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Tsagkroni, V.; Veenendaal, W.P.

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ABSTRACT

To better understand the functioning of subnational politics, knowledge of size effects is indispensable. By means of a mixed-methods analysis of elections in 65 Greek island municipalities, this paper examines the effects of size on a wide range of democratic outcomes in a new, underexplored context. Our quantitative analysis is complemented by a comparative investigation of the neighbouring municipalities of Chios (population 54,000) and Psara (population 460). We find that smaller municipalities have higher levels of participation, lower levels of competition, and a greater presence of independent candidates without party labels. On the other hand, we do not find evidence for an effect of size on the re-election of incumbents or the prevalence of clientelism.

Introduction

Across Europe, subnational administrations are becoming more and more powerful. However, large gaps remain in our understanding of subnational politics, especially compared to national politics. While the more than 100,000 subnational administrations in Europe employ most of the continent's civil servants and politicians and are responsible for most democratic decision-making, they continue to be neglected as cases in comparative politics (Loughlin, Hendriks & Lidström 2014, p. 24). A key difference between national and local politics is the size of governance units. Subnational administrations are by default smaller than national ones, and most subnational units – especially at the local level – are in fact extremely small, comprising only a few hundred or a few thousand citizens. Yet, despite these administrations' augmented powers and responsibilities, we know surprisingly little about how democracy functions on such a very small scale.

The bulk of the existing academic literature on size effects focuses on either (small) sovereign states (Anckar 2002; Ott 2000; Corbett & Veenendaal 2018) or

CONTACT Vasiliki Tsagkroni ✉ v.tsagkroni@fsw.leidenuniv.nl 🖳 Leiden University, Room Number 6.08, Turfmarkt 99, The Hague 2511 DP, Netherlands

subnational administrations in the United States (Lewis 2011; Oliver, Ha & Callen 2012). The few studies that have been conducted in Europe primarily examine the citizen-level of politics and mainly focus on levels of voter turnout, political interest, political trust, or satisfaction with the provision of municipal services (Allers et al. 2021; Cancela & Geys 2016; Denters et al. 2014; Hansen 2013; Lassen & Serritzlew 2011). While these studies have generated important insights, they have only been able to shed light on some size effects, while others have been neglected. In terms of Dahl's famous conceptualisation of democracy along the twin dimensions of participation and competition (Dahl 1971), it can be noted that the effects of size on the participatory dimension of local democracy have been abundantly studied, while the competitive dimension has received much less attention. As a result, we now have a lot of evidence that smaller units experience higher levels of voter turnout, but we do not know much about the effects of size on the characteristics and intensity of political competition and other elements of democracy. Furthermore, existing analyses of local democracy in Europe are almost exclusively quantitative in nature. As a result, while they have been able to detect some broader correlations, they have been less successful at analysing the day-to-day functioning of local politics.

This article makes an important move beyond existing scholarship by examining a broad range of size effects across the 65 island municipalities of Greece on the basis of a mixed-methods analysis. The contribution of the paper is threefold. In the first place, while most studies of size effects focus on democratic participation, our paper provides a more comprehensive analysis of size effects by looking at a much greater range of democratic outcomes. Second, we examine size effects in a completely new context, testing the validity of existing theories and findings in a setting that so far has remained unexplored. A crucial aim of our paper is to see if anticipated size effects also hold in the tiny, geographically isolated Greek island municipalities that have not previously been studied. Finally, our paper also offers a methodological innovation, examining size effects on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Our mixed methods design allows us to test correlations between size variables and a variety of democratic outcomes, as well as to provide an in-depth investigation of potential causal patterns that may be at the root of these correlations.

Being islands, the Greek municipalities we examine are geographically isolated from political developments in adjacent municipalities, allowing for a relatively 'pure' test of size effects. The large number of island municipalities in Greece and the significant variation in both their population and territorial size provides us with an ideal natural laboratory to conduct this analysis. We study the effects of size on five different political outcomes: 1) political participation, 2) political competition, 3) incumbency entrenchment, 4) the presence of political parties, and 5) patron-client linkages. Our quantitative analysis is based on data from the three most recent Greek municipal elections (2010, 2014, and 2019) in all 65 cases, while our qualitative analysis provides an in-

depth comparison of two geographically adjacent municipalities which differ strongly in size: Chios (population: 54,000) and Psara (population: 460). Based on a content analysis of election manifestoes and interviews with eight local politicians on these islands, we take a closer look at local political dynamics in these two cases.

To set the stage for our empirical analysis, we first discuss the existing academic literature on the relationship between size and democracy, on the basis of which we also formulate our hypotheses. Subsequently, we provide a description of the political context of the Greek island municipalities, after which we motivate our methodological approach and case selection. We then discuss the results of our quantitative analysis, followed by the outcomes of the qualitative investigation of Chios and Psara. We end with a conclusion in which we discuss the generalisability of our findings and their implications for academic and political debates about size effects. This research is significant for advancing our understanding of Greek politics and society, as it elucidates the impact of municipal size on democratic processes, particularly within the distinct context of Greece's many island municipalities. By examining various democratic outcomes, the study reveals notable size-related trends that have broader implications for subnational governance in Greece.

The political effects of population size

Already since the ancient Greek philosophers, scholars have paid attention to the political effects of polity size. Over the centuries, this debate has repeatedly been affected by changes in contexts and perspectives (for extensive discussion, see Dahl & Tufte 1973, Chapter 1). Plato and Aristotle, but later also Montesquieu and Rousseau, primarily highlighted the political advantages of small-sized communities. According to these thinkers, small units have more cohesive and homogenous societies, facilitating a sense of community and avoiding the need for authoritarian leadership. The opposite perspective was most persuasively formulated by the American founding fathers Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, who argued that the homogeneity of small communities creates the risk of a tyranny of the majority. According to these thinkers, larger and more heterogeneous societies are less likely to be dominated by a single group but instead generate a plurality of groupings and interests, which they believed to be conducive to republican governance.

Despite its long existence, the debate about the political effects of size is not part of modern mainstream political science. The most influential post-war study on the topic, Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte's *Size and Democracy* (1973), identifies a trade-off between various size effects: while smaller units offer greater opportunities for political participation, larger units have a greater capacity to develop and implement policies. A recent study of eleven different size effects reaches similar conclusions, adding that small communities are likely

to have more representative politics but also greater power concentration, less institutionalised forms of succession, lower levels of political competition, and lower levels of professionalism (Gerring & Veenendaal 2020). Most other publications have, however, primarily emphasised the democracy-stimulating characteristics of small societies, both at the national level (Anckar 2002; Diamond & Tsalik 1999; Ott 2000), and at the local level (Kuhlmann & Wayenberg 2016; Oxhorn, Tulchin & Selee 2004; Rodden & Wibbels 2019). However, these claims have not gone unchallenged: more qualitative studies that have closely analysed the everyday nature of politics in small communities find that smallness also creates a number of informal dynamics, which potentially undermine democratic governance (Baldacchino 2012; Corbett 2015; Oliver, Ha & Callen 2012; Veenendaal 2015).

Existing scholarship distinguishes a number of size effects, on the basis of which we can formulate our hypotheses. The most commonly observed size effect, for which there is now ample empirical evidence, is that smallness increases the political participation of citizens (Allers et al. 2021; Denters et al. 2014; Tavares & Raudla 2018). The link between size and voter turnout has been studied over and over again, in a great variety of contexts. As meta-analyses of these studies demonstrate, a very clear majority of empirical analyses confirms that smaller jurisdictions have higher levels of voter turnout (Cancela & Geys 2016; Górecki & Gendźwiłł 2021). Studies of non-electoral forms of participation, such as party membership or participation in citizen's assemblies, are rarer but generally point to the same effect (Ladner 2002; Van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke 2012). A variety of explanations for this effect have been proposed, among which the higher levels of homogeneity and community cohesion in small settings, the increased power of individual votes, and the closer connections between citizens and politicians (Gerring & Veenendaal 2020). Yet irrespective of the causal explanation, on the basis of existing evidence we can hypothesise that:

H1: The smaller the jurisdiction, the higher the participation of citizens.

While the effects of size on participation have been studied extensively, this is not the case for the effect of size on political competition, Dahl's other classic dimension of democracy (Dahl 1971). However, the few studies that have been conducted (Dahl & Tufte 1973; Gerring et al. 2018; Kouba & Dosek 2022; Gerring & Veenendaal 2020) show that larger polities have higher levels of competition. Competition can be studied on the basis of two different indicators: the number of (pre-election) political alternatives or competitors that voters can choose from, and the competitiveness of the election results itself.

When it comes to the availability of political alternatives, the main factor that limits the number of electoral competitors in smaller settings is the higher level of social cohesion in these settings (Dahl & Tufte 1973;

Trounstine 2008; Cruz, Labonne & Querubín 2020). Social cohesion limits the diversity of political interests among the population, which in turn limits the number of substantive or programmatic alternatives that citizens would support. Moreover, social cohesion has been linked to a dominant set of cultural norms to which inhabitants of a small jurisdiction are supposed to adhere, increasing what Dahl and Tufte have called the 'cost of dissent' (1973, Chapter 6). In small societies, deviating from these dominant cultural norms may have negative social repercussions, limiting citizens' willingness to openly express criticism of those in power (Baldacchino 2012). In combination, these factors result in the following hypothesis:

H2: The smaller the jurisdiction, the lower the number of electoral competitors.

Second, we can look at the competitiveness of elections themselves. If smaller jurisdictions have fewer electoral competitors, that should also mean that elections themselves are less competitive, in the sense that the likelihood of a landslide victory of one competitor increases. To measure this, we could look at the average vote share for the largest party: an earlier study found that this share is statistically higher in smaller jurisdictions (Gerring et al. 2015). In addition, electoral competitiveness can also be measured by looking at the difference between the top-two competitors, or measures such as Gerring et al'.s incumbent-challenger index (2018). Yet, regardless of the specific indicator used, all these earlier studies show that smaller jurisdictions tend to experience lower levels of electoral competitiveness. Therefore, we can formulate the following hypothesis:

H3: The smaller the jurisdiction, the less competitive the elections.

While the effects of size on political competition have not been studied extensively, that is even more the case for the next outcome we examine: the effect of size on incumbency. In virtually all democratic systems, incumbent politicians have an electoral advantage vis-à-vis their challengers, a pattern known as the 'incumbency effect' (Krehbiel & Wright 1983; Eggers 2017). The strength of this effect varies from unit to unit and from election to election, but if smallness indeed attenuates political competition, we can expect incumbency effects to be stronger in smaller settings. The presence of incumbency effects should manifest in less alternation in office (or turnover), and longer terms in office for political leaders. Earlier studies have indeed found that incumbents of small polities tend to remain in office for a longer period of time (Lascher 2005; Sutton 2007; Gerring & Veenendaal 2020). As a result, we can hypothesise that:

H4: The smaller the jurisdiction, the higher the likelihood that incumbents are re-elected.

In addition to the effect of size on the *degree* of competition (competitiveness), size can also be expected to influence the *character* of competition. As we have discussed, if higher levels of social cohesion in small settings translate into a lack of substantive alternatives, this means that differences between electoral competitors are likely to be personal rather than programmatic in nature, meaning that smaller polities should experience more personalised forms of competition (Dahl & Tufte 1973, pp. 87–88; Oliver, Ha & Callen 2012; Denters et al. 2014). Political personalisation is a phenomenon that occurs throughout Western democracies (and perhaps beyond), but we expect it to be stronger in small settings.

The personalisation of politics is harder to measure on the basis of quantitative indicators, but one indicator that is often used in studies of local politics is the extent to which elections are contested by local independent lists or by individual competitors without party affiliations. For both indicators, the few earlier studies that have been conducted find a strong effect: in small municipalities elections are more likely to be contested by local independent lists and/or by individual competitors (Kjaer & Elklit 2010; Tavares, Raudla & Silva 2020; Kostelecky et al. 2023). Therefore, we can hypothesise that:

H5: The smaller the jurisdiction, the lower the likelihood that elections are contested by national political parties.

A final relationship that we study is the link between size and patron-client linkages. Patron-client linkages, or clientelism, can be understood as 'the trade of votes and other types of partisan support in exchange for public decisions with divisible benefits' (Piattoni 2001, p. 4). It refers to an exchange between voters and politicians, in which the former provide political support (usually in the form of a vote) in exchange for material benefits. Clientelism can be observed in countries and settings around the world, but smallness can be hypothesised to increase the incidence of clientelism (Weitz-Shapiro 2012; Rueda 2017; Veenendaal 2019). In the first place, smallness facilitates intimate, face-to-face connections between voters and politicians, and this direct contact can be used to establish clientelistic exchanges and promises. Close contact also strengthens opportunities of both citizens and politicians to monitor if clientelistic promises are kept. Finally, in small settings the value of individual votes is higher, as a single or a few votes are more likely to be electorally decisive. Politicians may therefore have a greater incentive to attract these voters by offering material benefits in return (Veenendaal 2019).

Clientelism is notoriously hard to study, especially on the basis of quantitative methods. Therefore, we examine the effects of size on the presence of patron-

client linkages primarily by means of our qualitative analysis. We hypothesise that:

H6: The smaller the jurisdiction, the greater the incidence of patron-client linkages.

Now that we have formulated our six hypotheses, we can take a look at the specific political context in which we want to test our premises. Therefore, the subsequent section takes a look at the specific contours of local politics in Greece.

The organization of local government in Greece

The 1975 Greek constitution, which was implemented after the re-establishment of democracy, includes several provisions on local government (articles 101 and 102). It assigns the administration of subnational affairs to local authorities (article 101), which are administratively and financially autonomous (article 102). In turn, the Greek state is responsible for providing municipalities with the necessary means and controlling the legitimacy of their actions (Tomara-Sideri 1999). In practice, the constitution codifies the integration of local administrations (municipalities and districts) with the national administration (Hlepas 2001), meaning that municipalities had a weak position vis-à-vis the Greek government. Since 1975, several reforms of this system have been implemented, which all aimed to strengthen the role of local administrations and decentralise tasks from the national to the local level (Georgogiannis 2008). However, decentralisations in Greece have mostly been symbolic, focusing on 'political healing' after a 'long period of authoritarian state rule, broadening legitimacy and fostering political stability' (Hlepas 2010, p. 73).

In 1975, 264 municipalities (local administrative entities under public law that are self-governing) and 5,761 communities (local administrations outside city limits, consisting of a town or a village and its surrounding settlements) existed, a number that changed as a result of various legal reforms throughout the years. The large number of municipalities and communities made the administration of local governments difficult, complex and time-consuming. Therefore, a 1998 reform plan, commonly known as the Kapodistrias reform (law 2539/97) forcibly merged a large number of subnational administrations (Georgogiannis 2008), resulting in a drastic 80 per cent reduction in the number of subnational entities – from 5,775 (441 municipalities and 5,382 communities) to 1,033 (900 municipalities and 133 communities). Apart from reducing the number of administrative units, the Kapodistrias reform also aimed to strengthen their structure and competences (Akrivopoulou, Dimitropoulos & Koutnatzis 2012). In the end, however, the reform did not effectively address the weaknesses of

local government and, in fact, primarily strengthened the central public administration (Hlepas 2010).

The Kapodistrias reform was followed by the 2010 Kallikratis programme, (law 3852/2010) implemented at the beginning of the Greek debt crisis. This programme aimed to save resources by further limiting the number of local authorities, streamlining their management, and further increasing their autonomy. The programme once more redefined the boundaries of local administrative units, leading to a drastic reduction from 1,033 to 325 municipalities and completely abolishing the tier of communities, forcing them to merge with existing municipalities. In addition, the programme was the first to apply the notion of insularity, a constitutional principle on the sustainable development of island areas that emphasises the peculiarities of island entities. As small units with strong seasonal fluctuations that multiply the needs for (human) resources in the summer months while coping with isolation in the winter months, the Greek islands face a series of specific administrative challenges. The periodicity of the administration's workload and the high financial costs for maintaining service infrastructures for a relatively small number of users exacerbate these challenges (see Spilanis et al. 2005). These particular problems of island administrations are now regulated for the first time, as the Kallikratis programme created a close overlap between island and municipal boundaries and formulated additional responsibilities for island municipalities and island regions.

Until the 2023 local elections, the Greek local electoral system consisted of a two-round majoritarian system for the election of mayors and a mixed proportional system for the election of municipal councilors (Hlepas & Chadjipadelis 2022). In order to be elected as mayor, a candidate needs to obtain 50 per cent of votes in the first round; if this does not happen, a second electoral round is held among the top-two candidates. The number of councilors is determined by the population size of the municipality, and municipal council size ranges from 13 to 49 seats. When it comes to the distribution of council seats among the lists, the winning list automatically obtains a three-fifths (60 per cent) majority of seats, while the remaining seats are proportionally allocated to other candidates and parties. Each local electoral list includes a mayoral candidate followed by the names of councilor candidates. While national parties are barred from running at the municipal level, local lists are commonly endorsed by one of the national parties (Hlepas & Chadjipadelis 2022), but this is not always the case. The Kallikratis programme was followed by the Kleisthenis reform (2018), which introduced a fully proportional electoral system without a legal threshold for the allocation of seats (Hlepas & Chadjipadelis 2022). This system was first used in the 2023 elections, which is not included in the data for this paper.

A closer examination of the functioning of local government in Greece reveals that mayors are the central political players, who mostly dominate municipal councils in what is described as a monistic system (Hlepas & Gemitis 2011). The dominance of mayors is reinforced by the fact that they

cannot be removed from office and by their 'informal access to decision-making processes at higher levels of governance' at the national level (Hlepas and Gemitis, 2011, p. 518). At the municipal level, mayors are the focal points of informal networks of influence, in which local businessmen, media, associations, and church officials are also important players. Despite all the reforms implemented since the 1980s, clientelism and patronage continue to play a crucial role in the local political system (Mouzelis 2002; Voulgaris 2007; Vavouras & Tsiris 2011).

Methodological approach

Existing studies of size effects mostly employ a quantitative approach, which by definition focuses on observable and measurable indicators. However, qualitative studies of politics in small communities have revealed that these settings also have powerful informal dynamics, such as patron-client linkages and (hyper-) personalism. For this reason, in this paper we employ a mixed-methods design (Clark & Creswell 2008); Tzagkarakis and Kritas (2023) consisting of a large-N quantitative analysis and a qualitative comparison between two cases.[1] By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the discrepancies between formal and informal dimensions of politics can be most optimally identified and studied, offering a more complete test of size effects. More specifically, the quantitative analyses enable us to test for correlations between our independent and dependent variables, while the qualitative analysis allows us to examine the presence of causal patterns that may be at the root of these correlations (Lieberman 2005).

Having populations of between 115,000 (Rhodos) and 150 (Gavdos) and territories of between 1,633 km^2 (Lesbos) and 12 km^2 (Kastellorizo), the Greek island municipalities offer ample variation in both population and territorial size (see Figure 1), making them interesting cases for comparative investigation. Being islands, these municipalities are geographically isolated and more likely to be shielded from potential confounding factors such as neighbour effects, allowing for an optimal test of size effects. This is even more so since the approval of the Kallikratis programme, which resulted in a close overlap between island and municipal boundaries. After the implementation of this programme, only the largest Greek islands of Crete and Euboea consisted of multiple municipalities, while many of the smallest islands became part of a larger (multi-island) municipality. The Kallikratis programme created a total of 65 island municipalities, but in 2019 the larger islands of Corfu, Kefalonia, Lesbos and Samos were once again split into multiple municipalities, which means that we remove them from our sample in that year. Since the

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[1]Note that by 'mixed methods', we refer to a combination of a quantitative and a qualitative analysis, not some hybrid between these two.

Figure 1. Map of the Greek island municipalities. Cases for qualitative analysis in the square Source: Wikimedia Commons.

implementation of the Kallikratis reforms, three local elections have been held (in 2010, 2014, and 2019), offering us 191 data points based on which we can analyse size effects. In our quantitative analysis, we examine all local elections that have been held in these three election years.

Our quantitative analysis is based on election results in 65 island municipalities across three election years. As independent variables, we use two measures of size: population size (derived from the census) and territory size.[2] In line with other studies, to study the hypothesis that smaller jurisdictions have higher

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[2]It is worth noting that as a result of emigration, virtually all Greek island municipalities have a higher number of registered voters than their official population. For this reason, the number of registered voters was also considered as an independent variable. For instance, the 2020 census reports that the population of the municipality of Chios is 54,030, whereas the number of registered voters for the 2019 elections (which comprises only adults) was 59,928. This pattern occurs across all islands, irrespective of their size: the municipality of Psara has an official population of 460, whereas the number of registered voters for the 2019 elections was 599. However, a quick test reveals that population figures and the number of registered voters are highly correlated ($r = .978**$, $p < 0.01$) and for this reason we checked for potential multicollinearity. The results of variance inflation factor (VIF) scores on each of the regression models suggest that there is indeed high multicollinearity among these variables, and therefore we have decided to exclude registered voters from our model. We include the rest of the models as robustness checks in the Appendix, with both variables producing identical results (see Tables 7 and 8).

levels of participation (H1), we take voter turnout levels as our dependent variable. To study the hypothesis that smaller units have fewer electoral competitors (H2), we examine the number of competitors in each election (both political parties and independent candidates). To measure if smallness reduces the competitiveness of elections (H3), we examine two variables: 1) the organisation of a second electoral round (which needs to be held when no mayoral candidate obtains 50 per cent of votes in the first round), which we expect to be less likely in smaller municipalities, and 2) the percentual distance between the top-two candidates (Gerring et al. 2018), which we expect to be higher in smaller municipalities. We examine our hypothesis that smaller jurisdictions experience a higher incumbency re-election rate (H4) by looking at whether sitting mayors were re-elected, using a dummy variable for each election. The hypothesis that elections in smaller jurisdictions are less likely to be contested by national political parties (H5) is studied by calculating the proportion of lists that were endorsed by a national political party. Finally, as mentioned before, we do not test the effect of size on clientelism (H6) in our quantitative analysis. For all dependent variables included in the quantitative analysis, we rely on the official election results as presented on the website of the Greek government.[3]

Of course, observed differences in our dependent variables can also result from factors other than size. For this reason, we also include a number of control variables in our quantitative analysis. Since our cases are nested in election years, we include time – measured as the year in which an election was held – as a first control variable. Second, while the Kallikratis reform has resulted in a much closer overlap between island and municipal boundaries, this overlap is still not perfect. To control for geographical effects, we include a dummy variable that distinguishes between municipalities that consist of one island and municipalities that consist of multiple islands (such as Alonnisos, Astypalaia and Chalki). Third, some municipalities also function as the capital of Greek regions (the higher administrative tier), and since the presence of the regional administration may affect electoral outcomes, we also control for this by means of a dummy variable. Fourth and finally, for each municipality we include the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita as a control variable.

Our qualitative analysis is based on a comparison between two 'most similar' cases, which however differ strongly on the variable of interest (size). For this purpose, we have selected the municipalities of Chios and Psara, located just 75 kilometres apart in the eastern Aegean Sea. With a population of 54,000 and a territory of 904 km^2, Chios is among the four largest cases in our sample. On the other hand, Psara has less than 500 inhabitants who reside on a territory of just 45 km^2, placing it clearly in the bottom quartile of municipalities. The geographical proximity, shared history,

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[3]This website also indicates whether each competitor in an election was supported by a national political party, allowing us to use this as a measure for hypothesis 5.

and shared cultural characteristics of these islands make them ideal cases for comparative investigation, allowing us to pinpoint the effects of size while keeping other variables constant.

The qualitative analysis is based on two research methods. In the first place, we conducted a computer-based content analysis of electoral manifestoes. Data include a total of 20 electoral manifestoes of all competitors in all three elections years for both municipalities.[4] We have used a 'semi-automated' Computer Assisted Text Analysis (CATA), which allows for the identification of the components of 'dictionary' categories, enabling us to estimate the contribution of identifiable dimensions to the manifestoes (see Trantidis & Tsagkroni 2017; Bara, Weale & Bicquelet 2007, p. 580). We identify five categories, as presented in Table 4 (excluding secondary points), and we developed a dictionary to measure the salience of these categories. The combined dictionary contained some 43 entries and HAMLET II[5] was used to identify the number of entries associated with each category. Second, we have conducted eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former mayors and mayoral candidates in the municipalities of Chios (five interviewees) and Psara (three interviewees).[6] The questions asked during these interviews focused on the impact of the size of the island on a) the nature of electoral campaigns, b) the characteristics of local politics, c) the differences between candidates, d) the relationship between the candidates and the electorate, and e) levels of consensus or conflict in island politics.[7]

The combination of interviews and the analysis of electoral manifestoes allows us to revisit all our six hypotheses in the qualitative analysis, enabling us to check to what extent potential correlations found in the statistical analysis are supported by our qualitative evidence. Based on a triangulation of our interview and manifesto data, the qualitative analysis will sequentially discuss the evidence for each of the six hypotheses that we have formulated. In turn, we can use these data to detect any potential causal patterns that may be at the root of the correlations that we found in the quantitative analysis.

Results of the quantitative analysis

To provide a quantitative test of our first five hypotheses, we apply bivariate and multiple linear regression analyses, first, to explore the (magnitude of the) relationships between variables and, second, to understand how much of the

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[4]To be specific, in 2010, we had 2 manifestoes in Psara and 3 in Chios; in 2014, 2 in Psara and 4 in Chios; and, in 2019, 2 in Psara and 7 in Chios.

[5]HAMLET II is a software that serves to conduct a computer-assisted text analysis, with the objective to assess individual and joint word frequencies, so that their resulting similarities and co-occurrences can be assessed.

[6]Some of the interviewees have participated more than once in municipal elections, and some have also served as mayors of their respective municipality.

[7]An overview of the interviewee profiles can be found in the online Supplementary Materials in Table SM 1. Due to the small size and ensuing lack of anonymity in small islands, we cannot provide more information about our interview respondents than the island/municipality in which they are politically active.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for population and territory.

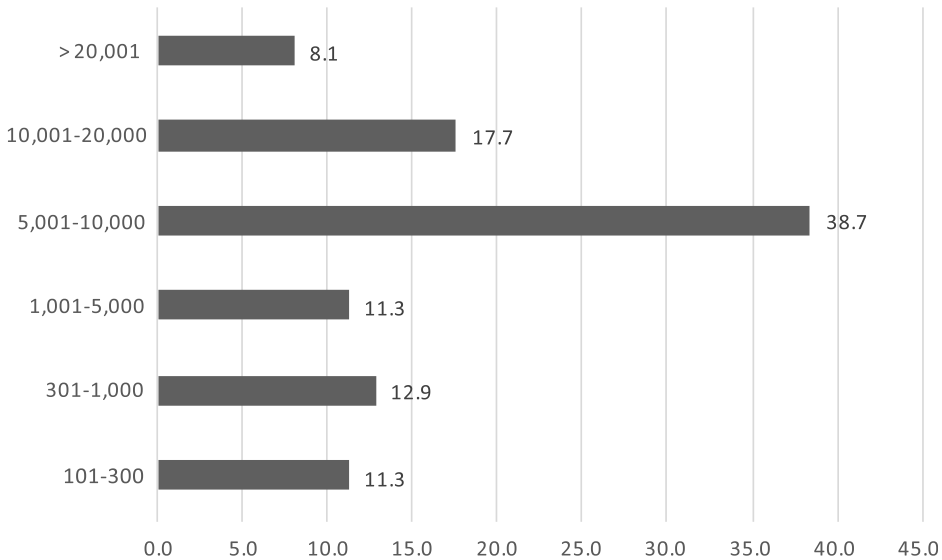|	N	Min	Max	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation
Population	65	150	115,500	12,595	3,000	22,906.188
Territory (km²)	65	12	8,425	522.28	95.00	1,581.040

N= number of cases.

Figure 2. Population. Numbers on the horizontal axis refer to % of municipalities falling within each population category.

variation of our two measures of size can explain and predict our dependent variables. However, before we discuss these results, Table 1 presents some descriptive statistics of our two measures of size. As this table and Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate, our 65 cases offer ample variation on both measures, allowing us to effectively examine size effects. Among the 65 municipalities under examination, a plurality of 38.7 per cent has a population of between 5,001–10,000 inhabitants and a plurality of 29.0 per cent have a territory of between 51–100 km². The largest population cluster (>20,000 inhabitants) is more than 65 times larger than the smallest cluster (<300 inhabitants), and both clusters have a significant number of cases. The same can be said about the distribution of cases on the territory measure, showing that we have ample variation in these respects.

Participation

To study the effects of size on participation (H1), we examine voter turnout in both the first and second electoral rounds (if there was a second round). There is
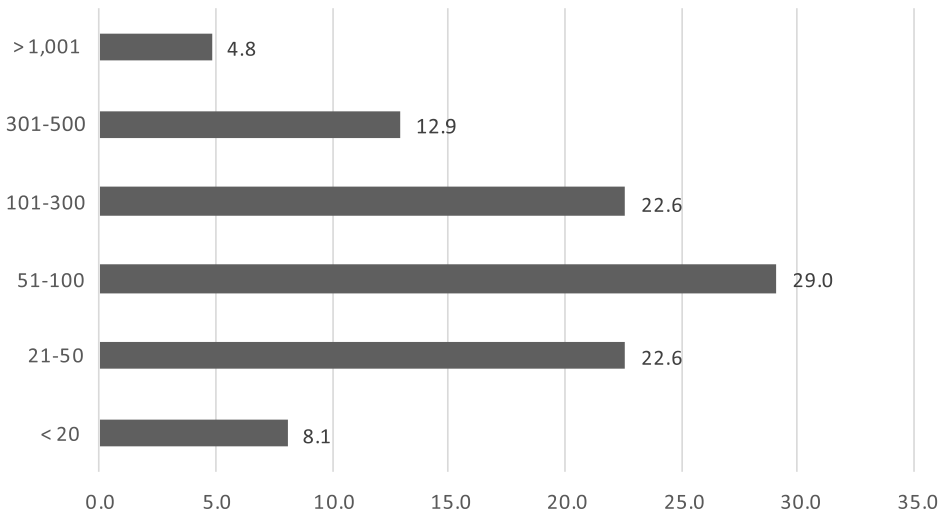
Figure 3. Territory in km^2. Numbers on the horizontal axis refer to % of municipalities falling within each territory category

Table 2. Bivariate analysis.

	Population	Territory
Turnout, first round	−0.070	−0.201*
Turnout, second round	−0.181	−0.233**
Number of candidates	0.551***	0.285***
Number of electoral rounds	0.204***	.0.108**
Percentage points distance top-two, first round	−0.192*	−0.121
Percentage points distance, second round	0.152	−0.004
Re-election of incumbents	−0.09	−0.124*
Candidates with party labels	0.272***	0.208***

*** $p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.

substantial variation in turnout levels across our cases, ranging from just 21.5 per cent to almost 82 per cent. The average turnout in the second round (48.8 per cent) was nearly 6 per cent points lower than in the first round (56.8 per cent).[8] The results of our bivariate and multivariate analyses, presented in Tables 2 and 3, show that population size, surprisingly, does not have a statistically significant relationship with voter turnout in either the first or second round. However, when it comes to territory size, there is a clear negative correlation with voter turnout: the smaller the territory of the municipality, the higher the turnout in both rounds. Since only territory size correlates with turnout in the expected direction, we can only partially confirm our H1. Given the many previous (meta-) studies that have found a clear negative correlation between population size and turnout, it is remarkable that this

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[8]We should note here that there were two cases of concurrent elections during the three municipal elections we study; the second round of 2014 and the first-round of 2019 municipal elections took place on the same day as European parliament elections. However, looking at the turnout in those two rounds, there is no statistically significant difference in terms of voter turnout with the other four rounds.

Table 3. Multiple linear regression analysis.

	Turnout, first round	Turnout, second round	Number of candidates	Number of electoral rounds	Percentage points distance top two, first round	Percentage points distance, second round	Re-election of incumbents	Candidates with party labels
Population	0.018 (0.107)	−0.064 (0.123)	0.503*** (0.090)	0.192*** (0.050)	−0.176 (0.109)	0.247 (0.130)	0.022 (0.060)	0.199*** (0.028)
Territory	−0.224* (0.094)	−0.198 (0.101)	0.008 (0.079)	0.003 (0.044)	−0.016 (0.094)	−0.100 (0.107)	−0.126* (0.060)	0.079** (0.024)
GDP	0.141 (0.072)	0.119 (0.100)	0.151* (0.061)	0.033 (0.034)	0.077 (0.072)	0.024 (0.105)	0.007 (0.035)	0.012 (0.019)
Prefecture Capital	0.143 (0.265)	−0.146 (0.309)	0.332 (0.224)	0.086 (0.124)	−0.014 (0.277)	−0.102 (0.331)	−0.341* (0.139)	0.122 (0.069)
Part of Island Complex	−0.304 (0.214)	−0.518 (0.265)	0.453* (0.181)	0.258* (0.100)	−0.373 (0.217)	0.088 (0.280)	0.145 (0.104)	0.036 (0.055)
(Intercept)	0.007 (0.084)	0.173 (0.127)	−0.072 (0.071)	0.422*** (0.039)	0.047 (0.087)	−0.064 (0.133)	0.622*** (0.042)	0.158*** (0.022)
Election Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R²	0.074	0.171	0.338	0.185	0.062	0.082	0.078	0.557
Adj. R²	0.044	0.109	0.316	0.158	0.030	0.012	0.047	0.543
Num. obs.	191	87	191	191	180	86	191	191

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

pattern is not found in our analysis. This may be compatible with studies that have found other factors, such as territory size, to have a stronger effect on turnout than population (Bolgherini, Grimaldi & Paparo 2024).

Number of competitors

We hypothesised that smaller jurisdictions have a lower number of electoral competitors (H2). Our analysis reveals that there are indeed clear correlations between the number of competitors and population as well as territory size, which run in the expected direction. We observe that there is a higher number of candidates participating in the first electoral round in more populated and larger islands (see Tables 2 and 3). For instance, the 2010 elections on the larger island of Kos (population 33,400 and 290 km^2) were contested by five candidates, whereas the number of candidates running in neighbouring Nisyros (population 1,000 and 50 km^2) in the same election year was only two. In fact, in some of the smallest municipalities, elections are only contested by a single candidate (5.12 per cent of total). For example, in 2019, that was the case for Leipsoi (population 790), Sikinos (population 273), Agios Efstratios (population 270), and Agathonisi (population 185). In sum, our findings provide ample evidence to confirm H2.

Competitiveness of elections

To study our hypothesis that smaller jurisdictions have less competitive elections (H3), we examined two dependent variables: the number of electoral rounds and the distance in percentage points between the top two candidates. In 2010, 25 island municipalities (or 39.7 per cent) had a second electoral round, whereas this was 24 (38.1 per cent) in 2014 and 30 (49.1 per cent) in 2019. Our analysis shows a clear negative correlation between the two measures of size and the number of electoral rounds: the larger the population and the larger the territory, the greater the likelihood of a second round. In other words, there is a higher number of direct first-round wins in smaller and less populated municipalities. By means of illustration: in the larger municipality of Kalymnos (population 16,600 and 110 km^2) all three elections had a second round, whereas the neighbouring island of Leipsoi (population 790 and 17 km^2) never had a second round in all three election years.

In addition to the number of electoral rounds, we also examined the distance in percentage points between the top-two candidates. We find that there is a weak but still significant correlation between this variable and population size, but only in the first round (see Tables 2 and 3). Overall, the mean percentage point difference between the top two candidates in the first round is 13.85 per cent, and 10.78 per cent in the second round. The highest percentage point distance between the top-two candidates was 77.00 per cent on the island

of Sifnos in first round 2019 (population 2,600 and 73 km^2) while the lowest was 0.08 per cent on the island of Amorgos in 2010 (population 2,000 and 121 km^2) also in the first round. A closer look at other cases shows that the elections in which the winner of the first round obtained the lowest percentage of the vote all took place among the largest population islands: Lesbos (population 84,600 and 1,633 km^2) in 2010 with 29.63 per cent, Samos (population 32,974 and 480 km^2) in 2014 and Zakynthos (population 48,800 and 406 km^2) in 2019 with 22.74 per cent. In summary, the study suggests that on larger islands, there tends to be closer competition in the first electoral round, while smaller islands sometimes show more decisive first-round victories (Table SM 3). Based on these findings, we can tentatively confirm H3.

Incumbency re-election

To examine the hypothesis that smaller jurisdictions have a higher re-election rate of incumbents (H4), we study the relationship between our two measures of size and the re-election of incumbent mayors. The overall percentage of incumbency re-election is 21.97 per cent (of which 4.18 per cent of mayors were re-elected twice and 13.61 per cent were re-elected once). The majority of these elections were won in the first round, such as the three times-elected Konstantinos Vratsanos in the municipality of Psara (population 460 and 45 km^2), who obtained 53.8 per cent of votes in 2010, 51.3 per cent in 2014 and 73.1 per cent in 2019. The population size and territory of municipalities in which re-election occurred is smaller than average. In 31 cases (almost half of the overall sample), the same candidate was (re)elected in two out of three election years; in ten of these cases, the incumbent candidate ran unopposed in one election year, and in two cases, the candidate ran unopposed twice (Veggelis Kottoros in Agathonisi, in 2010 and 2019, and Fotis Mangos in Leipsoi, in 2014 and 2019). In other cases, incumbents usually won in the first round, such as the twice-elected Nikolaos Zorzos in the municipality of Thira, who gained 68.4 per cent of the votes in 2010 and 50.6 per cent in 2014. When looking at the correlation between our two measures of size and the re-election of incumbents (see Tables 2 and 3), the analysis yields negative and significant results, but only for territory and not for population. Therefore, we find modest evidence for H4: the territorial size of municipalities affects the likelihood of incumbent candidates' re-election.

Party labels

Finally, to study the effects of size on the presence or absence of political parties (H5), we analyse the extent to which candidates run under a party label. We find a strong positive correlation between this variable and our two

measures of size (see Tables 2 and 3), meaning that the higher the population and the larger the territory of municipalities, the more likely it is that candidates run under a party banner. Only 11.5 per cent of all elections in our sample were contested by candidates with clear party labels, while in the remaining 88.5 per cent of elections, candidates did not run under a party banner. A closer look at our cases reveals that elections in larger islands like Rhodos (population 115,500 and 1,400 km^2), Chios (population 54,000 and 904 km^2), and Samos (population 33,000 and 477 km^2) are commonly contested by lists with affiliations to national Greek parties such as New Democracy (ND), Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and the Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance (Syriza), while none of the competitors in municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants ran under a party label. In sum, our analysis clearly supports the H5: elections are less likely to be contested by 'partisan' candidates in smaller islands, indicating that political competition in these islands is indeed more personalised in nature.

In combination, the findings of our quantitative analysis reveal that size strongly affects the characteristics of elections in Greek island municipalities. The typical pattern on larger islands is that elections are contested by a relatively large number of candidates with party labels, none of whom is able to win a decisive majority in the first round. By contrast, the pattern on the smallest islands is that only one or two independent candidates contest elections, one of whom (often the incumbent) already obtains a majority of votes in the first round. Intriguingly, and in contrast to earlier studies, we do not find an effect of population size on turnout. From this perspective, it is remarkable that very 'uncompetitive' first rounds of elections in small islands are still accompanied by relatively high turnout figures: on the island of Agistri (population 1,140, 13 km^2), the winning candidate, for example, obtained a huge 84.6 per cent of votes in the first round of the 2010 elections, which still saw a high turnout level of 75.5 per cent. In such cases, the close connections and personal relations between voters and politicians might explain why people still make an effort to participate. In the following section, we examine this conjecture in more detail.

Qualitative analysis: Chios and Psara

Our qualitative analysis enables us to provide some illustrations of the five hypotheses analysed in the quantitative analysis. More importantly, it allows us to examine our sixth hypothesis, which focuses on the manifestation of clientelism. We build on the quantitative indicators that we captured in the statistical analysis and enrich our argument with the analysis of electoral manifestoes and interviews with former mayors and

mayoral candidates in Chios (population 54,000) and Psara (population 460).

In contrast to the quantitative analysis, we do find a clear size-related difference in election turnout between Chios and Psara. In Chios, voter turnout for both electoral rounds has consistently been around 45 per cent, which is lower than the average of 57 per cent turnout in all elections, whereas in Psara turnout was always between 60 per cent and 70 per cent, which is higher than average. When it comes to our hypotheses on the number of competitors (H2) and the competitiveness of elections (H3), we observe that in Chios all three elections were contested by three or more candidates, and only in the 2010 election did one candidate manage to win a majority in the first round. Over time, there has been an increase in the number of electoral competitors in Chios, from three candidates in 2010 to seven in 2019. And while the second electoral round of 2014 on Chios was not particularly close (60.6 per cent vs 39.4 per cent), the second round of 2019 was among the closest in our sample (51.7 per cent vs 48.3 per cent). The situation is entirely different on Psara. All three elections here were contested by just two candidates, meaning that one candidate always obtained a majority in the first round and no second rounds were held. Moreover, all three elections were won by the same candidate, Konstantinos Vratsanos. As interviewee 1 points out, it is difficult to find any candidate to run against what is considered the monopolistic position of Vratsanos on Psara.

In larger jurisdictions, where issues tend to be more complex and diverse, candidates produce detailed manifestoes to address the wide range of concerns and to present comprehensive solutions. In order to gain greater visibility, detailed manifestoes help candidates distinguish themselves from their competitors. In smaller jurisdictions, the issues may be less complex or varied, so candidates appear to rely on simpler communication methods rather than detailed manifestoes. This distinction is also present in our two selected cases. A closer look election manifestoes shows that in Psara, the manifestoes of all competitors in the three elections focus mainly on infrastructure and the prosperity of the citizens, highlighting ferry connections and spatial planning, whereas in Chios the focus is much broader (see Table 4). The manifestoes here focus on a wide variety of issues, among which ferry connections and spatial planning, strategies to increase tourism, local agriculture, irrigation and waste disposal problems, and, more recently, the environment.

As interviewee 2 points out, on local Psara issues, there are no clear distinctions among the candidates or their manifestoes. The manifestoes are not very lengthy or specific on policy and mainly consist of open appeals to the electorate and a short biographical note of the candidate, accompanied by landscape photos of the island. In Chios, conversely, campaign manifestoes are much more substantive in terms of policies, and much lengthier. Even when candidates are

Table 4. Results of the content analysis of election manifestoes.

Dimension	Percentage	
	Chios	Psara
Reconstruction of Local Economy	8.7 per cent	3.4 per cent
Governance and Municipal Structures	7.6 per cent	2.3 per cent
Infrastructure	12.4 per cent	4.5 per cent
Culture	6.7 per cent	0.9 per cent
Quality of Life and Public Space	13.3 per cent	6.2 per cent

Note: Percentage refers to the proportion of the manifesto referring to the dimension.

not linked to parties, their electoral program looks like that of a political party, with a detailed structure, themes, and details.

In relation to our hypothesis on incumbency re-election (H4), we can see that incumbent mayors on Psara have almost always been re-elected, as was the case for Ioannis Filinis (1985–2002) and Emmanouil Agapousis (2003–2010), who, like Vratsanos, had multiple terms in office. This is not the case for Chios, where after every election a new mayor is elected; the last election in which an incumbent Chios mayor was re-elected happened in the 1940s. The quantitative analysis suggests that size affects the extent to which competitors run under a party label (H5), and this is illustrated by our two cases. In Chios, at least half of the candidates in each election is supported by a political party, even if they formally run as independent candidates. Candidates do, however, sometimes change their party affiliation. Lamprinoudis, the elected mayor of 2010, was for example supported by PASOK in that election, but ran as an independent candidate in 2014. The lack of consistency of party associations can be seen as an effort to keep a local focus on politics, away from 'party dominance, to serve party plans, or to allow parties' attempts to hijack local politicians' efforts' (interviewee 8). Furthermore, candidates and combinations on Chios constantly change through the years, with the exception of the candidate from the Greek communist party (KKE) who ran in all three elections. Only two candidates or combinations from the 2010 election also participated in subsequent elections (in 2014 and 2019). Nevertheless, it is clear that party politics play a large role on Chios.

In Psara, we observe a very different pattern, as Vratsanos is an independent politician who never ran under a party label. The absence of political parties confirms the importance of personalities on Psara. Reflecting on his lack of affiliations with political parties, in 2019 Vratsanos motivated his dedication to stay away from party politics by saying that 'as mayor of Psara for about eight years, I have been serving with zeal and dedication my place and its people. All these years, I've stayed away from party anointing and dependency, and I will continue to do so in the future' (Vratsanos 2019). This reveals a perception of parties as having independent agendas and interests, which could shift the focus away from the local interests of the municipality.

In sum, elections in Chios are competitive, contested by candidates with party labels, who have manifestoes that are substantive and less personal, and elections generally result in a defeat for incumbent candidates. Elections on Psara are uncompetitive (only two candidates per election), contested exclusively by independent local candidates, focusing on a less formal and more personal approach when it comes to campaigning, and generally result in a victory for the incumbent mayor.

Patron-client linkages

Finally, we discuss the effects of the size of Chios and Psara on local political dynamics, focusing in particular on patron-client linkages (H6). Based on the interview data and our analysis of election manifestoes, some broader frames emerge that encapsulate the key points raised by our respondents.

Transparency and accountability

The first broader issue emerging from the interview data relates to transparency and accountability. More specifically, what draws attention on Psara is that the various candidates opposing Vratsanos emphasise transparency and accountability issues (interviewees 1 and 7) and highlight that the municipality should serve its citizens and not the incumbent mayor. Transparency is also addressed in the manifestoes of candidates running against Vratsanos. Just after the elections in 2014, Andreas Karagiorgis (the future candidate in the 2019 elections), who at the time was a special associate of Vratsanos, accused the mayor of vindictively firing him because other members of the Karagiorgis family did not vote for Vratsanos. As Karagiorgis stated:

> The truth is that my uncle was a candidate for the rival list, and some of my relatives voted for him. He [Vratsanos] expected that because I was his special associate, everyone in my family would vote for him. He was elected with a difference of eleven votes, and four of the six who turned the situation around and gave him the victory belonged to my family, but that does not count. (Politis 2014)

Vratsanos responded that Karagiorgis had been fired for a lack of productivity, but Markos Vratsanos (the opposing candidate in the 2014 elections; no family relationship) claimed that such firings had occurred in the past and reveal the values and administrative style of Vratsanos. This specific incident of perceived retaliatory actions by incumbents, such as firing individuals linked to rival candidates, highlights how personal relationships and family ties influence local politics on Psara. Based on both our interviews and analysis of election manifestoes, we do not find evidence for this in Chios. On this island, the need for transparency and accountability is only marginally stressed in the manifestoes, and these issues did not come up at all in the interviews, suggesting that

smallness does increase the likelihood of transparency and accountability issues, which in turn could provide a foundation for patron-client linkages.

Personal connection, family ties, and clientelism

Our interview material also shows that personal connections and family relations dominate the politics of very small island municipalities; as 'the smaller the place, the more family-friendly things are' (interviewee 5). The impact on personal relations and family ties on election dynamics comes out strongly from the interviews. However, these issues play a different role in Chios and Psara, and it appears that this can be explained by the different size of these municipalities. In Psara, personal connections and family relationships dominate politics, while voters often support candidates based on family ties rather than policies. As interviewees 1 and 7 highlight, tactics such as handing out pre-filled ballots or 'crossed ballots', where the candidate offers already filled ballots to voters, are common. This practice enables candidates to estimate the number of votes they can expect to receive and is a strong indicator of clientelism.

On the other hand, in Chios, personal connections and family ties primarily reflect the lack of anonymity among citizens. According to our interviewees (4, 5, and 6), even in larger island municipalities like Chios, there remains a high level of familiarity among the residents. As one interviewee remarked, 'people do not vote according to your program; that is why there is a lack of programmatic positions. People vote for the person, based on what they know about them, their decency, their emotional appeal, and their clientelist capabilities' (interviewee 3). This familiarity creates a scenario where everyone knows each other and interacts on a daily basis, which can deter people from attending events organised by candidates to avoid being seen as partisan. Notably, this point was mentioned only by interviewees from Chios, as electoral campaign events are rather rare on Psara due to the island's small population size (interviewees 1 and 7).

Personalities and personal relationships on both islands also appear to have an additional impact, drawing attention away from policies and plans. On the islands, 'policies have a name and a surname, focusing on specific interests of specific people' (interviewee 4). As such statements demonstrate, politics in small municipalities often centres on personal needs and interests rather than policies and plans, meaning that clientelism is a common phenomenon. Much political discourse occurs in informal settings like cafés and bars, while long-term strategic planning is lacking due to the clientelist nature of politics. Both for Chios and Psara, interviewees highlighted that most of the politics is done in cafés and other public spaces where people sit and discuss community issues. Particularly significant for our analysis are the explicit statements from interviewees who note the lack of long-term strategic planning due to the strong clientelistic character of local politics. They claim that this results in a failure to create transparent processes via bureaucratic proceedings (interviewees 6, 7

and 8). In sum, we find a deeply entrenched local tradition of clientelism and patronage which undermines transparency and accountability, especially on Psara (as discussed above) and to a lesser extent on Chios.

Clientelism and off-island voters

The interviews reveal a third focal point: the influence of off-island voters, which creates opportunities for political candidates. In Greek local elections, off-island residents have voting rights, but they need to come to the municipality to vote. In Psara in particular, a significant proportion of the electorate resides off-island (approximately 25 per cent), allowing local politicians to finance costly travel in exchange for votes. This practice is perceived as a 'legal' form of campaigning (interviewees 1 and 7), but it is less prevalent in Chios (interviewee 5), where the proportion of off-island voters is lower (approximately 16 per cent). Consequently, the election results in Psara may hinge on a candidate's ability to attract off-island voters, thereby favouring incumbents who have access to island resources. The interview data indicate that candidates frequently engage in this clientelistic or 'vote-buying' tactic to secure votes, while this practice is less common in Chios, where the larger electorate makes such strategies prohibitively expensive. In Psara there are only 150 off-island voters, while the corresponding figure for Chios is over 10,000.

In sum, interviewees confirm that patron-client linkages play a significant role on both islands. Yet while clientelism and patronage are strongly present on both Chios and Psara, the observed differences in terms of transparency, accountability, and the influence of off-island voters suggest that we can still support our hypothesis (H6) that clientelism is more prevalent in smaller island municipalities, as patron-client linkages do have a bigger impact on Psara than on Chios. The analysis furthermore reveals that this is linked to the smaller size of Psara, which strengthens the impact of family ties, the prevalence of personal over public interests, and the likelihood that politicians will make use of strategies like crossed ballots and buying votes of off-island residents.

Conclusion

Even though small subnational communities across Europe become more and more powerful, our understanding of the political effects of polity size remains deficient. Existing research is mostly quantitative in nature and focuses mostly on only one political outcome – participation – while other effects remain underexplored. On the basis of a mixed-methods analysis of three elections in 65 Greek island municipalities, this article makes an important move beyond existing scholarship. Our analysis looks at the effects of two measures of size (population and territory) on six different political outcomes (participation, the presence of competitors,

electoral competitiveness, incumbency entrenchment, the presence of political parties, and patron-client linkages). Moreover, our mixed-methods approach allows us to test correlations between variables, but also to look at how politics functions in practice. Finally, we examine a group of cases – the Greek island municipalities – which so far have remained underexplored in comparative politics, despite their obvious suitability for comparative investigations.

Our results indicate that the size of municipalities and islands affects all of the outcomes we study, but some much more clearly than others. We find that in smaller island municipalities, the number of electoral competitors is lower, candidates are less likely to run under a party banner, and the incidence of patron-client linkages is higher. In addition, turnout in territorially smaller municipalities is higher (but only in the first round), elections in small municipalities tend to be less competitive (especially measured in terms of the number of electoral rounds, and, to a lower degree, the closeness of election results), and in territorially smaller municipalities incumbents are more likely to be re-elected.

These findings were illustrated by a qualitative comparison between the islands of Chios and Psara, which pointed to a number of interesting differences between these islands that can explain why patron-client linkages are more pervasive on smaller Psara than on larger Chios. The only hypothesis we were unable to confirm concerns voter turnout (H1), as our analysis revealed an effect tied to territory rather than population. This finding is unexpected, particularly in light of numerous prior studies that have documented a strong correlation between population size and voter turnout. A possible explanation may lie in the reduced electoral competition often observed on smaller islands; where competition is limited, voters may perceive fewer meaningful choices, potentially leading to lower turnout. The persistence of clientelist practices across both small and large island municipalities highlights the deeply rooted nature of these dynamics in Greek local politics, and the resilience of personalism and clientelism as defining features of local politics. Despite reform efforts such as the 2010 Kallikratis programme, these dynamics remain deeply ingrained, indicating the need for other approaches to address these systemic challenges. While municipal amalgamations and decentralisation processes may offer potential avenues for change, they are unlikely to fully counteract the enduring influence of personalism and clientelism in shaping the political landscape of the Greek islands.

Our findings have important implications for debates about size effects, but also for debates about the democratic consequences of ongoing decentralisation reforms. While advocates of decentralisation argue that closer connections between politicians and citizens strengthen democracy (Oxhorn, Tulchin & Selee 2004), our analysis shows that the reality is more ambiguous. Smaller governance units may indeed have higher levels of participation, but we found a smaller effect than previous studies. On the other hand, our analysis shows that a smaller size clearly has a dampening impact on democratic competition

and results in a greater focus on personal relations than on substantive political issues, with a weaker role for political parties. These results pose a strong challenge to the supposed democracy-stimulating effects of decentralisation. Moreover, our qualitative analysis reveals that processes of decentralisation and municipal amalgamations are unlikely to counter the fundamental nature of politics in the Greek islands.

In sum, this study's findings hold significant implications for Greek politics, shedding light on the persistence of patron-client linkages, especially in smaller municipalities. The research critically challenges assumptions about decentralisation and democratic reform, particularly in how these ideals intersect with deeply rooted local political practices in Greece. More specifically, the study: 1) reinforces the view that patron-client linkages are not merely remnants of Greece's political past but are structurally embedded, especially in smaller, isolated municipalities like the Greek islands, suggesting that political reform alone may struggle to dislodge entrenched informal networks that shape electoral behaviour and public decision-making, 2) challenges the notion that decentralisation inherently strengthens democracy by increasing citizen participation and making governance more accountable, 3) reflects a deeper fragmentation within Greek political organisation, with political parties being sidelined in these local contexts, 4) highlights the limitations of structural reforms that do not address the informal power dynamics underpinning Greek local politics, 5) exemplifies the challenges peripheral regions face in achieving democratic consolidation, and 6) suggests that effective policy-making in Greek local governance must recognise the limitations of decentralisation in isolation.

While our article sheds more light on the consequences of size for a range of political outcomes, we are also keenly aware of the limitations of our analysis, which focuses on a particular subset of (island) municipalities in one particular European country. Our sample is large enough and contains sufficient variation for us to be confident about our findings, but at the same time we would like to stress that more comparative, cross-country analyses are necessary to be able to ascertain the generalisability of our results. Fortunately, there are over 100,000 subnational units in Europe alone, which contain enormous variation in size and political institutions. Given the enduring 'methodological nationalism' which characterises the discipline, scholars of comparative politics have only just started to explore the tremendous possibilities that this realm of cases presents. We hope that our paper contributes to this research agenda and provides a starting point for more extensive analyses of the varied political effects of size.

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Notes on contributors

Vasiliki Tsagkroni is Senior Assistant Professor of Comparative Politics at the Institute of Political Science at Leiden University. Their research includes far-right parties, populism and narratives in times of crisis.

Wouter Veenendaal is professor by special appointment in Kingdom Affairs and associate professor of comparative politics at Leiden University. His research focuses on the democratic effects of population size, with a particular focus on small states and territories.

ORCID

Vasiliki Tsagkroni http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1421-2229
Wouter Veenendaal http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5572-4669

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