

Studying the politics of small states: A response to Baker, Dookeran and Jugl

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ABSTRACT: As co-editors of the *Handbook on the politics of small states*, we reflect briefly on the insightful arguments of Kerry Baker, Winston Dookeran and Marlene Jugl, which are, in their turn, inspired by a critical reading of our book. We revisit our working and pragmatic definition of small states, repropose justifications for their study, and tentatively explore the relatively underutilised merits of a comparative methodology. These considerations help to once again address (1) why we should study the politics of small states, (2) how to study it, and (3) what do we actually focus on when we study small state politics.

Keywords: comparative studies, politics, small states,

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Introduction

The size of a polity does not determine policy output or policy success; nevertheless, small states tend to share a number of challenges and opportunities. As we argue in the *Handbook on the politics of small states*, small states struggle to find the balance between national and international priorities, to create a pluralistic domestic society, and to maintain national independence in the face of external pressure while taking advantage of international interdependence. They seek shelter from stronger actors but shun dependence on the very same actors. Contributors to the *Handbook* unpack how the challenges vary across times and regions, and between states; and they explore the effect of domestic and international institutions and balances of power on policy output and outcomes.

Regional and world market dynamics, great power rivalry, geopolitical and geoeconomic locations, and the availability of international institutional shelters and platforms, all constitute contextual factors that play an aggrandized role in the politics of small states; more so than in states that are endowed with more material capabilities: such as a larger territory, larger population, larger armies, and a larger economy. External shocks are likely to have more severe effects on small states, because of their relative lack of material capabilities which would otherwise act as shock absorbers. As Robert Jervis reminded us more the 40 years ago, small states have less influence over international events and a smaller margin of time and error than the great powers (Jervis, 1978, pp. 172-173). However, as the *Handbook* suggests, small states have responded to this vulnerability by economic, policy and administrative flexibility.

In the November 2021 issue of *Small States & Territories*, Winston Dookeran, Marlene Jugl, and Kerryn Baker take their point of departure in the *Handbook on the politics of small states* to discuss the contribution of the book and how to build on its findings to further nuance and broaden our current understanding of small state politics. The three authors have different starting points: Dookeran (2021) begins from the current international crisis; Jugl (2021) takes off from considerations about the public administration of small states, while Baker (2021) reviews the vulnerable position of some of the world's smallest states in the Pacific region. Despite these dissimilar starting points, they all contribute significant insights on why we should study the politics of small states, how to study it, and what do we actually focus on when we study small state politics.

Studying the politics of small states: Four justifications

The study of small state politics may satisfy at least three different purposes. First, events and developments in small states often serve the function of the proverbial canary in the coal mine: a warning of the dangers and challenges to be faced by stronger actors in the future. As argued by Winston Dookeran, small states “are on the edge of the fault lines of the ripples and shake-up of the liberal order”. In an international order, which is post-hegemonic and less liberal than the post-Cold War order, small states face tough choices. Moreover, these choices have become even tougher since early 2020 as the Covid-19 “pandemic is accelerating geopolitical trends that existed before the crisis, such as shifts in the end of multilateralism, the vacuum of global governance, and the rise of various forms of nationalism”. In sum, argues Dookeran, the pandemic is a political stress test for small states; or, as it was recently described in a special section on the pandemic in this journal, “a ‘wicked’ problem: multi-faceted, spanning sectoral and national borders, constantly evolving, and characterised by lack of consensus over its nature and the proper solutions” (Högenauer, Sarapuu and Trimikliniotis, 2021, p. 4). This wicked problem is facing all states; but as the vulnerability of small states leave them more context dependent, the challenges are likely to have a stronger and deeper impact on them and the consequences are likely to be felt earlier than in stronger states. Consequently, other states can learn from the experiences of small states, both in identifying the nature of the dangers and challenges following from the overlapping health, economic and political crisis and – as implicated by Dookeran – from the solutions pursued by small states to meet these challenges, such as minilateralism and political and administrative flexibility.

Second, small states are laboratories for understanding and developing policy. As noted in the title of a seminal article in the field, “small states offer important answers to large questions” (Veenendaal & Corbett, 2015). Many societal challenges (and solutions) are related to scale. This is true of both the political economy and the effectiveness and legitimacy of democratic governance and public administration. Understanding these challenges and how to meet them requires us to understand both large and small states, and some very small states may serve as extreme cases. Marlene Jugl suggests that studies of small states should be framed as “‘policy experimentation’ in order to highlight their relevance for a broader audience.” She argues that conditions are particularly challenging in small states. There is much truth in this, although one should keep an open mind that some problems are solved more easily in small states due to institutional flexibility and a pragmatic political culture. However, this same fluidity and lean decision making also leads to heightened personalisation and ‘big man’ politics (e.g. Singham, 1968). Among other things, this means that policy making is less likely to be institutionally driven and instead worked out ‘on the fly’ by those in positions of power.

In this latter respect, policy making in small states does not necessarily provide a scaled down version of what happens in larger states.

Third, there is also a methodological reason why small states are often useful laboratories for understanding challenges and for innovating policy: small administrations and political elites are often less formal and more accessible to the analyst, who is thus much more likely to get access to government ministers and top-level bureaucrats in small states than in larger ones. Thus, data for understanding and innovating policy is often more easily accessible in small states than in larger states.

In addition, studying small states has intrinsic value. Knowing about the migration policy of Hungary or about the climate activism of Kiribati is important in itself if we want to understand the world we live in. We need to remind ourselves regularly that the median population size of the contemporary sovereign state is just around 5.4 million. By producing knowledge on specific (understudied) states, these studies both fill lacuna in the literature and add nuances and new perspectives to the existing literature. Kerryn Baker's contribution to this symposium, discussing independence as a non-binary choice "with flexible sovereignty arrangements considered a useful middle ground", is an apt example and an interesting starting point for discussing the nature of sovereignty and independence. It also offers insights into the motivation for opting for flexible sovereignty: a choice made not only in the Pacific but also by European Union member states, trading autonomy for influence and shelter. The study of politics and international relations is currently becoming more sensitive to non-Western perspectives. The large body of literature on small states outside the West – such as on the plethora of small island states in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific – is an already existing, and often overlooked, rich source of information and knowledge. At the same time, the study of small states has its own lacuna, most notably on small states in Africa and the Middle East. Insights about such small jurisdictions as Cap Verde, Comoros, Bahrain and Qatar *qua* small states are conspicuous in their absence.

How should we study the politics of small states?

The study of small state politics is characterized by a large number of single case studies. Many of these studies contain highly valuable descriptions, explanations, and evaluations of small state politics. They study only selected aspects of one state (e.g., the defence policy of Estonia) and therefore cannot be used "to extrapolate probabilities (statistical generalizations)". While this is a limitation, findings from these studies can still lend themselves "to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalizations)" (Yin, 2014, p. 21). By taking a point of departure in existing knowledge (codified in theories or identified through a review of the relevant literature in the field), and using this knowledge as baseline for discussing the empirical findings of the specific study, the analyst can add to the existing knowledge in a systematic manner, thereby increasing our generalized knowledge of and about small states. Less commonly, the ambition of producing general knowledge is also advanced through comparative case studies, allowing the analyst to appreciate or discover similarities, differences and patterns across small states.

Marlene Jugl advocates the combination of various comparative designs across a continuum "from comparative case studies of small, medium and large states; to large-N studies based on multiple regression." She finds Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to be particularly promising for studying the configuration of factors leading to a particular

outcome. This is an important point, although the study of small states is already more methodologically pluralist than meets the eye. Case study research is the preferred method of many scholars and students of small state politics; but there is no unified understanding of what case study research is among small state scholars. Some case studies aim at causal inference and hypothesis testing, whereas others employ ethnographic and other methods to understand lived experiences and local perceptions (as exemplified by Kerryn Baker's discussion of independence and sovereignty in small Pacific island states).

This methodological pluralism reflects how small state politics is studied from a diversity of disciplines and subdisciplines e.g., comparative politics, political economy, international relations, defence and security studies, public administration and management, sociology and anthropology. Despite (or because of) this pluralism, methodological debates are largely absent from the study of small state politics. In the future, those examining small state politics should be more willing to engage in these debates and, even more importantly, take advantage of multi-disciplinarity to study cases from both competing and combined methodological approaches.

What do we study when we study small state politics?

Most often, small states are understood of as a particular *type* of states with shared characteristics, similar behaviour and/or facing the same size- and scale-related challenges and opportunities. Over the past decades, a continuous debate has unfolded on exactly how to delineate and define what a 'small state' is. As we discuss in the introductory scene-setting chapter of the book, small states have been understood historically, simply as 'non-great powers': a residual category. A similar residual personality has been ascribed to small states in Europe and/or the European Union, with all but the few large countries - France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain within the EU; and including the United Kingdom (post-Brexit) and Russia outside the EU – being considered implicitly as small. More recently, a number of studies have treated small states as political constructs, constituted by the shared understandings and preferences of political elites and people inside and outside the "small" state.

However, most definitions include material elements such as size of the population or the economy. Some stick to absolute definitions, with the most common cut-off point being a population of one million. Absolute definitions often serve as a starting point for studies of the political economy or public administration of small states. Within these issue areas, absolute size is likely to affect both decision making and outcomes. Small economies are less likely to achieve economies of scale and prove more vulnerable in times of economic or environmental crises. They typically need trade agreements more than bigger economies, because of their small domestic markets; but for this same reason, they also have less to offer in trade negotiations. Small administrations suffer from small pools of talent and personalized relations among small elites, inhibiting rule of law governance and meritocratic organization. At the same time, small absolute size is conducive to policy innovation and flexibility. In studies of democracy, absolute size is also seen as important for both the democratic process, outcome, and legitimacy. Relative and relational definitions of small states often serve as a starting point for studying small states in international relations. The national security challenges of small states are typically dependent on the relative power of the state vis-à-vis regional and global great powers as well as small state rival powers. As highlighted by Winston Dookeran, these challenges are not simply the function of power; but also of geopolitics and patterns of amity and enmity among great powers.

In the introductory chapter of our *Handbook*, we propose a synthetic and pragmatic definition of small states. Our starting point is that small states are legally sovereign, although their actual autonomy and the importance of specific capabilities associated with sovereignty may vary over time and space. From this starting point, we argue that small states share two characteristics: (1) domestically, they suffer from the relatively more limited capacity of their political, economic, and administrative systems; and (2) internationally, they typically find themselves as the weaker part of asymmetric relationships. Consequently, “in external relations, the consequences of limited capacity are exacerbated by power asymmetry, leaving small states to struggle with being price and policy takers overall” (Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020, p. 7).

The contributions from Marlene Jugl and Kerryn Baker encourage us to nuance this understanding. They both argue in favour of more fluid understandings of small states. Inspired by Külli Sarapuu and Tina Randma-Liiv’s *Handbook* chapter on public management and policy making in small states, Jugl urges students of small states to move “from a dichotomous understanding of size (small or not, according to a certain threshold) to a continuous understanding; from a question of categories to a question of degree”. In Jugl’s view, such a stance that acknowledges that the characteristics, challenges and opportunities of small states are not a question of either/or, but a question of degree would allow for more nuanced and fine-grained theories and hypotheses. Baker goes even further in her discussion of independence and sovereignty in the Pacific. Sovereignty, she argues, is malleable and negotiated, and independence may be sector specific and/or involve different types of association with stronger actors. Baker’s emphasis on, and her discussion of, the flexible nature of independence and its dependency on external interests is inspiring for further exploring the nature and development of asymmetric relationships between small states and their larger patrons and allies. It is also a valuable point of departure for continued dialogue with chapters in the *Handbook* on subnational jurisdictions (by Prinsen), *de facto* state agency (by Berg and Vits), protodiplomacy (by Criekemans), as well as Corbett and Cornell’s chapter on small states in the Pacific.

Conclusion

Given their diverse starting points and equally diverse trajectories of their arguments, Baker, Dookeran and Jugl have offered us various yet equally valuable reflections on where and how small states can be situated in the current 21st century scenario; and what prospects they may face, going forward. Covid-19 may have provided a breather of sorts: the machinery of international relations has gone into low gear as lockdowns have been imposed, mobilities curtailed, and much diplomatic efforts has had to fall back to phone calls and virtual meetings. Yet, the political architecture is unmistakably changing and shifting: the current liberal order is seriously under threat; multilateralism is being called into question; and the United States and China appear heading towards a more direct contest of hegemonic portent, and unlike anything seen before. Small states may be here to stay, but they would need to work out new postures and policies in order for them to skilfully navigate the new world order and to secure their place within it.

It looks like: once more, unto the breach.

Disclaimer

This article did not benefit from research funding.

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