

**Guest editorial introduction:
Referendums in small states and territories: A comparative analysis**

Peter Clegg
University of the West of England
Bristol, United Kingdom
Peter.Clegg@uwe.ac.uk

and

Wendy Grenade
St George's University
St George's, Grenada
wgrenade@sgu.edu

Abstract: This guest editorial introduces a special section exploring the politics of referendums in small states and territories through a comparative lens. While referendums are commonly viewed as decisive instruments of popular sovereignty, the cases assembled here demonstrate that, in small polities, they rarely deliver clear or final resolutions. Drawing principally on examples from Europe, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, the section explores how structural conditions such as economic vulnerability, demographic scale, colonial legacies, and unequal relations with metropolitan powers shape referendum campaigns and outcomes. Contributors demonstrate that referendums often function less as mechanisms of settlement than as iterative moments within longer constitutional trajectories defined by uncertainty, negotiation, and managed ambiguity. Particular attention is paid to referendum design, franchise boundaries, legitimacy, and the emotional and narrative dimensions of campaigning. Taken together, the articles argue that referendums in small states and territories are best understood as contingent, politically embedded processes whose democratic value depends on context, sequencing, and integration within broader constitutional debates.

Keywords: comparative analysis, constitutional politics, referendums, self-determination, small states, territories,

© 2026: Islands and Small States Institute, University of Malta, Malta

Introduction

Referendums are regarded as a direct and authoritative mechanism of democratic decision making. They allow citizens to pronounce on issues of particular political or constitutional significance, including electoral reform, policy direction, and questions of sovereignty, autonomy and independence (Qvortrup, 2017; Tierney, 2012). In small states and territories, referendums often assume an especially prominent role within political life. Their visibility is heightened by small electorates, hyper-personalised political cultures and campaigns, and by these polities' political, economic and constitutional dependencies on external actors (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018; Warrington & Milne, 2018). At the same time, the accrued experience of many small polities suggests that referendums rarely deliver straightforward or definitive outcomes. As the contributions to this special section demonstrate, referendums in small states and territories often fuse high levels of civic engagement with persistent political ambiguity.

The special section in *Small States & Territories*, 9(2) builds on a growing literature concerned with the political subtleties of small states and territories, particularly those shaped by colonial legacies and asymmetrical relations with metropolitan powers. It also extends recent comparative work on referendums in these contexts (Clegg, Baldacchino, & Morris, 2025), while extending the empirical range of analysis across Europe, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Together, the contributions examine not only why referendums are adopted, but how they operate in practice, and why they so often fail to resolve the questions they are intended to address. In doing so, the special section situates referendums within broader debates in small state studies, island studies, and constitutional politics, emphasising outcomes, but also process, context, and unintended consequences.

Specific conditions and historical dynamics

Specific structural conditions shape referendum politics in small states and territories. Economic narrowness and non-differentiation, reliance on external markets and/or on fiscal transfers, and exposure to international political pressures frequently heighten perceptions of risk associated with political change (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012; Grydehøj, 2020). In referendums concerning sovereignty or constitutional status, these conditions tend to favour continuity, as voters weigh prospective gains against concrete concerns about economic stability, welfare provision, security and international access (Clegg, 2025; Connell, 2021). Clegg, Baldacchino, & Morris (2025) detail numerous cases in which referendums mobilised extensive public debate yet failed to produce change because electorates doubted whether promised reforms extend beyond political hype and would materially improve everyday life; or else, they feared that any benefits would be offset by new burdens and vulnerabilities.

Historical trajectories further complicate these dynamics. Many small territories occupy intermediate constitutional positions that render them neither fully sovereign nor entirely subordinate. These arrangements frequently reflect pragmatic compromises between self-rule and shared rule, fostered over long periods, balancing autonomy with continued access to metropolitan support (Prinsen & Blaise, 2017; Rezvani, 2014). As demonstrated by the cases examined in this special section – particularly Greenland, New Caledonia, Gibraltar, and Puerto Rico – constitutional change regularly proceeds incrementally via a sequence of referendums, each expanding political capacity while leaving ultimate status unresolved (Ballantine Perera, 2026; David, 2026; Gad & Nielsen, 2026; Pantojas-García, 2026). So, referendums act less as decisive settlements than as institutionalised moments within longer processes of negotiation, adaptation, and managed ambiguity.

Referendums in small territories therefore often serve symbolic and strategic purposes alongside their legal effects. Inverse or confirmatory referendums, such as those held in the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar, were never genuinely contestable; their results were anticipated, yet politically useful in asserting voice internationally and reinforcing collective identity (Ballantine Perera, 2026; Dodds & Pinkerton, 2013). Similarly, Puerto Rico's repeated status plebiscites have served expressive and mobilising functions despite their limited capacity to force congressional action (Pantojas-García, 2026). Conversely, where outcomes are genuinely uncertain – as in Scotland's 2014 independence referendum, the UK's 2016 EU referendum, or New Caledonia's series of self-determination referendums – campaigns become more polarised and their aftermath more unstable and uncertain (David, 2026; Oliver & Winters, 2026).

Several contributions stress the importance of referendum design. Question formulation, voter eligibility, turnout thresholds, institutional sequencing and timing are key to democratic legitimacy, particularly in small polities where demographic balances are finely calibrated, and electoral margins narrow (Qvortrup, 2025; Tierney, 2012). Disputes over the composition of the electorate are therefore especially consequential. The restricted franchise used in New Caledonia, Greenland's partial inclusion in Danish and EU referendums, and the exclusion of 'non-belongers' – proportionately large, resident but non-citizen populations – in Caribbean territories such as the Cayman Islands show how referendums simultaneously define and delimit the demos (Bromby, 2026; David, 2026; Gad & Nielsen, 2026).

These boundary-drawing exercises are never neutral. In post-colonial settings, claims grounded in Indigeneity, long term residence, and formal citizenship frequently intersect with international norms of self-determination (Burgos Rivera, 2023; Trinidad, 2019). While limiting franchises may be justified as protecting the rights of a colonised people, they may also undermine perceptions of inclusiveness and fairness. The boycott of New Caledonia's third referendum in 2021 provides a clear illustration of how procedural legality can diverge from political legitimacy when rules regarding participation are contested or wider social contexts are insufficiently accommodated (David, 2026).

Across the special issue, contributors identify the persistent difficulty of securing affirmative outcomes in referendums proposing significant constitutional change. Drawing on Scotland and Brexit, Oliver and Winters (2026) explain how emotional narratives, perceptions of risk and leadership credibility, and elite coordination shape referendum outcomes more profoundly than constitutional design alone. Pro change campaigns in small or semi sovereign polities often struggle to articulate futures that overcome uncertainty and dependency, a pattern that recurs in Greenland's delayed independence referendum (Szakály, 2026) and Puerto Rico's inconclusive plebiscites (Pantojas-García, 2026).

Underlying these cases is a broader tension. Although referendums are widely valued as instruments of popular sovereignty, their binary format limits their capacity to capture multidimensional constitutional futures. In deeply divided societies, Yes/No referendums tend to map onto existing identity cleavages rather than facilitating compromise or nation building. The New Caledonian experience illustrates how repeated binary consultations may entrench polarisation while displacing debate on social cohesion, redistribution, and institutional reform (David, 2026).

A further cross-cutting theme concerns the conditional nature of referendum outcomes. Even where referendums are legally binding, their implementation is frequently shaped – or constrained – by metropolitan governments, courts or international actors. Greenland exemplifies this dynamic. Although the right to determine independence through referendum is entrenched in the 2009 Self-Government Act, its practical exercise remains conditioned by Danish fiscal transfers, defence responsibilities, and intensified geopolitical interest in the Arctic (Gad & Nielsen, 2026; Szakály, 2026). The experience of Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands is even more explicit, with repeated plebiscites failing to generate institutional change because ultimate authority rests with the US Congress (Pantojas-García, 2026; Tucker, 2026).

This external structuring of power also helps to explain why referendums in small polities are often framed defensively rather than programmatically. Instead of articulating detailed alternative constitutional futures, referendum campaigns often emphasise preserving existing arrangements or resisting externally driven proposals. The Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, and Cayman Islands cases show how referendums may operate as instruments of reassurance, veto, or resistance rather than as vehicles for transformation (Ballantine Perera, 2026; Bromby, 2026; Gold, 2026). Where forward-looking plans are absent or lack credibility, uncertainty is amplified and sustained mobilisation for change becomes difficult.

At the same time, inconclusive or negative outcomes should not automatically be interpreted as democratic failure. In several cases examined here, repeated referendums reflect the genuine complexity of societies grappling with historical injustice, asymmetrical power relations, and competing visions of belonging. The New Caledonian and Greenland cases, in particular, highlight the importance of time, sequencing, and sustained dialogue, and shows how constitutional futures cannot be resolved through plebiscites alone.

Taken together, the contributions suggest that referendums in small states and territories are best understood as elements within longer, negotiated constitutional trajectories rather than as decisive or final events. They interact with representative institutions, international norms, judicial frameworks, and evolving identities. When embedded within deliberative and inclusive processes, referendums can enhance legitimacy, mobilise civic engagement and consolidate incremental change. When poorly designed, rushed or instrumentalised, they risk deepening mistrust and leaving core constitutional questions unresolved.

The special section reflects these themes through a wide range of cases and approaches. It opens with Oliver and Winters' analysis of Scotland and Brexit, which provides a conceptual lens for understanding the emotional and narrative dynamics of referendum politics. Greenland receives sustained attention through complementary contributions by Gad and Nielsen, and by Szakály, examining how referendums have shaped – and constrained – Greenland's expanding action space. New Caledonia's experience is analysed by David as a cautionary case illustrating the limits of repeated binary referendums in deeply divided societies. Comparative insights are further developed by Şen's examination of decolonisation referendums in US and French overseas territories. Caribbean cases explore plebiscites on political status, constitution making and public policy reform, with articles by Pantojas-García, Tucker, and Bromby highlighting shared challenges of voter turnout, legitimacy, and franchise. European cases return the discussion to long traditions of direct democracy and the constraints faced by territories embedded within larger political systems, through analyses of Jersey and Gibraltar. The issue concludes with Malhotra's comparative reflection on the Falkland Islands, Malta and Chagos, situating referendums within evolving international norms of sovereignty and decolonisation.

Conclusion: No quick fixes

Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that referendums in small states and territories are neither inherently emancipatory nor intrinsically destabilising. Their effects are contingent, shaped by structural conditions, historical relationships, institutional design and political context. If referendums are to contribute meaningfully to democratic governance in small polities, they should be understood not as quick fixes, but as part of broader and ongoing constitutional conversations.

Acknowledgements

A big thank you goes to Godfrey Baldacchino, Caroline Morris, and all those who participated in the conference, 'Referendums in Small States and Territories: The Elusive "Yes" Vote', held at the Centre for Small States, Queen Mary University of London, 16 and 17 April 2025, which inspired this collection.

Disclaimer

This article and the wider research project was kindly funded by Centre for Small States, Queen Mary University of London, and the University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom.

The authors declare no conflict of interest in writing this article.

The authors also declare that Generative Artificial Intelligence was not used in the crafting of this article.

References

- Baldacchino, G., & Hepburn, E. (2012). A different appetite for sovereignty? Independence movements in subnational island jurisdictions. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 50(4), 555-568.
- Ballantine Perera, J. (2026). The Gibraltar 1967 and 2002 referendums: The (in)ability of referenda to resolve or 'normalise' a colonially contested territory. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 143-156.
- Bromby, M. (2026). Past referendums informing the present and the future in the Cayman Islands. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 113-126.
- Burgos-Rivera, A. M. (2023). Elite settlements in island territories: the road to a binding political status referendum in New Caledonia and Puerto Rico. *Island Studies Journal*, 18(1), 186–206.
- Clegg, P. (2025) Bermuda's independence referendum: 30 years on. *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs and Policy Studies*, 114(5), 712-715.
- Clegg, P., Baldacchino, G., & Morris, C. (2025). *Referendums in small states and territories: A policy brief*. August.
<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/law/media/law/docs/news/Referendums-in-small-states-and-territories-brief.pdf>
- Connell, J. (2021). The 2020 New Caledonia referendum: The slow march to independence? *Journal of Pacific History*, 56(2), 144–160.
- Corbett, J., & Veenendaal, W. (2018). *Democracy in small states*. Oxford University Press.
- David, C. (2026). The 2018-2021 sequence of referendums in New Caledonia: The uselessness of a 'Yes/No' referendum in divided societies. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 61-70.
- Dodds, K., and Pinkerton, A. (2013). The Falkland Islands Referendum 2013. *Polar Record*, 49(4), 413-16.
- Gad, U. P. and Nielsen, R. L. (2026). Referendums and postcoloniality in Greenland: Self-determination and action space as collateral damage of bounding and un-bounding demoi. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 29-46.
- Gold, P. (2026). Three referendums in Gibraltar. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 157-168.
- Grydehøj, A. (2020). Unravelling economic dependence and independence in relation to island sovereignty: The case of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). *Island Studies Journal*, 15(1), 89–112.
- Hargreaves, P. (2026). Jersey States, referendums and direct democracy. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 127-142.

- Malhotra, A. (2026). Constitutions, referendums, and the influence of international norms: analogies between principled states and small island communities. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 169-184.
- Oliver, T., and Winters, K. (2026). Narrating constitutional futures: Emotional and identity dynamics in the Scottish independence and EU referendums. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 11-28.
- Pantojas-García, E. (2026). Puerto Rico's seven status referenda: The myth of a pro-statehood mandate. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 87-96.
- Prinsen, G., & Blaise, S. (2017). An emerging 'islandian' sovereignty of non-self-governing islands. *International Journal*, 72(1), 56–78.
- Qvortrup, M. (2017). The rise of referendums: Demystifying direct democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(3), 141–152.
- Qvortrup, M. (2025). *Understanding referendums*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Rezvani, D. A. (2014). *Surpassing the sovereign state: The wealth, self-rule, and security advantages of partially independent territories*. Oxford University Press.
- Sen, I. G. (2026). Comparing decolonisation referendums in US and French Overseas Territories. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 71-86
- Szakály, Z. (2026). The referendum on the independence of Greenland. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 47-60.
- Tierney, S. (2012). *Constitutional referendums: The theory and practice of republican deliberation*. Oxford University Press.
- Trinidad, J. (2019) *Self-Determination in disputed colonial territories*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tucker, A. R. (2026). Constituting self-determination: Constitution-making referenda in the US territories. *Small States & Territories*, 9(1), 97-112.
- Warrington, E., & Milne D. (2018). Governance. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Island Studies: A World of Islands* (pp. 173-201). Routledge.