

From margins to momentum: Ten years of small states and large questions

Hillary Briffa
King's College London
United Kingdom
hillary.briffa@kcl.ac.uk

and

Anna-Lena Högenauer
University of Luxembourg
Luxembourg
anna-lena.hoegenauer@uni.lu

Abstract: This article introduces a special section in *SST* journal: a symposium marking the ten-year anniversary of Veenendaal and Corbett's (2015) seminal piece, "Why small states offer important answers to large questions", revisiting their provocation and extending its reach across new disciplines. Featuring 25 interdisciplinary contributions, the symposium explores how small states contribute meaningfully to major debates in political science, international relations, public administration, law, health, education, and beyond, challenging theoretical orthodoxies, enriching comparative insights, and offering scalable models of innovation and resilience. The contributions are organised around four themes: *Revisiting the canon: power, agency, and theory-building*; *Rethinking statehood, sovereignty, and the international legal order*; *Resilience, innovative governance, and institutional learning*; and *Representation, rights, and social transformation*. They illustrate how smallness is both constraint and catalyst.

This introduction maps the intellectual trajectory sparked by the original article, synthesises the contributions, and reflects on the continuing importance of small state scholarship. In doing so, it highlights how far the agenda has come, reflects on the formation of an epistemic community around small state scholarship, outlines the enduring relevance of studying small states on their own terms, and emphasises the ongoing pressing need to centre small states in academic and policy debates across the globe.

Keywords: democracy, innovative governance, resilience, smallness, small states, sovereignty, agency,

© 2025: Islands and Small States Institute, University of Malta, Malta.

Introduction: a decade of recentring the peripheral

In 2015, Wouter Veenendaal and Jack Corbett posed a bold provocation to the field of comparative politics: "*Why do small states offer important answers to large questions?*". They were concerned that, although states with a resident population size of less than 1 million make up almost 20% of the world's sovereign states, scholars were regularly justifying their omission and exclusion from research agendas by referring to the small size of the states, the dearth of data, their supposedly limited sovereignty, and their insignificant role in international relations. Omitting so many cases thus reduces the representativeness of the literature, particularly when small states do not fit into the patterns identified through the study of large states. In those instances, the omission of small states leads authors to overlook important theoretical and empirical insights.

Veenendaal and Corbett (2015) illustrated this point through two examples that are at the heart of comparative politics: democratisation and decentralisation. On democratisation, they argued that the Caribbean and Pacific small states have been relatively successful; unlike many, larger developing countries. Thus, the exclusion of small states has led the literature to develop the argument that economic development is a precondition for democratisation, when there are, in fact, several small states that are relatively poor and yet relatively democratic. On decentralisation, Veenendaal and Corbett warn against a myopic vision of small state politics by authors who often fail to engage thoroughly with the literature on small states. For example, they note that many advocates of decentralisation argue that bringing government closer to the people fosters more inclusive and responsive politics. However, by examining small states – where politics already operates at a close interpersonal scale – they highlight the often-overlooked downsides of such proximity. In particular, strong cultures of social conformity and personalism can undermine pluralism, discourage dissent, and reinforce exclusionary norms, particularly for marginalised groups such as women and minorities. Thus, far from offering unqualified support for decentralisation, small state experiences reveal both its potential benefits and its pitfalls; especially regarding representation and accountability.

Veenendaal and Corbett's article (2015) quickly became a touchstone for scholars across multiple disciplines seeking to redress the structural biases of their research agendas. A decade later, the intellectual project they initiated has matured and diversified, giving rise to a vibrant, interdisciplinary academic community that challenges the marginalisation of small states and centres them as crucial sites for theory development.

This special section of *Small States & Territories* is both a celebration and a continuation of that agenda. Drawing together 25 original contributions from across political science, international relations, public administration, gender studies, law, sociology, public health, tourism, economics, international history, sports, finance, defence, and education, the symposium revisits Veenendaal and Corbett's central claim by asking: *To which large questions do small states offer important answers today?* What emerges is a dynamic and interdisciplinary conversation that collectively affirms – and significantly extends – their foundational insight that small states matter.

More specifically, at least four key arguments are surfaced. First, small states are not passive in the face of world politics or upheavals, but active agents that strive to proactively shape their destiny. Second, while small states often suffer from limited resources, strained capacity, and overspecialisation, their strategies to overcome their inherent vulnerabilities and associated risks can further our understanding of how to build resilience. Third, small states can be entrepreneurial in their attempts to overcome the limitations of size, and they may serve as laboratories of innovation for solutions that may be scalable elsewhere. Finally, the distinctive challenges and responses of small states in some contexts cannot be adequately addressed by a large state literature, thereby mandating a bespoke research agenda.

In advancing these arguments, the symposium also expands the conversation beyond the traditional boundaries of comparative politics to engage with key themes in international relations. These include the role of small states in shaping global power dynamics, exercising agency, challenging assumptions about limited sovereignty, and navigating a shifting international order that will impact upon their immediate and long-term security. Collectively, these contributions reflect a shift in the small states literature over the past decade toward recognising small states not as submissive recipients of external forces, but as proactive actors that make strategic choices and anticipate international developments.

Small states: how size intersects with strategy

This shift is evident in several emerging strands of research. For instance, shelter theory has illuminated how small states leverage strategic alliances and international organisations to compensate for structural vulnerabilities: whether for military protection, economic assistance, access to knowledge and innovation, or broader diplomatic influence (Thorhallsson, 2018). Yet, recent scholarship has pushed beyond this by illustrating how small states also use international institutions as platforms for advancing their own agendas. Thus, as contributors to this symposium expose the savvy leveraging of international institutions to advance their ends (Nicholls, 2025; Wilkinson, 2025), they follow in the footsteps of modern scholars who have been exposing how small states exploit opportunities within bodies like the European Union (e.g., Grumbinaite, 2024; Högenauer and Misik, 2024), reframe their security challenges as a source of agency (Kolnberger and Koff, 2024), and occasionally achieve unexpected diplomatic victories (Baldacchino, 2023).

Rather than treating small states as marginal players in world politics, these perspectives foreground their ability to act with foresight, agility, and intention. At the same time, the symposium does not overlook the structural constraints of smallness (e.g., Lewis, 2025). Instead, it highlights how size interacts with strategy, demonstrating that small states are not simply microcosms of larger states but offer distinct insights that can enrich broader theoretical understandings of international relations, as well as many other disciplines, including those that have yet to fully engage with the small state experience.

Beyond foreign policy, the symposium therefore examines how small states approach critical challenges in domestic governance, often within environments marked by heightened exposure to external shocks or systemic vulnerabilities. These contributions illustrate that compact administration, far from being a liability, can enable more responsive institutions, cross-sectoral coordination, and adaptive governance. By focusing on how small states build resilience, anticipate risk, and pioneer innovative policy solutions, the symposium positions them as valuable case studies for understanding effective governance under constraint.

Finally, the symposium revisits classical questions of comparative politics, including democracy, legitimacy, and political representation. It explores how small states often exhibit a hybrid political profile: combining traditional governance structures with liberal democratic institutions. While these societies may show resistance to rapid social change, they also display forms of democratic innovation and experimentation that challenge the assumption that smallness breeds political stagnation.

Four thematic clusters

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue coalesce around four thematic clusters, which shall be outlined in turn. First, “*Revisiting the canon: power, agency, and theory-building*” engages directly with foundational concepts in international relations and comparative politics, challenging assumptions about where power resides and how agency is exercised. Second, “*Rethinking statehood, sovereignty, and the international legal order*” examines how small states contest and reshape the institutional architecture of global politics, offering insights into norm-building, diplomacy, and strategic autonomy. Third, “*Resilience, innovative governance, and institutional learning*” showcases how small states use their constraints as a springboard for creativity, developing adaptive policy frameworks in areas such as climate finance, health, education, and public administration. Finally, “*Representation, rights, and social transformation*” brings the focus back to the domestic level, exploring how scale, social cohesion, and tradition shape democratic legitimacy, gender representation, and

soft power. Together, the contributions illustrate the versatility of small states as empirical cases, as well as their conceptual power to inform broader academic debates across disciplines.

I: Revisiting the canon: power, agency, and theory-building

Several contributors take up Veenendaal and Corbett's (2015) call to challenge the theoretical parsimony of traditional IR and comparative politics by using small states as a lens to rethink core concepts and develop novel frameworks. Anders Wivel (2025) interrogates the very nature of power and agency, arguing that small states' experiences call for a relational understanding of international relations that better accounts for graded, contingent forms of agency. Similarly, Tom Long (2025) traces how the insights of Veenendaal and Corbett have travelled into international history and relational international relations, critiquing the great-power centrism and stark binarism of canonical Cold War narratives and making a case for foregrounding small state perspectives in global historiography.

Doing so can subvert assumptions, such as the expectation that limited scale must surely stymie small states during times of crisis. Rather, Baldur Thorhallsson (2025) challenges this inevitability by examining small states as laboratories for crisis management, showing how their flexibility and close-knit administrative structures offer timely insights into governing under uncertainty. In a related vein, Tiina Randma-Liiv and Külli Sarapuu (2025) frame small states as poster children for robust governance in an age of turbulence, outlining how features like polyvalence, high trust, and informality become strategic assets in times of crisis.

If power and agency are foundational questions in international relations, then foreign policy specialisation offers a concrete lens through which to analyse them. Tomáš Weiss (2025) explores how small states' strategic choices around specialisation reveal much about both domestic political economies and the nature of the international order; particularly when one considers which issues are *not* prioritised by the resource-stretched small states. Specialisation helps small states overcome size-related disadvantages by allowing them to concentrate very finite assets. Weiss argues that, by studying where small states invest their resources, we can learn a lot about domestic politics and key economic actors or NGOs, but also about power-distribution in international organisations. We can also learn how international limitations and domestic constraints interact.

At this intersection of the domestic and the international, it becomes clear that, owing to their constraints, small states must actively seize and create windows of opportunity. Revecca Pediti's (2025) contribution theorises this process as "the opportunity-seeking value-creation framework," offering a novel and generalisable template for understanding how small states can punch above their weight diplomatically.

At the same time, there is always the risk of overstating the ability for small states to succeed. Patsy Lewis (2025) therefore injects some realism regarding structural constraints into the discussion by presenting a more fundamental critique of the functioning of the global political economy and of the neo-liberal model of development. She emphasises the importance of history, economic structures, and the strategic interests of powerful states for the economic development of both small states and non-independent territories in the Caribbean. She argues that the influence of external actors in the economies of these states and territories plays an important part in explaining why they have been unable to move beyond their role as supplier of primary exports, except for the development of externally-driven tourism and offshore finance, which have become new forms of monoculture. She recognises that the legacy of colonialism still casts a long shadow over many small states and non-sovereign territories, which must operate in an economic system that is ill-suited to their needs, and where structural change is still needed for them to truly exercise agency.

Additionally, where Veenendaal and Corbett had critiqued the omission of small states from the comparative politics literature, Pascal Lottaz (2025) presents the opposite problem in the nascent field of neutrality studies. Here, the disproportionate focus on small states as norm entrepreneurs of neutrality has, in turn, overlooked the role of great powers in the cascading of these norms. Scholarly rigour thus requires us to adopt a more balanced account of the significant contributions of all actors so that, in our zeal to subvert the assumption of smallness as weakness, we do not swing to the other extreme.

II: Rethinking statehood, sovereignty, and the international legal order

In addition to keeping the small state enthusiasts honest, Lottaz's (2025) chapter also brings us to the second key emergent theme from the contributions. Several essays explore how small states innovate within – and sometimes challenge – the legal and normative architecture of the international system. In Lottaz's case, he examines how small neutral states have contributed to norm-building in international law, not through coercion but through persistent diplomacy and consensus-seeking.

Harnessing international law is a strategic means of seeking to bind the behaviour of larger actors in the international system to an established, negotiated, and agreed upon set of principles (Briffa, 2020). As Michael Barnett (2010, p. 146) had astutely recognised, "World Orders are created and sustained not only by great power preferences but also by changing understandings of what constitutes a legitimate international order." In this spirit, Caroline Morris (2025) demonstrates how small states like Vanuatu and Tuvalu have leveraged the formal equality of international law to drive climate litigation at the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, seeking justice and accountability for the climate emergency, reconfiguring the relationship between law and power in the process.

Marius Buga (2025) explores the ambiguity of sovereignty itself, especially for small states navigating a volatile global order. In his article, he argues that small states enrich our understanding of national sovereignty by helping us fathom when and why states cede or defend it. While small states cannot fully defend their sovereignty alone, this does not mean that they simply give up on this goal. Rather, the study of cases like the Baltics highlights the complex interplay of sovereignty, resources and identity, whereby sovereignty is strategically used as a resource in some contexts, but not in others; small states may partially surrender sovereignty for economic purposes, such as to secure a larger market; but, at the same time, some small states invest considerably in security in a context where they feel that their cultural identity – and not just their physical territory – is under threat. Using examples from the Baltic region, Buga thus shows how small states reframe sovereignty as both an inviolable right and a tradable asset, depending on strategic context.

In the same spirit, Rory Miller (2025) demonstrates how energy-rich small states like Qatar and Norway wield hydrocarbons as tools of strategic agency, challenging assumptions that energy geopolitics is the sole purview of great powers. Selling this narrative reflects the argument that opportunities arise from structural, material, ideational, or technological shifts, but gains are not automatic: they need to be harnessed through entrepreneurial action, as illustrated by Greece's strategy after the economic crisis (Pedi, 2025).

Like Buga, Erik Männik (2025) also investigates the continued relevance of security for small states, focusing on the renewed need for the Baltic states to strengthen their military security. At the same time, trying to keep up with larger powers is a challenge, as are drafting an appropriate doctrine, acquiring the right equipment, maintaining interoperability, and establishing adequate defence forces; the latter, possibly with the help of conscription. Thus,

Männik recognises that we still have much left to learn about defence policy from small states like those in the Baltic Sea region, particularly in the context of shifting US foreign policy, in combination with the irredentist Russian threat.

Such shifts have significant implications for the international order. Consequently, geopolitical analyses of small state behaviour also figure prominently in this symposium. Tyler Parker (2025) surveys the strategic manoeuvring of Gulf Cooperation Council states amid shifting polarity, highlighting how small monarchies navigate multipolarity, manage regime durability, and adapt to leadership transitions.

Similarly, Sebastian Wolf (2025) explores how small states operate within and contribute to regional orders. Wolf's analysis of norm-building in the Council of Europe and human rights regimes demonstrates how small states can shape international discourse through consistent moral advocacy, echoing Morris (2025). All these authors' arguments thus find purchase in Wivel's initial theme of regionalism and relationalism, given that the stories of these states' pursuits become meaningful once we shift from great power-centric explanations to multi-scalar, multi-actor accounts of international agency.

III: Resilience, innovative governance, and institutional learning

A multi-layered approach to studying state behaviour also better reflects the realities of the "small scale syndrome": how "at decreasing levels of size, certain parameters are likely to become more important, more prevalent, more difficult to ignore or resist" (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 17). Studying and learning to recognise the idiosyncrasies of the nature of the small state, which impact on the strategies which can subsequently be nurtured, gives rise to the third emergent theme from the symposium collection: namely, how small states build resilience to withstand and overcome shocks, particularly through innovative governance and institutional learning.

Marlene Jugl (2025) sets the scene for this section by identifying a significant oversight in the literature on comparative administration: the literature identifies key forms of coordination – negative and positive coordination, hierarchical mechanisms and network-type tools – as well as key problems – overlaps and underlaps, bureaucratic politics, blind spots – but, in practice, has derived these general conclusions exclusively from the study of large and medium-sized states. Conversely, Jugl (2025) points out that many small states do not experience those coordination problems (as least not to the extent that large states do) and they also rely on different coordination strategies. Thus, ministers often have broad portfolios, including multiple topics (Corbett, Veenendaal and Connell, 2021) and civil servants and politicians tend to rely on informal communication, personal relations, and short communication channels. By drawing our attention to the overlooked field of central government coordination, Jugl (2025) reveals how small states challenge universalist assumptions about bureaucratic dysfunction and shows how informal coordination can substitute for formal complexity, thereby offering important lessons for larger polities.

The absence of coordination problems can, of course, facilitate more robust policymaking, and thus the contribution of Tina Randma-Liiv and Külli Sarapuu (2025) shows how much we can learn from small states in that regard. They argue that turbulence is a long-experienced 'normal' for small states, which are traditionally more vulnerable due to their small size, their overstretched and generalised bureaucracies, and their (often) economic overspecialisation. But the authors also highlight how many small states have already developed the features necessary to respond to turbulence with robust governance, marked by pragmatism, trust, multi-actor collaboration, adaptive leadership capable of repurposing existing tools, and vigilance.

The contributions that follow illustrate how small states – despite their small administrations – manage to achieve resilience and innovation across a range of policy areas, often by experimenting with new solutions. In fact, it is precisely their heightened vulnerability to external shocks and existential threats that compels small states to think more proactively about resilience and to pursue innovative policy approaches out of necessity rather than choice. Thus, Emily Wilkinson (2025) examines how Small Island Developing States (SIDS) overcome limited human resources to craft state-of-the-art strategies to reduce the impacts of climate extremes and other external shocks on their economies. Because the effects of climate change are particularly disastrous for small island states, these countries have developed innovative financial instruments that have the potential to reform the international financial system. Successful examples of this are the issuing of green bonds or initiatives that allow individuals or organisations to sponsor marine protection and ocean management, national contingency funds, or catastrophe risk insurance.

Alicia Nicholls (2025) is also concerned with the way small states can become engines of institutional innovation. She investigates how small states balance compliance with global anti-money laundering, countering the financing of terrorism, and counter proliferation financing (AML/CFT/CPF) regimes, with protecting the competitiveness of their international financial services sectors. She highlights a distinctive challenge: these small states have no individual representation in some of the key forums where these rules are made. Yet, through the cases of Mauritius and Belize, she also shows how some small states' international financial centres (IFCs) are leading the way in creating robust AML/CFT/CPF frameworks despite resource constraints, disproportionate international scrutiny, and asymmetrical participation in global financial governance rulemaking. They even manage to maintain the competitiveness of their financial sectors. This resilience is the result of politically endorsed strategic reactions, the development of in-house compliance tools, and the use of compliance as a way of international marketing. As a result, the development of financial centres in small states like Mauritius and Belize into unlikely leaders in AML/CFT/CPF compliance counters the stereotype of small states as regulatory laggards.

Far from lagging behind, necessity is often the mother of invention. For instance, Troy Lorde (2025) argues that tourism-dependent small states face a greater risk of limited resources, fragile ecosystems, and undiversified economies than large states. However, to overcome their predicament, they have developed scalable solutions for global tourism challenges through a focus on sustainability and niche market segments rather than mass tourism. Examples include the innovations in high-value tourism, investments in environmental conservation and disaster resilience, and an emphasis on their cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, Sarah Cuschieri (2025) foregrounds the insights into public health that small states provide. With their often physically compact populations, small states can produce studies that are more representative of the national population. In particular, they have produced detailed epidemiological research on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that provide insights into the health effects of ageing populations and lifestyle changes, such as changes in food practices. In addition, they have demonstrated a great capacity for rapid and effective action during the Covid-19 crisis.

The latter builds on an established body of research which argues that small scale can prove to be an asset in times of public health crisis because it is easier for governments to identify and address shortcomings across a small jurisdiction; while population health surveillance and control measures are easier to implement (Briguglio and Azzopardi-Muscat, 2016). Policymakers can also draw on the higher social capital that results from more localised and personalised politics to secure greater compliance and consent with emergency measures

(Baldacchino, 2005). Of course, this does not happen automatically, but also depends on scientifically sound decision-making and leadership domestically (Briffa and Agius, 2021), and on the pursuit of external support (shelter) from international partners (Briffa, 2023).

These dynamics were mirrored in the field of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the case of the Maldives, Aminath Muna and Aminath Shiyama (2025) provide a powerful account of how small states can adapt rapidly and creatively to educational disruptions. Despite facing challenges such as digital divides and limited internet connectivity, the Maldives implemented a multi-pronged strategy that combined pre-existing digital investments, televised instruction, and strong community mobilisation. Teachers, parents, and local organisations worked collaboratively to ensure educational continuity: an outcome made possible by the country's small scale, strong interpersonal networks, and proactive policy design. Their case study reinforces the idea that resilience is not simply a function of scale; but of social cohesion, strategic foresight, and local ownership.

This interplay of scale, responsiveness, and social capital is not unique to public health or education in the Maldives. Similar dynamics shape broader approaches to educational resilience across small states. As Aminath Shiyama, Aminath Muna, Terra Sprague and Michael Crossley (2025) argue, the study of small states matters, as it highlights the role of context and the importance of integrating distinctive, historical, cultural and environmental priorities into educational policy and practice. In particular, building educational resilience requires adapting frameworks to local contexts: drawing on unique perspectives on climate change, as well as on traditional and indigenous environmental knowledge and community-based practices. Recognising conditions of climate stress and postcolonial constraint, their work amplifies local voices and knowledge systems, reminding us that big answers often begin in small classrooms.

The pursuit of resilience in small states is not confined to institutions or policies; it also plays out in the structure of everyday systems that sustain life. Among the most critical of these is food. Elmar Kulke's (2025) analysis of fresh fruit and vegetable supply chains in small island economies reveals just how contingent resilience is on such factors as connectivity, market volume, and geographic isolation. His comparative study of Pacific and Caribbean island states shows that food systems are not simply shaped by availability, but by the structure of international supply chains and the organisation of local retail networks.

In this regard, as with education and public health, building resilience in food systems reveals the tensions between local needs and global structures. In less-connected or lower-income contexts, internationalised supermarkets often source directly from local farmers, while in more affluent and globally integrated islands, the same supermarkets may paradoxically import produce from abroad; even when it is grown nearby. As Kulke (2025) notes, this has led to situations where bananas from overseas are sold in stores just steps away from local banana plantations. By showing how small island states navigate questions of equitable access, sustainable sourcing, and the unintended consequences of globalised retail supply chains, Kulke's findings illustrate how small states can offer innovative insights into the broader global challenge of designing resilient, equitable, and sustainable food systems in the face of market fragmentation and climate vulnerability.

IV: Representation, rights, and social transformation

While structural systems like health, education, and food supply underscore the material dimensions of resilience, small state experiences also compel us to examine how resilience is socially distributed: through representation, rights, and access to power. Just as infrastructure can be vulnerable to external shocks, so too can democratic institutions and civic participation

be shaped by the unique sociopolitical dynamics of small scale. It is here that questions of voice, visibility, and vulnerability come to the fore.

The theme of small state democracy featured prominently in the original piece by Veenendaal and Corbett (2015), with both positive and critical undertones. On the one hand, they pointed out that – contrary to modernisation theory – many small states managed to pursue democratisation despite relative poverty. On the other hand, they criticised what one could call the romanticisation of small state democracy by scholars of comparative politics, who overestimate the advantage of bringing politics closer to the citizen, when they advocate decentralisation in larger states. They reminded us that “small can also be easy to dominate” (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015, p. 541).

The contributions to the symposium highlight both the strengths and risks associated with smallness, as well as distinctive elements in their experience and similarities with larger states. Parker (2025) illustrates the “easy to dominate” argument of Veenendaal and Corbett (2015) through the example of Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar, where democratisation has stalled due to the dominance of traditional models of governance which – in the case of Qatar – have received more support than attempts to introduce an elected council. On the other hand, Wolf (2025) argues that four of Europe’s microstates – Liechtenstein, Monaco, Andorra and San Marino – have so far largely avoided becoming the personal fiefdoms of charismatic leaders or demagogues through a complex system of checks and balances enshrined in mixed-constitutions often combining traditional monarchical elements with consensus-oriented decision-making, strong courts, and forms of direct democracy. And yet, while these very small states have benefitted from the societal stability and regulatory pragmatism that have brought economic prosperity, they have also – like larger states – experienced a rise in populism in recent years.

Wolf’s contribution raises an important point, which is that the European microstates derive part of their stability and high degree of legitimacy (as perceived by their populations) from a combination of traditional elements with democracy. This argument also comes up in other contributions. Kerry Baker (2025), for example, points towards the co-existence of customary and religious political norms and the broad acceptance of these blends. Taken together, these insights suggest that small states not only adapt democratic principles to fit local traditions and cultural expectations, but that their democratic legitimacy often depends on such adaptations. Rather than being either fragile democracies or idealised civic republics, small states offer a more nuanced picture of democratic resilience: one shaped by scale, social cohesion, and the complex interplay between modern governance structures and embedded traditional authority. As such, they compel us to rethink assumptions about what constitutes democratic consolidation and how legitimacy is sustained across diverse political contexts.

In addition, Baker (2025) reminds us that small states not only have a strong track record of democratic continuity but have also engaged in democratic innovation. Firstly, she points out that some small states have rare voting systems, such as the single non-transferable vote (Vanuatu) or the Borda Count (Nauru) that can serve as models for electoral reform proposals. Overall, Baker’s argument about innovation matches what we know from other small states. For example, Paulis et al. (2024) discuss the role of the Klima-Biergerrot, the citizen assembly on climate, in involving Luxembourg’s citizens in national policymaking. This type of involvement, which is more substantial than a petition or a referendum (both of which also exist in Luxembourg), is more feasible in geographically compact and relatively homogeneous small states.

Finally, Baker (2025) highlights how small states in the Pacific Islands have experimented to improve the traditionally low representation of women. These range from provisions allowing for the appointment of the highest-polling unelected female candidates when women's parliamentary representation falls below a certain threshold (as in Samoa), to requirements for full parity (Bougainville). Similarly, European small states like Malta and Luxembourg have also experimented with electoral quotas, although it should be noted that this has only produced limited effects so far (Högenauer, 2025).

The contribution by Ramola Ramtohl (2025) therefore adds to our understanding of the barriers women face in entering politics in small states. Firstly, the prevalence of personality-driven politics often gives rise to negative campaigning, which disproportionately harms women; particularly when such attacks take the form of sexualised ridicule that undermines their reputations in conservative societies. In these contexts, women's private morality is frequently subjected to public scrutiny. Secondly, homogeneous and conservative small state societies tend to put up greater resistance to change. These findings once again mirror observations from European small states, where adversarial political cultures tend to keep women out of politics in countries like Malta; whilst traditional family norms continue to exert a disproportionate influence on women's political participation in both Malta and Luxembourg. (Högenauer, 2025).

Ramtohl (2025) reflects on the gendered consequences of small scale, showing how limited anonymity, entrenched conservatism, and personalised politics combine to hinder women's political representation in small island societies. Her analysis draws attention to how voice and visibility can be constrained in tightly knit political environments. Yet, small states also provide surprising arenas for asserting visibility and influence on the global stage. Neal Jesse, Steven Lobell, and Kristen Williams (2025) explore one such arena in their analysis of sports diplomacy as a strategic foreign policy tool. They argue that in a shifting international order – characterised by great power competition and new alignments – small states carve out space to exercise agency through soft power, particularly by investing in sport. Whether through hosting mega-events like the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup, participating in high-profile anti-doping and regulatory initiatives, or strategically aligning with prominent teams and media platforms, small states use sport to shape global perceptions, bolster national identity, and signal competence on the world stage. Their examples range from Norway's leadership in anti-doping governance to Qatar's use of the 2022 World Cup as both diplomatic platform and instrument of regional influence.

Small states also play a role in conflict diplomacy through sport, as seen in symbolic gestures like joint Olympic marches or inclusive national teams. These practices illustrate how sports diplomacy enables small states to transcend material constraints, using visibility, symbolism, and participation to build soft power and gain legitimacy. In doing so, their work chimes with that of scholars such as de Carvalho and Neumann (2015, p. 2), who had argued that, "Great power status is about being a state to be reckoned with; small-power status is about being noticed or seen." In this spirit, Jesse, Lobell, and Williams (2025) continue to challenge traditional assumptions that military or economic strength is a prerequisite for international relevance. They argue instead that narrative control, identity projection, and norm entrepreneurship are equally powerful tools in the hands of small states.

Conclusion: from margins to momentum

These insights offer a fitting bridge to the final contribution of the symposium, where the authors of the original article reflect on how far this agenda has come; and where it might go next: we certainly gave them a lot of homework to read!. As a reflective response, Veenendaal

and Corbett (2025) offers a powerful coda to this collective endeavour. In revisiting the intellectual origins of their 2015 article and its unexpected journey, they speak candidly to both the professional and personal challenges of advocating for the relevance of small states within disciplines still structured around the priorities of large ones. While their work may not have substantially shifted the mainstream of comparative politics, it has become a cornerstone for an epistemic community that continues to grow in breadth, confidence, and creativity.

What emerges from their response is not only humility, but a deep sense of solidarity with scholars – many based in or working on small states – who have found, in their article, a powerful methodological and intellectual justification for pursuing the questions that matter most to us. They rightly point to the shared sense of marginalisation that unites our community, but also to the innovation, collegiality, and interdisciplinary richness that such marginalisation has helped foster. In their words, the study of small states has become a form of “non-traditional area studies” (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2025, p. 125) not defined by region, colonial heritage, or disciplinary orthodoxy, but by an analytical commitment to understanding place, scale, and agency on their own terms.

This, perhaps, is the greatest tribute to the legacy of their work: not the formulation of a grand theory, but the formation of a scholarly community that continues to challenge where and how we look for answers to the large questions of our time. As Veenendaal and Corbett (2025) themselves acknowledge, the answers remain contingent; but the conversation they began is very much alive. And, as this symposium demonstrates, it is flourishing.

The contributions to this symposium illustrate the many ways by which studies of small states can enrich the existing comparative politics literature as well as add value and nuance to every discipline where they are studied. They shed light on how small state societies can be resistant to change, how this can affect the ability of women to enter politics, but also why some may favour the inclusion of traditional political features such as monarchies or religious traditions alongside elements of liberal democracy. At the same time, despite their conservatism, they are more prone to experiment with new or different electoral systems, forms of representation, and policy solutions than larger states. Part of the reason for this innovation may lie in the greater vulnerability of their specialised economies and small populations to economic shocks, external threats, environmental catastrophes, and now international regulation over which they have limited control. These vulnerabilities require them to be responsive to and, ideally, to anticipate challenges. In the process, the practices of small states continually interrogate the prevailing assumption that power and scale are coextensive and coterminous with influence.

Taken together, these contributions affirm and extend the argument that small states offer important answers to large questions. But they also push us to ask why these insights have so often been missed. As Wivel (2025) notes, the failure lies not just in the marginalisation of small states, but in the generalisation of findings from great powers as if they applied universally. If Veenendaal and Corbett’s 2015 article was a critique of disciplinary blind spots, this symposium showcases the constructive potential of reversing the gaze.

Rather than treating small states as exceptions, these essays reveal them to be exemplars, strategic innovators, norm entrepreneurs, and conceptual trailblazers. They invite us to build theories from the margins, and to take smallness seriously: not as a deficiency, but as a vantage point. In doing so, the interdisciplinary contributors to this special section pick up the mantle of Veenendaal and Corbett (2015) with creativity and rigour.

Ten years on, the question is no longer whether small states matter. Rather, it is what we continue to miss when we refuse to see them.

Disclaimer

The authors declare that this article did not benefit from research funding
The authors also declare no conflict of interest in writing this article.

References

- Baker, K. (2025). Small states and large questions: Elections and political participation. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 82-85.
- Baldacchino, G. (2005). The contribution of ‘social capital’ to economic growth: Lessons from island jurisdictions. *The Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 94(378), 31–46.
- Baldacchino, G. (2012). Meeting the tests of time: small states in the 21st Century. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 15(1), 14-25.
- Baldacchino, G. (Ed.) (2025). *The success of small states in international relations: Mice that roar?* Routledge.
- Barnett, M. (2010). Social constructivism. In J. Baylis, S. Smith, & P. Owens (Eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics* (p. 146). Oxford University Press.
- Briffa, H. (2020). Small states and the challenges of the international order. In S. Center & E. Bates (Eds.), *After disruption: Historical perspectives on the future of the international order* (pp. 50–59). Center for Strategic & International Studies. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200901_Bates_History_FullReport_v1.pdf
- Briffa, H. (2023). Small states and COVID-19: Challenges and opportunities for multilateralism. *Global Perspectives*, 4(1).
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2023.57708>
- Briffa, H., & Agius, G. (2021). Tourism and COVID-19 in 2020: The case of Malta as a small state. *Small States & Territories*, 4(1), 75–104.
- Buga, M. (2025). Conceding or defending sovereignty? Lessons from small states. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 99-102.
- Briguglio, L., & Azzopardi-Muscat, N. (2016). *The vulnerability and resilience framework applied to the public health system*.
<https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/41920>
- Corbett, J., Veenendaal, W., & Connell, J. (2021). The core executive and small states: is coordination the primary challenge? *Public Administration*, 99(1), 103-117.
- Cuschieri, S. (2025). Small countries, big insights: The role of small states in shaping global public health. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 37-40.

- de Carvalho, B., & Neumann, I. B. (2015). *Small state status seeking: Norway's quest for international standing*. Routledge.
- Grumbinaite, I. (2024). *The rotating European Union Council Presidency and small member states: Small states, big challenges*. Routledge.
- Högenauer, A.-L. (2025). Can the European Parliament be a stepping stone into national politics? The gendered career paths of Maltese and Luxembourgish members of the European Parliament. *European Union Politics*, 26(1), 96-114.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14651165241299113>
- Högenauer, A.-L., & Mišik, M. (Eds.) (2024). *Small states in EU policy-making: Strategies, challenges, opportunities*. Routledge.
- Jesse, N. G., Lobell, S. E. & Williams, K. P. (2025). Small states: Sports diplomacy as foreign policy strategy. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 112-115
- Jugl, M. (2025). Small states and a more nuanced understanding of central government coordination. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 30-32.
- Kolnberger, T., & Koff, H. (Eds.) (2025). *Agency, security and governance of small states: A global perspective*. Routledge.
- Kulke, E. (2025). Food systems in small island economies. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 60-64.
- Lewis, P. (2025). Development of small states and the limits of the global political economy. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 45-47.
- Lottaz, P. (2025). Neutrals and norm building: A question of size. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 69-71.
- Long, T. (2025). Historical dynamics of international relationships: Veenendaal and Corbett beyond comparative politics. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 22-25.
- Lorde, T. (2025). Tourism-dependent small states: Innovation, adaptation and the search for balance. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 65-68.
- Männik, E. (2025). A case for studying small states defence ... again. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 108-111.
- Miller, R. (2025). Small states and the use of energy as a strategic instrument. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 48-51.
- Morris, C. (2025). Small states' answers to big questions in law. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 33-36.
- Muna, A., and Shiyama, A. (2025). Small islands, significant solutions: Educational resilience in the Maldives during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 95-98.

- Nicholls, A. (2025). Balancing anti-money laundering, terrorist financing and proliferation financing (AML/CFT/CFP) compliance and financial sector competitiveness: What lessons can small states teach us? *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 103-107.
- Parker, T. B. (2025). Bridging the Gulf: Big answers through small Middle Eastern states. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 41-44.
- Paulis, E., Verhasselt, L., & Kies, R. (2024). From deliberation to headlines: Media coverage and framing of the 2022 Luxembourg Climate Citizens' Assembly (Klima-Biergerrot). *Politics of the Low Countries*, 6(1), 1-23.
- Pedi, R. (2025). Opportunity seekers and value creators: A new framework for understanding small-state diplomacy. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 72-77.
- Ramtohl, R. (2025). Gender, and women's political activism: Insights from small states. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 56-59.
- Randma-Liiv, T., & Sarapuu, K. (2025). Small states as poster children of robust governance? *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 116-120.
- Shiyama, A., Muna, A., Sprague, T., & Crossley, M. (2025) Large questions faced by education at the sharp end in SIDS. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 78-81.
- Thorhallsson, B. (2025). Crisis management in small states: Lessons for the global community. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 52-55.
- Thorhallsson, B. (Ed.) (2018). *Small states and shelter theory: Iceland's external affairs*. Routledge.
- Veenendaal, W. P., & Corbett, J. (2015). Why small states offer important answers to large questions. *Comparative Political Studies*, 48(4), 527-549.
- Veenendaal, W. P., and Corbett, J. (2025). Ten years of 'Why small states offer important answers to large questions'. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 121-126.
- Weiss, T. (2025). Small states and specialisation: Domestic politics, foreign policy, and their interface. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 86-89.
- Wilkinson, E. (2025). Small state innovations to strengthen financial resilience in an era of accelerating climate change. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 90-94.
- Wivel, A. (2025). Why small states offer answers to important questions in international relations: Rethinking power and agency. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 26-29.
- Wolf, S. (2025). European microstates and political legitimacy beyond liberal-democratic constitutionalism. *Small States & Territories*, 8(1), 19-21.