

**Marlene Jugl (2022). *Country size and public administration*. Cambridge University Press. Series: Elements in Public and Non-profit Administration. 85pp, pbk. ISBN: 9781009122887, UK£17.00. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/country-size-and-public-administration/7D6003254C2BCECAD304C88C6DF77274>**

This short book opens with an ambitious declaration: the reader is promised “the most comprehensive theoretical and empirical account to date of the effects that country size has on the functioning of public administration” (Abstract). When considering that country size is one of the most manifest and widely used characteristics of states, it is quite striking that this claim actually proves true. Indeed, this concise publication from the Cambridge Elements series is the first inclusive account of the impact of country size on the functioning of public administration. Despite the growing interest in the function of country size, especially among small state scholars, there is hardly any systematic discussion on it as an independent factor in comparative public administration.

What the book offers is a well-structured and smoothly written treatise on the impact of country size in the domain of public administration. Importantly, the volume does not focus on the peculiarities of a specific size; rather, the focus is on country size, from small to large, as measured by population size. The central argument is that the factor of size is important. Country size has effects on administrative structures, on administrative practices, and eventually on public service performance. The three analytical anchors of *structures*, *practices* and *performance* form the backbone of the book and keep the analysis on a clearly defined track.

Following an overview of existing knowledge, the author formulates her theoretical argument, with the concept of economies of scale at its core. While large states benefit from economies of scale in the organization of their public administration, enabling specialization and professionalization, they also face diseconomies of scale that result in various “bureaucratic pathologies” and increased management costs (p. 20). Small states, on the other hand, struggling to realize economies of scale, face the consequences of limited opportunities for specialization and the risk of patronage. Nevertheless, small states can succeed by taking advantage of more informal working procedures and a more personalized working environment that reduce the costs of management and control, and make for faster and nimbler decision making. These theoretical propositions lead the author to expect that “the downsides” of scale “overshadow positive effects at the extremes of country size” (p. 25). Consequently, the book provokes the reader with an argument that the public administration functioning most effectively can most probably be found in medium-sized states that are the closest to the “golden mean or ideal country size for good administration” (p. 2).

The theoretical propositions are tested with empirical analysis that relies on a combination of methods, both quantitative and qualitative. Considering the dearth of systemic empirical studies on the impact of country size, one of the core aims of the author is the provision of examples concerning how the effects of size can be methodically studied. In this respect, the book is indeed trailblazing: first, it demonstrates the scholarly opportunities available when using publicly accessible international data; and, second, the empirical analysis of size effects relies on a clear theoretical framework that establishes the causal relationship. This kind of systemic approach is still an exception rather than a norm among the public administration studies on scale effects.

Based on the empirical analysis, the author concludes that “the theoretical expectation that the maximum public service performance is found at medium population size” (p. 52) is supported. However, not surprisingly, the overall conclusion of the author is a more general “size matters” and needs to be included in studies of comparative public administration (p. 69). Indeed, country size is not deterministic and there is no ideal size for a country. Despite the most favourable conditions for organising public administration probably being found in medium-sized countries, the actual performance of administrative systems is dependent on many other political, economic and social factors, and their interaction with the implications of scale, either small or large.

Altogether, the book makes manifest a genuine puzzle: why is there so meagre a scientific debate on the effects of country size when the discipline of public administration itself is thriving, and size measured in terms of population is one of the most visible country characteristics? The answers to this puzzle can only be speculative. However, a few propositions come to mind. For one, the existing academic debate on the function of country size tends to focus predominantly on the effects of small scale, not size. Most probably, the focus on small states relates to the nature of country size as “a meta factor” shaping the overall political, economic, and social context of states (p. 4). The implications of a limited size are so overwhelming that they unavoidably enter the picture when one attempts to make sense of the functioning of small countries. This is not necessarily the case for larger states.

Furthermore, even within the discipline of small state studies, the research on small public administrations is modest. Probably, this reflects the state of the discipline of public administration in small countries. For example, country size as a factor is quite well-established in the broader field of international relations, which typically approaches issues through the lens of power and the challenges of small powers (i.e. size is not a straightforward materialist reflection of the size of a country’s population). Conversely, the scholarly community of public administration in small states seems to suffer from the same lack of scale that is characteristic of the public sectors of their countries: small numbers of scholars (if present at all) who are multi-tasking, cannot afford to specialize, and are pressured to be selective in their endeavours.

Often, knowledge of the functioning of small administrations is created by outside observers; either because of academic interest, contribution to the policy analysis of international organizations, or engagement in development aid projects. While this might lead to the expectation that volumes of research on size effects are produced in large countries – because the diseconomies of scale are evident and there is much more room for specialization – this is not the case either. The “luxury” of specialization seems to encourage focussing on the specific manifestations of scale problems, like the difficulties of public sector coordination, rather than country size as such.

What is the relevance of this book, then, for those interested specifically in the implications of small country size for public administration? The book is highly relevant and makes an important contribution to the field, not only because of the quality of the analysis, but for establishing the factor of country size as a significant variable for comparative public administration, and advancing the theoretical understanding of the effects of size. The format of the book is perfect for use in educational contexts, especially within comparative public administration courses where the factor of size is underrepresented.

Furthermore, small state scholars have a lot to gain from the recognition of country size as a pertinent factor. In an ideal world, this could lead to the virtuous circle of more international interest, engagement of small states in comparative research projects, and the creation of more data and stronger scholarly capabilities in small countries, generating more advanced knowledge on effects of size, and, again, more international interest. High-quality empirical studies on the effects of country size also allow for the making of more evidence-based policy decisions, not only in designing new policy solutions within small states, but also in drawing or suggesting lessons from other country contexts.

Last but not least, the book makes a valuable contribution to furthering the research agenda on both country size and small states. The theoretical synthesis provided in the book allows for the combination of the study of size with other pertinent topics in contemporary public administration and public policy. For instance, the effects of country size are relevant from the perspective of current governance topics such as “anticipatory governance”, “robust governance”, or “crisis governance”, where the special traits of small states represent both the characteristics helping to cope with complex policy environments (for example, flexibility and quick informal coordination) as well as potentially leading to substantial problems (for example, lack of transparency, legitimacy or access). With the factor of country size much better theorized, such studies present an opportunity to make context-sensitive conclusions and to provide generalizations of wider relevance.

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