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Micro and mass personalism: how size changes the nature of personalistic politics

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Citation

Vlist, J. M. D. van der, & Veenendaal, W. P. (2025). Micro and mass personalism: how size changes the nature of personalistic politics. *Democratization*, 1-22. doi:10.1080/13510347.2025.2579100

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

June 2026
Volume 33, Number 4

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2025-2026

Democratization

ISSN: 1351-0347 (Print) 1743-890X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fdem20

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To cite this article: Denny van der Vlist & Wouter Veenendaal (03 Nov 2025): Micro and mass personalism: how size changes the nature of personalistic politics, *Democratization*, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2025.2579100

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2579100>



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Micro and mass personalism: how size changes the nature of personalistic politics

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ABSTRACT

While noting a trend towards increasing personalization, the literature on personalistic politics has so far ignored population size as an explanatory factor of personalism. Departing from the question how size affects personalism, in this article we contrast the personalization literature on mass democracies with qualitative research in eight underexplored micro-democracies. Our findings demonstrate that personalistic politics is of a fundamentally different nature across the two contexts, leading us to draw a conceptual distinction between *mass* and *micro* personalism. We find that compared to mass personalism, micro personalism facilitates an even greater personalistic control of public offices and similar instrumental functions of political parties. The biggest difference, however, is that micro personalism facilitates unique direct and mutual connections between politicians and the electorate. This has important consequences for the functioning of democracy. We show that while micro personalism increases the risks of power concentration, the direct access to politicians offers greater opportunities for citizens to hold politicians accountable. Our findings therefore refine the concept of personalistic politics, and offer critical and original insights about the relationship between size, personalism, and democracy.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 23 May 2025; Accepted 17 October 2025

KEYWORDS Population size; personalistic politics; democracy; political competition; political parties; comparative politics; qualitative methods

Introduction

In the last two decades, a substantial academic literature has emerged on the so-called personalization of politics.¹ This term signifies a change in which individual politicians instead of political parties become the principal actors in politics. Personalization is associated with a greater focus on the characteristics and capacities of individual politicians, and a decline in the salience of ideologies, political programmes, and party organizations. The phenomenon is primarily studied in the context of advanced Western democracies, in which the weakening links between political parties and voters are regarded as a main cause of personalization.² In most non-Western democracies, robust political parties and party systems have generally struggled to take root, and politics has arguably always been more personalistic.³ In this sense, it could be

argued that Western democracies are becoming more similar to their non-Western counterparts.

While the literature pays extensive attention to the causes and consequences of personalization, the effect of population size on political personalization so far remains underexplored. Much like the entire field of comparative politics, the literature on political personalization focuses almost exclusively on larger countries like Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Very little attention is paid to small or micro-polities, neither at the national nor at the subnational level. This is regrettable, since existing studies on local politics or the politics of small states clearly point to a very personalistic nature of politics.⁴ However, as a result of the lack of comparative studies, we currently do not know if personalistic politics in small societies operates in similar or different ways compared to large countries. In this article we therefore ask: how does population size affect the nature of personalistic politics?

This question has important analytical implications. If personalism in small and large societies is similar in nature, analysing personalistic politics in small jurisdictions could provide us with great insights into the consequences of (extreme) political personalization and the type of political system that may emerge as a result. But if personalistic politics in small societies is of a fundamentally different nature than in large societies, it might also have very different effects on the functioning of democracy. In the academic literature on large democracies, the personalization of politics is commonly regarded as a negative development, which is said to undermine democratic representation, accountability, and stability.⁵ In this article we investigate if these conclusions can also be drawn for personalism in small societies. Specifically, we study how the potential differences in the functioning of personalism across small and large societies affect the quality of democracy. [Figure 1](#) offers an illustration of the complete causal framework that we investigate.

Based on a review of the literature on political personalization in large democracies, which we subsequently contrast with extensive qualitative research in eight diverse small states and municipalities, we first aim to identify the main differences between personalistic politics in large and in small democracies. In these sections, we will demonstrate that personalism in small settings fundamentally differs from personalism in mass societies, creating a need to conceptually distinguish between these two phenomena – which we label *micro personalism* and *mass personalism*. The commonality between micro personalism and mass personalism is that there is a strong focus on individual politicians. The main difference is that in small settings, personalism is caused and driven by direct personal connections between voters and politicians, which are logistically impossible in the mass societies of larger democracies.

In the second analytical part of our article, we critically assess the effects of both types of personalism on democratic governance. More specifically, we look at how the differences between micro personalism and mass personalism affect democratic representation and accountability, and political power concentration. The purpose of our article is therefore twofold: to examine the effects of population size on

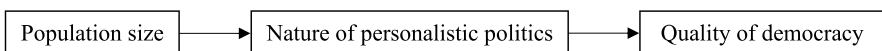


Figure 1. Causal framework examined in this study.

personalistic politics, and to assess what this means for the presumed link between personalism and democracy. For the sake of clarity, we define units here as “large” when they have at least 5 million inhabitants, and as “small” when they have populations lower than 100,000. However, we acknowledge that population thresholds are always arbitrary,⁶ and that there are many in-between cases in which a more mixed type of personalism may exist.

Review of the literature on personalistic politics in large democracies

At the outset of this review, some concepts require further clarification. Political personalization is conceived as a *process* in which individual political actors become increasingly important relative to collective political actors, such as parties, cabinets or parliaments.⁷ Scholarly attention has focused on the extent to which this change is occurring, as well as the potential causes and consequences of the phenomenon.⁸ Personalization is distinct from personalism, which denotes a *situation* in which political individuals are relatively more important than collective political actors.⁹ Although obviously related, both concepts require different analytical approaches – longitudinal versus cross-sectional – yet encompass the same features of personalistic politics that are of interest to our analysis.

Personalistic politics tends to be contrasted with the “partyiness” of a political system.¹⁰ Partyiness is defined as the extent to which political parties – as collective actors – organize the linkage between state and society. Political parties are commonly seen as the primary intermediary between society and the state: they structure democratic representation by organizing collective decision-making, engaging in conflict and cooperation, and fostering responsiveness and accountability.¹¹ In contrast, personalistic politics indicates a situation in which individuals rather than collective political parties function as the linchpin between society and the state.¹² Three dimensions form this society-state linkage: (1) the (party) anchorage in the state through political office, (2) the intermediary (party) organization, and (3) the (party) connection with the electorate.¹³ Combined, these three dimensions reflect the links in the chain of democratic representation and can thereby convey the degree and functioning of personalism.

Larger democracies that experience personalistic politics frequently have institutional structures that bolster the power of their leaders. Directly elected presidents are known to have stronger mandates and legitimacy, providing them with a means to establish their own bases of power.¹⁴ More recently, however, it is argued that parliamentary democracies are becoming increasingly similar to their more personalistic presidential counterparts.¹⁵ Prime ministers are increasingly able to amass autonomy by centralizing decision-making, exhibiting control over personnel, and increased international decision-making. Instead of political parties controlling executive-legislative relations, this “presidentialization” of parliamentary systems creates executives that dominate relations with parliament. Likewise, presidents in presidential systems are argued to expand their position by increasingly ruling by decrees, effectively sidelining other institutions.¹⁶ Personalistic politics in larger democracies can elevate leaders to almost embody the state itself, which has a number of implications, such as increased polarization,¹⁷ a demise of impartial bureaucracies¹⁸ and a weakening of horizontal accountability.¹⁹ Although political institutions remain important, individual rulers circumvent or use these structures to advance their own agendas.

However, personalistic politics can not only be found at the apex. Personalization is considered to be a process that manifests in both centralized and decentralized forms, meaning that it can also occur among rank-and-file politicians.²⁰ For example, electoral systems with single-member districts provide ways for individual politicians to construct their own independent label, providing for a more personalized representational link.²¹ Indeed, it is notable that coinciding with the trend towards more personalized behaviour, larger countries increasingly offer opportunities for personalized voting.²² Due to their more personalized brands, individual politicians nowadays operate more independently from their parties, resulting in deviations in parliamentary behaviour or even party switching.

Musella and Rullo argue that the political fragmentation stemming from this personalization might further enhance the position of executive leaders vis-à-vis other institutions.²³ Whereas parliaments and collective political parties used to be able to counterbalance the power of government, fragmentation is seen to increasingly hamper the potential of opposition parties to perform their democratic role.²⁴ Leaders are now more likely to surpass or avoid parliament altogether, leading to forms of a “monocratic government” in which executive leaders dominate a fragmented and weaker parliament.²⁵ The ruling style of U.S. president Trump is a case in point.

Political parties are often described as crucial intermediary institutions in democracies,²⁶ and even in larger personalized democracies, political parties univocally remain the vehicle of choice to structure personal rule. Most notable are the so-called personal parties which exist solely as a vehicle for the leader to win elections.²⁷ Within these parties the decisional control is completely centralized in the hands of the leader, which can be reflected in decisions over the selection of candidates, policies and the organization of the party.²⁸ Leaders are considered to “own” their parties, the most prominent examples being the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) with Geert Wilders as the only member, the Italian political parties spearheaded by Silvio Berlusconi, and Alberto Fujimori’s parties in Peru. On the opposite side of the spectrum are decentralized personalistic parties, which are labelled network or movement parties.²⁹ These parties may be just as personalistic as the “personal” parties, but power within these parties is diffused over many independently operating politicians or members, as for example in the Democratic Party in the United States.

Of course, personalistic politics not only appears in new parties. Parties that are traditionally more collective might also be subject to personalization due to the strengthened positions of leaders and individual candidates. Moreover, due to institutional changes towards more personalized selection methods, such as electoral primaries, parties have further emphasized the importance of individual politicians.³⁰ Although these traditional parties may still be less personalized than newer personalistic parties, they nonetheless experience a clear trend towards personalization, in which individuals are increasingly able to dominate collective party structures. Overall, larger democracies feature more party organisations characterised by decentralized personalism, with primaries serving as the candidate selection mechanism, than parties with centralized personalistic or collegial selection methods.³¹ But even in these parties, leaders and candidates alike manoeuvre within party structures to maintain and enhance their own powers at the expense of the party organization.³² Personalism is thereby frequently argued to undermine the institutionalisation of political parties, as personal power can override routinised procedures and may hamper the

“infusion of value” into party organisations.³³ Party organizations thus remain alive, but only as instrumental mechanisms that help individual politicians attain their (career) goals, rather than carrying any intrinsic or collective value beyond these interests.

A crucial development that is argued to stimulate political personalization are the advances in communication technologies that provide ways to establish a direct link between politicians and voters that is otherwise logistically impossible. While some political systems facilitate decentralized personalistic connections between voters and politicians, for example through constituency clinics or other forms of constituency service, the direct connections with voters necessarily remain limited due to higher representation ratios in larger democracies. For example, on average a member of parliament in the United Kingdom currently represents approximately 73,000 registered voters, making it impossible to establish and maintain direct contacts with all of them.³⁴

Television has been heralded as one of the initial drivers of personalization, offering politicians in larger democracies direct visibility and a way to connect to the masses.³⁵ More recently, social media have provided additional ways to bridge the gap between voters and politicians, offering opportunities to directly address large groups of voters without having to deal with media intermediaries. Politicians – of all ranks – are able to reach broad segments of society by connecting directly with citizens via social media platforms,³⁶ and some politicians even create their own social media platforms, such as Trump’s Truth Social, to reach voters with their message. These media platforms have been found to further increase the personalization of politics by constructing connections between individual politicians and the larger masses.³⁷

As a consequence of advances in digital communication, politicians in larger polities seem to campaign permanently, focusing on securing access to the traditional media and visibility on social media, constantly showing themselves to the electorate. The established personal connection requires almost permanent maintenance, and implies, especially in more competitive settings, an eternal struggle for attention.³⁸ Voters are found to be increasingly likely to appreciate these personal appeals, indicating that candidates are progressively more important in determining their vote choices.³⁹ However, as is clear from some of the larger democracies, personalism does not necessarily come at the expense of programmatic connections with voters, as individual politicians can embody ideological stances as well.⁴⁰ Whereas personalistic politics focuses on the appeals of individual politicians and their qualities, these appeals can be aptly connected to broader issue agendas. Either way, personalistic politics in larger democracies increasingly seems to resemble an audience democracy, with politicians fighting to secure their audience in a continued but mostly one-sided communication with the voters.⁴¹

Each of the three dimensions of personalism – in office, within the party, and in connection with the electorate – provides insights into what we here label mass personalism. This concept has a number of characteristics, presented in [Table 1](#). First, most of the literature on mass personalism highlights the capacity of leaders to dominate institutions, but also acknowledges that they nevertheless operate within existing institutional frameworks. In other words, despite personalization, institutions continue to exist and play a role. Second, political parties are still used, albeit instrumentally, as intermediary institutions in larger personalized democracies. Party institutions are required to coordinate political actions across institutions, organize and streamline

Table 1. The key characteristics of mass personalism.

State-society linkage	Mass personalism
In political office	Individual politicians embody the state; but institutions define the extent to which they can do so.
Within the party	Parties still exist; but are only of instrumental value.
Connection to the electorate	One-sided and indirect; mediated through (social) media.

group-behaviour under the leader, or as a coordination mechanism in more decentralized settings. Finally, and most importantly, politicians use traditional and social media to establish and maintain a personalized link with the electorate. Although a direct connection with voters can logistically hardly exist, politicians tend to campaign almost permanently, either by securing access to intermediaries such as the traditional media, or more directly via social media platforms.

Case selection and methodology

Now that we have outlined the main characteristics of mass personalism, we proceed to investigate the differences between mass personalism and micro personalism. To do so, we examine the characteristics of personalism in a wide variety of small jurisdictions: four sovereign microstates and four even smaller municipalities. These two groups of cases were selected in separate research projects; one on politics in microstates and one on politics in European municipalities. In both projects, case selection occurred on the basis of the most different systems design, meaning that our two sets of cases comprise maximum diversity in background characteristics. As Table 2 shows, our cases vary on all dimensions that are usually assumed to shape democratic politics, and that can therefore also be expected to influence the nature of personalism: geographical location, level of economic development, level of political autonomy, and (three types of) political institutions. This variation allows us to control for a range of factors that may affect the nature of personalism, and to thereby pinpoint the effect of population size – our independent variable of interest. The great variation among our cases also strengthens the representativeness and generalizability of our findings. We do mention one caveat: while the sample of microstates covers four different world regions, the sample of municipalities is restricted to Europe. We do not regard this as a problem, because the landscape of local government in Europe is extremely diverse, as our case selection also reveals.⁴²

Our four selected microstates are San Marino, St. Kitts and Nevis, Seychelles, and Palau, and our four selected municipalities are Ermensee (Switzerland), Sant’Alfio (Italy), Selbu (Norway), and Zoeterwoude (The Netherlands). While these cases are all micro-societies, they still vary substantially in population size, ranging from Ermensee’s population of 1.000 to Seychelles’ population of 90.000. However, they all fall under the aforementioned threshold of 100.000 inhabitants. Crucially, the combination of sovereign microstates and sub-national municipalities enables us to examine the similarities and differences of personalism across units with strongly varying levels of political autonomy. Moreover, the cases differ significantly in terms of their geographic location, historical or cultural backgrounds, socio-economic conditions, and political and electoral institutions. This diversity offers us the opportunity

Table 2. Overview of the selected cases^a.

Cases	Population	Geography	GDP per capita in US\$	Political autonomy	Federalism	Government system	Electoral system
<i>Microstates</i>							
San Marino	30.000	Continental	65.700	Sovereign	No	Parliamentary	Open-list PR
St. Kitts and Nevis	50.000	Islands	30.100	Sovereign	Yes	Parliamentary	Single-Member District
Seychelles	90.000	Islands	29.500	Sovereign	No	Presidential	Mixed Member Majority
Palau	20.000	Islands	15.800	Sovereign	Yes	Presidential	Single-Member District
<i>Municipalities</i>							
Ermensee (Switzerland)	1.000	Continental	79.100	Strong (76,98)	Yes	Hybrid	Two-Round Bloc Vote
Sant'Alfio (Italy)	1.600	Continental	30.800	Limited (61,78)	No	Presidential	Plurality Representation
Selbu (Norway)	4.100	Continental	62.700	Strong (70,84)	No	Chairmanship	Open-list PR
Zoeterwoude (Netherlands)	9.300	Continental	56.400	Limited (59,95)	No	Parliamentary	Open-list PR

^aPopulation and GDP per capita data are gathered for the years of the data collection. Regional-level GDP per capita data is used for the four municipalities. Moreover, subnational cases include their most recent score on the national Local Autonomy Index, which – on a scale from zero to one hundred – gives an indication of their sub-national autonomy. See Ladner et al., "Local Autonomy Index."

to identify the core features of micro personalism.⁴³ Subsequently, we can compare and contrast the type of personalism that we observe in our eight micro-cases with the characteristics of personalism in mass societies that we have described above.

To study our cases, we employ a qualitative methodological approach. Qualitative research is often heralded for the potential to uncover theoretical mechanisms, and is therefore particularly well suited for the aims of our study.⁴⁴ Moreover, qualitative methods are uniquely suited to observe the more informal patterns of politics that are known to dominate smaller democracies.⁴⁵ Extensive fieldwork was conducted in all cases, resulting in a total of 98 semi-structured interviews.⁴⁶ Interview respondents were selected to ensure variation on three criteria, namely partisan affiliation, institutional position, and gender, providing a broad and diverse sample that includes politicians, journalists, civil servants, and other relevant private sector and civil society actors. The interviews were supplemented with fieldwork observations, for example during campaign activities, and a content analyses of government documents and media reports. By combining these various methods, we can systematically identify the core features of personalism within smaller communities across the different contexts.

Analysis of personalistic politics in small jurisdictions

In this section, we examine the characteristics of personalism in the eight selected micro-societies. Based on our interview materials and other data, we aim to identify the main components of what we call micro personalism.⁴⁷ In order to effectively contrast these findings with the characteristics of mass personalism, we sequentially look at the three dimensions outlined in [Table 1](#): personalism in political office, within the party, and in connection to the electorate.

In political office

Existing research shows that smaller societies experience a greater concentration of political power than large ones.⁴⁸ In addition, population size is also found to have an effect on leadership tenures, in the sense that leaders in small jurisdictions have comparatively longer terms in office than their counterparts in large societies. More concretely, an increase in population size from 100.000 to one million inhabitants translates into a decrease of five years in average leadership tenure.⁴⁹ Both dynamics have an effect on personalism, as executive politicians in small jurisdictions face fewer institutional constraints and fewer political challengers, giving them additional means to embody the state. In Palau and Seychelles this refers primarily to the president, while St. Kitts and Nevis like other Anglophone Caribbean countries has an extremely powerful prime minister. San Marino, by contrast, employs centuries-old institutions that were explicitly designed to function as a break on power concentration: its heads of state are two Captains Regent who jointly only serve a half-year term and cannot be elected to the office in the three years after that.⁵⁰ In the municipalities, the mayor tends to be the principal authority. Ermensee, Sant'Alfio, and Selbu have an (in)directly elected mayor who wields significant influence over almost all local decision-making. Only Zoeterwoude, in which the mayor is a nationally appointed outsider, provides an exception by having alder(women) taking up the main positions of power.

Similar to large democracies that experience centralized personalism, political leaders in small societies dominate the entire political arena, claiming to do so on behalf of the population they represent. The difference with large democracies is that institutional control mechanisms in small societies are weaker, which can be attributed to a lack of human and financial resources as well as political and social pressures that foster self-censorship.⁵¹ As a result, political leaders in small societies can amass vast powers, almost akin to rulers in authoritarian states. This is particularly true for Caribbean microstates such as St. Kitts and Nevis, where an interviewed academic asserted that:

Our politics, our political democracy has been personalised. The Prime Ministers want to get their hands on every single thing in the Caribbean, so they have awesome powers. And because they have such awesome powers, it often dilutes the true picture of democracy.

In the absence of term limits, Caribbean prime ministers regularly have terms in office spanning 15 or even 20 years. Within this period, they are able to acquire omnipotent positions, with apparently no politicians and institutions being able to challenge their dominance.⁵²

The situation is similar in Seychelles, where presidential term limits were only introduced in 2021. Alternation in presidential office only occurred in 2020 in this microstate, with the first two presidents of the country serving terms of respectively 27 and 12 years. The lack of alternation in office, and the vast powers assumed by the Seychellois president were the main reason for the country's classification as a hybrid regime until recently.⁵³ In Palau term limits do exist, but presidents can return after a 4-year break, and one individual has held the office for 16 years. While Palau has a political system modelled after the United States, with at least on paper strong checks and balances, the Palauan interviewees agree that in practice the president strongly dominates the system. As an interviewed member of parliament indicates:

You wonder if there are really checks and balances, because right now we have a lot of relatives of the President in parliament. The President is now so powerful and influential that the Olbiil Era Kelulau [the Palauan parliament] comes out as being subservient to the President.

Similar patterns are observed in the four municipalities. Although individual tenures do not match those seen in some microstates, dominant politicians in Ermensee, Selbu, and Sant'Alfio belong to longstanding local dynasties. Interviews with politicians, civil servants and journalists in these municipalities reveal that small communities allow locally entrenched families to secure political power through their accumulation of positions in the community, for example in local sport, leisure or religious associations, access to resources, and personal appeal. This combination of roles results in a form of control that can span decades. For instance, in Sant'Alfio the mayor is the son of a former mayor who served in office for nearly three decades, while in Selbu, the current mayor directly succeeded his mother.

The municipal leaders wield power in a deeply personal manner, even to the extent that in practice, they *are* the local administration. Municipal government – particularly in smaller municipalities – is characterized by a rather informal form of governance, enhancing a type of rule that revolves around persons rather than institutions.⁵⁴ In all four municipalities, interviews and fieldwork evidence indicates that decision-making predominantly occurs through informal discussions among the most influential actors, rendering formal institutions like the municipal council largely irrelevant.

These informal practices result in an absence of checks and balances, creating opportunities for leaders to dominate all aspects of the political process, irrespective of the formal powers given to these leaders. Such opportunities particularly arise in the context of a limited and less professional local government, as illustrated by a local politician from Sant'Alfio:

There is no structure here. Everything goes through the mayor. (...) He controls everything. Even to the point that we say, or joke, that he would be replacing the lightbulbs himself if he could.

In sum, similar to large democracies, personalism in small societies translates into a very centralized form of personalism in which leaders embody the entire polity. The weakness of institutional checks and balances means that they have even stronger opportunities and reach to achieve this dominance. On the dimension of political office, the difference between mass and micro personalism is therefore primarily a matter of degrees.

Within the party

As we discussed in the theory section, personalism in large democracies results both in the emergence of new, personal parties and the personalization of traditional parties. When looking at our eight micro-cases, broadly similar observations can be made, albeit with two important qualifications. Firstly, the existing scholarly literature highlights that small societies are characterized by the weakness of ideologies and substantive political platforms, meaning that political parties in these settings have arguably always been person-oriented.⁵⁵ These micro-societies have therefore never witnessed the traditional collective parties that could be observed in mass democracies. Instead, the majority of party organizations in our micro-democracies feature a rather centralized form of personalism. Secondly, in contrast to mass democracies, some micro-polities are so personalistic that political parties never even materialized, and elections are partially or even exclusively contested by individual candidates, which we can regard as the apex of decentralized personalism. This applies to the microstate of Palau and to the municipality of Ermensee.

Examples of new, personal parties abound primarily in cases with proportional electoral systems, where the entry barriers for such competitors are lower. San Marino is an excellent example: this microstate has a highly fragmented party system, with two larger (but shrinking) traditional parties and a great number of smaller parties that rapidly come and go. Of the seven parties that won seats in the most recent (2024) election, only the traditional two parties have existed for more than ten years. Sammarinese interviewees indicated that the new parties are formed by and around individual political leaders, and only serve as political vehicles to realize their personal ambitions. As one member of parliament indicated:

The micro-parties are evidently personalistic; they originate from personal contrasts within the larger parties. Then there are some parties which are only and exclusively formed out of political opportunism. I can see at least two of them. They will align themselves with anyone.

However, also in microstates where the party system remained relatively stable, like St. Kitts and Nevis and Seychelles, it is clear that intra- and inter-party relationships have always been shaped by personal connections and conflicts. While political parties in these cases do not dwindle when their leaders disappear, that should not

be taken as a sign that the control of these leaders over the party is limited. It rather means that leadership transitions tend to be executed well, as is the case for the Seychellois People's Party – the ruling party from 1977 until 2020. An interviewed opposition member explained that the party ostensibly went through some transitions, but that in fact the same individuals continue to run the show:

The Parti Lepep (People's Party) has been in power for over thirty years. (...) And even though they have changed from SPUP to SPPF and now to Parti Lepep, it's the same leopard, the same people. James Michel, the current President, took part in the coup d'état; there are pictures of him with his Kalashnikov.

Unlike the microstates, the four municipalities feature a mix of local branches of national parties, independent local lists, and independent candidates. Regardless of their organizational form, however, these local competitors operate similarly to the ones in the microstates, in the sense that they are built on personal connections rather than ideological considerations. Interviews indicate that participation in a local party or group often stems from an existing personal relationship with a leader or another member, while conflict and cooperation are also based on interpersonal relationships. In all four municipalities, these personal relationships facilitate local leaders to control their parties or lists by personally selecting candidates and individually drafting political programs. This personal approach even allows leaders to transform local branches of parties that operate collectively at the national level into personal vehicles, as described by a local politician in Selbu:

The mayor is the biggest party here, he won the election and can do what he wants. There are no big ideological differences here and his party [Arbeiderpartiet] is nationally on the left, but here it can be wherever he thinks is right. (...) When the most right-wing party [Fremskritt-partiet] disappeared in Selbu, one of their members joined the local Arbeiderpartiet, because he could get along with the leader.

To conclude, on the second dimension we do not observe substantial differences between micro-polities and increasingly personalized mass democracies. While personalism appears to be more centralized than in mass democracies, parties are still the main vehicles of political competition. The only places where this situation is really different are the micro-jurisdictions in which individual politicians compete in elections: Palau and Ermensee. In Palau, the absence of parties is facilitated by traditional clan structures that determine political allegiances and voting behaviour.⁵⁶ In Ermensee, individual candidates can sustain their position in a directly elected executive of by relying on personal and family connections instead of party affiliations.

Connections to the electorate

As we discussed, personalism in large democracies is accompanied by attempts of politicians to directly communicate with voters. Despite attempts to foster a personal connection, especially in district-based electoral systems, this communication is mostly one-sided, and logistically needs to be established and maintained through traditional or social media. This situation is completely different in micro-societies, where the small population size enables and even stimulates frequent, direct contact between citizens and politicians. In small societies “everybody knows everybody”, and voters and politicians likely interact in a variety of social roles, both professional and private.⁵⁷ In fact, interviewed politicians in small societies even complain that they can hardly have

a private life, as they will encounter and need to interact with voters wherever they go. Even in Seychelles, the largest micro-democracy in our study, there are only approximately 2,500 citizens per representative, pointing to a much lower contact threshold for voters than in mass democracies. Despite a similar tendency towards personalism, in mass democracies very few voters have the opportunity to directly engage with politicians.

While the four microstates are larger than the four municipalities, the interviews revealed that politicians are still in contact with voters on an everyday basis. This personal contact is a key driver of voting behaviour, as most citizens will vote for a politician they know personally. As a Palauan politician indicated:

We are very personality oriented. We vote for people because of who they are, not for their performance. It's really because they came to your funeral, or they assisted your kids with some problem, or your relatives go for medical treatment, or you had a house party where he donated to you.

Close personal contact can obviously carry benefits in terms of political representation, since politicians in small settings are often keenly aware of the demands and preferences of their constituents. At the same time, these contacts can put immense pressure on politicians to extend favours and services to their supporters, as a member of parliament from St. Kitts and Nevis highlighted:

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

As the quote alludes to, citizens of small societies expect to have direct contact with their representative: this is an indispensable character trait of what is seen as a good politician.

These patterns of citizen-politician interactions are even stronger in the smaller municipalities. Again, to illustrate, a representative in Zoeterwoude represents approximately 700 citizens, and this figure is even lower in the other three municipalities. Hence, interviews across all four municipalities report that the combination of frequent personal interactions and the absence of programmatic differences results in a connection between politicians and the electorate that is mostly based on personal networks and relationships. Often these networks are highly durable, as citizens and politicians are familiar with each other from their schooldays, their involvement in local associations or through family connections. Unsurprisingly, while personalism in large democracies is often associated with a permanent campaign to cultivate and maintain personalistic connections with the masses, electoral campaigns in the four small municipalities are almost non-existent. Few campaign activities take place before elections, which across the various cases and politicians – government and opposition alike – are regarded to be a nuisance, as explained by an opposition member in Zoeterwoude:

It is very difficult to establish yourself during an election campaign. And to be honest, I just really dislike elections, it is a waste of time. In the end, it is all about our coalition negotiations afterwards. Often, we end up with the same outcome we ended the period with anyway. People will keep voting for the same people they know and voted for before.

However, these close, personal contacts do not entirely eliminate the role of intermediary (social) media. Except for Sant’Alfio, all municipalities feature local media outlets, and each has active social media group pages that engage a significant portion of the population. While the presence of such media is consistent with patterns observed in larger democracies, these platforms are employed differently. In the small municipalities, social media complements face-to-face interactions rather than serving as a one-sided communication tool, as is often the case in larger democracies. Interviewees assert that social media interactions primarily extend the existing social relationships rather than replacing them, as for example highlighted by a politician from Selbu:

There is a Facebook group for Selbu. A lot of people are in it; some politicians as well. People bring up issues, and things can blow up. Some politicians interact with people there as well, if things said are not correct or to provide a response.

In sum, it is on the third dimension that we observe the biggest difference between micro and mass personalism. Direct personal connections between citizens and politicians are ubiquitous in micro-polities, whereas they remain logistically impossible in mass democracies. This has a number of implications for the functioning of democracy, which we will discuss in the next section.

Micro personalism, mass personalism, and democratic rule

Our analysis shows that micro personalism exhibits several important similarities and differences in comparison to mass personalism. We have provided an overview of these similarities and differences in [Table 3](#). The common denominator of both concepts is that they refer to a situation in which individual politicians are more important than collective political actors. The distinctions between the two are found in their organization of the state-society linkage.

In political office, personalist politicians try to personify and embody the polity they represent, projecting power through personal rather than institutional means. The main difference between micro and mass personalism is the degree to which these politicians are able to do so. While institutional constraints retain some significance under mass personalism, limiting the extent and ways in which politicians can control the polity, such constraints are much weaker in micro-societies. In smaller democracies, power tends to be more concentrated, tenures longer, and checks and balances weaker. Informal political practices in micro-societies further amplify these dynamics, obviating the need to manipulate or circumvent formal institutions, as is the case in mass personalism. Consequently, under micro personalism, politicians are able to dominate the political arena to a much greater degree than in mass personalism.

Table 3. The key characteristics of mass and micro personalism.

State-society linkage	Mass personalism	Micro personalism
In political office	Individual politicians embody the state; but institutions define the extent to which they can do so.	Individual politicians embody the entire state; institutions are largely irrelevant and offer few constraints.
Within the party	Parties exist; but are only of instrumental value.	Parties mostly exist; but are only of instrumental value.
Connection to the electorate	One-sided and indirect; mediated through (social) media.	Two-sided and direct; through socially overlapping roles and personal interactions.

While party organizations in micro personalism appear to be more centralized than those in mass personalism, in fact parties play a remarkably similar role in both contexts. Political parties are consistently present, albeit as personal vehicles that offer little institutional or intrinsic value beyond their instrumental purpose for the (career) goals of individual politicians. The only exceptions are found in some of the smallest contexts in which the strong presence of other social groups, such as clans or families, creates the conditions for the absence of political parties.

The most pronounced difference between micro and mass personalism lies in the connection between politicians and the electorate. In mass personalism, politicians engage with the electorate in a one-sided and indirect manner, primarily mediated through the (social) media. This creates a dynamic of a permanent campaign where politicians compete for attention and visibility to cultivate and sustain a relationship with their electorate. By contrast, smaller democracies provide opportunities to foster direct personal relationships between citizens and politicians, which are logistically impossible in the context of mass societies. Most interactions are two-sided and direct: politicians and voters interact frequently and in-person, and are familiar to each other through (socially) overlapping roles. While both forms of personalism require ongoing maintenance throughout the electoral cycle, micro personalism operates in a more informal way that blurs the lines between the personal and the political sphere. Combined, these aspects indicate that connections with the electorate are of a fundamentally different nature in micro personalism than in mass personalism.

What are the consequences of these differences for democratic rule? As we discussed in the theory section, personalism in mass societies is generally regarded as a threat to representative democracy. The key arguments of this literature are that personalism (1) undermines ideological and substantive forms of political representation, reducing democratic accountability and transparency; (2) results in a concentration of power in the hands of one or a few individuals, weakening democratic checks and balances, and potentially harming principles such as the rule of law; and (3) contributes to societal and political polarization.⁵⁸ If we take a look at recent developments in large Western democracies like France, Italy, or the United States, we can indeed see most if not all of these trends unfolding, resulting in profound concerns about democratic erosion.

Building on our comparative analysis of micro personalism, a first, positive observation is that in all eight cases, democracy remains intact and stable.⁵⁹ However, if we dig a little deeper, we can see that democracy in small societies suffers from a variety of profound shortcomings, which can be linked to the consequences of mass personalism mentioned above. Politics in small settings tends to be characterized by the absence of programmatic competition, high levels of power concentration, and a potential for profound political and social polarization.⁶⁰ At first glance, the democratic consequences of personalism therefore appear to be strikingly similar across large and small societies.

However, the differences we observe between mass and micro personalism can also be expected to result in different democratic outcomes. We start with the dimension of personalism in political office, where we observed that micro personalism offers even greater opportunities for power concentration than mass personalism does. The reason is that in smaller societies institutional checks and balances are weaker, resulting in a dominant position for the executive.⁶¹ If, in turn, this executive is strongly personalized, it becomes evident that one or a few politicians can quite easily come to dominate

the entire political arena of a small polity. Personalism therefore has the effect of reinforcing the concentration of power that follows from a small population size. This is markedly different from large states like the United States, where power is traditionally dispersed among a much greater range of institutions and actors, such as a bicameral Congress, a powerful judiciary, powerful states, and powerful independent media. As recent trends in American politics demonstrate, personalism may certainly weaken the functioning of these institutions, but in small societies these institutions have never been strong to begin with. In sum, therefore, our conclusion is that on the dimension of political office, micro personalism carries greater risks for democracy than mass personalism, albeit that this is again a matter of degrees.

On the second dimension, personalism within the party, we did not observe any strong differences between micro and mass personalism, as a result of which we also do not expect different effects on democracy. That leaves us with the third dimension of personalism in connection to the electorate. On this dimension, we observed the strongest differences between micro and mass personalism. Based on our analysis, we would argue that the direct connections between citizens and politicians inherent to micro personalism produce less of a threat to democracy compared to the one-sided type of communication that is an attribute of mass personalism. The main reason is that direct interactions between citizens and politicians in micro-societies create natural opportunities for citizens to hold politicians accountable. This argument is important but also quite complex, so we take some space to unpack it.

As we have demonstrated in our analysis, citizens of small societies have constant, unfettered access to their politicians. The academic literature has highlighted that this proximity can be theorized to offer enhanced opportunities for democratic representation, responsiveness, accountability and transparency.⁶² However, that argument hinges on the assumption that the contact between citizens and politicians revolves around substantive political issues. In reality, what we observe in our eight micro-cases is that citizens are inclined to use their direct access to politicians to also ask for personal favours and benefits. As a result, the direct contact between citizens and politicians can in fact be argued to produce a number of important democratic drawbacks: it results in a constant blurring of private and professional roles and interests, and it is an important stimulus for the development of patron-client linkages.⁶³ As we know from the literature on clientelism in large states, clientelistic relations strengthen the position of politicians vis-à-vis voters, who may become economically or socially dependent on their political representatives.⁶⁴ Coupled with personalism, clientelism may therefore further increase the risk of power concentration.

The reality of our eight cases shows, however, that this is not the full picture. While direct contacts may indeed increase the likelihood of clientelistic ties, we also note that clientelism – like personalism – is of a different nature in small societies. In comparison to large states, where clientelism is primarily initiated and organized by politicians and their hierarchical party apparatuses (i.e. supply-driven clientelism), in small societies citizens can put formidable pressure on politicians to bestow them with benefits (i.e. demand-driven clientelism), as demonstrated by our quote from the politician in St. Kitts and Nevis.⁶⁵ As a result, in small societies clientelism does not necessarily weaken the position of citizens vis-à-vis politicians; the opposite may in fact come closer to the truth.

Yet irrespective of whether relations between citizens and politicians in our eight cases are clientelistic in nature or not, the direct connections entail that citizens can

constantly hold politicians accountable for their actions. In large democracies, personalism is said to weaken democratic accountability because voting behaviour is increasingly determined by the personal characteristics of candidates instead of their programmatic agendas and promises. In these systems, accountability happens first and foremost on election day. In small societies, this was never the case to begin with; democratic accountability always occurred on a daily basis and at a very informal level, in which programmatic considerations were arguably never important. As an interview respondent from San Marino indicated:

Here politicians are questioned every day, because (...) there is direct contact with the people. So I think that the political commitment is stronger here in San Marino, and this is also the reason why politics here is more lively.

The fact that politics is strongly personalistic does not in any way undermine these daily opportunities for holding politicians accountable.

Conclusions

The increasing personalization of contemporary democracies presents an urgent need to understand the functioning and implications of personalistic politics. Our analysis contributes to this task by examining a previously overlooked factor that strongly influences the nature of personalistic politics: population size. Based on a comparison between the existing literature on personalistic politics in larger democracies and a qualitative study of eight highly diverse micro-democracies, we reveal similarities but also important differences between personalistic politics across the two contexts, leading us to argue that there is a need to conceptually distinguish between mass and micro personalism. On the basis of three dimensions of the state-society linkage – in political office, within the party, and in connection to the electorate – we find that: (1) personalism in micro-democracies facilitates individual politicians to embody the polity to a much greater degree than in mass personalism; (2) personalistic politicians in both large and small democracies employ parties for solely instrumental purposes; and (3) while the connection to the electorate is mostly indirect and mediated by (social) media in larger democracies, this personalistic connection is direct and two-sided in micro-democracies.

These distinctions not only contribute to a refinement of the concept of personalistic politics, but also have important implications for the debate about the relationship between personalism and democracy. Specifically, we argue that the enhanced concentration of power in micro personalism presents a greater threat to democracy than is the case for mass personalism. In reverse, the direct and two-sided interactions with voters in micro personalism offers mechanisms of accountability that are impossible in mass personalism, making mass personalism more harmful to democracy in that regard. Nevertheless, while both types of personalism clearly result in democratic infringements, our micro cases also reveal that democracy survives even in hyper-personalistic contexts. Most of our cases have been firmly democratic for long periods of time, constituting a positive observation in an otherwise worrisome trend of increasing personalist rule.

These conclusions open up several avenues for further research, focusing on the consequences, manifestation, and implications of different types of personalistic politics. As research on other microstates and US municipalities suggests, patterns of

personalism found in our cases are likely to travel well to other smaller contexts, strengthening the generalizability of our findings.⁶⁶ Further research could explore such patterns through more direct comparisons between smaller and larger cases, thereby directly assessing these effects across specific population sizes and contexts. The sub-national level in particular offers interesting lines of inquiry; methodologically due to the “nested” multi-level structure of contemporary states and the large number of available sub-national cases, as well as theoretically in order to understand the functioning of micro and mass personalism in relation to different layers of government. Such investigations could also provide a better estimation of the most pertinent – but still arbitrary – size thresholds for both types of personalism.

Notes

1. McAllister, *The Personalization of Politics*; Karvonen, *The Personalisation of Politics*; Rahat and Kenig, “From Party Politics to Personalized Politics?”
2. Dalton et al., “Political Parties and Democratic Linkage”; Mair, “Ruling the Void”; Rahat and Kenig, “From Party Politics to Personalized Politics?”
3. Mainwaring and Torcal, “Party Institutionalization.”
4. Oliver et al., “Local Elections and Small-scale Democracy”; Corbett and Veenendaal, *Democracy in Small States*.
5. Adam and Maier, “Personalization of Politics research agenda”; Frantz et al. “Origins of Elected Strongmen.”
6. Crowards, “Defining ‘Small’ States.”
7. Rahat and Shaefer, “The Personalisation(s) of Politics.”
8. Karvonen, *The Personalisation of Politics*; Kriesi, *Personalization of National Election Campaigns*; Renwick and Pilet, “Faces on the Ballot.”
9. Pedersen and Rahat, “Political Personalization and Personalized Politics.”
10. Cross et al., “The Personalization of Democratic Politics”; Rahat and Kenig, “From Party Politics to Personalized Politics?”; Pedersen and Rahat, “Political Personalization and Personalized Politics.”
11. Katz, “Party Governments”; Müller, “Political Parties in Parliamentary Democracies”.
12. This is not to say that personalism is the only alternative for political parties as the linkage between society and the state. Other alternatives can for instance be found in interest groups or institutions that facilitate direct democracy, such as referendums. See Katz, “Party Governments.”
13. Katz and Mair, “Evolution of Party Organizations”; Rahat and Kenig, “From Party Politics to Personalized Politics?”
14. Shugart and Carey, “Presidents and Assemblies.”
15. Poguntke and Webb, “The Presidentialization of Politics”; Poguntke and Webb, “Presidentialization and Coalition Politics.”
16. Musella and Rullo, “The Personalization of Government.”
17. Franz et al., “Personalist Ruling Parties.”
18. Li and Wright, “Personalist Parties undermine State Capacity.”
19. Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid, *The Perils of Personalism*.
20. Balmas et al., “Two Routes to personalized Politics.”
21. Cross and Young, “Personalization in SMP systems.”
22. Renwick and Pilet, “Faces on the Ballot.”
23. Musella and Rullo, “The Personalization of Government.”
24. Tuttnauer, “Government-Opposition Relations.”
25. Musella and Rullo, “The Personalization of Government.”
26. Schattschneider, *Party Government*.
27. Frantz et al., “Personalist Ruling Parties”; Gunther and Diamond, “Species of Political Parties”; Calise, “The Personal Party.”
28. Kefford and McDonnell, “Inside the Personal Party”; Rahat, “Party Types.”
29. Rahat, “Party Types.”
30. Rahat and Kenig, “From Party Politics to Personalized Politics?”

31. Tuttnauer and Rahat, “Institutional Personalism and Personalized behaviour.”
32. Rahat, “Party Types.”
33. Bolleyer, *Party Institutionalisation*; Harmel et al., “Personalization and de-institutionalization.”
34. Website of the United Kingdom Parliament on Parliamentary Constituencies, on July 21st, 2025.
35. *The Personalisation of Politics*; Poguntke and Webb, “The Presidentialization of Politics”; Rahat and Kenig, “From Party Politics to Personalized Politics?”
36. Metz et al., “Personalization on Facebook.”
37. Enli and Skogerbø, “Personalized Campaigns in Party Contexts.”
38. Bennister and Worthy, “Electoral Presidentialization.”
39. Wattenberg, “The Rise of Candidate-Centred Politics”; Garzia et al., “Partisan Dealignment and Personalisation.”
40. Rahat and Kenig, “From Party Politics to Personalized Politics?”
41. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*.
42. Loughlin et al., “Local and Regional Democracy”; Gendźwiłł et al., “Local Elections and Voting.”
43. Cross et al., “The Personalization of Democratic Politics”; Rahat and Kenig, “From Party Politics to Personalized Politics?”
44. George and Bennet, “Case Studies and Theory Development.”
45. Veenendaal, “When Things Get Personal.”
46. The interviews in the four microstates were conducted in 2010-2011, while the interviews in the four municipalities were conducted in 2022-2024. However, given the stability of personalistic politics in small units, this difference does not harm the comparability of our findings. An overview of all interviewees can be found in the Appendix.
47. Importantly, we never drew conclusions based on single interviews, but only present conclusions if these were shared by at least a majority of our interviewees.
48. Gerring et al., “Theory of Power Concentration.”
49. Gerring and Veenendaal, *Population and Politics*.
50. Veenendaal, “Politics of the Four European Microstates.”
51. Baldacchino, *Islands and Despots*.
52. Barrow-Giles, “Democracy at Work”; Hinds, “Beyond Formal Democracy.”
53. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*.
54. Karlsson, “The Hidden Constitutions.”
55. Oliver et al., “Local Elections and Small-scale Democracy”; Corbett and Veenendaal, *Democracy in Small States*.
56. Veenendaal, “How Democracy Functions without Parties.”
57. Corbett, “Everybody knows Everybody.”
58. Adam and Maier, “Personalization of Politics research agenda”; Frantz et al. “Origins of Elected Strongmen”; Rahat and Kenig, “From Party Politics to Personalized Politics?”
59. The only case that experienced a regime change was Seychelles, but this country transitioned from a hybrid to a democratic regime in the early 2020s, and therefore became more democratic.
60. Veenendaal, “Democracy in Microstates.”
61. Ibid.
62. Anckar, “Small is Democratic”; Diamond and Tsalik, “Size and Democracy.”
63. Veenendaal, “When Things Get Personal.”
64. Hicken, *Clientelism*; Stokes, “Perverse Accountability.”
65. Auyero, “From the Client’s point”; Pellicer et al., “Clientelism from the Client’s Perspective.”
66. Oliver et al., “Local Elections and Small-scale Democracy”; Corbett and Veenendaal, “Democracy in Small States.”

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek [grant number: VI.Vidi.191.029].

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Appendix. Overview of conducted interviews

Table A1. Overview of conducted interviews.

	Microstates				Municipalities				Total
	San Marino	St. Kitts and Nevis	Seychelles	Palau	Ermensee	Sant'Alfio	Selbu	Zoeterwoude	
Politicians	9	6	7	9	6	8	6	10	61
Civil servants	1	2	3	2	1	0	2	1	12
Journalists, academics, and other civic actors	8	5	3	5	1	1	1	1	25
Total	18	13	13	16	8	9	9	12	98