by and large, population size is not one of the contexts under consideration.

While population size is typically absent from these debates, we can infer similar assumptions about how it might shape transparency to those discussed above. In the decentralization literature, the transparency of smaller local units is highlighted as a key motivation to devolve authority and competences to subnational administrations (Faguet, 2014; Kuhlmann and Wayenberg, 2016). The smaller the administrative or organizational unit, the more it will have a natural level of transparency because it is easier for citizens to understand public sector processes and gain access to public sector decision makers, and thus scrutinize how public money is spent or the merits of key appointments (Dahl and Tufte, 1973: 108). This should create a virtuous feedback loop between citizens, their representatives, and the bureaucracy, which is why we should not observe non-transparent political dynamics like clientelism, patronage, and corruption in small states. The fact that the small state of Iceland topped (in a positive sense) the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index for many years is in line with this expectation. Similarly, the literature on transparency argues that smallness should facilitate monitoring and reduce corruption, but empirical studies are rare and come to contradictory results (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015: 81, 85; Xin and Rudel, 2004).

Service provision

The final performance dimension, the effective provision of public goods and services, is closely related to and partly results from bureaucratic representativeness and transparency. While early studies highlighted benefits of large territories with large markets and resources, this debate has shifted considerably: In his watershed publication *Small is Beautiful*, Ernest Schumacher (1973) argues that “there is a tremendous longing and striving to profit, if at all possible, from the convenience, humanity, and manageability of smallness” (p. 59). Following this seminal volume, a range of theoretical and empirical studies argued that a small size poses no significant barrier to the production of goods and services, and might even be an advantage by fostering flexibility, manageability, and consensus-orientation (Karras, 1996; Katzenstein, 1985; Kohr, 1977).

More recently, the claim that smallness results in a better provision and allocation of public services primarily appears in the literature on decentralization and local government (Charron et al., 2013; De Vries, 2000; Diamond and Tsalik, 1999; Faguet, 2014; Kuhlmann and Wayenberg, 2016; Treisman, 2007), which puts forward three arguments. First, smaller units should allow for the creation of more tailor-made goods and services, better reflecting citizens’ demands and preferences. This relates to the idea of active

representation discussed above and to the assumption that small societies have more homogenous preferences (Alesina and Spolaore, 2005). This also builds on the assumption that public officials in small societies are geographically and psychologically closer to the people, which enables them to find policies appropriate for local contexts (De Vries, 2000: 197).

A second, related argument is that smallness also fosters the *capacity* of the administration to target and deliver public services more effectively (Ahmad et al., 2005; Dillinger, 1994). The assumption behind this notion is that smaller units are less bureaucratic, more flexible, dynamic, and effective (De Vries, 2000: 197; Sarapuu and Randma-Liiv, 2020). The lower number of public officials and the decreased complexity of small administrations is supposed to create a more informal style of policymaking and greater capability to coordinate and adjust public service delivery.

A third argument, linked to transparency and the closeness between public officials and citizens, is that small societies favor public service quality by enhancing the role of citizens in service production and strengthening their capacities to hold public officials accountable (Andrews, 2011; Charron et al., 2013: 3; Diamond and Tsalik, 1999: 129): “[t]he effect of decentralization is to dramatically tighten the feedback loop between those who produce public goods and services and those who consume them” (Faguet, 2014: 5). Aside from ‘democratizing’ the production of public goods, more transparency in small jurisdictions should also reduce opportunities for public officials to ‘shirk’ or engage in rent-seeking, which is why decentralization has been advocated as an antidote to government corruption in developing countries (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006).

Many assumptions about the effect of population size on public service provision have not been studied empirically (Treisman, 2007). Although some studies suggest citizen satisfaction with the delivery of public services to be higher among inhabitants of smaller municipalities (Charron et al., 2013; Diaz-Serrano and Rodríguez-Pose, 2015), another study finds that size makes no difference for service efficiency and effectiveness (Andrews et al., 2006). At the national level, Rose (2006) finds no evidence for size effects on a large number of public service outcomes, while Jugl (2019) finds a curvilinear effect of size on public service quality. These studies do not suffice to establish a clear, unidirectional size effect on the provision and quality of public services (Gerring and Veenendaal, 2020: 358). Likewise, the assumptions that small states have more homogeneous societies and that they have a natural level of transparency have been called into question by some scholars (Anckar, 1999; Sarapuu and Randma-Liiv, 2020). While acknowledging these sceptic voices, we still conclude that the majority of the literature assumes a positive effect of smallness on the functioning and performance of public administration.

Data and methods

Although assumptions and arguments about the effects of population size frame much of the literature on administrative performance, they are rarely studied empirically. This article begins to fill this gap. Specifically, we explore how the public sector performs across these dimensions in three of the world’s smallest states: Malta (Europe), Suriname

(Caribbean) and Samoa (Pacific). These under-studied cases are small in terms of population size and territory, the most common operationalizations of country size (Crowards, 2002). We do not formulate any specific cut-off point or threshold to distinguish between small and large states, because any such figure is arbitrary (Maass, 2009). Nevertheless, our three cases clearly belong to the category of smallest states in the world.

We choose small states as extreme cases for size-related questions. If much of the literature is based on assumptions developed for larger states, then small states offer an important environment for probing their universality. To ensure that population size is the key variable under examination we focus on three “most different” (Przeworski and Teune, 1970: 34–39) small states with meaningful variation on the factors summarized in Table 1: They are located in different regions, have very different histories, cultures, geographies, and levels of wealth. PPP is not only a proxy for income but also for the level of development and translates into different education levels in our three cases. Most importantly, they also have different institutions and political traditions. Following the most-different systems research design, we therefore expect that any similarities that we observe across these three cases can be attributed to the one contextual feature they share: their small population size. To corroborate such conclusions, we rely on detailed case analyses that allow us to triangulate findings across the three cases and to trace the mechanism that connect smallness with the outcomes of interest.

Given the lack of quantitative data on administrative performance in small states (Jugl, 2019), this article is based on qualitative analysis. We have conducted field research in all three states, which primarily consisted of semi-structured interviews with public officials

Table 1. The three cases.

	Malta	Suriname	Samoa
Population	460.000	615.000	205.000
Territory	316 km ²	163.820 km ²	2.381 km ²
Region	Europe	Caribbean	Pacific
PPP (in US dollars)	\$ 44.000	\$ 16.500	\$ 6.500
Geography	Islands	Continental	Islands
Culture & ethnicity	Homogenous	Diverse	Homogenous
Colonial power	United Kingdom until 1964	Netherlands until 1975	Germany/New Zealand until 1962
Government system	Parliamentary	Hybrid	Parliamentary
Party system	Two-party	Multi-party	Dominant-party ^a
Interviews (Year)	23 (2017)	21 (2018)	16 (2011), 11(2013)

Source: [CIA World Factbook \(2021\)](#).

^aThe Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) has dominated Samoan government since the 1980s. They were defeated in the April 2021 election by the newly formed Faith in the One God of Samoa (FAST) Party. This article cannot account for the type of system that may emerges post 2021.

(see [Table 1](#) for the number of interviews per country), complemented by document analysis. Our interview respondents were selected with the aim to acquire as much diversity in views and perspectives as possible, which is why we have paid attention to variance in terms of functions, gender, political allegiance.¹ All semi-structured interviews started from a set of questions, which was adapted to the specific respondent and based on insights from previous interviews. They typically lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. Since size effects are complex and often concealed, interviews are an important method for uncovering the various ways in which smallness affects bureaucratic performance. Furthermore, following [Bertelli et al. \(2020\)](#), if we really want to pay attention to context we also need to know how the public service and public servants interact with their environment, and interviews offer us an excellent opportunity to gain such insights.

Administrative performance in small states

The discussion of the literature has summarized arguments about how population size should affect bureaucratic performance and revealed several underlying assumptions about small units: that their populations are more homogeneous, that their administrations are less bureaucratic and more flexible, and that they facilitate contact and the exchange of information between citizens and public officials. To examine these assumptions and the resulting arguments critically, this section discusses the insights from our most different small states for each of the three performance dimensions.

Representativeness

As discussed above, higher levels of homogeneity in small units are assumed to result in a more representative bureaucracy. However, this argument presupposes that the recruitment of civil servants in small units works in a similar way as in larger ones. In fact, one crucial difference with larger units is that small state bureaucracies struggle with a shortage of highly qualified candidates ([Sarapuu and Randma-Liiv, 2020: 61–63](#)). This scarcity can be expected to force public personnel managers to consider applicants regardless of their sociodemographic characteristics such as gender and ethnicity, which should favor passive representation in the bureaucracy. Against these expectations, we find in our three cases that three different mechanisms undermine bureaucratic representativeness. These mechanisms are linked to each country's unique characteristics.

In the case of Samoa, a lack of skilled workers has been a longstanding issue that can be linked directly to the low level of development (illustrated by PPP in [Table 1](#)). Since independence, the lack of Samoans with necessary training and qualifications was explained by the difficulty accessing higher education, but more recently the shortages were attributed to many overseas trained workers choosing to work abroad ([Amosa, 2012; Liki, 2001](#)). On the one hand, this scarcity has incentivized the hiring of qualified candidates regardless of gender or other characteristics and resulted in a particularly high representation of women in senior civil service roles. According to the [Samoa Public Service](#)

Commission (2019), 57% of women are in senior executive positions across the Ministries (468 positions in total) and eight out of 17 CEO/Heads of Department are women.

On the other hand, this phenomenon undermines representativeness in several ways. First, children of wealthy families can more easily afford to go overseas to study and are thus advantaged when applying for domestic top-level positions. Secondly, the low levels of economic development do not make the Samoan public sector an attractive employer for everyone. Government jobs in Samoa may be well paid compared to other sectors of the local economy, but they compare poorly to jobs graduates might obtain overseas. Those who can afford it, often see overseas education as a pathway to migration. In response, the Samoan government has sought significant improvements in human resource capacity, for example by providing scholarships for studying abroad (Naidu et al., 2020) linked to a scholarship bond agreement. As a condition of their scholarship students must return to Samoa after graduation to work for a pre-determined period. However, graduates may be reluctant to stay home after serving their bond periods and work for less educated senior managers (Amosa, 2007). Thus, small size together with low levels of development and public-sector attractiveness results in shortage of skilled candidates which has contradictory effects on representativeness: human resource pressures can result in lessor gender-based discrimination, for example, but can have negative effects for the overall quality and representativeness of the public service.

While brain drain seems less acute in the other two cases and university enrolment is significantly higher in Malta, these cases experience other downsides of smallness that undermine representativeness, namely the politicization of the public service. In Malta, which has a polarized two-party system in which the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party compete for control, the governing party traditionally has the capacity to appoint a great variety of public offices:

Our major concern is the influence government has on deciding bodies everywhere; on boards, on every aspect of a citizen's life, you know. I mean [...] you would need to apply for a planning permit, but the people deciding are people the government put on the board [...]. If you really want to abuse the system [...] it is extremely easy. And you get to a point where you look around and you say "ok, the government controls everything." (Interview with human rights NGO spokesperson)

As this quote illustrates, Maltese governments traditionally appoint party loyalists or political supporters in public positions, creating a civil service that is politically biased in their favor. While Malta's civil service regulations allow for political appointments only in top positions (Camilleri, 2018), in a small public administration these are particularly decisive and influential. In the last years, Malta's state system has been increasingly criticized for the complete political control it provides to the governing party. While this system of patronage may or may not result in a bureaucracy that is representative in terms of gender, age, or geography, this bias practically means that many of the alleged benefits of representative bureaucracy, such as producing more equitable outputs or generating more trust, do not materialize.

The situation is different in Suriname, which has a multi-party system in which political parties traditionally represent and cater to specific ethnic groups. With Suriname, one of our three small states is ethnically diverse, which calls deterministic assumptions about smallness and homogeneity into question. In contrast to Malta's system, Suriname has a tradition of coalition governments in which multiple parties must work together. Similar to Malta however, positions in the Surinamese civil service are usually filled on the basis of partisan loyalties. Interviewees confirm that positions in the public sector are broadly seen as a public resource which can be awarded to political supporters immediately after a party enters government. Party identities in Suriname overlap closely with ethnic identities, and coalition negotiations often result in a horse trading for control over particular ministries. In terms of recruitment of civil servants:

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

As a result of ethnicity-based patronage, the Surinamese civil service in total should be quite representative in ethnic terms. However, certain services or policies are overseen entirely by bureaucrats from one ethnicity, which limits benefits of representation only to this population group. When a particular party ends up either in the opposition or controlling another ministry, this may have dramatic consequences for the representation of its ethnic group in the public administration. In addition, patronage-based recruitment undermines many of the alleged benefits of a representative bureaucracy. While party-based and ethnicity-based recruitment are linked to country-specific features in Malta and Suriname, they are both facilitated by smallness: these small administrations show limited professionalism in terms of skills but also in terms of being a distinct group with an own identity that could shield the bureaucracy from political influence (Jugl, 2019). Previous studies have shown that small state governments are relatively powerful and can easily capture an under-specialized bureaucracy (Corbett et al., 2021).

Transparency

While the classic understanding of transparency expects close connections and face-to-face nature in small societies to produce more honest, open and accountable government, in practice we find that closeness between citizens, politicians, and civil servants primarily results in patron-client linkages, undermining transparency. The literature on public administrations in small states indicates that the line between politics and administration is consistently blurred, leading to concerns about conflicts of interest, patron-client linkages, and corruption (Baldacchino, 1997: 77–78; Lodge et al., 2015; Ott, 2000: 37–39). Elite circles are incredibly tight and many actors are related in one way or another (Corbett et al., 2021). In the Pacific, concepts like *fa'asamoa* (the Samoan Way) capture aspects of this dynamic, which makes it virtually impossible to award a government contract to a company that is not owned by a relative, old school friend, or a fellow member of a

community organization. These observations lead us to suspect that patron-client linkages and corruption are the core dynamics that could undermine transparent government in small states.

The interview materials in our three cases provide contradictory evidence about the impact of size on transparency. On the one hand, they confirm the positive assumptions in the literature that smallness enhances transparency in government:

It's a small country ... So you can't hide anything around this place in Samoa ... So I walk away from that kind of rubbish [corruption], because I know you can never hide in this country. Never. No matter how long, it will come up. It will come up and it will come back to haunt you. And it will disgrace you forever in this small country, because everybody knows everyone. (Interview with government minister)

On the other, the fact that politicians – the main patrons – are directly accessible to citizens means they are often directly pressured to arrange certain public goods or services for their constituents. The effect of this is that the entire civil service, and with it any institutionalized form of transparency, are often bypassed, as politicians become directly involved in the allocation of services. In Malta, ministers might even be pressured by their colleagues to arrange certain matters for colleague's constituents:

If you are removing one or two parking spaces, you can have another minister calling you, because an authority that falls under your responsibility is going to remove two parking spaces and all eight families on that road, voting for the other minister, call him and tell him "please speak to minister X, because the authorities are going to remove two parking spaces." (Interview with government minister)

Maltese interviewees confirmed that such informal lines of communication are ubiquitous, and are often at the basis of public decisions or actions, bypassing formal accountability mechanisms. This is compounded by the dominance of the respective governing party in Malta.

Party dominance of the executive is something that Samoa shares with Malta. Both countries have also experienced high profile assassinations linked to corruption cases. In Malta, journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was murdered in 2017 in a bid to silence her work revealing corruption, while in 1998 the then Samoan Minister of Public Works, Luagalau Levaula Kamu, was assassinated by Eletise Leafa Vitale, who was the son of Leafa Vitale, a HRPP member of parliament and the previous Minister of Public Works, amidst widespread corruption allegations (Iati, 2013: 459). Both cases point to the prevalence of corruption despite the natural level of transparency that small size ought to provide. While these are high-profile cases, the practices that underpin them are embedded in the daily fabric of political and administrative life. As salaried workers, politicians, including ministers, and civil servants are expected to contribute to the material well-being of relatives and constituents (who are often the same people). In return,

... when you go to a fa'alavelave [traditional ceremonial obligation] because of out of their own cultural uh sensitivity to their leader, they give you a big a big fine mat, or a carton of eleni [tinned fish], or a carton of pisupo [corned beef], so those are the extras ... In my view that's a straightforward exchange, cultural exchange, because you being there is part of your contribution to the recognition of the work you are doing ... Nothing under the table [laughter]. (Interview with government minister)

The result is a process of reciprocity in which family members with high profile positions in government are awarded considerable status by their families and community members, but in return they are expected to support them financially and provide preferential access to government services. These exchanges are not secretive and in the absence of state services they also serve important social and economic functions for cash-poor members of the community. Our interview reveal that these exchanges are ubiquitous.

The interviews in Suriname reveal that despite all the differences with Malta and Samoa, similar patterns can be observed, perhaps on an even greater scale. Surinamese ministers also indicated that they are constantly asked by citizens to make certain public decisions in their favor, or to approach their colleagues in order to arrange that for them:

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

Moreover, in Suriname many members of parliament (MP) also combine their function with a job in the public service. This creates obvious problems with transparency:

Here in parliament we have MPs who receive two salaries from the state; sometimes even three. In addition to being an MP, some people are policy advisor at a ministry or some other function; head of a school, or director of a public institute. And this creates conflicts of interest, because in your role of MP, how are you going to check the budget of the ministry at which you are also a policy advisor? This is not correct. (Interview with member of parliament)

The paradox of transparency in small states is that while they should have a naturally high level of openness due to reduced distance between rulers and rules, in practice the 'face-to-face' nature of these societies also means that the ideal of a legal rational bureaucracy is difficult to realize or maintain.

Service Provision

The final size-related assumption we discussed is that small units are better able to provide and allocate public services to their constituents. However, the evidence from small states indicates that this argument fails to take other size-related effects into account, which in

combination offer a much less positive picture. First, smallness tends to result in centralization or power concentration (Gerring and Veenendaal, 2020; Jugl, 2019), which is an important contextual factor for public administration practice (O'Toole Jr and Meier, 2017: 7, 16–17). Indeed, various analyses of bureaucracies in small states show that the perceived dynamism, flexibility, and informality of small administrations are thwarted by the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of a few senior bureaucrats, actually creating a very hierarchical and rigid civil service (Baldacchino, 1997; Bray, 1991; Chitto, 2011). Power concentration not only reduces the flexibility of the public administration, but also increases the scope for corruption, as there are fewer checks and balances in the system. In turn, rigidity and corruption are widely understood to have detrimental effects on the delivery of public services (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006).

The argument about power concentration and the weakness of checks and balances is best illustrated by the Malta and Samoa cases, where the ruling party has been omnipotent, leading to recurring corruption scandals. In Malta, executive dominance and corruption are deeply rooted (Corbett et al., 2021), and clientelistic service provision is so ubiquitous that voters feel they benefit from it and support it:

There is a consensus, an agreement in the community that this should be allowed and encouraged because we benefit all from it. So corruption becomes not a sin that people fall into and then you punish when you can punish them, but actually becomes a policy. And voters vote for it, because they perceive it as a policy that generates wealth. (Interview with journalist)

Interviews in Samoa revealed similar patterns. Samoan MPs, referencing an incident in which the former Deputy Prime Minister was accused of using his position to influence the police, similarly argued that citizens took little issue with the abuse of executive power despite widespread newspaper coverage:²

People don't really see what's happening to the Deputy Prime Minister. They don't really care. I mean the only ones who care are the educated ones and the opposition and a few others who sort of read the papers ... they are very forgetful and they are very forgiving. (Interview with member of parliament)

A second overlooked size effect is that smaller units tend to have less professional public sectors (Jugl, 2019), another important contextual factor for administrative performance (O'Toole Jr and Meier, 2017: 17–18). Together with patronage, the more restricted pools of human resources should result in fewer capable administrators (Chitto, 2011), who are less likely to create high-quality goods and services that correspond to citizens' needs. In Malta, for example, patronage creates an administration that is focused on fixing short-term issues and problems of citizens, instead of developing more long-term policies:

You see, instead of making policy, what you do is working on where the complaints are coming. So it's a purely administrative, customer care approach, rather than a policy-making approach. (Interview with senior bureaucrat)

The negative effects of smallness on professionalism are best illustrated by the case of Suriname, where ethnic-based patronage has created a vastly oversized public sector. Firing civil servants is perceived as political suicide, but since there are too many civil servants for the work that needs to be done, many of them actually never show up at work:

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

Patronage comes at the cost of the effectiveness and performance of the Surinamese civil sector. Many civil servants are not qualified for their position, and the incapacity of the administration and lack of service provision means that politicians –under pressure from their constituents – step in and arrange things for their voters:

The counters at ministries don't really work, so citizens cannot get any social benefits there. And this means that we have to spend money from our own pockets on a lot of these things, you see? (Interview with member of parliament)

Discussion and conclusion

Heeding recent calls to pay more attention to the role of context, this article has highlighted the effects of population size on performance of public administrations. It has focused on three dimensions of administrative performance – representativeness, transparency, and service provision, overlapping broadly with the 'input', 'throughput', and 'output' components of administrative systems. In the theoretical section, we outlined central but empirically understudied assumptions made in the literature, which revolve around claims that smallness enhances performance on these three dimensions. We then investigated the veracity of these claims on the basis of qualitative research in three most different small states.

We found that the existing literature fails to take some important negative effects of smallness into account. Most importantly, our analysis foregrounds patronage as a key size effect that undermines the performance of public administration in small states. Patronage undermines representativeness in two of our cases because it means that civil servants are recruited on the basis of their political loyalty. It also undermines transparency in all three cases, because it generates informal channels of communication and exchange between citizens and public officials, in which professional roles and norms become blurred. And it undermines the provision of services in all three cases because it results in an oversized, overly centralized and under-professionalized civil service that is vulnerable to corruption and unable to respond to citizens' long-term needs.

Importantly, despite the many differences between our cases, similar size effects resurface. While public administration research has struggled to draw meaningful comparisons between OECD member states and countries in the Global South, population size is a contextual factor that enables us to do so. This does not mean that size operates in isolation from other contextual factors such as history, geography or culture. Our findings

regarding representativeness in particular demonstrate that contextual factors such as underdevelopment and brain drain (Samoa), polarized two-party competition (Malta), or ethnic politics (Suriname) create specific problems for the representativeness of the public administration in the three cases. However, in the end the small size of our countries – and the limited pool of administrative talent to draw from – aggravates the downsides of these three contextual factors, and is therefore an overarching problem that all three countries share. Our findings therefore rather imply that population size is a meta-factor that shapes contextual aspects internal and external to the public administration (O’Toole Jr and Meier, 2017; Van der Wal et al., 2021). Furthermore, while we argue that smallness stimulates the likelihood of patronage, this does not mean that patronage does not exist in larger states: there is an entire academic literature which clearly shows that it does (Hicken, 2011; Keefer, 2007). Our argument is simply that the likelihood of patronage relationships in smaller units is higher than in larger ones (cf. Corbett et al., 2021), and that this has important and underestimated consequences for public service performance.

Our study has several limitations. First, we only consider three performance dimensions, which according to the academic literature should vary between countries of different sizes. We are aware that there are myriad other performance dimensions that could be studied, but doing so is beyond the scope of this paper. We therefore leave it to future research to explore these other dimensions, among which the effectiveness or efficiency of administrative outcomes. Secondly, interview-based research comes with the usual limitations. However, given that majorities of interviewees across the three countries mentioned the same dys-functionalities, we have strong reasons to believe that social desirability bias or interviewer effects did not have a strong effect on our results. A third limitation is our focus on three democratic small states. While their variation on other contextual variables strengthens the generalizability of our findings to other democratic contexts, we are less certain about how much our insights will apply to non-democratic small states. However, given the fact that small states are overwhelmingly democratic (Gerring and Veenendaal, 2020: 340), our findings can nevertheless be extended to the wide majority of cases around the globe.

Finally, our findings have some important implications for the broader literature on public administration and decentralization. While much of this literature either implicitly or explicitly suggests that “small is beautiful” (Schumacher, 1973), our findings problematize these claims. Instead, we find that the role of size is much more ambiguous, complex, and multifaceted than most existing studies assume and therefore organizing public administrations on a significantly smaller scale may not make them more representative, transparent, or effective: in fact our analysis points to the opposite conclusion. Our findings suggest that contemporary optimism about decentralization and the transfer of powers to smaller administrative units may be somewhat misguided. Our hope is that this exploratory analysis demonstrates why future studies are necessary and important to further disentangle and dissect the diverse effects of size.

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Data Availability Statement

The underlying interview data are not shared to ensure interviewees' anonymity.

Notes

1. Given the small size and the ensuing lack of anonymity in the cases we analyzed, we cannot provide more details about our interview respondents without compromising their privacy.
2. The recent defeat of the HRPP party at the 2021 election could be interpreted as a sign that these attitudes are changing (Lesa, 2021).

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