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SPECIAL SECTION

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO ISLAND GEOGRAPHY

WILEY



Islands of democracy

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From a comparative political perspective, island jurisdictions stand out as having exceptionally democratic regimes in comparison with mainland or continental polities. Irrespective of their geographical location, levels of economic development or constitutional status (sovereign or nonsovereign), with only a few exceptions, island jurisdictions around the world have democratic political institutions. While some scholars have explained this relationship on the basis of colonial history, international political dynamics or the geographical isolation and remoteness that stem from being an island, others have argued that the smallness of islands explains the correlation, meaning that size is actually the causal factor that explains the prevalence of democratic governance. In this paper, an original account of the relationship between islandness and democracy is provided, foregrounding the informal political dynamics that can be observed in island territories around the world. To do this, the specific nature, dynamics and varieties of democratic governance in island jurisdictions are examined. Most island nations have adopted the political-institutional framework of former colonial powers or metropolitan states, and these have only rarely been modified to suit the (small) island context. Yet due to the greater social intimacy and interconnectedness of island societies, these formal institutional frameworks are likely to be complemented or overshadowed by a set of powerful informal political dynamics, which means that a large part of the political process is conducted outside of the official political channels. These informal politics have mixed effects on the quality of democratic governance, as face-to-face relations offer both opportunities and drawbacks for democratic transparency and accountability. The last analytical section of the paper examines the interaction between formal institutional structures and the prevalent informal political dynamics in island territories, and argues that this interplay perhaps provides the best explanation for the survival of democratic institutions in island territories.

KEYWORDS

democracy, governance, informal politics, islands, political institutions

1 | INTRODUCTION

From a comparative political perspective, island jurisdictions stand out as having exceptionally democratic regimes in comparison with mainland or continental polities (Anckar & Anckar, 1995; Clague et al., 2001; Congdon Fors, 2014; Diamond

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& Tsalik, 1999; Srebrnik, 2004; Stepan & Skach, 1993). Irrespective of their geographical location or constitutional status (sovereign or non-sovereign), with only a few exceptions, island nations and territories around the world successfully maintain democratic institutions and regimes (Freedom House, 2017). The two world regions that almost exclusively consist of islands – the Caribbean and the Pacific – are often cherished for their extraordinary democratic credentials, especially in comparison with other world regions with similar levels of economic development (Domínguez, 1993; Reilly, 2002). But also in Europe, Africa and Asia, island nations tend to have significantly more liberal regimes than their continental counterparts.

The prevalence of democracy in island territories is particularly remarkable because it defies most of the existing explanations of democratic transition and consolidation (Veenendaal & Corbett, 2014). While scholars of democratisation have time and again emphasised economic development, cultural homogeneity, stable institutions and the proximity to democratic neighbours as preconditions for democratisation, none of these factors appears to offer a robust explanation for the omnipresence of democracy in island nations around the world. In fact, poor island states in Africa and the Pacific are not less democratic than richer ones in Europe or Asia, and culturally heterogeneous countries like Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu do not have less liberal regimes than homogenous island states such as Iceland, Jamaica or Nauru. Democracy thrives in islands with all kinds of institutional set-ups (or even in the absence of democratic institutions like political parties), and can also survive in islands located in world regions that are otherwise remarkably undemocratic (e.g., sub-Saharan Africa).

While scholars have traditionally explained the relationship between islandness and democracy on the basis of colonial history, international political dynamics or the geographical isolation and remoteness that stem from being an island, others have argued that the smallness of islands explains the correlation, meaning that population or territorial size is actually the causal factor that regulates the prevalence of democratic governance. Drawing on evidence from island jurisdictions around the globe, this paper presents an original explanation that highlights the interaction between formal and informal political dynamics in island jurisdictions. Given the fact that the bulk of island territories have small populations, the focus of this paper is on small island territories with fewer than five million inhabitants, although findings may also apply to larger islands. Several recent publications have conceptualised islandness as a psychological or sociological condition (or metaphor) that can be found in any type of polity or space (cf. Grydehøj, 2017), but for the sake of conceptual clarity this paper employs a purely geographical definition, conceiving of island territories as landmasses entirely surrounded by water.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, a brief synopsis of the existing literature on the influence of islandness on democratic development is provided. The specific nature, dynamics and varieties of democratic governance in island jurisdictions are examined in a subsequent analytical section. Next, a second analytical section examines the interaction between formal and informal patterns of governance in island territories. This section shows that while most island nations have adopted the political-institutional framework of former colonial powers or metropolitan states, due to the greater social intimacy and interconnectedness of island societies these formal institutional frameworks are likely to be complemented or overshadowed by a set of powerful informal political dynamics. The conclusion highlights the effects of this interaction on the quality of democratic governance, and argues that face-to-face relations offer both benefits and drawbacks for democratic transparency and accountability in island societies.

2 | OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOLARLY DEBATE ON ISLANDNESS AND DEMOCRACY

While many scholars have found strong evidence of a statistical correlation between islandness and democracy, in many cases such discoveries were quite haphazard, in the sense that island status was just one of the control variables in a larger regression analysis (cf. Barro, 1999; Clague et al., 2001). As a result, much less effort has been put into the search for potential explanations of this link. In a series of publications, Dag and Carsten Anckar have however devoted ample attention to this issue, and in doing so have also focused on the empirical overlap between small states and island states (Anckar, 2002, 2006, 2008; Anckar & Anckar, 1995). Yet while the Anckars have mostly discarded explanations that assume a spurious correlation between islandness, size and democracy, two explanations have, in fact, been extensively discussed in the literature, namely colonial history and international political linkage (Baldacchino, 1993; Diamond & Tsalik, 1999; Hadenius, 1992; Masala, 2004; Veenendaal, 2015).

In comparison with mainland territories, the process of decolonisation in island jurisdictions generally unfolded at a much later point in time. Indeed, one could argue that decolonisation in many islands is still an unfinished process, since a remarkable number of island territories maintain a constitutional link with the former colonial power under some non-

sovereign arrangement (Aldrich & Connell, 1998; Baldacchino, 2010; Clegg & Killingray, 2012; Grydehøj, 2016). In those island nations that did experience a formal transfer of sovereignty, and are therefore presently categorised as independent states, the process of decolonisation was “undramatic, somewhat haphazard, or even sudden” as “few actually *struggled* for independence” (Baldacchino, 1993, p. 31, italics in original). In formerly British island countries like Malta, the Eastern Caribbean microstates, Seychelles, Kiribati or Tuvalu, decolonisation occurred as much on the initiative of local politicians as the British authorities. And in contrast with some mainland colonies that witnessed mass independence movements and violent conflict prior to achieving decolonisation, in most island territories the process was smoother, better managed and certainly less violent. However, because colonial rule itself was by definition not democratic, it seems somewhat misguided to treat colonialism as a cause of democratisation (cf. Androus & Greymorning, 2016; Favole & Giordana, 2017). Furthermore, the processes through which colonialism can be linked to democratic development remain largely unspecified.

A second group of scholars has linked the prevalence of democracy in island states to the position of these countries in the international system. The role of (small) island jurisdictions in the international economy has long been regarded as one of vulnerability and dependence, and several scholars have highlighted that most small island territories can hardly ensure their own economic survival (Bertram & Watters, 1985; Clarke & Payne, 1987; Harden, 1985). While more recent analyses of the economic and political performance of small island nations tend to reach more optimistic conclusions (Armstrong & Read, 2003; Easterly & Kraay, 2000), island territories certainly tend to have open economies that are more dependent on global markets and international trade, which means that they are also more open to political influences and pressures from larger or neighbouring countries. As a result, (small) islands can be regarded as prototypical cases for theories that highlight international linkage as a stimulus for democratisation (Levitsky & Way, 2005; Masala, 2004; Wright, 2009). On the other hand, there is increasing empirical evidence that foreign aid and international pressure rarely produce successful democratic transitions, and might even have the opposite effect (Bräutigam & Knack, 2004). Moreover, while democratic powers still provide the bulk of foreign investments in small island nations, Chinese engagement in African, Caribbean, Pacific and Arctic islands is rapidly growing, but does not (yet) seem to have negative repercussions for democratic governance in these territories.

3 | BEYOND THE VENEER OF FORMAL DEMOCRACY: THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF ISLANDNESS

If it can be concluded that colonial history and international linkage provide at best imperfect explanations of the prevalence of democracy in island territories, perhaps the geographical quality of “islandness” itself can explain the link. Therefore, the present section will analyse and discuss the various political effects of islandness. As mentioned before, there is a strong empirical overlap between the variables of smallness and islandness, both of which hypothesised to produce a measure of geographical isolation and remoteness, a greater degree of community cohesion and an inclination to person-oriented and informal politics. Since most island territories are small, it can be hard to disentangle the effects of islandness and smallness. Yet both conditions produce a number of political effects that primarily relate to so-called *informal politics*, political dynamics that occur outside of the framework of formal political institutions, rules and procedures (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Lauth, 2000). As a result, islandness and smallness do not so much appear to explain the presence or absence of democracy, but rather appear to strongly mediate the ways in which politics and democracy operate in island settings.

As a first observation, an obvious difference between islands and continental states is that the former have no land borders and are exclusively surrounded by water. The clearly demarcated spatial limit of island territories creates a certain measure of geographical isolation and remoteness, which may vary between islands located just off the mainland (e.g., Bahrain or Singapore) and islands located in the middle of vast oceanic spaces (e.g., Tonga or Tristan da Cunha). Various authors have argued that this remoteness is not an exclusively geographical attribute, but also has political, psychological and sociological ramifications, as a result of which “islandness” is as much an imagined as a real-world quality (Grydehøj, 2017; McCall, 1994, p. 103). While there is an evident risk of overstating the absoluteness of island boundaries (Hau’ofa, 1994), and many islands in the Mediterranean, North Atlantic and Indian Ocean were historically visited and occupied by a variety of groups and powers, the maritime boundaries do at least provide some degree of remoteness and isolation from continental affairs.

This geographical isolation means that in comparison with mainland territories, islands are less likely to be affected by conflicts, instability or violence in neighbouring areas (Clague et al., 2001, pp. 22–23). The classic example is Britain, which, being relatively isolated from conflicts, revolutions and turmoil on mainland Europe, had a profoundly more gradual

and steady process of political liberalisation and democratisation than continental Western European countries. A similar pattern may be observed in African, Caribbean and Pacific islands, which because of their geographical isolation may have been less affected by conflicts in nearby mainland countries in the post-independence era. However, the shelter provided by oceans and seas has certainly decreased over time, and there have been myriad cases of political turmoil and international conflicts spreading across islands. Superpower rivalry during the Cold War affected islands across the globe, and island territories located in zones of geostrategic interest (like the Spratly Islands or the South Kuril Islands) are repeatedly subjected to conflicts between great powers.

Yet apart from external threats, the image of islands as peaceful and harmonious communities is also challenged by prolific examples of domestic conflicts and violence. This is particularly the case in culturally plural island territories, because as Dennis Austin highlights, “when small island communities are mixed (. . .) resentment is both mutual and strong” (2000, p. 61; cf. Srebrnik, 2004). Classic examples of culturally heterogeneous islands with legacies of violent conflict include Cyprus, Fiji, Ireland, Sri Lanka and Timor, and in all of these cases, geographical isolation appeared to act as a catalyst rather than as a break on the intensity of conflicts. Yet even to a greater extent than intra-island conflicts, relations between multiple islands united in a single political jurisdiction are likely to be fraught with tensions and antagonism (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012; LaFlamme, 1983). In virtually every archipelagic unit around the globe, from the former Netherlands Antilles and St Kitts and Nevis in the Caribbean to Comoros in the Indian Ocean and the Federated States of Micronesia in the Pacific, tensions emerge between the main island on which the central administration is based and the peripheral island units that resist the political dominance of this island (Favole & Giordana, 2017). In some cases, including Comoros, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, inter-island antagonism turned into open violent conflict, thereby threatening or eliminating democratic government.

But while social relations within and between islands may be quite hostile at times, the rigid maritime boundaries are also found to enhance community cohesion, social integration and attitudinal homogeneity among island inhabitants (Anckar, 2002; Lowenthal, 1987; Sutton, 2007). According to François Doumenge, “[i]slanders are never happier with their insularity than when asserting that they are completely different from their neighbors” (1985, p. 102), meaning that islandness has a strong influence on the formation of group identities. Given the fact that small island societies are characterised by overlapping, multiple role relationships between inhabitants (Lowenthal, 1987; Ott, 2000), individual citizens commonly encounter and engage with each other in various roles and relationships, presumably resulting in higher levels of social integration. While larger democracies are increasingly plagued by declining levels of political trust and increasing detachment of citizens from politics, in small island societies citizens are more likely to be politically involved and active (cf. Kwong & Wong, 2017). As empirical indicators of such trends, it can be remarked that in small island states like Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Iceland, Malta and Nauru voter turnout levels commonly exceed 85% or even 90%, while such figures are extremely uncommon in larger continental countries.

Yet the rich case-study literature on island societies also points to a number of informal dynamics that may undermine the functioning of democracy.¹ In the first place, while the overwhelming majority of small states maintain formally democratic institutions, in practice politics may be remarkably authoritarian, as power tends to be concentrated and monopolised in the hands of single individuals and organisations (Baldacchino, 2012). One consequence of the higher levels of community cohesion and attitudinal homogeneity in small islands is that there can be a lack of political diversity and alternatives, and that there may be strong pressures to conform to dominant norms and conventions. In practice, this means that small islands have a natural inclination to oligarchy and power concentration. Within the framework of representative democracy, individual political leaders in small islands can acquire vast powers, to the point that they dominate the entire political arena. Examples of such leaders can be found around the world, including Lynden Pindling in the Bahamas (1967–1992), Makarios III in Cyprus (1960–1977), Hammer DeRoburt in Nauru (1968–1989) and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore (1959–1990). In other islands, such as Greenland or Samoa, politics is very much dominated by a single political party, which despite the presence of free and fair elections continues to remain in office.

In addition to power concentration, these examples also point to another political phenomenon in small island territories, which is the personalisation of politics (Sutton, 2007; Veenendaal, 2013). As a consequence of increased social intimacy and the absence of strong ideological divisions that result from higher levels of attitudinal homogeneity, politics in small islands largely focuses on personalities and personal relationships. In the words of D.P.J. Wood, in small islands “the political decisions are left squarely with those who have known each other since childhood” (1967, p. 34). In contrast with dominant assumptions in the academic literature, however, the absence of ideological or substantive politics does not produce a more consensual or harmonious political environment. In fact, many small islands have strongly polarised or even “tribal” politics, with fiercely antagonistic relations between political parties. Caribbean island societies offer the most well-known

examples of this trend (cf. Peters, 1992), but island jurisdictions like Malta, Seychelles, the Marshall Islands and Zanzibar are also known for their hotly contested politics.

A final informal political characteristic of small island politics that deserves mention here relates to the close contacts between citizens and political leaders. Due to the greater social proximity and the prevalence of multiple role relationships, citizens and politicians in small islands meet and interact with each other on a daily basis. This “reciprocal communication” (Dahl & Tufte, 1973, p. 87) has often been linked with increased representation and responsiveness, but also can promote conflicts of interest, favouritism and clientelistic politics. The case study literature on individual small island territories corroborates the prevalence of patron–client networks in small island societies around the globe. Since clientelism produces a highly unequal power relationship between political leaders and followers, it enhances the tendency to power concentration. Furthermore, since many voters are socially and economically dependent on political parties and their respective leaders, clientelism represents a more cynical, alternative explanation of increased political involvement and participation of small island populations.

4 | THE INTERACTION BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL POLITICS IN ISLAND SOCIETIES

In sum, as the previous section highlights, politics in island territories is characterised by strongly counteracting pressures towards consensus and conflict. On the one hand, higher levels of social cohesion and integration facilitate cooperation and unity among island inhabitants, especially in vulnerable circumstances or during severe external threats. On the other hand, the blending of public and private spheres and the personalisation of politics mean that personal conflicts, rivalries and antagonism might easily spill over to the public domain, potentially creating a very hostile political environment. In terms of informal dynamics, this means that island territories frequently experience sudden political conflicts and split-offs within parties and governments, but might also witness surprising instances of political cooperation between former arch rivals. The modern political history of island nations like Curaçao, the Marshall Islands, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Timor-Leste points to myriad examples of such constantly shifting alliances and conflicts between political leaders (cf. Kupferman, 2011; Seibert, 1999).

Like the counteracting pressures towards consensus and conflict, islands also experience offsetting tendencies towards democratic and authoritarian politics. Higher levels of homogeneity, social integration and direct contacts between citizens and political representatives can be deemed to stimulate representation and the political involvement and participation of citizens, while power concentration in the hands of single individuals and patron–client linkages can be supposed to undermine democratic governance. Given the fact that islands are so disposed to democracy, a straightforward conclusion might be that the democracy-stimulating forces are apparently superior to the authoritarian tendencies. However, the case study literature on islands demonstrates that such a conclusion would be premature. In many cases, powerful informal tendencies towards authoritarian politics are in fact encapsulated within a formally democratic system, which in turn is often rather weak and superficial. While informal politics play a role in all kinds of political systems (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004), and can interact in various ways with formal institutions, the relative power of informal politics in small island territories means that the presence of a nominally democratic system might not say that much about how politics work in practice (Baldacchino, 2012; Peters, 1992; Veenendaal, 2014).

This can be linked to the earlier discussion about colonial legacies. To a greater extent than continental polities, island jurisdictions that have been colonised are likely to have retained (or carbon-copied) the political institutions of their former metropolitan power. All of the former British islands in the Eastern Caribbean have integrally adopted the Westminster-Whitehall system, despite ongoing questions about the feasibility of this model in the Caribbean small island context (Bishop, 2011; Ryan, 1999). In similar fashion, Palau has copied the entire US political system, even though having two houses of parliament and sixteen federal states does not seem particularly appropriate for an island nation with only 20,000 inhabitants. The islands of the former Netherlands Antilles all employ the Dutch consensus model, while former Portuguese colonies like Cape Verde have implemented Portuguese semi-presidentialism. It is important to note, therefore, that the prevalence and survival of democracy in island nations in many cases actually signifies and refers to the preservation of colonially inherited political institutions, which only very rarely have been adapted to the small island context (Sutton, 2007).

Seen from this perspective, a cumbersome conclusion could be that democratic institutions in island nations survive because – to put it bluntly – they do not matter very much. While small island nations might possess all the institutional hallmarks of a democratic system as it can be found in larger continental countries, in practice most politics occurs on a face-to-face level, outside of these formal institutional channels. The prevailing informal dynamics might contain

undesirable forms of political domination and power-play, and widespread patron–client linkages entail that many citizens are economically and socially dependent on politicians, but in the end these political patterns can be accommodated within – or perhaps even facilitated by – the democratic institutional framework (cf. Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, pp. 727–728). Moreover, given the external and international pressures on island nations to maintain a system that is at least nominally democratic, there may be additional benefits not to reform existing political institutions, even if they are widely considered to be dysfunctional or superficial.

The end result, therefore, is a formally democratic system with remarkable anti-democratic informal dynamics. As Donald Peters observed for the small island states in the Eastern Caribbean: “[i]n spite of the existence of open, regular elections, opposition parties, and other institutional aspects of a modern democracy, the governmental system of the Eastern Caribbean does not function like a democracy” (1992, p. 2). Describing politics in São Tomé and Príncipe, Gerhard Seibert notes that “[t]he democratization process runs the risk to remain restricted to the creation of institutions based on formalist perceptions of liberal democracy (. . .). Democratic institutions have merged with the political attitudes and clientelist models of resource distribution which have characterized all previous regimes” (1999, p. 244). As this latter quote reveals, informal political dynamics in island nations are often much older and more resilient than the formal democratic institutions, and the (re-)introduction of democracy has not significantly altered pre-existing ways of conducting politics.

Yet aside from fulfilling some of the minimal criteria of democratic governance, a key (and underestimated) benefit of the political system of small islands is the stability that it produces. While personalistic politics may produce infinite conflicts between politicians, resulting in permanent political turbulence that has become the hallmark of Pacific island nations like Nauru, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, this turmoil rarely affects the stability of the overall regime or the political-institutional system as a whole. One reason for this may be that despite its downsides, in the end the small island system “works” for all its consumers and participants. For citizens, direct access to politicians facilitates the continuation of clientelistic exchanges, which in the absence of a social welfare system provide a vital source of income (Duncan & Woods, 2007). Because patron–client linkages increase citizens’ dependence on political actors, there will be few initiatives to reform the political system on the part of island populations. For politicians, the system facilitates the accumulation of power and money, allowing them to distribute state resources to supporters in return for political support. The fact that all these dynamics can exist within the contours of a democratic system might in fact pose the strongest explanation for the survival of democracy in island territories.

5 | CONCLUSION

This paper has departed from the now well-documented statistical connection between islands and democratic governance. This link has repeatedly been explained on the basis of “third” variables such as colonial legacies and international influences, but neither of these explanations provides a satisfactory account of the near-universality of democratic governance in small islands. Therefore, attention was directed towards the more intrinsic sociological and political consequences of islandness and smallness. On the basis of evidence from islands around the globe, the conclusion can be drawn that smallness and islandness provide mixed blessings. On the one hand, they produce a geographically shielded cohesive society in which citizens are closely connected to politics, but on the other hand they create a tendency to inter- and intra-island conflicts, power concentration, personalised politics and patron-client relationships. In conclusion therefore, the “goldfish-bowl” features of island societies (Seibert, 1999, p. 4) provide both blessings and drawbacks for democratic development.

How, then, can we explain the survival of democratic regimes in islands around the globe? On the basis of the evidence reviewed in this paper and highlighted in the last section in particular, I would suggest that the answer can be found in the interaction between formal and informal politics. As a result of the fact that small island politics tends to focus on informal, personal relations rather than ideological dimensions or substantive issues, debates about institutional change or reform are unlikely to emerge. This is evidenced by the fact that almost all African, Caribbean and Pacific island states have adopted and retained the political system of their former colonial power(s). The survival of these democratic institutions may thus be a consequence of the fact that they do not matter a lot in practice, as most politics is conducted outside the formal institutional arrangements.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Godfrey Baldacchino has labelled these joint dynamics as the MITE-syndrome; the acronym stands for monopoly, intimacy, totality and exile (Baldacchino, 1997; Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018).

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