‘Everybody Knows Everybody’: Practising Politics in the Pacific Islands

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In contrast to the disadvantage that economists and international donors often see as stemming from smallness, political scientists have a relatively equivocal view of the normative implications of size on democratic performance. Largely, studies interested in the correlation between size and democratization focus on the persistence and quality (or depth) of democratic norms and claim either that small is beautiful or that it is despotic. In this article I take a different approach. Rather than attempting to measure the impact of size on democratic outcomes, I provide a nuanced description of how it shapes political life by drawing on the views, experiences, and reflections of politicians in the Pacific Islands. Based on this ‘insider view’ of politics, I highlight the centrality of family and kin to political dynamics and discuss their relevance to ideas like consensus and oversight, and persistent critiques about ostracism and corruption. I conclude by arguing that smallness provides mixed blessings – it is neither entirely beautiful nor endemically despotic.

Keywords: small island states, small island developing states, microstates, Pacific Islands, democratization.

Introduction

Size provides an obvious point of contrast between democracies in the Pacific and those in other parts of the world and yet, by and large, recognition of its importance is relatively absent from extant analysis of politics in the region. Conversely, size is of interest to economists, particularly as it relates to market performance, and human geographers concerned with urbanization, migration patterns and remittance flows.¹ Donors and international organizations also actively articulate the challenges faced by small states, especially in relation to sovereignty but also development and aid. The various research arms of the United Nations (UN) have been concerned with the development of microstates since the 1970s.² More recently, the UN’s Small Island Developing States Network and the Commonwealth Secretariat’s Global Biennial Conference on Small States seek to understand how support from the international community can address disadvantages related to size,

including the challenges of isolation and vulnerability to climate change and external economic shocks.

In contrast to the handicap that economists and international donors often see as stemming from smallness, political scientists have a relatively equivocal view of the normative impact of size. Political theorists have long argued that ‘small is beautiful’ when it comes to democratic politics as smallness limits the number of competing interests in the *polis*.³ Largely, advocates of this perspective hark back to antiquity and the Aristotelian belief that political stability is best maintained when the entire citizenry are able to meet together in one place and debate matters of common concern.⁴ More recently, large comparative studies find a correlation between small country size and democratization, particularly amongst states in the Pacific and the Caribbean.⁵ Conversely, when contrasted with the faceless efficiency of a Weberian state, many of the characteristics commonly associated with politics in small countries – personalization, the absence of bureaucratised party machines, incidences of patronage and nepotism – are seen to be the antithesis of liberal democratic ideals.

Despite general acknowledgement that size matters in the Pacific, comparatively little is known about how politicians negotiate smallness. To redress this gap, in this article I ask how politicians in the region experience governing, with particular emphasis on their reflections about size. Rather than attempting to prove that size matters – I accept the prevailing view amongst politicians that it does – I instead describe and analyse how they see it influencing political practices, and by extension the democratic process. Drawing on in-depth interviews (102), published life histories (28) and participant observation,⁶ I provide a picture of everyday political life that interprets both the challenges and opportunities that smallness presents to political leaders.

By paying close attention to politicians’ experiences, I offer a nuanced account that stands in contrast to the prevailing literature which tends to either idolise or malign size. In

doing so, I highlight the centrality of family and kin to political dynamics and discuss their relevance to concepts like consensus and oversight, and persistent critiques about ostracism and corruption. While smallness may not provide a predictive account of differences between countries and individuals, I find it can help us understand some of the likenesses – both within the Pacific and more generally with small states throughout the world. I conclude that smallness provides mixed blessings – it can be both a burden and an advantage, a source of resilience and susceptibility – and in doing so highlight several possible avenues for future enquiry.

The methodological rationale for this project is derived from the interpretivist tradition – an approach to studying the political world that focuses on *meaning*.⁷ Interpretive research is based on the ontological conviction that actions and practices are shaped and framed by ideas held individually and collectively about the world.⁸ In this respect it is based on constructivist-subjectivist rather than realist-objectivist prepositions.⁹ The scholarly aim in interpretative research is *understanding*, generated by establishing the beliefs and meanings which inform actions and practices embedded in traditions that bind ‘situated agents’ together in often unacknowledged inter-subjective communities that are open-ended and evolving.¹⁰ The analytic goal is to provide enough information to convince the reader that I am depicting the shared experience of politicians ‘from *within* their world, rather than *outside* it’.¹¹ Thus, the standard is plausibility – of perspectives that we imagine or *feel* are right, rather than scientific proof demonstrated via correlation and covariance.¹² To substantiate this perspective, where possible I use extensive quotations to provide a sense of the politicians’ voice. However, this voice is ultimately constructed by me and as such represents patterns that I have identified as emerging from the collected information.

Interviews with politicians in the Pacific are the primary data sources used in this article. Interviews have their limitations – they can provide a platform from self-justification

for example – but the more we conduct the more confidence we can have in the patterns that emerge.¹³ Interviews were semi-structured and biographical in nature and as a result do not easily lend themselves to quantitative analysis. All were conducted as part of a broader research project on the life stories of politicians in the Pacific region. The influence of size was as a theme that emerged inductively during this research, as did the specific topics and sub-themes that I address throughout the article. In line with the aims of the project, I provide only one side (the politicians’) of an inherently complex story. I do not deny that there are many alternate and often critical viewpoints, but rather claim that the value of highlighting this perspective stems from its relative absence in the existing literature. As a result, rather than undermining my findings, self-justification was necessarily encouraged in this instance.

To compliment interviews I also drew on published life histories and observation based analysis.¹⁴ Observation involved spending time with several politicians as they went about campaigning and representative work. In line with an interpretive approach, observation or the power of ‘being there’ helped me to make sense of the patterns that emerged during interviews, thus providing confidence in my emerging themes.¹⁵ As these patterns and themes were also established by reading across published life histories a relatively small number of interviews enabled me to establish a ‘point of contrast’ that quickly established area, country and institution-specific nuances.¹⁶ However, as with all research of this nature, this portrayal is unavoidably shaped by the level of access I was granted and the views of those I spoke with.

Having outlined what this article aims to achieve, let me clarify what I do not cover. I do not seek to judge or measure democratization against this normative definition (think Freedom House rankings and their equivalents) but rather explore politicians’ views about holding public office. Consequently, the title ‘everybody knows everybody’ points to the organic and human explanation of political processes in the Pacific that I provide. Similarly, I

do not specifically address concerns about the capacity for institutional mechanisms, like ombudsman and leadership codes for example, to fix ‘problems’ that stem from familiarity and kinship ties in small island states (SIS). This is an important topic, but one that I address in a separate article.¹⁷ Lastly, while implicit in many of the reflections outlined here, a detailed examination of how politicians in the Pacific Islands experience their legislative, representative and ministerial roles is beyond the scope of this piece, but is instead the focus of the book-length project outlined above.

Who is Small and Why?

Like most definitions, attempting to stipulate what constitutes a small islands state, or a small island developing state, is fraught with complexity. In this article I am specifically referring to the independent and self-governing Pacific countries, which are commonly split into three sub-regions of Melanesia (Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu), Polynesia (Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu), and Micronesia (Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Nauru, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, and Palau).¹⁸ Papua New Guinea (PNG) is usually included in this list but because of its relatively larger population (around seven million), and the fact that interviewed politicians did not self-identify with small size in the same way politicians from other countries did, I have decided to leave it out. Consequently, population size is one marker by which we can define smallness, although even here distinctions are porous with Fiji’s population nudging 900,000 while little more than 1,000 people reside on Niue. Land area is another such measure. Pacific Island countries included in this study tend to have relatively small amounts of accessible land spread across numerous islands (only Nauru and Niue are single island countries). Conversely, if country size is taken to include sea area, Pacific Island nations are amongst the biggest in the world due to their sovereign claims to large tracts of ocean.

While geography and population provide some justification for looking at these countries as a group, the term ‘Pacific Islands’ or ‘South West Pacific’ also captures regional similarities, including the relevant likenesses in political systems – inherited and introduced – and the influence of Christianity.¹⁹ There also exists a geographic and ideological Pacific community, derived from an understanding of island states linked by the Pacific Ocean, and reinforced in part by the growing number of Islanders living around the Pacific Rim.²⁰ As such, the focus of this article on a specific region draws from the logic of area studies. The promise of area studies, as opposed to a single country study, or surveys of larger numbers of countries, is that shared history, geography, languages and religion are likely to affect the pattern of politics in similar ways. That is not to say all experiences are identical – country specific nuances are detailed throughout – but in this article I have intentionally focused on likenesses.

Family and Kin

Basically politics, your family members have to be a part of it ... Without your family members, especially in a small community like this, if you don’t have family support, then basically you don’t have a chance of running ... everybody knows everybody and there is that power struggle between families ... So, that is why you need your elders and family members to run side by side on your way of politics.

[Palauan politician]

It is virtually impossible to talk about any aspect of political life in the Pacific Islands without returning, in one way or another, to the importance of families and kin. Families can be supporters, voters, campaign workers and political strategists. They often contribute to campaign funding and participate in election committees and rallies. Once elected familial links become important networks through which politicians exert influence, form coalitions

and maintain constituent access, as David Hanlon outlines in the case of Tosiwo Nakayama, the inaugural President of FSM:

One of the more remarkable aspects of Tosiwo Nakayama's life is the network of relationships throughout the Chuuk group and further west that would later translate into political support ... The personal relationships established on those islands where his father resided for extended periods of time as a commercial agent of Nambo came strongly into play in his election to the Congress of Micronesia ... ²¹

However, while family support is often central to winning an election in SIS, it is also true that politics has the unique capacity to split families apart.

I told him [relative] it is not a good idea to stand now ... I said "you know it would be good for you to come in as part of my campaign team ...

When the seat was declared and the interviewer ... he said "what do you think ... of [relative] standing against you?" I said "I really don't know where he is coming from and if you say you are family you should have family values ... what are you going to be teaching your children that it is alright to stand against a family member?"
[Fijian politician]

Similarly, election defeat, which tends to be harrowing for politicians the world over, takes on greater significance when voters are family and friends:

It feels terrible! The feeling of public rejection is extremely harsh on the mind and the heart ... when it is an extended family type of relationship in the Pacific where you're elected by your friends and your relatives, basically ... So that when you lose an election under those circumstances, you really feel rejected.
[Marshallese politician]

The professionalization of politics and politicians has become the orthodox conceptual lens by which historical changes in parliamentary life are measured in American and European democracies. Conversely, such trends – synonymous with bureaucratised political parties, relatively secure employment tenure, high salaries, and narrowing career trajectories – are unapparent in the Pacific. Prior to the 2006 coup, Fiji had a relatively strong two-party system, although differences were largely based on ethnic cleavages (Indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian), enabling some politicians to run in seats without family links. In most other Pacific Island countries political parties have limited influence – many have none at all.²² Even in periods and places where political parties exert relatively greater influence, and in tune with trends in other small island jurisdictions,²³ it is often difficult to distinguish between personal and political, local and national, opportunistic and idealistic.

In contrast to a faceless rational-legal bureaucracy often idealised by modernists and donor agencies, the persistent influence of family and kin on politics in the Pacific is often referred to by the label ‘traditional’ or by country specific terms like *fa’asamoa* [Samoa] or *wantokism* [Western Melanesia]. Specifically, these terms denote the expectations that family members place on all moneyed elites, but especially those in politics, as inaugural Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Sir Peter Kenilorea relates:

Solomon Islands politics and the culture itself is such that whatever material possessions I appeared to have were deemed to be the property of everyone else. My constituents seemed to know intuitively when my fortnightly pay was due and came around very soon after the money went into my bank account ... However, to cease being generous to my constituents could have caused the end of my political career, given the prevailing communal political environment and practices.²⁴

Politicians representing rural or outer island constituencies recount having 20-40 relatives and constituents staying with them in the capital most nights.²⁵ They describe how supporters

feel they know them personally and that they are owed favours for their allegiance. In most cases, this load is not only carried by the member but also their spouse and siblings, with a number recalling how they were harassed at school by students and teachers as a result of their parents political views.

The tradition versus modernity dichotomy has historically been the dominant conceptual framework in the study of politics in the Pacific Islands and although it can oversimplify how politicians operate – most fulfil multiple roles and assume overlapping identities that, in addition to their political work, might include being a lay preacher, NGO organizer and chief²⁶ – in the context of this article it does provide an insight into the relative social proximity between politician, voters, and constituent. Indeed, given the population size of countries discussed here, it is hard to conceive of a circumstance where politics can ever be anything but personalized, with only government ministers in a Westminster setup expected to be ‘full time’ politicians. Members of Niue’s Assembly, for example, the Pacific’s smallest political entity, represent constituencies of roughly 40-60 electors and are paid to attend parliament one or two days a month, although the Cabinet of four is busier.²⁷ And while this is an extreme example (constituencies in the larger Pacific countries of Fiji and Western Melanesia have some thousands of voters, for instance, divided by distinct linguistic and cultural groups) political work is often done in conjunction with other types of employment. Moreover, the impact of this relatively reduced social proximity between member and constituent is not confined to their representative function but also extends to legislative and ministerial decision-making, as this reflection highlights:

Size has its privilege but it also has its headaches, you know. If ... so and so cannot be medevac’d ... Those decisions are very, very hard. They’re not faceless human beings or numbers or medical charts that come in front of you just to sign off on a TA. They are human beings that you know ... So, it’s hard to make

decisions in public service in small island states, because they're small. I mean it's as simple as that.

[Marshallese politician]

The Tyranny of Distance

Anxiety about the challenges of smallness often relate to isolation and in particular economies of scale, and while politicians from across the region hold varying views on how best to approach these challenges, there is a degree of consensus on what they are. Often missing from these discussions in academic settings is the impact that geography can have on how politicians undertake their core functions. Representing a constituency, for example, is a central concept and activity common to most democratic governments. In the Pacific, politicians attract criticism for failing to visit their constituencies frequently, but this task is often far from straightforward, as the following extract about an unsuccessful re-election campaign highlights:

... there is a long distance between my constituents [in Yap state] and Pohnpei [the capital] and I didn't have a chance to visit them and maintain that close contact that I had with them ... so the person [opponent] who was in that position was able to keep that close touch with the constituents and that is always the disadvantage.

[FSM politician]

This type of experience is not uniform across the region. Challenges created by constituent access are exacerbated in countries with large numbers of hard to access islands (in FSM and Kiribati for example), in which case politicians from the single island countries of Nauru and Niue, and politicians who represent urban constituencies, have a logistical advantage when managing constituent affairs and re-election campaigns.

Challenges created by travel demands are not exclusive to constituency matters. The heavy reliance of Pacific Island countries on support from the international community means

that senior government officials, including ministers and politicians, often find themselves undertaking an enormous amount of overseas travel. Not only does this represent a disproportionate cost on scarce human resources, it places tremendous pressure on family life with many politicians lamenting the time away from home. Moreover, given limited education and employment opportunities apparent in many Pacific Island nations, some families live in separate countries – especially in Micronesia and Polynesia where large overseas populations can be found in Guam, Hawaii, New Zealand and Australia – with one partner staying at home to fulfil their political duties while the other supports children in their studies.

Equally, while population size is comparable to local government jurisdictions in larger states, as members of the international community they are still required to operate expensive sovereign institutions, even if they are scaled-down versions.²⁸ So, while the footing is equal in theory, relative capacity can limit their ability to influence key international forums. Moreover, in the relative absence of bureaucratised political parties, one commonly cited downside of travel, many argue, is that political opponents get a free hand in the constituency while they are away. Leaders in particular can find themselves out of a job while travelling overseas. Travel is not always an encumbrance – some in fact confess to enjoying opportunities to ‘get off the island’. Politicians often recall the satisfaction that comes from the more-or-less equal voice of sovereign states in international forums and relay how they appreciate being afforded the same courtesies as representatives from larger countries. Moreover, they contend that these meetings help facilitate key agreements and life-long friendships that later become diplomatic back channels. However, this does not detract from the more general theme.

Consensus versus Ostracism

The relatively reduced social proximity between politician and constituent, when combined with the relative absence of parties, is one of the most contentious normative aspects of politics in the Pacific Islands. As outlined, political theorists have long argued that ‘small is beautiful’ when it comes to democratic politics, pointing to the capacity of small communities to reach consensus on matters of common concern. Consensus is synonymous with a ‘Pacific Way’ of politics – a phrase coined by inaugural Prime Minister of Fiji, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara – and usually refers to shared ideas about solidarity and reciprocity, the fostering and maintenance of kinship networks and relationships, attachment to land and the ocean, respect, dignity, consultation and shared leadership.²⁹

Rather than being an impediment to democratic politics, in this view remoteness and smallness unifies communities around common challenges while the relatively small social distance between leaders and those they govern provides for more direct citizen involvement, accountability and transparency. Teresia Teaiwa, for example, wonders how Pacific Islanders can ‘hold grudges against people whom they cannot avoid, people they are bound to run into at the supermarket, the market or the street, people whom they are often bound by blood and history?’³⁰ A desire to live up to this harmonious ideal is also commonly articulated by politicians:

You know, being a politician in the Marshall Islands, we are all almost related customarily, and when you debate on the floor and sometimes you say something bad against the other politicians, that is one thing that you have to be careful about. When you get out of the *Nitijela* [parliament], whether you say something bad, you are still related to that fellow ... It is very unique, compared to other places.

[Marshallese politician]

Echoing this desire to live up to the ideal of consensus, one of the common regrets that politicians articulate is that their political activities have damaged friendships and antagonised personal disputes, supporting Jeffrey Richards assertion that when differences exist in small communities, they are often ‘more personal, more intense, [and] more emotionally charged’³¹:

I think some of my mistakes were being too forthright and outspoken against my own government ... I suppose in a way when I sit back, I think, although that resonated with a lot of people, with the public, but it was the wrong thing to do in terms of the unity of the government ...

Some of the [other] things that I regret are some of the personal spats that I have had with others, and it got ugly ... I developed a reputation of being quite tough and hard on that sort of thing and fighting back. Not one to back down.

Sometimes, I suppose, a little bit of give and take would have been better ...

[Cook Islands politician]

This perspective, which is an inversion of Teaiwa’s view above, can also help us understand all manner of political practices that are incongruous to outsiders, yet represent a coherent logic in the context within which they are embedded, as Daryl Tarte relates in his biography of then Deputy Prime Minister and later President of Fiji, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau:

... the phone rang ... “The roof blew off Sid Koya’s [Leader of the Opposition] house in Lautoka last night,” he announced ... “Why does he come to me for this sort of thing? I’m not responsible for Government housing,” he said petulantly. I smiled and said: “When you consider this later, I expect you’ll be more pleased than sorry that the Leader of the Opposition should bring his problem to the Deputy Prime Minister to solve. That’s Fiji.”³²

Similarly, it also provides an insight into the types of considerations that inform backroom deals and power sharing arrangements:

[My colleague] didn't make it to President but he was the one who nominated the President on the floor. So, a lot of people didn't understand what was going on. They thought that we gave it away ... [but] caucus sat there, we voted, we lost and we said "it is about time to go out and show the people that we are bringing us together", and that is what we did ... Maybe someday the union maybe fragmented but in our time we want to make sure that things stay very peaceful.
[FSM politician]

Critics of this type of politics argue that tight social controls in SIS demand conformity while the idealisation of consensus works against the pluralist expression of discontent. Stephanie Lawson, for example, argues that rhetorical appeals to culture and tradition, including the emphasis on consensus articulated in the 'Pacific Way', have been manipulated by (chiefly) elites to preserve their positions of privilege.³³ Concerned with the apparent decline in ethical leadership, Ron Crocombe claims that many of the region's politicians have treated their countries as personal 'fiefdoms' due to their extensive influence over nearly all aspects of social, economic and political life.³⁴ A lesser but no less insidious version of this scenario is what Peter Larmour calls 'policy corruption'³⁵ where politicians may not take money directly but instead leverage their influence and insider knowledge to advantage their businesses:

So, you can get rich, or you can get poorer. Poorer because, you know, people in Solomon Islands they look at members of parliament as all things to all men. They will end up asking you to pay for their bag of rice ... school fees ... that can drive members of parliament to secure loans to help them, or to get money by other means ... but yes ... in that position you [also] have that power, you are influential, you open doors.
[Solomon Islands politician]

An informed public is, theoretically, best placed to hold politicians to account and curb corrupt practices in a democratic state. Civil society and the media in particular, usually

fulfil this function but in many of the Pacific's smaller countries media outlets are government owned, which often fuels speculation about interference. Veteran Pacific reporter Michael Field cites his willingness to condemn political figures as the overriding rationale behind his successive banning from several Pacific Island countries,³⁶ while his colleague, Tonga's Kalafi Moala,³⁷ was imprisoned for his editorship of the newspaper *Taimi 'o Tonga* which ran stories that were critical of the ruling monarchy. Not that we should think of political elites as a homogenous group. At the height of Nauru's economic crisis in the early 2000s a group of young leaders, some of whom later became politicians, began publishing a newsletter – *The Visionary* – which was highly critical of government policy. This outspokenness represented a major transformation to the established order of Nauruan politics.

Churches are the strongest non-government institutions in the region and yet, as Larmour argues, they have a mixed record of speaking out against government policy.³⁸ He points to their reliance on public funds and tax concessions to explain this trend, while I have argued elsewhere that this is also partly symptomatic of the propensity for politicians to hold prominent roles in the church – as lay preachers, elders or deacons for example – in conjunction with their political positions.³⁹ Indeed, the nature of human resource capacity in SIS is such that nearly everybody is called upon to simultaneously play multiple roles that are otherwise distinct in larger states.

Combined, these factors highlight how the threat of social ostracism can marginalise political opposition, which in turn facilitates patriarchal authoritarianism and the personalization of power, with terms like 'patronage' and 'big man' politics employed to describe electoral malpractice in particular. The regular rotation of leadership via elections, adherents of this view maintain, does not provide sufficient proof of democratization, with the ideal pursuit of consensus masking the ugly reality of conformity that confronts

discontented citizens in small communities,⁴⁰ as former Vice-President of Fiji, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, himself a high chief, articulates:

Finding the place of civil society in this great challenge is made difficult by the attitudes of governments throughout the region. They are often suspicious of community organizations, querying everything from their motives and mandates, to their funding and legitimacy. This is unfortunate because it diverts energies from the real priorities.⁴¹

Parliamentary Oversight and Accountability

The general view amongst political commentators and donors in the Pacific region is that parliamentary oversight and accountability instruments largely underperform, with the last consolidated regional round of *Legislative Needs Assessments* conducted by UNDP noting that regional parliaments are less than effective mechanisms of governance, with a large proportion of the blame reserved for their members.⁴² In particular, critics point to the way politicians manipulate Westminster institutions to their advantage, leading to regular votes of no-confidence and constantly shifting coalition governments.⁴³ When combined with the propensity for power to be concentrated in individuals rather than the office they hold, and the underlying threat of social ostracism, political practice in the Pacific often appears the antithesis of the Weberian rational-legal ideal. Certainly, politicians frequently make vocal public proclamations about the need for improvement in parliamentary oversight regimes, while most agree that reduced social proximity makes managing real and potential conflicts of interest a perpetual concern.

Some politicians actively pursue their accountability function, although, as this extract highlights, strictly holding to these principles can lead to electoral defeat:

I had only one objective ... to get on the Public Accounts Committee to see if I could make a difference to the financial management ... I knew that I probably won't last for a second term because I knew that I had something to do and I

knew it would be very unpopular to do. So, my fate in parliament was pre-determined, by me. I knew it. I knew I was going to step on a whole lot of toes, big toes. I was going to be disrupting the old conservative element in politics.
[This Niuean politician was defeated after one term]

Aside from challenges presented by the social context, another limitation to legislative performance is capacity constraints, especially as many of the most skilled Islanders migrate overseas, and the disproportionately high cost that parliamentary oversight and accountability mechanisms present to small island governments:

There is still limited capacity of the Parliament's staff to do the research for you ... That is difference from the US or other countries that have all of these things ... the capacity is not there. But we work with, of course, regional agencies, parliamentary agencies ... and UN. They try to help, they try to support us ...
[but] it is a challenge.
[Marshallese politician]

Similarly, public sector reforms that have been rolled out across the Pacific over the last decade or so bring their own challenges as, against the backdrop of reduced social proximity and threats of ostracism, incentive-based contracts for senior civil servants, symptomatic of new public management regimes, undermine the job security of those prepared to speak truth to power.

Combined, these dynamics provide a fairly gloomy picture of parliamentary oversight and accountability mechanisms in the Pacific region. Two factors counter this view. The first is innovation. To satisfy the public that oversight roles are being fulfilled, parliamentary committees in Tuvalu can and do nominate prominent community members to join politicians in their inquiries. Moreover, all proposed legislation in Tuvalu is referred to the eight island councils [local government] for discussion after the first reading, as outlined in this extract:

And our system was very democratic ... the bills from parliament ... they come out to the people on each island to scrutinise. So, the MP takes the Bill and explains it to them, and they say “No, no” do it this way and they make the amendments as they want. So, it is not the second house like the House of Lords ... the second house is everybody on the Island who comments on the Bill.
[Tuvaluan politician]

As described, councils have the power to propose amendments, although Taafaki and Oh concede that complex legal language often restricts scrutiny.⁴⁴

Secondly, social proximity can fulfil many of the same functions as cumbersome accountability institutions in small island settings. As we saw earlier, holders of public office are placed under great pressure when making decisions as they are personally identified with their choices.⁴⁵ Consequently, things ordinarily considered deviant, when removed from the blinding light of large-state orthodoxy, may fulfil many of the functions for which transferred instruments were initially intended,⁴⁶ as the following reflection on the capacity of ministers to manipulate education scholarships indicates:

Samoa is a very small place. Everyone knows what you are doing. You can never hide anything here because it is only a very small island state. I mean every person knows everyone so that is something that you have to be very careful [of].
[Samoan politician]

Moreover, politicians not only have to justify their actions to their constituents but also, under now common conditionality agreements, to international donors and aid agencies.

Nepotism and Corruption

That is one thing about “small is beautiful” it is easy to tell when somebody is crooked. It is easy to catch them. And it is peaceful as I said. We never thought that there were people like that in the world, when suddenly somebody [con-man

Sydney Gross] ran away with the money. Oh, we never dream of anybody like that.

[Tuvaluan politician]

Nepotism and corruption have become popular topics in the Pacific. Politicians are regularly accused of being the worst perpetrators and are also, paradoxically, the most vocal critics. The relationship between politics, smallness and corruption is complex and fraught with contradictions. As Larmour argues, and echoing the above discussion about consensus and ostracism, there is much ‘talk’ and ‘silence’ about corruption in the region.⁴⁷ Culture is often used as a defence by politicians against external accusations of corruption and all but the most ardent cultural determinists would acknowledge culture and size are interrelated:

... it is very difficult for us to put a line where the politician starts and stops ... For me, as a minister of state ... it becomes very difficult. I cannot refuse my members or my supports, I cannot refuse them. Even if they didn’t vote for me, if they ask I must go ... For us it is something natural, it is in us. For a marriage I can buy 3, 4, 5 pigs, and 3-4 bullocks, yams, kava and mats.

[Ni-Vanuatu politician]

This quote, and the one above, again refocus our attention on how social proximity presents challenges and opportunities for politicians,⁴⁸ as this extract highlights:

My other daughter is the Director of Administration. The worst thing was that was one of my portfolios [laughter]. Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not ... last week, she was chosen to come with me [overseas] but ... I said “sorry, [she] is not coming with me” ... for a daughter and father to go on the same trip, no. I would rather somebody else.

[Niuean politician]

Voluntary self-regulation of this type is usually considered ideal by democratic theorists and this example illustrates how collective perception can influence individual

discretion (although his daughter might feel hard done by). However, as the following extract about a politician foregoing remuneration from board memberships illustrates, some people are better placed than others to remove themselves from situations that could result in conflicts of interests:

My wife and I were both working. Personally, I was prepared to make the sacrifice on a matter of principle, that is why I resigned from all of those twelve state owned enterprises ... I was comfortable with the principles that I had, I was comfortable standing by those principles.
[Tongan politician]

This instance, however, is an exception to the more common story where politicians face numerous financial obligations from family and kin, compelling them to pursue alternate income streams.

If we accept that size naturally increases transparency, we also have to take seriously the popular perception that corruption is on the rise – this is the logic that underpins Transparency International’s (TI) *Corruption Perception Index*. As one of the first attempts to document political corruption in the region, Crocombe’s book *Cook Island politics* describes extensive nepotism under Sir Albert Henry’s government – a picture of public life co-opted by one family.⁴⁹ His antidote to this type of political practice is a version of ethical leadership that tends to hinge on the capacity of individuals to resist pressures from family, kin, and moneyed interests.⁵⁰

Two counter-arguments to this view emerge from this study. The first relates to gossip which, in small communities, can be both prevalent and insidious:

That’s the thing about a small island country ... Even the tender system that we have for construction ... They always question “why is this [one] getting that multi-million dollar job, and why didn’t [so and so] get it?” “He’s corrupt and the minister knows that guy, he’s related to the Prime Minister.” Those will always

be there ... So for us as hardened politicians, we just turn our ear and scratch the other one: 'Yeah, good on you'.

[Samoan politician]

From this perspective, public perception, often fuelled by donor indices like TI's, is sensationalised and misleading.

The second counter-argument empathises with politicians and instead places much of the blame on the insatiable demands of supporters and constituents, as this extract from Henry's biography illustrates:

Albert Henry's biggest problem was that he had no one round him strong enough and knowledgeable enough to say, 'No! Don't do that!' His political colleagues were either older, uneducated 'yes men' or younger, ambitious politicians promoting themselves in the hope of grasping power at a later date. His legal advisers in Auckland did strongly urge him to call halt. But by the time he was so deeply involved that he felt he could not turn back.⁵¹

In this view, corruption stems from the individual and collective greed of the endless stream of supporters and clients who depend on the patronage of politicians for their survival.

Patron-client dynamics are not unique to SIS but politicians argue that there is a difference in the way representation and popular mandates are understood in these contexts. The trouble, they argue, is that while their constituents may want and expect change, their capacity to do so is restricted by all the problems of smallness that economists prescribe. Corruption, in this context, refers to politicians' who over-promise, the unsustainable expectations of constituents, and the inability of both the state and the market economy to deliver increased material benefits. Echoing this dilemma, state failure is often used as a byword for corruption by donors in particular. Perhaps the most extreme example from the Pacific is Nauru which for the first two or three decades after independence had some of the highest levels of per capita income in the world. Its economic demise is often blamed on the

inability of the bureaucratic-state, and in particular the opulence of some leaders, to appropriately manage its phosphate revenues.⁵² Alternatively, as Duncan and Woods argue with reference to the Caribbean, patronage-based politics, while often offensive to liberal sensibilities, can contribute to the maintenance of democracy as elites are forced to part with substantial amounts of money during and after election campaigns, the net effect of which is a redistribution of wealth that mitigates against poverty and social exclusion – much like the welfare state.⁵³

Finally, some political leaders argue that large-scale corruption in the Pacific Islands is perpetrated by outside interests. The influence of logging and mining companies in Solomon Islands is well documented but many Pacific Island leaders and governments have also been victims of various scams, particularly in the period immediately following independence. Some Pacific Island countries also function as tax-havens for wealthy individuals and corporations from all over the world.⁵⁴ Geo-politics is also another source of external influence, with China and Taiwan in particular keen to support sympathetic leaders, as this extract highlights:

[The] Taiwan Embassy now they give the money, that is why we are in the opposition ... we told our leader to argue with the embassy for the money: ‘Why you give the money before the elections? Why you never give after the elections?’

[I-Kiribati politician]

Conclusion

Does smallness provide for a healthier democracy? Based on this ‘insider’ view of political life in the Pacific Islands the answer is mixed and to a large extent dependent on how we define democratic practice. Against the modernist/liberal measures common to larger states, political practice in the Pacific Islands, across a range of categories from independence of the

press to persistent patronage and cronyism, seems to be a perversion of the ideal. Conversely, if we accept the argument that small states labour under uncomplimentary comparisons with models and doctrines created for larger countries,⁵⁵ and the older Athenian view that ‘small is beautiful’, problems of size become strengths and provide a plausible account of democratic resilience. From this perspective, the fact that ‘everybody knows everybody’ offers an organic, human explanation of political processes that stands in contrast to the ‘rule of nobody’ so prized by advocates of the rational-legal ideal.

While interesting in theory, questions about the ideal size for democratic governments are largely irrelevant for Pacific Islanders and their politicians as they have relatively little control over whether their populations and land masses grow or shrink. Consequently, the more significant concern for commentators and would-be-reformers in the region, and more generally for those interested in the governance of SIS, is not whether democracy in the Pacific is working, but how. In this article I have provided an insight into this question based on the views, experiences and reflections of politicians. I have shown that smallness can be both a burden and an advantage to Pacific Islanders and their leaders. The influence of family and kin can produce dynamic political activism and ensure strong links between the member and their constituency. And yet, it can also increase material and emotional demands on moneyed elites and in extreme cases break families apart – especially when seen against the backdrop of the ‘tyranny of distance’.

Similarly, smallness can be both a source of susceptibility and resilience when it comes to questions about ostracism, oversight and corruption. Social proximity can help us understand how and why individuals conform to prevailing norms and power dynamics that collectively stifle pluralism. Conversely, it also provides a more nuanced account of actions ordinarily considered nepotistic and corrupt in larger states. In particular, it highlights how strict lines of accountability become blurred in the Pacific where individuals fulfil

overlapping roles. Importantly, this ‘insider view’ also sheds light on capacity constraints common to smaller countries and helps us to understand how this disadvantages them in international forums and leaves them vulnerable to the interests of larger states, commercial enterprises and criminal syndicates.

The experiences of politicians provide a unique insight into political life in the Pacific Islands but, in part due to the paucity of existing literature on the subject, their reflections also highlight the need for further enquiry. To conclude, let me briefly outline possible avenues that emerge from the themes discussed here. Firstly, as outlined in the introduction, we need to know more about how politicians practise their legislative, representative and ministerial roles, and their experiences representing SIS in international organisations.⁵⁶ Secondly, given the focus of this article on the Pacific Islands, there is obvious need compare the experiences of politicians from other SIS, particularly the Caribbean. Thirdly, I showed that politicians from single island countries or those representing urban constituencies face different challenges to those from outer islands, but we do not know if their relative ease of access result in have lower rates of incumbent turnover. Similarly, we need to know more about how the availability of digital communications has changed the access problems that arise from the ‘tyranny of distance.’ Fourthly, throughout I have pointed to the importance of human relationships and overlapping roles in SIS, however we do not know enough about the form and function of these elites networks and what this means for the operation of legal-rational institutions. In particular, we need to know more about how the types of arrangements found in Tuvalu operate, and whether they are transferable.

Finally, on its own, and in the context of an area study like this one, size has little to say about the different political and developmental trajectories between Pacific Island countries in the way a more conventional comparative study might. It does not explain why Nauru, endowed with significant natural resources, has suffered economic decline, why

Tuvalu has fostered innovative reforms, why some Pacific states have political parties and others do not, or why Solomon Islands and Fiji have experienced coups. To answer these questions we must also include other narratives – colonial legacy, institutional transfer and design, underlying cultural norms and economic capacity – and seek alternate data sources. However, while smallness may not provide a predictive account of difference, it can help us understand some of the likenesses – both between Pacific Island nations and small states throughout the world. Specifically, it illustrates that small size provides mixed blessings – it is neither entirely beautiful nor endemically despotic.

Notes

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- ¹ See L. G. Bertram, *Contemporary Pacific*; F Hezel, *Pacific Island Nations: How Viable Are Their Economies*; S Chand, *Pacific Economic Bulletin*.
- ² For examples see J Rapaport, E Muteba, and J. J Therattil, *Small States & Territories: Status and Problems*; E Dommen and P Hein, *States, Microstates and Islands*.
- ³ For discussion see G Baldacchino, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*: 106-08. The classic text in the genre is Dahl and Tufte, *Size and democracy*.
- ⁴ H Srebrnik, *World Development*: 329; Baldacchino, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*: 106.
- ⁵ For discussion see D Anckar, *Democratization*; ———, *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*; Baldacchino, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*; Srebrnik, *World Development*; P Larmour, "Democracy without Development in the South Pacific."; N T Duncan and D Woods, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*.
- ⁶ Interviews and observation were undertaken in Samoa, Fiji, Palau, FSM, Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, PNG, Tonga, Kiribati and Nauru and with retired or transiting politicians in Australia and New Zealand. All Fijian politicians were parliamentarians prior to the 2006 coup. While not 'representative' in a positivist sense, I have drawn on the reflections of politicians from every one of the countries identified in Table 1 below. It is almost impossible to conceive of a viable comparative measure of representativeness in the Pacific considering the varying sizes of populations and legislatures. Rather, in line with the conventions of interpretive research, I have taken what I could get, spoken to as many people as possible, and in the process pieced together an account that captures the amalgam of politician's experiences. Certainly, the number of interviews I have conducted is quite large compared with conventional research of this type. For a summary of the life histories employed in this study see [omitted]

Table 1

Country	Interviews	Life Histories	Total
Cook Islands	4	2	6
Fiji	16	12	28
FSM	4		4
Kiribati	14		14
Marshall Islands	6		6
Nauru	6		6
Niue	2	1	3
Palau	7	1	8
Samoa	16	3	19
Solomon Islands	15	5	20
Tuvalu	4		4
Tonga	3	2	5
Vanuatu	5	2	7
Total	102	28	130

⁷ D Yanow, "Qualitative-Interpretive Methods in Policy Research."; M Bevir, *Public Administration*.

⁸ M Bevir and R. A. W Rhodes, *Governance Stories*.

⁹ D Yanow, & Schwartz-Shea, P. "Interpretive Research: Characteristics and Criteria.": 33.

¹⁰ C Hay, *Public Administration*: 167.

¹¹ G Reeher, *First Person Political*: 23. Emphasis in the original.

¹² G Reeher, *First Person Political*: 23.

¹³ Xu, Y and Weller, P, *Inside the World Bank*: 17.

¹⁴ For a more thorough discussion of how I use these texts comparatively see [omitted]

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion on the use of observation-based methods in interpretive research see Rhodes, RAW, P. 't Hart and M. Noordegraaf. *Observing Government Elites: Up Close and Personal*.

¹⁶ While broadly covering the region, the sample of in-depth interviews and life histories (autobiography and biography) relies on the experience of post-independence leaders, and politicians from Melanesia and Fiji in particular. Interviews were granted upon my stated commitment not to use names in any publications, and as far as possible suppress the identity of the interviewee. In the case of female politicians, for example, nominating their country would make them easily identifiable as the percentage of women elected to parliament in the Pacific Islands is amongst the lowest in the world. In addition, while I have endeavoured to remain faithful to the integrity of what politicians' said during interviews, clarity and conciseness demanded a degree of editing, with such instances clearly identified using the standard methods. In the case of published life histories, conventional referencing rules have been applied.

¹⁷ see [omitted]

¹⁸ For discussion see N Thomas, *Current Anthropology*.

¹⁹ For discussion see J Fraenkel, "Oceania's Political Institutions and Transitions." P Larmour, *Interpreting Culture and Corruption in the Pacific Islands*: 7.

²⁰ R Rich, L Hambly, and M Morgan, *Political Parties in the Pacific Islands*.

²¹ D Hanlon, "'You Did What, Mr President!?!' Trying to Write a Biography of Tosiwo Nakayama," 171.

²² There are two main exceptions to this trend. Political parties were relatively prominent around independence. However, over the last two decades coalitions have tended to rise and fall on the strength of their leaders rather than by mobilising mass support around socio-political cleavages. For discussion see Rich, Hambly, and Morgan, *Political Parties in the Pacific Islands*. The second exception is Samoa where the Human Rights Protection Party has enjoyed relatively uninterrupted power for thirty years. For discussion see A So'o and J Fraenkel, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*.

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- ²³ For discussion see Duncan and Woods, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*.
- ²⁴ P Kenilorea, *Tell It As It Is*: 299.
- ²⁵ Politicians in Niue, which has much higher standard of living compared to other Pacific states, claim they are not subject to these requests.
- ²⁶ For further discussion see J Corbett, *Journal of Pacific History*.
- ²⁷ Crocombe, *The South Pacific*: 435.
- ²⁸ R Baker, "Scale and Administrative Performance: The Governance of Small States and Microstates," 7 & 15.
- ²⁹ See E Huffer, "Regionalism and Cultural Identity: Putting the Pacific back into the plan."; R Crocombe, *The Pacific Way: An Emerging Identity*.
- ³⁰ T Teaiwa, "Ethnicity and Identity," 271.
- ³¹ Jeffrey Richards, *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*: 44.
- ³² D Tarte, *Turaga: The Life and Times and Chiefly Authority of Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau*: 119.
- ³³ S Lawson, *Tradition versus Democracy in the South Pacific*; ———, *The Journal of Pacific History*.
- ³⁴ Crocombe, *The South Pacific*: 643.
- ³⁵ Larmour, *Interpreting Culture and Corruption in the Pacific Islands*.
- ³⁶ M Field, *Swimming With Sharks: Tales from the Pacific Frontline*: 10.
- ³⁷ K Moala, *Island Kingdom Strikes Back: The Story Of An Independent Island Newspaper - Taimi O Tonga*.
- ³⁸ P Larmour, *Interpreting Culture and Corruption in the Pacific Islands*: 34-35.
- ³⁹ J Corbett, *'Two Worlds'? Interpreting Leadership Narratives in the 20th Century Pacific*.
- ⁴⁰ For discussion see Baldacchino, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*; Srebrnik, *World Development*.

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- ⁴¹ J Madraiwiwi and W Tubman, *A Personal Perspective: The Speeches of Joni Madraiwiwi*, 69.
- ⁴² M Morgan and D Hegarty, "Strengthening Pacific Parliaments: Legislative Reform Program for Pacific Island Countries," *United Nations Development Programme* 2003. For discussion see A Kinyondo, *Parliamentary Affairs*; K Rozzoli, *Parliamentary Affairs*.
- ⁴³ For discussion see Fraenkel, "Oceania's Political Institutions and Transitions."
- ⁴⁴ T Taafaki and J Oh, *Governance in the Pacific : politics and policy in Tuvalu* See also P Panapa and J Fraenkel, *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper*.
- ⁴⁵ See also Baker, "Scale and Administrative Performance: The Governance of Small States and Microstates," 18.
- ⁴⁶ D Murray, "Public Administration in the Microstates of the Pacific," 201.
- ⁴⁷ Larmour, *Interpreting Culture and Corruption in the Pacific Islands*.
- ⁴⁸ See also G Johnson and B Graham, "Presidential Perspectives on Political Economy in Micronesia."
- ⁴⁹ R Crocombe and T Davis, *Cook Islands politics: the inside story*.
- ⁵⁰ For discussion see the corruption chapter in Crocombe, *The South Pacific*.
- ⁵¹ K Hancock, *Sir Albert Henry, his life and times*: 149.
- ⁵² For discussion see J Connell, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*. See also Bennett, J. *Pacific forest: a history of resource control and contest in Solomon Islands c.1800-1997*.
- ⁵³ Duncan and Woods, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*: 211.
- ⁵⁴ See A Van Fossen, *Contemporary Pacific*.
- ⁵⁵ See Murray, "Public Administration in the Microstates of the Pacific," 185 & 202.
- ⁵⁶ see [omitted]

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