

Review of *Democracy in Small States. Persisting Against All Odds* by Jack Corbett and Wouter Veenendaal. Oxford: Oxford University Press, in *Small States & Territories*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2018, pp. 215-216. <https://www.um.edu.mt/sst/sst12nov2018>

Jack Corbett and Wouter Veenendaal's book has two general and interconnected questions at its core: 1) *Why are small states more democratic than large ones?* and 2) *How does domestic politics actually work in small states?* (p.4). Readers who are familiar with the theories of democracy might question whether there is still something new to be said about democracy, while readers who are unfamiliar with the idiosyncrasies of small state politics may begin with the question: why small states, and what can they teach us about democratization? However, Corbett and Veenendaal's book offers plenty of good arguments for why small states matter and for how they can be perfect laboratories for examining the main theories of democratization. For one, they are far less studied; much of what we know (in terms of the origins, the causes, and the persistence of democracy) derives from the democratic experiences of larger states. Small states are often left out of the dominant narratives; however, including them has important empirical and theoretical gains. Small states tend to be more democratic than larger states, and this fact helps countervail the narratives of democratic reversal and authoritarian endurance worldwide. Furthermore, it seems to be case, as the authors argue and try to demonstrate, that the standard theoretical explanations for democratization – economic growth, cultural diversity, colonial legacy and institutional design, the presence of an institutionalized party system, and geographic location – do not appear to have explanatory power in small state units.

The book is purposefully written so that each chapter tackles one of the main theories from the democratization canon and then the final chapter proposes a new theory of democratization based on the empirical analysis made in the preceding pages. The analytical strategy employed throughout the chapters is clear and straightforward, and the methodological caveats are thoroughly discussed. Seeking to tackle the two central questions of the book, the authors proceed in two steps. First, they perform a statistical analysis to explore the correlation between the key factors put forward by the literature and the likelihood of democracy in both larger states and smaller states. Second, they discuss the statistical results, demonstrate why each of the statistically tested theoretical accounts fail to explain the prosperity of democracy in small states, and finally, sort out the main features of functioning democracy in small states. The authors draw on data from more than 250 interviews conducted in 28 countries spanning across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Pacific; complemented by a wide range of

documents such as newspaper articles, diaries, biographies and autobiographies and records of parliamentary debates, *inter alia*.

The book is ground-breaking and opens research avenues in at least two directions. On the one hand, it advances a theory of small state personalism (p. 9-10, chapter 8) that can be tested in other geographies. Pushing this exercise forward would require testing where each of the cases included in the book fit in terms of the proposed theory of personalism. On the other hand, the authors implicitly treat smallness as a mediating or intervening factor. For instance, they argue that it is not institutional design that matters for democratization in small states, but rather the interaction between size and democratic norms and traditions (p. 85). They also state that it is not economic performance that matters, but rather how elites use economic resources and narrate the stories of their performance and craft internal cohesion (p. 121). These are illustrations of other similar arguments used in the book; and underline how smallness interacts with key factors expected to explain democratization. The nature and implications of this interaction, is something that perhaps could have been theorized further in the concluding chapter. This is one of the most interesting findings.

A book as innovative and provocative as this one also raises important questions. First, given the huge variation that exists in the universe of small states, there are some challenges for theory-building, as some arguments seem to apply better to some cases than others (e.g. geographic location factors have stronger explanatory power in small states situated in Europe and the Caribbean than in Africa or Asia; personalism has helped some democracies prosper while others have experienced undemocratic developments). Second, though informal politics seems to prevail in smaller jurisdictions, formal institutions are not irrelevant. In fact, even though world democratic indexes have their imperfections and fail to capture more informal political dynamics, they actually suggest that small states have more democratic formal institutions when compared to larger states. Therefore, this somehow suggests that maybe there is something distinct about the origins and development of formal political institutions in small states, and inspecting this further can potentially give us new insights on the prospects of democratization in small states and beyond.

Overall, this book represents a major contribution to knowledge, as it is the first global analysis of politics and democracy in small states. Moreover, it brings together a wide variety of data that is beautifully related and integrated into an original and coherent work. The book is thus of interest not only to scholars and students of democratization and small state politics, but also to a larger audience interested in the dynamics of politics in small states in more practical terms.

Edalina Rodrigues Sanches

Researcher at Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa

ersanches@ics.ul.pt