Small Is Democratic, But Who Is Small?

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Abstract

Several studies indicate a significant correlation between small states and democracy, smallness usually being defined in terms of microstates with populations of less than one million. However, no convincing model has emerged so far of the mechanisms that serve to transform smallness into democratic conduct. This is probably in part a consequence of the negligence of the fact that the smallness-democracy relation is within the microstate camp time-dependent as well threshold-dependent. A mechanical application of the conventional microstate criteria therefore appears a somewhat doubtful method to achieve an understanding of the true impact of smallness.

Keywords: Democracy; microstates; size thresholds; state size.

Introduction

Research on democratic government suggests that small states are more likely to be democratic than large states. Indeed, an abundance of findings support this belief: state size is a more useful category than degree of development or geographic location for understanding the prerequisites for democracy, a large majority of microstates are democracies compared to a much smaller portion of larger countries, there is a significant correlation between small island states and democracy, with a decrease in the size of the political unit, the likelihood of durable freedom and democracy increases. Summarizing the literature in the field Henry Srebrnik concludes that small country size has been shown to be conducive to democracy, that smallness reinforces popular rule, and that evidence indicates that a significant feature about many small island jurisdictions has been their ability to maintain democratic political systems [1].

The literature also sets out separate observations, which contribute to an intuitive understanding of this link between small size and democracy. In an influential essay, Larry Diamond has spelled out a chain of democracy requirements: "Democracy requires consent. Consent requires legitimacy. Legitimacy requires effective performance" [2]. Concerning consent, several ideas substantiate the belief that small is beautiful. Some of these ideas were brought forward already in the early 1970s by Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte in their by now classic treatise on *Size and Democracy*, and these ideas revolved around systematic differences between small and large in terms of participation, unity, loyalties and control. For instance, whereas complex networks of interaction characterize large units, power and specialization that are difficult to detect and understand, small units appear in contrast more simple, elementary and easy of access. This means that citizens are in small units more able to orient themselves towards political life and political organization; this, in turn, promotes a spirit of fellowship and community. Furthermore, feelings of tolerance and understanding prevail in small units as smallness promotes open channels of communication between those who govern and those who are governed and enables citizens to deal more directly with top leaders [3]. All this advances consent and thereby legitimacy. The remoteness that is characteristic of many small island states works in the same direction. True, remoteness may call forth inward-looking and insular societies, but is also likely to substantiate a feeling among society members that they are alone in the world and thrown upon own resources – again, a spirit of fellowship and community will follow [4].

On the other hand, effective performance, one would believe, constitutes a severe challenge to small units, as economic development has proved to be a main force behind the rise and stability of democracy and as many small units tend to be poor and under-developed in terms of resources, manpower and wealth. This belief, however, is not well founded. Modernization assumptions are certainly valid in the world today: of rich countries, the over-whelming majority is democracies, of poor countries, the over-whelming majority is non-democracies, of countries that are neither rich nor poor, about half are democracies and about half are non-democracies. The pattern is, however, different when small states are taken out from the population to form an own sub-population. To be sure, the link between richness and democracy appears within this sub-population as well. However, as one moves down the income scale, no corresponding decrease can be detected in the proportion of democratic states: small is democratic, rich or poor [5]. Obviously, to compensate for a less convincing performance in terms of economy and wealth small states have comparative advantages and in-built capacities for resourcefulness and rapid policy development.

Be this as it may, the terrain that links small size and democracy is still thinly settled as far as definite findings are concerned. Focusing the particular case of small island states, Srebrnik ends his before-mentioned review on the somewhat pessimistic note that "maybe we will never be able to isolate scientifically that elusive independent variable that seems to make islands more conducive to democracy" [1]. However, such pessimism may be unwarranted. It may well be the case that attempts at isolating variables have been conducted from wrong premises and from unreflecting assumptions concerning small size ceilings. By making use of population statistics for determining size [6] and Freedom House rankings for determining democracy [7], this essay aims at contributing by empirical means to a more refined search for relevant variables and factors. The essay makes two methodological inquiries. First, it investigates the extent to which the relation between smallness and democracy is time-dependent. An affirmative outcome, it would seem, opens the door for analyses of democratization dynamics and, in consequence, for an understanding of how smallness has come to be democracy enhancing. Second, it investigates if the relation also is threshold-dependent, meaning that it takes different forms in size-grouped microstates. An affirmative answer of course brings up the question if the conventional political-science way of defining smallness in terms of microstates, states with populations of less than one million being "small", and states with larger populations being large or at least "not-small", really is the relevant method for detecting the democracy-enhancing qualities that obviously are inherent in smallness.

Microstate Developments

Table 1 conveys some basic information about the microstate universe, as classified by Freedom House during selected years in the categories of "Free", "Partly Free" (PF) and "Not Free" (NF) nations. Microstates are defined in the conventional manner as states with populations of less than one million, and countries that are rated "Free" are regarded democratic, much in line with the judgment by Larry Diamond that the "Free" rating in the Freedom House survey is the best available indicator of liberal democracy [8]. Three particular features stick out from the presentation. First, the number of microstates has increased conspicuously during the years, being 33 in the mid-70s and then stabilizing from 1995 onwards at 42. Secessions and decolonization have added to the number, as in the decade between 1975 and 1985, a whole array of new independent microstates emerged. On the other hand, however, purely technical reasons have tempered the growth. Given the one million microstate threshold, some microstates disappear from the rolls as they experience a population growth, which surpasses the microstate threshold. For instance, whereas Gambia and Guinea-Bissau were microstates still in 1990, they were no longer in the microstate camp in 1995. Anyhow, the overall growth in number certainly renders more manageable in microstates studies the classic comparative politics problem of "many variables, small N", that was stated by Arend Lijphart in a much-quoted essay from more than thirty years ago [9].

Table 1. The Microstate Universe during Selected Years 1975-2005.

	Microstates, N	Democracies, %	Non-democracies, %	
			PF	NF
1975	33	36	42	22
1980*	39	41	31	21
1985*	40	43	28	23
1990*	40	48	25	20
1995	42	67	14	19
2000	42	67	19	14
2005	42	67	21	12

*Does not add up to 100 per cent, because of missing democracy data for a few microstate cases. Upon being ranked in 1974-1976 as non-democracies, the European diminutives of Andorra, Liechtenstein and Monaco disappeared for several years from the Freedom House rankings.

Second, the microstate group has undergone a rapid democratization, the portion of democratic microstates increasing from slightly more than one third in 1975 to two thirds from 1995 onwards. The turn of the tide in the early 1990s had several reasons, as some new independent and democratic microstates now entered the international scene (Andorra, Belau, Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands), and as several others, like Cape Verde, Guyana, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Samoa, San Marino and Sao Tomé and Príncipe now implemented regime changes that implied a crossing of the borderline between non-democracy and democracy. As the absolute number of microstates is fairly low, percentage and ratio figures are influenced markedly by small shifting; still, the democracy development has been impressive and incontestable. Obviously, different factors have in separate cases contributed to this development. For instance, the former authoritarian one-party states of Cape Verde and Sao Tomé and Príncipe which created institutional conditions for competitive elections on the eve of the breakdown of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are rather clear-cut diffusion cases. Liechtenstein and Samoa were motivated by international pressure to relax franchise restrictions, and Guyana, managing in 1992 the first free and fair elections in the country, was in the late 1980s finally liberated from the pro-socialist and authoritarian leadership of Forbes Burnham.

The trend towards democratization is discernible within the group of non-democracies as well, as the number of "Not Free"-microstates have been declining over the years. In 1985, nine microstates were ranked in this category; in 1995, the number was reduced to eight, and in 2005, only five cases remained. These cases, featuring the worst of the worst among the small states and being ranked as "Not Free" during almost their whole existences as independent states are: Brunei, Equatorial Guinea, Maldives, Qatar and the Vatican City. Disregarding the specific and even peculiar case of the Vatican City [10], these die-hards are all representatives of still prevailing forms of traditional authoritarian rule, in which authority is owed to a ruler, family or clan. Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah rules the absolute monarchy of Brunei since independence in 1984, and in Equatorial Guinea, the tyrannical President Macías was executed in 1979 in a military coup staged by Teodoro Obing, who has ruled the country since. Maldives was ruled by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom from 1978 to 2008, and the Arab microstate Qatar was ruled since independence in 1971 by absolute monarch Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thami until 1995. A new constitution from 2003 has not eliminated the monopoly of power enjoyed by the al-Thami family.

Three, the many democracies notwithstanding, it remains a fact that microstates were earlier predominantly non-democratic. The idea of the democratic microstate has therefore only lately gained in empirical validity. Of course, the fact that a majority of the microstates were up to the 1990s in the non-democratic camp does not necessarily falsify altogether the doctrine of smallness fostering democracy. It is quite conceivable that a tendency towards non-democracy was during earlier periods still more prominent among larger states than in small states, the implication of

this being, then, that small states, although inclined towards non-democracy more than democracy, still outflanked larger states in terms of democracy disposition. This seems indeed to be the case. In 1972 Freedom House ranked as "Free" 42 countries out of 145, this representing 29 percent of the world's polities; in 1980 and in 1985 the number of countries judged by Freedom House as "Free" stood at 52 (32 percent) and 56 (34 percent) respectively. As evident from Table 1, the percent figures are somewhat lower than the roughly corresponding figures for microstates only. Furthermore, whereas 41 percent of the microstates were democracies in 1976, the same was true of 23 percent only of the larger states, and whereas 46 percent of the microstates were democracies in 1986, only 30 percent of the larger states were then ranked as democracies [8, 11].

In short, there are more microstates in the world today, and whereas a majority of these states were earlier to be regarded as non-democracies, the situation is today reversed, most states being democracies. The conclusion is therefore near at hand that the microstate group, size being a constant, provides fertile soil for research attempts at elucidating paths towards democracy and mechanisms that promote democratization. However, this expectation proves overly optimistic. The general trend towards democratization notwithstanding, there is much immobility in the microstate group. Many small states have emerged from colonial rule as democracies and have remained loyal to democratic rule; others have become independent from non-democratic or authoritarian rule and have likewise maintained their original regime choice. The traffic between the two groups has been limited. More than two thirds of the countries in this study are in fact unaffected by the democratization traffic: whereas 18 countries out of 51 in the materials at hand have always been classified as democracies, 17 are always classified as non-democracies. Of the remaining 16 cases, seven represent democratization while three represent non-democratization, and six are oscillators, meaning that they have wavered to and from democracy and non-democracy positions. It would appear that this last group opens a door for detailed analyses of the existence and operation of democracy thresholds; however, since the oscillations have been in most cases occasional and caused by transient circumstances, the group does not really provide much fuel for research. One example is Malta, where shortcomings in the civil rights department during the reign of the Malta Labor Party brought about less than perfect Freedom House ratings of Malta for some years during the 1980s. This short interlude cannot, however, upset the judgment that Malta has performed convincingly since independence as a democratic nation.

The Significance of Size Thresholds

Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte introduced the idea of size thresholds within the small state universe already in their before-mentioned treatise on *Size and Democracy*. Investigating on theoretical as well as empirical grounds the political importance of differences in country size, the authors found it likely that the characteristics of smaller systems were associated in a significant way not with any small system but with very small systems only. "Whatever this threshold may be", they wrote, "it is, most likely, lower than the population of even a very small country like Iceland" [3: 94]. The same reasoning appears in other important texts within the size and democracy discourse. For instance, investigating the relationship between size and insularity on the one hand and democracy on the other, Axel Hadenius has demonstrated the existence of a link between small size and democracy, which is, however, strong only at a very low level of size. The connection between small size and democracy, therefore, according to Hadenius, has a roof [12]. Recent studies likewise suggest that a threshold effect may be operating, the implication of which is that the smallest countries have a much higher degree of democracy than larger countries. The critical cutting point appears to be 500.000 individuals: when the population size surpasses this threshold, there are no longer any associations between size and democracy [13]. In other words, there is a difference between being small and being diminutive.

Threshold effects within the materials at hand are investigated in Tables 2, 3 and 4, which summarize the classifications from Table 1, while adding a size dimension. In Table 2, five size categories are identified, and for each category a democracy – non-democracy ratio is given, calculated as a percentage. In the first category are the truly diminutive

cases with populations of less than 100.000, in the second category are cases with populations of more than 100.000 but less than 250.000, in the third category are cases in the 250.000 – 500.000 interval, in the next category are cases with populations of more than 500.000 but less than 750.000, and in the fifth and final category are cases in the 750.000 – one million interval. Countries classified by Freedom House as "Free" are in the democracy camp, whereas all other countries are in the non-democracy camp. While Table 2 reports overall distributions within the size categories and Table 3 adds a time dimension, Table 4 contrasts each category against remaining larger categories, this meaning, for instance, that the distributions for states with populations of less than 500.000 people are compared with the corresponding distributions for states with populations of more than 500.000 people. Each microstate has been classified for any of the seven measure points at which the state in question has qualified as a microstate; the total number of classifications in the Tables is thereby 269. One implication of this is that the one and same country, given population growth over time, may be counted in several size categories. For instance, in 1980 Solomon Islands was a democracy case within the 100.000 – 250.000 interval; in 2005, the same country was a non-democracy case in the plus 500.000 size category. Countries, then, are regarded here as units, and the calculations therefore contribute to a study which is not only about particular small countries but also, and even predominantly so, about smallness in general and small size as a context.

Table 2. Democracies versus Non-Democracies in 269 Size-Categorized Microstate Cases.

Population size	N	Ratio democracies – non-democracies, %
< 100.000	83	70 – 30
100.000 – 250.000	54	70 – 30
250.000 – 500.000	70	51 – 49
500.000 – 750.000	33	27 – 73
750.000 – 1.000.000	29	28 – 72

Table 3. Democracies versus Non-Democracies in 269 Size-Categorized Microstate Cases: Distributions over Time.

	< 100.000	100.000 – 250.000	250.000 – 500.000	500.000 – 750.000	750.000 – 1 million
1975	2 – 6	3 - 3	3 – 5	2 – 4	2 – 3
1980	5 – 5	5 - 4	3 – 5	2 – 2	1 – 4
1985	7 – 3	5 - 5	3 – 8	2 – 2	0 – 2
1990	7 – 3	5 - 1	6 – 6	1 – 3	1 – 3
1995	12 – 3	7 - 1	7 – 4	1 – 4	1 – 2
2000	12 – 3	7 - 1	7 – 4	0 – 5	2 – 2
2005	13 – 2	6 - 1	7 – 2	1 – 4	1 – 5
1975-2005	58 – 25	38 - 16	36 – 34	9 - 24	8 – 21

The resulting pattern is palpable enough: categories that are larger in terms of size tend to house lesser portions of democracy. The two smallest size categories embrace cases that represent even an excess of democracy, the portion of democracy cases exceeding two thirds in both categories. When these thresholds are surpassed, the situation is much more balanced in the 250.000 – 500.000 intervals, the number of democracy cases and non-democracy cases now being almost equal. Finally, the two largest size categories produce a pattern that is in fact reverse as compared to the two smallest categories, one good fourth only of the cases representing democracy. As evident especially from Table 4, the divide is really between cases that are below and go beyond the 500.000 threshold – the former group has a democracy surplus that amounts to close to two thirds of all cases, whereas the second group has a still larger-sized democracy deficiency. The two groups are therefore very different, and it is obvious that research findings on democracy extension and democracy determinants will be much dependent on what populations are used.

Table 4. Democracies versus Non-Democracies in 269 Size-Categorized Microstate Cases: The Impact of Size Thresholds.

Population size	N	Ratio democracies – non-democracies, %
< 100.000	83	70 – 30
> 100.000	186	49 – 51
< 250.000	137	70 – 30
> 250.000	132	40 - 60
< 500.000	207	64 – 36
> 500.000	62	27 - 73
< 750.000	240	59 – 41
> 750.000	29	28 - 72

In sum, democracy appears to be a characteristic feature of "small" microstates but not of "large" microstates. The situation in 2005 may be given as a snapshot that is certainly again illustrative of the relevance of the 500.000 divide: of the many countries below this threshold, 84 per cent were democracies; of the few countries over the threshold, only two out of 11 were democracies. To be sure, the number alone of countries in categories adds to the threshold relevance: 31 microstates out of 42, equaling three fourths, are in 2005 below the 500.000 ceiling. Another snapshot from the year 1995 conveys the same impression: of many cases below the 500.000 threshold, 77 per cent are democracies, while the same is true of two only out of eight larger cases. Therefore, it appears that two families of microstates emerge. The one is large and consists of a great number of small microstates; in fact, close to one third of all classifications are about cases with populations of less than 100.000 people. The overwhelming majority of the members of this family are democracies. The second family consists of a few larger microstates, almost all of which are non-democracies.

The observation that non-democracy is a characteristic of "larger" microstates brings up the question to what extent the fact that microstates were earlier predominantly non-democracies is simply a consequence of microstates being earlier

on average larger than at later measure points. An examination of the data at hand extends some support for this assumption. In 1975 one third and in 1980 one fourth of the microstate cases were in the plus 500.000 categories as against one bare fifth in 1995 and again in 2000. Obviously, then, an earlier assertion in this study must be somewhat rephrased. The finding that the microstate universe has been democratized, while certainly valid in itself, is partly a consequence of microstate newcomers since the early 1990s being smaller in size and thereby more vigorous democracy carriers. In part at least, democratization becomes a question of size thresholds. While the microstate group earlier included several large-sized units marked by less than immaculate democracy records, the group has during later stages come to embrace a larger share of smaller units, which are conducive to democracy. At the same time, due to population growth, some of the large-sized units that suffer democracy defection, most notably Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Kuwait, Oman, Swaziland and the United Arab Emirates, have simply disappeared from the microstate group. Still, considerations of differences between "small" and "larger" microstates do not in full explain the early tendency of microstates to display a pattern of non-democratic behavior. As evident from Table 3, would, for instance, the 500.000 ceiling have been applied here instead of the 1 million ceiling for defining microstate status, the lead finding would have been that a majority, albeit slim, of the microstate cases were still in the mid-1980s in the non-democracy camp.

The variance across size categories invites efforts to grasp by means of comparisons the mechanisms that underlie the size-related decline of democratic capability. Several possibilities come to mind. For instance, given that islands and island groups make up the great majority of the world's small states, and given that migration is a major preoccupation of island states, it is a reasonable thought that a noticeable increase in immigration and thereby in size may produce ethnic tensions and anti-immigrant sentiments that spill over into politics. This line of reasoning is probably relevant in understanding why cases like Fiji and Solomon Islands have turned from democracies to non-democracies concurrently with experiencing population growth; however, systematic investigations along these lines encounter difficulties. This is for several reasons that all again connect to immobility. To understand how and to what extent growth undermines democratic capability, one need to compare nations before and after experiencing growth; however, this is a possible strategy in few cases only. Most cases simply do not satisfy the requirement of growth, and it is easy to understand why it must be so. The smaller a territory, the more likely it is to be an island [14], and this relation becomes stronger as one moves down the size scale: indeed, a study from 1980 demonstrates that of microstate territories with a population of 500.000 or below, 79 percent were islands [15]. Islands, again, have a restricted range and quantity on which to sustain life; also, due to constraints imposed by insularity, there are often high rates of migration from small islands [16]. For most microstates, there are definite limits to growth: small is doomed to smallness, and the democracy-related mechanisms that are activated by growth do not have free scope. Alternatively, in other words: small is doomed to democracy, since there is no room for a growth that would constitute a democracy challenge.

Some figures illustrate further this analytical difficulty. Of the altogether 51 microstates that are registered in this study, three appear only once in the materials. Of the remaining 48, while nine have been above the 500.000 threshold at each time they have been registered, a vast majority of 31 have always been below the threshold. Many small states show insignificant population growth figures over time; in other places, while significant enough in terms of absolute figures, this growth is still well within the size parameters that are laid down here and is not in itself likely to constitute a challenge to democracy. One example is democratic Belize with a population figure of 149.000 in 1985 and a corresponding figure of 270.000 in 2005 with many migrating from Guatemala and El Salvador. Only in eight cases may a crossing of the 500.000 divide be registered, and almost all of these cases, Cap Verde and Solomon Islands being the two exceptions, have been classified as non-democracies throughout the years. The situation remains much the same when and if experimenting with other size thresholds. Of 51 countries, 25 have always remained below and 19 always over the 300.000 threshold. Only seven cases, then, have passed during the years this threshold, and in five of these cases, no change in the democracy status can be registered.

Discussion

In itself, of course, small size does not mean much and does not explain much. Its impact is through a variety of mechanisms and channels that are sensitive to variations in size and transmit the effects of size to political style and political structure. Obviously, smallness strengthens, paves the way for and expedites the impact of political, economic and social factors that promote democracy; smallness also, obviously, tempers and negates the impact of political, economic and social factors that are detrimental to democratic breakthrough and the maintenance of democracy. It is of course only natural that the relation between small size and democracy weakens as one moves in the analysis from small-sized entities to somewhat larger entities. As the size of entities increases and as smallness thereby becomes a less pronounced quality, the potential of entities for promoting the democracy-enhancing functions of smallness will necessary decrease. What is astonishing, however, is the rate at which small size forfeits its potentials. Although states with populations of about one million are by any conventional measure small members of the international community, the one million ceiling is not a valid indicator of democratic capability. Rather, states that are close to this ceiling appear over-sized within the microstate universe from a democracy point of view.

The argument by Dahl and Tufte that characteristics of small systems are associated in a significant way with very small systems only therefore still appears well founded. Of course, their assumptions that even most subunits of political systems may be too large to allow for the testing of their paradigm does not hold true any more. The world looks today very different from that of the early 1970s when Dahl and Tufte completed their investigation. Typified by "miniaturism"[17], the modern world is populated by small units and even miniatures to a much greater extent than before, and the prospects for investigating on a cross-national basis the relation between smallness and democracy are now better and promising. Still, there is reason to exercise caution in threshold applications. In fact, any definition of microstate in terms of size can only be arbitrary. This is evident also from the fact that typologies and classifications abound. While many stick to the conventional microstate measure of a population of one million, other authors have preferred to introduce a distinction between small states and microstates, small states, according to one view, housing populations ranging from 300.000 to one million and microstates having populations of less than 300.000. Still others define microstates as having populations of less than 400.000, and a Commonwealth Secretariat Study Group defined in 1983 small states as having populations of less than half a million. Indeed, very precise measures have at times been introduced, identifying microstates as units with a population of less than 2.928.000 people do. The above examples are introduced here from introductory reviews by Edward Dommen and Philippe Hein to a volume in 1985 on *States, Microstates and Islands* [18, 19], and they certainly reflect to some extent breaks at that time in the global distribution of states by population. A recent attempt to define by means of cluster analysis the category of "small" states comes up with no less than 79 countries in this category [20]. Other factors that contribute to the great variety of definitions are about differences between scientific disciplines and within-discipline differences: clearly, the term small state itself means different things to different people [21]. Economists have often chosen high cut-off points between small states and other states [14], and political science studies of relations between states and thereby of the place of microstates in the international community are likely to employ somewhat higher cut-off points than political science studies of the relation between the state and the citizen.

Focusing on democracy, the present exercise has been in this last mentioned compartment. In addition, being empirical in approach, the exercise has pulled out guidelines that represent more than sheer guess-work. The main lesson to be learned is to abandon in democracy-oriented political science research the conventional one million microstate operationalization and to replace it with operationalizations that move on lower size levels, preferably the half a million threshold. There are several reasons why microstate politics should be a more central concern than hitherto of political science, and the most important of these reasons is that the small states family is imbued with democratic conduct and democratic performance. "Arguably, there is not a concept that is more central to the substance matter of the 'political' than democracy", it is stated in one recent survey of theoretical approaches to the comparative study of democracy [22]. While this statement is certainly true, it is likewise true that any ambition to understand better the nature and the

many determinants, shapes and manifestations of the democracy concept is well served by a deeper involvement from the part of the political science community in the microstate level. However, democracy is not a characteristic of all microstates and only if the microstate concept is redefined to fall below usual cut-off point is the analyst given a chance to wallow in democracy.

Competing Interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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