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How to Make Small Beautiful: The Promise of Democratic Innovations

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ABSTRACT

Small states are on average more likely to be democracies and it is often assumed that democracy functions better in small polities. ‘Small is beautiful’, proponents say. Yet, empirical scholarship shows that, while smallness comes with socio-political proximity, which facilitates participation and policy implementation, it also incentivizes personalism, clientelism and power concentration. Largeness, instead, comes with greater socio-political distance, but strengthens institutional checks and entails scale advantages. In this article, we depart from this trade-off and, wondering ‘how to make small beautiful’, we examine a potential remedy: democratic innovations. To do so, we first show that representative institutions were adopted in small polities by replication rather than by choice, and that they can aggravate the democratic problems associated with smallness. Subsequently, we draw on four usages of direct and deliberative democratic practices in small polities to explore which promises they offer to correct some of these pitfalls.

KEYWORDS

size; democracy; democratic innovation; small states; sub-state politics

1. Introduction

Small states are on average more likely to be democracies (Anckar, 2002; Hadenius, 1992, pp. 124–127; Ott, 2000) and it is often assumed that democratic government functions better in small polities (Diamond & Tsalik, 1999). The idea is commonly summarised under the metaphor ‘small is beautiful’ (Schumacher, 1973), and it goes back to one of the oldest debates in political science. Ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato (360 BC/2000, pp. 122–184) and Aristotle (350 BC/1959, p. 557), as well as Enlightenment thinkers like Montesquieu (1748/1803, p. 267) and Rousseau (1796, pp. 100–105) already argued that a small population size fosters consensual, liberal and effective governance. Against this view, Hamilton et al. (1787/2008, p. 54) objected in the Federalist Papers that a small polity should be avoided for its risk of power concentration.

Empirical scholarship on contemporary democracies shows that both the former and the latter positions are to some extent right. While many small states are formally democracies, in practice their politics are often quite illiberal in nature (Baldacchino, 2012; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018; Erk & Veenendaal, 2014). The effect of population size on democracy may best be understood as a trade-off: smallness comes with the advantage

of social and political proximity, which facilitates participation, representativeness and policy implementation, but it also incentivizes personalism, clientelism and power concentration. Largeness, instead, comes at the cost of greater social and political distance, but tends to strengthen institutional checks and entails administrative scale advantages. Thus, while politics in small polities is more participatory, personal and informal in nature, large polities experience a more competitive, impersonal and institutionalised form of democracy (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020).

Although theoretically comprehensive, these findings do have one important limitation: it is not clear if the observed democratic shortcomings of small polities are caused by smallness itself, or if they are produced by the representative political system that virtually all small polities have copied from larger polities, which may in fact not be very suitable for their small size. Departing from the variety of democratic shortcomings that representative institutions cause especially in small polities – from power concentration to personalism, to incentives for clientelism –, in this article we examine a potential remedy for these problems: direct and deliberative forms of citizen participation. To put it metaphorically, our question is thus not whether small is beautiful, but *how to make small more beautiful* by introducing democratic innovations.

Originally, democratic governance emerged in very small polities through citizen assemblies that were direct and deliberative rather than representative in nature. Only much later, in the wake of the French, American and English revolutions, did the first large modern democracies adopt representative electoral institutions (Manin, 2012). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these institutions were replicated by (or imposed on) other states regardless of their population size, as well as by sub-state entities – a process known as institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, the question if electoral representative institutions are suitable for small polities has never been asked (Manin, 2012, p. 112). As we will show below, the problems of power concentration, personalism and clientelism that we observe in small polities are aggravated by the representative and electoral nature of democracy, which gives a lot of power to a few people. We argue that direct and deliberative democratic innovations can potentially reduce this tendency.

Democratic innovations are forms of democratic decision-making that aim at increasing citizen participation beyond elections (Smith, 2009). Although they are diverse in nature, scholars generally distinguish ‘direct’ innovations aimed at increasing the *inclusiveness* of the democratic process (like referendums), from ‘deliberative’ innovations that aim at increasing the *reason-giving* of the democratic process (like citizen assemblies) (Cohen, 2009). It could be argued that politics in small polities is already very proximate, inclusive and informal, as a result of which these polities do not need such institutions. This view omits, however, the democratic pitfalls that representative government produces by giving a lot of power to few people. It is by diffusing power, rather than by increasing participation or proximity, that we expect democratic innovations to make the biggest contribution to small polities.

From this, it follows that our argument is *not* that democratic innovations only work in small political spaces, or that they work better in small than in large polities. Instead, our central theoretical argument is that these innovations may have different things to offer to small and to large polities: diffusion of power to the former, and increasing

participation and proximity to the latter. Our central empirical argument, in turn, is that by giving greater weight to programmatic than to personalistic issues, by rendering citizen participation more frequent, diverse and rotative, and by diffusing power from the hands of few to the hands of many, direct and deliberative democratic innovations have the potential to correct some of the pitfalls of power concentration, hyper-personalism and clientelism that electoral representative institutions produce in small polities. For that, however, the democratic innovations in small polities must be organised in a way that allows for addressing the pitfalls of personalism, clientelism, and power concentration. Otherwise, their contribution may be limited. Note that we envision democratic innovations here as complements rather than as substitutes of representative institutions.

These arguments have many implications. Not only has the average size of states been decreasing since the early twentieth century, but worldwide processes of decentralisation have created ever smaller and more powerful sub-state entities in large states (Hooghe & Marks, 2016; Lake & O'Mahony, 2004). Yet, despite their proliferation, small polities remain structurally understudied in comparative research (Veenendaal & Corbett, 2015). If our argument is correct, it would call on policymakers in both small and large states alike to think about the effects of scale when considering appropriate institutional designs for small states and sub-state units. We note that, while democratic innovations have been proliferating in the last two decades, they mostly do not take scale effects into consideration (OECD, 2020; V-Dem, 2022).

Because only very few small polities have institutionalised democratic innovations so far, we cannot offer a robust empirical examination of how democratic innovations work in small polities. Instead, we offer an exploratory comparison of four small polities in which democratic innovations have been implemented – Liechtenstein, San Marino, East-Belgium, and small Swiss cantons – to examine if these institutions are able to mitigate the democratic pitfalls that we observe in other small jurisdictions. The aim of this exploratory analysis is to formulate an original argument on the value of democratic innovations for small polities, and to provide preliminary evidence in favour of it, based on few but typical cases. Our argument speaks to the literatures on democratic reform and innovation, to debates about the effects of population size on politics, and to discussions about decentralisation and multi-level governance.

2. Representative Government in Small Polities

In this article, we are interested in the functioning of politics in what we call 'small polities'. By 'polity', we refer to political entities that can be sovereign states or sub-state entities (regional or local). When talking about 'smallness', we refer to a polity which is inhabited by a small number of citizens. How small is small, one may ask? Whereas various population thresholds have been proposed to separate small from large polities, any threshold is in the end arbitrary and historically contingent (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020). It therefore makes more sense to think of polity size as a continuum, rather than as a dichotomy. Nevertheless, even if size is viewed as a continuum, some polities are unquestionably small in relation to others. The four cases we discuss in this paper all have populations below 100,000, clearly making them small by all possible standards.

We study the democratic functioning of these small polities. Democracy can take different forms: 'representative', which we understand here as the government of

elected representatives, usually taking decisions by majority rule; ‘direct’, which we understand here as the decision-making through direct ballot by all citizens, usually by majority rule; or ‘deliberative’, which we understand here as the decision-making of either all citizens in a very small polity, or of their (sortitioned) representatives, aiming for decisions by as large as possible consensus after deliberation (Held, 2006). Although they rely on different types of representation, debate and decision-making, the three forms are *a priori* combinable (Hendriks & Wagenaar, 2023). Furthermore, when combined, some forms can be mandatory (e.g. parliamentary approval), while others may be advisory (e.g. referendums or citizen assemblies).

2.1. Origins

Whereas virtually all present democracies take a representative form – up to the point that representative institutions like elections and political parties are now even seen as requirements of democracy –, this has not always been the case. In its first uses in ancient Greek and Indian city-states, democracy emerged in a direct and deliberative form – with the most important political decisions being taken directly and after deliberation by popular assemblies open to all men with political rights. Furthermore, in fourth century BC Athens, most public offices were allocated by sortition to foster impartiality, and submitted to rotation to prevent power concentration (Hansen, 1991).

Although different forms of electoral institutions were used in the Roman Republic and in various medieval city states (sometimes in combination with sortition), it is only after the French, American and English revolutions that electoral representative government was adopted as the main feature of the first large modern democracies (limited to wealthy men at first). Beyond ideological reasons – grounded in elitism and consent theory –, the adoption of representative institutions followed the expansion of states’ population sizes that had become so large that direct governance was only possible on an occasional basis (in the form of citizen initiatives or referendums), while deliberative democratic practices and sortition were abandoned altogether (Manin, 2012).

While the average size of states increased in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it sharply decreased again after the First World War (Lake & O’Mahony, 2004) – primarily as a result of decolonisation and the fragmentation of large states (e.g. the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia). These processes have resulted in a proliferation of (very) small states, some with less than 100,000 citizens. Intriguingly however, this time, changes in state size were not accompanied by a corresponding change in democratic institutions: even the smallest sovereign states in the Caribbean and the Pacific employ a representative system analogous to that of large states (Anckar, 2002). In similar fashion, global decentralisation trends have resulted in increasingly powerful small sub-state entities (Hooghe & Marks, 2016), but with few exceptions, these entities also employ representative systems.

Contrary to large polities, the adoption of representative institutions in small polities was therefore not the result of deliberate choice but rather of a process of institutional isomorphism – that is the replication of institutions from one organisational environment to another (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Isomorphism took place in numerous contexts, but especially in small colonial or post-colonial states (Farrugia, 1993, pp. 202–203; Sutton, 2007). In many small states in the Caribbean and Pacific, for example,

constitutions and other political institutions were developed by the one or few citizens who had received legal training in the former colonial state. These individuals usually copied the system they were familiar with because it was already used in colonial times and/or in the metropolitan state, and did not have the time or expertise to seriously consider alternatives.

Similar mechanisms can also be seen at the sub-state level. In France, the first major territorial reform after the revolution in 1790, which modified the provinces and created the departments, established a nested territorial system in which the institutions of lower-level entities mirrored those of larger-level entities. This created not only uniformity, but also allowed for representatives of one level to be sent to another (Godechot, 1968, chapter two). In the United Kingdom, the local government reform of 1835 was an explicit follow-up on the 1832 parliamentary reform – replicating the logic of extended voting rights on the national level to the counties and, doing so, keeping in mind the electoral consequences for the main parties (Finlayson, 1966; Salmon, 2002, chapter seven).

We could provide more historical developments and examples, but our point should have become clear: representative institutions were introduced in many small polities after the modern revolutions by replication rather than by deliberate choice or a serious consideration of alternatives (Larmour, 2005; Sutton, 2007). A couple of small polities whose democratic systems are among the oldest in the world – such as the Isle of Man, Iceland, or the Channel Islands – deserve mentioning as an exception insofar as they have adopted representative systems themselves long time ago. However, given that their institutions are still representative in nature, they are subject to the same political dynamics as other small polities. These dynamics can seriously undermine the functioning of democracy, and are aggravated by representative institutions in a variety of ways. This leads us to question the suitability of representative institutions for small societies.

2.2. Pitfalls of Democracy in Small Settings

At first sight, representative democracy works well on a small scale. At the state level, various scholars have pointed to a statistical correlation between state size and democracy, as small states tend to disproportionately have democratic systems of government (Anckar, 2002; Diamond & Tsalik, 1999). Democracy survives even in very poor and culturally fragmented small states such as the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu in the South Pacific. Similarly, perhaps less surprisingly given the supervisory role of national or metropolitan states, virtually all small non-sovereign territories and sub-state entities that are part of larger democratic states have democratic institutions. However, case studies and comparative analyses of politics in small polities tell a rather different story – with smallness increasing the risks of hyper-personalism, patron-client linkages and power concentration.

2.2.1. Hyper-personalism

In small societies, everybody knows everybody (Corbett, 2015). This social intimacy not only creates a very particular social system in which family and kinship relations are of crucial significance (Baldacchino, 2012), but also has important political repercussions.

Voting behaviour in small communities is mainly driven by personal connections, meaning that political platforms, ideologies or policies play a subordinate role. In those small units that do have political parties, often hardly any substantive or ideological differences between parties can be discerned, and party labels or party manifestoes play a very superficial role (Richards, 1982).

Personal connections between citizens and politicians not only drive voting behaviour, but also their post-electoral interactions. In small polities citizens and politicians likely also know each other in other social roles – e.g. as family members, neighbours, or former schoolmates (Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018). These overlapping roles mean that small communities often lack a clear separation between the private and the public spheres, as a result of which political relations become personal, and personal relations become political. This creates an obvious tendency towards conflicts of interest and favoritism, running counter to the notion that politicians should represent and act on the interest of all their constituents.

In the absence of ideology, political cooperation and decision-making in small communities also strongly depend on personal relationships. The upside of this is that, in theory, all political competitors could work together. The downside is that personal and family rivalries often thwart effective cooperation, and may create a vicious type of polarisation. Small societies that operate two-party systems, such as Malta or small island states in the Caribbean, are beset by deep-seated political tribalism that polarises their entire societies and prevents effective decision-making (Baldacchino, 2012). Similar patterns can be seen in small municipalities, in which personal connections between politicians strongly determine the success or failure of political cooperation (Oliver et al., 2012).

2.2.2. Patron-client Linkages

The closeness between citizens and politicians could be presumed to increase the quality of representation, allowing citizens to directly voice political demands, concerns and preferences to politicians. However, case studies of politics in small polities time and again reveal that citizens primarily use this enhanced access to ask for personal benefits and services (Veenendaal & Corbett, 2020). Given that citizens and politicians in small societies are likely to know each other in various social roles, politicians often face formidable pressures to comply with the demands of voters. In addition, in small communities the power of individual votes is higher than in larger polities, as it is more likely that one or a few votes make the difference between winning or losing an election. Politicians who do not satisfy the demands of individual voters may therefore directly risk electoral defeat. In combination, these pressures provide a clear incentive for the development of patron-client linkages. Various studies of sub-state politics around the world have confirmed that clientelist exchanges are more common in small than in large units (Rueda, 2017; Weitz-Shapiro, 2012).

Given the close connections and economic dependence of citizens on individual politicians, elections often translate into a fierce struggle for control over resources, which are usually scarce in small communities. The close personal connections and lack of anonymity in small societies means that electoral outcomes may directly affect the personal situations of voters, strongly raising the stakes of an election. In the absence of a vibrant private sector, in many small societies the government is the primary employer,

and secure public sector jobs are the key benefit that may be awarded to voters in return for their support. Government patronage in small states and sub-state entities not only leads to an oversized civil service that functions as a drain on public resources, but also undermines its independence, neutrality, and quality (Jugl, 2020).

2.2.3. Power Concentration

A third and final characteristic of politics in small societies is the tendency towards power concentration in the hands of one or a few politicians. Empirical evidence shows that politicians of small societies have comparatively longer terms in office, and are less likely to face electoral defeat than their counterparts in larger jurisdictions (Sutton, 2007). This is a function of the decreased levels of political competition in small communities, in which fewer dissenting voices may be found and a strong political opposition is less likely to emerge (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). In many small states and small municipalities, the same politician(s) are able to win elections over and over again, and to stay in power for decades on end, gradually cementing their political dominance. Patron-client linkages obviously play an important role here, as the allocation of public resources enables incumbents to outflank their rivals.

Power concentration in small polities is also linked to the fact that politics and economics are more closely intertwined, producing a tendency towards convergence of the elite structures in the economic, political and social fields (Richards, 1982, p. 157). The overlap between these fields creates a very powerful executive, which has the capacity to directly interfere in people's private lives (Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018). The omnipresence of politics, the lack of anonymity, and the pervasiveness of clientelism may result in the absence of a critical mass and a strong public opinion. Finally, smallness also undermines the independence and performance of institutions that are supposed to function as a check on politics. In small jurisdictions, institutions like parliament, the media, the public administration, and the judiciary often struggle to perform their democratic role, either due to their political bias or because of a lack of resources.

2.2.4. Why Electoral Representative Institutions Aggravate the Problems of Smallness

As discussed above, representative institutions necessarily have oligarchic tendencies: they ensure that a small group of representatives (the elite) becomes responsible for the execution of policies that affect a much larger group (the mass). This 'democratic elitism' is what Joseph Schumpeter (1942) referred to in his theory of competitive leadership. *Per se*, it holds for any polity, regardless of its size. However, in small societies, in which power concentration is a permanent risk, the elitist tendencies of representative democracy pose a stronger threat to democracy, primarily because smallness increases the costs of dissent, undermines the formation of a powerful political opposition, and weakens the performance of independent institutions (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). Under such circumstances, implementing political institutions that create a division between rulers and ruled may not be a very good idea: they likely reinforce the already existing oligarchic tendencies of small polities.

In short, while small societies are often portrayed as more egalitarian, in practice, representative democracy commonly creates a very powerful elite that almost completely controls all resources (Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018). The more political power there

is to be wielded, the more relevant this mechanism becomes – be it for small states or small sub-state entities with significant political power.

3. The Promise of Direct and Deliberative Democratic Innovations for Small Polities

Direct and deliberative forms of government are as old as democracy itself, and, as we showed above, even originated in small polities. Their contemporary rediscovery, however, comes in the form of so-called ‘democratic innovations’, which are forms of decision-making that aim at increasing citizen participation beyond elections (Smith, 2009) – be it through referendums, deliberative citizen assemblies or other open forms of participation. The word ‘innovation’ reflects their ambition to go beyond the use of electoral institutions, that have become so universal across democracies by now that they are already considered ‘traditional’.

The last decades saw an increasing use of democratic innovations in many countries (OECD, 2020; V-Dem, 2022) – on the one hand to restore citizens’ declining trust in political elites, and on the other hand to submit increasingly complex problems of governance to broader public feedback and/or approval (Phillips, 1995). In the wake of their proliferation, a growing body of literature has studied their normative foundations (Lupia & Matsusaka, 2004; Parkinson, 2006), their practical design (Grönlund et al., 2014; Qvortrup, 2018) and, increasingly, their consequences for governance (Hug, 2004; Jacquet & Van der Does, 2021). Strikingly, however, the relationship between the size of polities and the suitability of democratic innovations remains mostly absent from these debates.¹

3.1. Nature, Base and Scope of the Argument

Departing from the observed pitfalls that representative government causes in small polities, we inquire if and how democratic innovations could alleviate these pitfalls. To do so, we examine for each pitfall on the basis of which mechanism(s) democratic innovations could create more positive outcomes. In the absence of a large sample of cases on which we could draw to test our expectations quantitatively, we will illustrate each mechanism with qualitative evidence from four small polities that already complement their electoral representative institutions with institutionalised forms of direct and deliberative citizen participation: Liechtenstein, small Swiss cantons, San Marino, and East-Belgium.

Two of these polities are small sovereign states (Liechtenstein and San Marino), while the other two are sub-state entities with significant political autonomy (Swiss cantons and East-Belgium). We believe that the formal difference in sovereignty between these states and sub-state entities poses no problem for their comparability: while nominally sovereign, Liechtenstein and San Marino have far-reaching agreements with neighbouring countries (Switzerland and Italy), which externalises part of their sovereignty (e.g. in matters like currency, diplomatic representation, and even higher educations and hospitals). East-Belgium and Swiss cantons, in turn, are among the most autonomous regions in Europe, and have a wide range of policy competences (Hooghe & Marks, 2016, p. 129). In sum, if one looks beyond the difference in formal sovereignty, it can be seen that these

four cases have a similarly high level of autonomy and policy discretion, while all still functioning within the contours of a broader multi-level framework.

When looking at the institutionalised democratic innovations in these cases, it can be seen that Switzerland and Liechtenstein are the two countries with the highest number of direct democratic votes worldwide since 1900 (Brüggemann et al., 2023, p. 11). From citizen initiatives, over optional, up to mandatory referendums, various types of votes are held several times a year (Marxer, 2007; Vatter, 2002). In Switzerland, this is true both on the national level and in the 26 cantons, eight of which have less than 100,000 inhabitants: Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Appenzell Innerrhoden, Glarus, Jura, Nidwalden, Obwalden, Schaffhausen and Uri.

San Marino, in turn, features one of the oldest forms of deliberative citizen participation still in use today: the so-called *Instance d'Arengo* (Instances of Arengo). On the 1st of April and the 1st of October every year, two new heads of state, the co-called Captains Regent are installed. On the first Sunday after their installation, all eligible citizens can present requests of public interest to them. These Instances of Arengo are frequently used: at each opportunity, at least several dozen requests are presented. If the Captains Regents deem a request admissible, it needs to be discussed and voted on by parliament within the term of the Captains Regent who received the request. Instances can be relatively minor (e.g. add a specific road sign somewhere), but they can also be politically highly significant (e.g. decriminalise abortion or increase the mandatory hours of education in elementary and high schools) (Bacciocchi, 1999).

One of the most far-reaching contemporary uses of deliberative citizen participation has been institutionalised in 2019 in East-Belgium, the smallest federal entity in Belgium. In the so-called *Permanenter Bürgerdialog* (Permanent Citizens' Dialogue), a 'citizens' council' selects topics that are debated within ad-hoc 'citizen assemblies', which meet over multiple weekends to deliberate and formulate recommendations to the East-Belgian parliament. While the members of the citizens' assemblies are selected randomly (respecting several socio-demographic strata) among all residents aged 16 or more, the members of the citizens' council are selected from among former members of citizens' assemblies. The recommendations of citizens assemblies are discussed by the parliamentary committee in charge of the topic – in the presence of the competent minister. If parliamentarians decide not to implement a recommendation, they are required to provide a motivated justification (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022).

These are all typical cases for the question we raise, insofar as they are small polities with less than 100,000 inhabitants, and with significant direct (for small Swiss cantons and Liechtenstein) or deliberative (for East-Belgium and San Marino) forms of citizen participation. This significance comes with the institutionalised nature of these innovations, which have been made permanent features of these polities' political systems (contrary to single *ad hoc* innovations whose political effects would be more difficult to assess).

Yet despite their suitability for examining the question at hand, these exclusively European cases are of course by no means representative of the entire universe of small polities. We thus refrain from drawing any firm empirical conclusions from the comparison between them. In the absence of preexisting work on the topic, and because a systematic large-n analysis falls short of a sufficient number of small polities with institutionalised democratic innovations, our examination is instead decidedly exploratory in nature and

primarily geared towards theory-building. The objective is to offer an original argument on the promises of direct and deliberative democratic innovations for small polities, to ground this argument theoretically, and to illustrate the grounding with preliminary evidence from real-world cases. Further analyses will be needed to test the argument more systematically and to examine how it travels to other cases and regions of the world.

3.2. Theoretical Grounds and Illustration of the Argument

The argument that direct and deliberative democratic innovations may alleviate the pitfalls that electoral representative institutions generate in small polities relies on three theoretical grounds: (i) the greater focus on programmatic rather than personal politics of these innovations, which we expect to reduce hyper-personalism and patron-client linkages; (ii) the more frequent direct consultation of citizens in referendums as well as the random/open selection and rotation of participants to processes of citizen deliberation, which we expect to weaken patron-client linkages and reduce power concentration; and (iii) the innovations' overall diffusion of power in the hands of the many rather than the few, which we also expect to reduce power concentration. We will discuss each in turn.

3.2.1. Hyper-personalism

As we have highlighted, small polities have a tendency towards hyper-personalism, with voting behaviour that is personalistic rather than programmatic in nature, and personal relationships between politicians driving political decision-making. We expect direct and deliberative democratic innovations to be capable of counterbalancing this tendency thanks to their inherently programmatic focus.

In direct democratic innovations, citizens are invited to directly express their opinion on policy questions rather than on people – which intrinsically renders politics more programmatic. Although referendums are occasionally misused by voters to sanction the government rather than to vote on the question itself (Trueblood, 2024), this tendency is lower in countries with frequent usage of referendums (Heidbreder et al., 2019). And even if people's voting behaviour would be driven by other motivations, the referendum remains tied to a programmatic question. In small Swiss cantons, for example, referendums constitute a clear demarcation from personal politics and are used not only for determining policy directions (e.g. on environmental policy or policing in Uri in 2024), but frequently even for determining the financial means by which certain policies should be implemented (e.g. on the financing of public constructions in Nidwalden in 2020). Similarly, Liechtenstein witnesses regularly votes on substantive policy issues (e.g. on energetically efficient construction or health records in 2024), substituting personalistic politics with vigorous debates about these very policies.

Deliberative democratic innovations, in turn, even go a step further in that they are free from any electoral bound that could be misused in a personalistic way. Instead, the content of debates in deliberative citizen assemblies focusses explicitly on policy questions and the deliberative process requires participants to justify their opinions, while aiming for the broadest possible consensus when formulating policy recommendations. In East-Belgium, for example, the first five citizen assemblies that have been organised so far have all coped with substantive policy issues: health care, inclusive education, digitalisation, affordable housing, and integration policy. The deliberations led participants to

programmatic considerations of the issues at hand – beyond the considerations of prominent stakeholders or organisations, and so did the follow-up deliberations in the parliamentary committee (Gebauer et al., 2023). Similarly, the San Marinese Instances of Arengo recently invoked diverse substantive policy issues (e.g. on rights of people with disabilities or combating violence against women), relying on extensively justified and clearly programmatically oriented proposals by citizens (see Instances 8 & 14, April 2023).

3.2.2. *Patron-client Linkages*

Another democratic pitfall that our preceding diagnosis found electoral representation to aggravate in small polities were patron-client linkages. We expect direct and deliberative democratic innovations to weaken these linkages again because of their greater programmatic focus, but especially because their greater repetitiveness, impersonality, and rotation reduce the potential for reciprocal exchanges between voters and politicians.

For direct democratic innovations, for instance, when decisions are taken directly through referendums or citizen initiatives, citizens cannot mandate someone to take decisions on their behalf and, in exchange, expect benefits and services. While the risk of rich elites or interest groups buying votes or influencing campaigns remains, the costs are increased considerably when referendums are organised on a regular and repetitive basis. In small Swiss cantons or in Liechtenstein, for example, the outcomes of referendums are clearly independent and do not seldomly result in the defeat of governmental or parliamentary proposals (Marxer, 2007, p. 11; Vatter, 2002, pp. 290–291).

A similar argument can be formulated for deliberative innovations. In addition to rendering power regularly to citizens and making them decide on issues rather than on people, citizen assemblies break patron-client linkages by the fact that they are composed by stratified sortition, which aims to achieve a socio-demographic representation of society. Beyond including people that usually do not have access to power, the resulting diversity – in combination with the deliberative methodology that focuses on justified and reciprocal argumentation – makes it very difficult for vested interests to influence the final outcome. Furthermore, participants are rotated every time a new citizen assembly takes place. In East-Belgium, for example, there is clear evidence of citizen assemblies to attract participants that do otherwise engage little within formal politics. Furthermore, debates clearly reflect participants' ownership of the topic, and their concerns of the results not to be captured for political or electoral purposes by any party – indicating that there is limited external influence on the process (Gebauer et al., 2023). A comparable logic applies to San Marino's Instances of Arengo. In theory, politicians could of course offer material benefits to citizens who, in return, could present a certain Instance to parliament. In practice, however, most Instances are coordinated by citizens and NGOs, and do not involve elected politicians, who by virtue of their office can already make their own proposals in parliament (Bacciocchi, 1999). Instead, Instances of Arengo clearly introduce an independent, programmatic element in otherwise quite clientelistic Sammarinese politics (Veenendaal, 2014).

3.2.3. *Power Concentration*

Finally, we have identified power concentration as an important potential pitfall that representative institutions aggravate in small polities. We expect direct and deliberative

democratic innovations to work against this pitfall because they ensure greater repetitiveness, impersonality and rotation, but especially because they put power in the hands of many rather than in the hands of few individuals.

Direct democratic innovations are – everything else being equal (notably general participation biases) – the most inclusive form of decision-making in that they allow every citizen to directly express their will on a political question. By that very fact, referendums and citizen initiatives diffuse power and move it away from the few hands that hold it in small polities. As alluded to before, referendum results in small Swiss cantons, and in Liechtenstein in particular, go frequently against the official advice of the government – even if it is elected by the same people that voted against their advice in the referendum, which comes with the fact that elections can never express citizens' full range of preferences. The success rate of popular initiatives is furthermore substantive (35,3% in Liechtenstein and 33,3% in small Swiss cantons between 1970 and 2020, Brüggemann et al., 2023), showing that citizens also make effective use of this instrument to influence politics.

For deliberative democratic innovations, one may think that they do not significantly increase the number of people involved in decision-making, because deliberative citizen assemblies in particular usually rely on a small number of participants in order to reasonably deliberate (Cohen, 2009). By the very fact that participants are sortitioned and rotated at every repetition, however, power is moved away from the usual suspects to a much broader and socio-demographically representative part of society – which also contributes to diffusing power. This is the case in East-Belgium, where a diverse range of citizens without other positions in formal politics has been sortitioned into the first five citizen assemblies. Substantively speaking, citizens did not hesitate to recommend reforming existing power structures, in the health care sector for example during the first citizen assembly. Furthermore, when recommendations are declined by politicians in the parliamentary committee, vivid debates between politicians and citizens take place – demonstrating citizens' advice cannot just be wiped away and does challenge traditional decision-making (Gebauer et al., 2023). In San Marino, there is no limit to the people who can participate in Instances of Arengo, and experience shows that many citizens make use of this opportunity. There are no data available on the proportion of Instances of Arengo which eventually are adopted or turned into policies, but it has been shown that Instances do have political effects – especially in terms of agenda-setting, i.e. when politicians may not implement the request of an Instance *per se*, but do take up the issue it aimed to tackle (Bacciocchi, 1999).

3.2.4. *Caveats and Conditions*

While these theoretical mechanisms seem solid enough for us to expect that our argument holds across a broad universe of small polities, it should be highlighted that there are several context- and process-related circumstances under which we do not expect direct and deliberative democratic innovations to work in the expected way. First, the less democratic a political regime is, the less any form of democratic decision-making – be it representative, direct or deliberative – can exert its power-controlling functions. Secondly, even in democratic regimes, democratic innovations have to be compelling enough to exert credible power controls. If referendums are only consultative or if citizen assemblies are not properly institutionalised into the existing political

system, little follow-up and effects are to be expected (Chwalisz, 2021). Thirdly, participation processes have to be seen as legitimate by decision-makers but also by the broader citizenry to accept them. Finally, as a scope condition, we expect the pitfalls of electoral representative governance to play out especially in small polities where a lot of resources are to be controlled: small states or sub-state entities with significant political autonomy. It is hence in these polities that the power-controlling effects of democratic innovations might be most useful.²

Now, even if these scope-conditions are satisfied, one may legitimately contend that neither direct nor deliberative democratic innovations are not free of shortcomings. Typically, referendums allow everyone to participate but can suffer from poor public deliberation, while the opposite is true for citizen assemblies (Cohen, 2009). While this trade-off holds to large extents in both small and large polities, it is for this very reason that we envision direct and deliberative democratic innovations as complements rather than as substitutes of representative institutions.

In the context small polities more specifically, one may wonder whether enough citizens will be willing to participate in deliberative innovations once they are permanent and recurring, whether the citizenry entails enough diversity for good deliberation in both direct and deliberative innovations, and whether smaller administrations will struggle with the implementation of referendum or citizen assembly results. In the absence of empirical scholarship on the matter and until proven otherwise, we consider each of these risks to be real. However, we also consider that, in the meantime, they can be addressed through careful institutionalisation in small polities (with particular efforts on publicising, expert diversification and budget allocation).

4. Conclusion

In many ways, small polities are perfect candidates for the implementation of democratic innovations. Their societies are characterised by close connections and a strong sense of community; their limited size offers myriad opportunities to politically involve citizens apart from elections; and – as we have sought to highlight in this article – direct and deliberative democracy has the potential to reduce some of their democracy-undermining dynamics. Given their small size, it appears to be no coincidence that the first democracies in Ancient Greece and India had direct and deliberative democratic systems.

What is much more surprising, however, is that only very few contemporary small sovereign states or sub-state entities employ instruments of direct or deliberative democracy. Instead, almost all of these polities have copied the representative political systems of larger nation-states, and have done so by replication rather than by deliberate choice – apparently without wondering if these would work well in a small-sized political context. The fact that small states and territories are – at least on paper – disproportionately democratic leads many authors to suggest that ‘small is beautiful’ because representative democracy apparently works well on a small scale. However, in-depth analyses of politics in small societies paint a very different picture, pointing to some serious democratic pitfalls that electoral representative institutions can cause especially in small polities: hyper-personalism, patron-client linkages and power concentration.

In this article, we explored the theoretical grounds of a potential remedy and the ways in which it could alleviate these pitfalls: direct and deliberative democratic innovations.

In particular, we expect (i) the greater focus on programmatic rather than personalistic politics of these innovations to reduce hyper-personalism and patron-client linkages; (ii) the more frequent direct consultation of citizens in referendums as well as the random selection and rotation of participants to citizen assemblies to weaken patron-client linkages and reduce power concentration; and (iii) the innovations' overall diffusion of power in the hands of the many rather than the few to also reduce power concentration.

The objective of this theoretical elaboration, which we illustrated with qualitative evidence from four cases, is primarily one of theory-building. In the absence of preexisting work on the topic and since a systematic testing falls short of enough representative cases, the modest but fundamental ambition was to offer a first argument on the promises of direct and deliberative democratic innovations for small polities, to ground this argument theoretically, and to illustrate the grounding with preliminary evidence from real-world cases. We readily acknowledge that more empirical evidence is needed to solidify our argument. That holds for the overall direction of the argument, for the mechanisms that we expect to be at work, and for the extent to which the relatively positive experience of our four European cases would be repeated if democratic innovations would be implemented in, say, a Caribbean or Pacific microstate.

Notwithstanding the importance of this further empirical examination, we hope that the present article will encourage practitioners to think about the size of polities when conceiving democratic innovations. To do so, the article made two contributions in particular. First, from a theoretical point of view, we showed that democratic innovations might have to offer different things to small and to large polities. While large polities seem mostly in need of increased proximity and participation, small polities seem more in need of diffusing power and increasing accountability. This invalidates the common assumption that democratic innovations are mostly needed for large polities, and it stresses that the design of democratic innovations need to seriously consider size effects to make an effective contribution. Secondly, we showed that democratic innovations do have the potential to perform power controlling functions in small polities, and that the adoption of such institutions could therefore improve the functioning of democracy in these settings. Beyond the societal relevance of these contributions, they talk to the scientific literature on democratic innovations as well as to the academic discussion about the suitability and applicability of political institutions across jurisdictions of different size.

Notes

1. To our best knowledge, this question has hitherto only been touched upon partly by Corbett (2018). In his single-case study of the Tuvaluan parliament, where he studied the functioning of a particular democratic innovation – the co-optation of ordinary citizens into the public accounts committee. In this article, we push the effort further with the more systematic preceding theorisation and the following broader most typical case comparison.
2. Any other effects of democratic innovations may of course still be useful for any type of polity.

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