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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The political consequences of smallness: the case of Saint Lucia

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the literature on the political consequences of smallness, focusing on the case of Saint Lucia. Interviews with 19 MPs and senators reveal a political reality of patronage and corruption that occurs in daily encounters with constituents, but also within formal institutions. The study shows that politicians who habitually grant personal favours to constituents, most times do so because there is a genuine need due to economic hardship. Thus, though it is not their *intent* to get involved in patronage practices, their actions nevertheless create exactly such practices. When it comes to patronage and corruption within formal institutions, however, MPs and senators are fully aware of its existence. Regardless of political affiliation, they also acknowledge that there is no interest in coming to terms with these occurrences, since the shared sentiment is that keeping the status quo is politically convenient for all parties.

KEYWORDS Saint Lucia; size; smallness; democracy; corruption; patronage

Introduction

What are the political implications of practicing politics in states that have very small populations? What specific dynamics, if any, are at play when practicing politics in a country with a population size of less than 200,000 individuals? Indeed, the academic literature is in dispute when it comes to the political consequences of smallness (see for example Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Farrugia, 1993; Ott, 2000; Ankar, 2002, 2010; Srebrnik, 2004; Sutton, 2007; Baldacchino, 2012; Veenendaal, 2018).¹ This inevitably also leads to diverging ideas as to the extent to which political institutions in small states are legitimate, or perceived to be as such. This article contributes to an ongoing debate about these issues by studying the island state of Saint Lucia – a country located in the Eastern Caribbean with a population size of 183,600 individuals (World Bank, 2022). But it also adds new insights that increase our understanding about practicing politics in, and between, formal and informal institutions.

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Even though all states in the Eastern Caribbean are unique, they still share a number of political characteristics. This makes the Saint Lucian case a piece of a larger puzzle, which implies that the findings of this study – at least to some extent – are generalisable to the other island states in the region. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* has during the course of years collected contributions that reveal something resembling a pattern of ‘politics in the everyday’ for this specific region of the world (see for example Duncan & Woods, 2007; Hinds, 2008; Baldacchino, 2012; Veenendaal, 2013; Girvan, 2015; Stapenhurst et al., 2018). The findings that will be presented in this article corroborate many of these previous results, but they also contribute new insights as well as a deeper understanding of the complexities of doing politics in a small island state. By conducting in-depth interviews with 19 Saint Lucian members of parliament (MPs) and senators during 2022, this study shows that personal relations have a profound effect on how politics is practised. It also shows that there are instances when Saint Lucian politicians engage in patronage practices without the intended purpose of doing so, but nevertheless do so. Most importantly, it shows that MPs and senators – across the board – are very aware of the fact that state institutions that are set up for purposes of combating corruption do not work; that they are aware of such being the case because of patronage practices; and that they acknowledge that necessary steps to address these practices are not even on the political agenda. Hence, although most of the interviewed politicians are in agreement about some of the serious challenges that emanate from the smallness of society, there is reluctance both in terms of introducing specific types of legislation, as well as in terms of reforming the political system in a manner that could help to address some of these issues.

This article is organised in four parts. The following section provides the theoretical context in which this study is situated, and hence engages with the academic literature on the political consequences of smallness, drawing attention to potential advantages as well as potential disadvantages of being a small state. This is followed by a section that explicates the methods and materials that this research is based on and also explains how results will be conveyed while maintaining the anonymity of respondents. This is a delicate matter, and an important one, when one engages in research on a small state that by consequence also has a small legislature, a limited number of ministers and a small number of senators. Measures must be taken when conveying results so that anonymity is not compromised. This section is followed by the empirical part of the study in which the results from the Saint Lucian case are presented and discussed in light of the theoretical assumptions of the political consequences of smallness. The final part of the article discusses conclusions based on the research findings.

The academic literature on the political consequences of smallness

As stated at the very outset of this article, the academic literature is not in agreement when it comes to the political consequences of smallness – quite the contrary. It is possible to delineate the theoretical debate into two opposing strands; scholars who emphasise the advantages of being small, and scholars who stress the disadvantages. Beginning with the potential benefits, we will find that some of the most prominent political theorists, Rousseau (1971) and Montesquieu (1949), both argued that a liberal state could best be developed in smaller countries largely due to the proximity between citizens and those elected. Not only was the physical nearness emphasised, but also the psychological closeness; the sense of being near the person/persons who represent you in government, was thought to create a closer connection to, and understanding of, democratic procedures. Adding to that, being close geographically as well as mentally, was also underscored as something positive as it was expected to make one more willing, and able, to watch over government practices and bring potential transgressions into the light (Montesquieu, 1949; Rousseau, 1971). These ideas have found resonance in the works of many contemporary intellectuals who are authorities in this specific field of study. For example, Dahl and Tufte (1973), in their seminal work *Size and Democracy* theorise that smaller units, be they constituencies, regions or countries, allow for easier access. In other words, in small states, political representatives are more accessible to the voters; voters are more likely to encounter their representatives when conducting their everyday business, more likely to engage in spur-of-the-moment conversations with them and therefore more likely to want to get engaged in political life and political organisations. The closeness and the ease by which voters can get in touch with their representatives also make the latter more aware of the actual needs and wants of the former, hence they are assumed to be more responsive and better equipped to form government policies on the basis of their deeper understanding of the grievances of the citizenry. All of these circumstances and traits have led to the notion of ‘small is beautiful’ (Anckar, 2010, p. 1), also in the sense of small being democratic. Indeed, there are a number of scholarly contributions that have observed a correlation between states with small populations (usually populations under 1 million or under 500,000 individuals) and democratic systems of government (see for example Ott, 2000; Anckar, 2002, 2010; Srebrnik, 2004). It is, however, important to note that these studies are largely quantitative, and hence not necessarily concerned with analysing if, or how, formal democratic institutions are a façade for informal undemocratic institutions and processes (cf. Saati & Bergman, 2022).

One of the more significant contributions is Ott's (2000) study from the turn of the millennium in which she too finds a correlation between smallness and democracy. By means of a quantitative analysis, she argues that not only being small but also being an island state has a significant positive impact on democracy, regardless of other factors – such as for example economic development – which is commonly associated with democratic performance (2000, pp. 127–129). Now, *why* small island states are more democratic compared to other small countries is not investigated further. As regards smallness in general it is, again, proximity between voters and political representatives, and between individuals in society at large, that is expected to create personal and informal connections. These connections, in turn, are anticipated to foster cooperation in general, and encourage political cooperation in particular. Hence, not only are small states bastions of democracy, but they also give rise to peaceful relations between people who reside there (Ott, 2000, pp. 111–130). Srebrnik (2004), takes it even a step further and states that: 'The small island countries of the international community are a welcome antidote and contrast to the anarchy, autocracy, internal warfare, militarism, violence and state collapse which is a feature of all too many larger, mainland states' (Srebrnik, 2004, p. 339).

This depiction of the political benefits of being a small state is disputed by a number of other scholars. In the words of Baldacchino (2012, p. 112), small may be beautiful, 'but to those who belong'. By their very virtue, small states tend to develop control mechanisms – albeit informal – that determine the boundaries of what can and cannot be done, what can and cannot be said. This applies to all spheres of life, ranging from the social all the way to the political, and signifies that if one does not conform to these (invisible) rules, one can easily be ostracised from society (Baldacchino, 2012). This potential drawback of smallness has also been brought to attention by Dahl and Tufte (1973, p. 92); authors who generally emphasise the benefits of small states. They refer to it as a 'single code' of homogenous values to which individuals – at least formally and manifestly – must adhere (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). Failure to do so might bring with it the prospect of social displacement or, as innovatively put by Baldacchino, being 'ex-isled' (2012, p. 109). This propensity towards a single code of conduct might very well produce harmonious societies – as envisioned by Srebrnik (2004) – when everyone actually conforms. However, it can also lead to the exact opposite when individuals or groups do not adapt.

The interconnectedness of individuals due to smallness, combined with the pressure to conform to certain rules of conduct may also bring with it other political consequences. When attitudes are streamlined, there is not much room for political diversity in any true sense of the word. A number of different political parties may exist, but the extent to which they are ideologically different may not be considerable (Veenendaal, 2018, p. 33). This, in

turn, gives rise to a political landscape characterised by personalisation and personal relationships – phenomenon that provide fertile soil for patronage, clientelism and corruption (Farrugia, 1993; Duncan & Woods, 2007; Hinds, 2008; Veenendaal, 2013; Corbett, 2015; Girvan, 2015; Veenendaal & Corbett, 2020). Indeed, it might be the case that some of the envisioned benefits of smallness as discussed earlier can be abused. As brought to attention by Farrugia (1993, p. 233), in small societies many people are connected to each other in one way or the other, and their paths – professional and recreational – constantly cross. The auditor general may be the niece of a senator; the chief justice may be the uncle of a member of parliament; a member of parliament coaches his daughter's football team and on these occasions meets another parent who is a contractor for building houses, and so on. These social webs give rise to what can be referred to as politics on the side-lines, or politics as practiced along informal avenues which, in turn, operate side by side with – or worse, overshadow – formal democratic institutions. Though these types of informal ways of conducting politics is highly questionable from a legitimacy perspective, others could (and do) argue that this type of clientelist politics gives rise to a high degree of accountability and responsiveness (Kitschelt, 2000). As conveyed by Kitschelt (2000, p. 851); due to the direct relationship between patrons and clients (for example, a member of parliament and a contractor), 'it is very clear what politicians and constituencies need to bring to the table to make deals work'. When politicians fail to deliver to their voters' selective wishes, they run the risk of losing their vote and other types of material contributions, for example electoral financing. Likewise, if individuals do not vote as they have previously stated that they would, different forms of advantages/payouts/contracts might suddenly come to a halt (Veenendaal, 2018).

Fieldwork and interviews in Saint Lucia

The findings that are presented in this article are mainly based on in-depth interviews with 19 Saint Lucian politicians. These were carried out during fieldwork in 2022. Interviews were conducted with MPs as well as with senators and included representatives from the two political parties that hold seats in parliament – *Saint Lucia Labour Party* (SLP) and *United Workers Party* (UWP) as well as with independent MPs/senators. All respondents had been informed about the purpose of the study in an information letter before interviews were scheduled. Participation in the interview was voluntary and based on informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Before recording started, participants were once again reassured about their anonymity in research articles and reports that would emanate from their answers, and they were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time during the interview (none of the respondents chose to do so; all interviews were carried out as planned).

Due to the smallness of Saint Lucia, the legislature is inevitably also small. The lower house (the house of assembly) has 17 elected seats, the upper house (the senate) has 11 appointed seats, totalling a number of 28. This makes the respondents very easy to identify should the findings that are presented on the forthcoming pages not be completely anonymous. This implies that not only will political party affiliation/independent status not be disclosed nor whether the person is a senator or a MP, but neither will gender, age or anything else that could possibly identify the respondent. During the course of conducting fieldwork in Saint Lucia, I was struck by the extent of candidness that all persons that I interviewed conveyed, and it is my understanding that their honesty was entrusted to me on the premise of being assured complete anonymity.

The 2021 general elections resulted in SLP winning 13 out of 17 seats in the house of assembly. This indicates that respondents have mainly been drawn from the governing party. For purposes of incorporating more views from the UWP/independent MPs, two of the 19 interviews were conducted with individuals who were elected in the previous election (2016). Perhaps most interesting, which will be discussed more at length in the final section of this article, is that experiences of how politics is practiced in the everyday, the advantages and disadvantages of being a small state and its political consequences, were quite similar across the board. In other words, with some exceptions, a rather distinct pattern in the answers of the respondents could be detected regardless of their political affiliation.

In addition to the 19 interviews with politicians, another seven interviews that were carried during the fieldwork are also part of the material for this study. These interviews were conducted with Saint Lucian journalists, legal professionals and members of trade unions. The identities of these respondents will not be revealed either, for the exact same reasons mentioned above; the smallness of Saint Lucia would make these individuals easy to identify. Secondary sources such as newspaper articles, election observer reports and academic work have also been used for purposes of triangulating the primary sources. Although Saint Lucia has not received much scholarly attention, the contributions of Barrow-Giles (2015, 2021) and Reynolds (2021) have been valuable.

In the next section of the article, the research findings will be presented. It will be structured such that it relates back to the theoretical assumptions of the potential advantages and disadvantages of being a small state, starting with the former and continuing with the latter.

The advantages of smallness – theory meets the experiences of Saint Lucian politicians

It is clear that Saint Lucian MPs and senators value the closeness between voters and politicians. The fact that political representatives often live in

the same community as their constituents, makes easy access in both directions inevitable. Respondents mentioned going to the same church as their constituents, shopping in the same supermarket and attending the same recreational activities. These occasions present themselves as instances where constituents can, and do, approach them. Respondents expressed it in terms of 'people get the chance to directly communicate their needs to us'; 'we have a really good understanding of their wants and can therefore fight for them appropriately in parliament'; 'we are in constant interaction with the people', and 'we laugh when they laugh, cry when they cry and therefore they become like family'. One of the respondents traced the ease with which people approach politicians not only to the smallness of the state but also to the colonial past, stating that:

People view the state with suspicion and therefore they do not run to the departments and ministries. They rather turn to the MPs. The fact is that during the independence movement, we promised people that we would do better than the colonial state. People expect that we will deliver for them because we promised that we would do that. This has built a culture of high expectations.

The last aspect concerning high expectations will be elaborated further when discussing the disadvantages of smallness as experienced by Saint Lucian politicians. In addition to being able to regularly 'gauge the temperature' of the citizenry as expressed by one politician, another one of the respondents wished to stress an additional aspect, saying that:

Closeness also keeps me honest and honourable. Simply put, the voters know everything about you. You cannot hide anything. You cannot make false statements about who you are, because everyone *knows* who you are and what you are.

Hence, the ideas of Dahl and Tufte (1973) and other scholars who stress the specific aspect of access as one of the prime advantages of small states appears to be borne out in reality. According to the experiences of Saint Lucian politicians, they are in very close connection to their constituents, which makes them well aware of their needs.

Another notion that was emphasised earlier as one of the benefits of smallness was that of reduced political conflicts in favour of political elite cooperation (Ott, 2000; Srebrnik, 2004). As it turns out, however, the reality of politics as practiced in Saint Lucia points to the direct opposite. Most MPs and senators conveyed that the political environment of the country is extremely charged and polarised; a sentiment that was also confirmed by the interviewed journalists. As stated by several of the respondents (politicians and journalists alike), 'the country is completely divided'; 'families are split and turn against each other because they support different political parties'; and, 'in Saint Lucia, you are either yellow or red'. Yellow representing

the current party in opposition; the UWP, while red represents the colour of the current ruling party; the SLP. Some of the respondents posited that the argumentative and harsh tone that characterises political conversations on social media has increased polarisation, but that the political atmosphere has always been very charged. They further asserted that this has created a political culture in which cooperation is nearly inconceivable, and in which the growing sentiment is that if you take suggestions from the opposition, you appear weak in the eyes of your voters. Although 'dialogues have happened in the past, it is becoming increasingly uncommon', one politician said. Continuing by stating that 'not even now, during an emergency situation such as the Covid pandemic, is dialogue and cooperation happening, rather the contrary'. Common practice, as conveyed by almost all of the interviewed politicians, regardless of currently being in the opposition or in the ruling party, is to 'oppose everything that comes from the other side just for the sake of opposing':

Everyone is responsible for this development. I am guilty of it too. It happens regardless of how big or small the opposition is. There is simply no effort to cooperate, which is sad because we all know that sometimes a bill can be good, and in the interest of the whole country. Even so, you end up opposing it anyway just because it comes from the other side.

Many of the respondents were thus fully aware of how cooperation could be in the best interest of the country. Still – across the board – political will to make an effort does not exist. Not only that, but the politicians also conveyed that there is a strong predisposition to discontinue different types of projects and initiatives that have been started by one administration as soon as there is a change of government. One of the respondents expressed it thus:

So, basically the money has already been spent, but we are going to stop the project just because *they* started it. Instead, the reasonable thing would be to continue and take credit for it. We are all aware that this is a huge waste of resources, and that we are always in a process of re-inventing the wheel.

Though social media was floated as an explanatory factor as to why politics has become even more divisive in the country, another factor could also be the Westminster model of government, which exacerbates confrontation by virtue of its very structure (Sanders, 1997; Hinds, 2008; Bishop, 2011). Research from other cases in the eastern Caribbean region would support this idea (Barrow-Giles, 2015), even going so far as to referring to it as the 'Westmonster' model (Bishop, 2011) and suggesting that it is not at all suitable for states with such small legislatures. Sanders (1997), Antiguan academic and diplomat has argued that it gives rise to a hostile environment and that the FPTP system with its winner-takes-all attribute harshens divisiveness. The finding is further supported by scholarship on St. Kitts & Nevis (Veenendaal, 2013) and the sentiment is also captured by one of the politicians in Saint Lucia who stated:

It is not as it is in the UK where the back-benchers do not necessarily need the party apparatus to survive. Here, you need the party. If you are in exile, you are in exile and there is no coming back. So basically there is no space for cooperation in a systematic way in different committees. There is a party-line and you stick with it, no matter what.

Somewhat surprisingly, though many of the MPs and senators were in agreement concerning the shortcomings of the Westminster model in light of Saint Lucia's specific circumstances; there had – according to them – not been any serious discussion concerning constitutional review.² However, as will be shown in the remaining parts of this article, when many procedures take place either in the informal sphere, or are conducted within formal institutions but handled in a corrupt manner, constitutional review might not matter much. This would explain the lack of interest in constitutional reform, even though recent research on Saint Lucia indicates that this is exactly what is needed to come to terms with the (absence of) integrity in relation to certain state institutions (Barrow-Giles, 2015; Reynolds, 2021, p. 177).

The disadvantages of smallness – theory meets the experiences of Saint Lucian politicians

As substantiated earlier, daily encounters between politicians and the constituents make the former fully aware of the grievances of the latter. Saint Lucian politicians, therefore, know that they are well equipped to address voter's concerns in a targeted manner. During the interviews, it, however, also became clear that there is a downside to easy access and closeness. The disadvantages can be separated into two different yet related categories. The first concerns the individual politician being overwhelmed by constituents who are constantly seeking his/her attention. The second, and more problematic, is how closeness – geographically, but perhaps also psychologically – leads to politicians being approached by constituents with the expectation of delivering personal favours to them. As expressed by one of the respondents:

During the past three decades, we have seen a culture develop in Saint Lucia where people have become increasingly dependent on the politicians for everything from rice, bread and sugar, to employment, bricks to their house and more. They have been cultured in that way, and they expect to be granted all of these favours. It is a mind-set that is very difficult to change.

All of the interviewed MPs and senators expressed that the pressure on politicians is tremendous. Since the country is so small, and daily encounters are so frequent, many of the representatives feel as though they are 'public property' as expressed by one of them. The line between public and private is completely blurred, resulting in politicians being approached at all hours of

the day for one, and secondly being expected to engage with constituents on a personal level. As to the former, many of the respondents had personal experiences of, for example, waking up in the morning and having a line of people outside their house waiting to ask for different things. Others experienced that voters demanded that they should make time to listen to them straightaway when approached and that when rejected, voters would express disappointment and even become angry. One respondent expressed reflected:

The pressure is almost ridiculous. People are in contact with you, literally face-to-face every day. They know you on a first name basis, they have your phone number, they know where you live and so on. It is *constant, never-ending, 24/7*. You become their councillor, their advisor, even their medical doctor. They come to you with their *every* need.

As to the second, social anticipations are likewise enormous. For example, many of the respondents had personal experiences of constituents expecting that they attend birthdays, weddings, funerals and graduations. Though these expectations, particularly if the politician conforms to the wishes of the constituents, can become 'extremely taxing', as expressed by one respondent, they need not necessarily be problematic from a legitimacy perspective. Being approached by voters and expected to deliver personal favours however is problematic, if the politician decides to deliver such favours. High expectations and being accessible almost constantly feeds into another aspect that deserves mentioning. Several of the interviewed MPs and senators discussed, at length, that being asked favours – material as well as social – leads to distractions from what they themselves want to prioritise politically. While they try to focus on making policies that are for the benefit of the entire country in the long-term perspective, voters want 'the end product of policies straight away', as expressed by one of the respondents. According to many of the MPs and senators, the experience is one of a huge discrepancy between what they are attempting to accomplish on a strategic level and the bread-and-butter issues that the citizens need assistance with immediately. According to most of the respondents, this has reached an almost extreme level during the Covid pandemic, due to loss of employment and economic hardship among large segments of the population. In their experience, the situation is now so dire that people, simply, cannot wait for the next paycheck to come through since they do not know if/when they will be employed again. Therefore, their sense is that the reliance on politicians to deliver with immediacy has reached an all-time high.

The combination of a number of factors ranging from smallness, interconnectedness of the people, tight social bonds, high demands on politicians to distribute all sorts of things so that people can survive, has created fertile

ground for patronage, clientelism and corruption. Hence, the theoretical argument of how personal relationships become particularly important in small states, has practical effects in Saint Lucia. Interviews with MPs and senators bring evidence that this plays out in two separate arenas. The first one is in the daily encounters between politicians and constituents, i.e. in the informal sphere. The other takes place in formal institutions. Interestingly, while patronage politics, clientelism and corruption are occurring knowingly, and sometimes even blatantly, in the latter, the intended purpose of extending a helping hand to constituents in everyday encounters might not be to encourage patronage politics, yet the consequence is exactly that. How these circumstances manifest themselves in the two separate arenas will be the focus of attention below.

MPs and senators in Saint Lucia respond to constituents who approach them and ask for favours in two distinct ways. On the one hand, there are those who habitually grant personal favours, and on the other, there are those who consistently refrain from doing so. There are no differences between these two categories in terms of politicians from a certain political party/independent status being overrepresented in either one of these groups. Though it might be tempting to immediately determine foul play and label those who grant constituents various favours as dishonest politicians, and as politicians who are acting in a self-serving manner for purposes of securing their voter base, the reality is too complex for such a conclusion. As conveyed by those who regularly grant favours to constituents, it is a sense of 'responsibility'; 'there is no choice but to help'; 'people are suffering economically'; and, 'you have to try and assist those who are most in need'. As expressed by one of the respondents:

There is a need, simply put. There are no national structures in terms of sufficient social programs that can alleviate some of the economic hardships that people are going through. Therefore, you must help them yourself even if it comes out of your own pocket.

Another one discussed how some constituents are 'serial askers', whereas others approach the politician only when the situation is so serious that they simply cannot solve it themselves. For the politician in question, separating these individuals from those who are in dire need of assistance becomes essential. However, many of the respondents who regularly grant favours admitted that this is a slippery slope and that individuals who once approached them because they truly needed assistance have since then developed into serial askers. Another one of the respondents was fully aware that granting favours is not something that politicians should engage in. A combination of feeling a responsibility to help with a desire to secure their voter base however made this politician engage in such actions after all:

I know that it is wrong. We should have patience and do it the right way. Try to make policies that will alleviate the problem in the long term. But when I see the despair in their eyes, I cannot say no. So I end up giving them money so that their situation can be dealt with immediately. I realize that I am fuelling this behaviour but I cannot help it. Also, if you do not help them it is common that they will say "I will remember this ..." which is an implicit threat of losing their vote in the next elections.

Quite a few of the respondents also stressed the point of underdeveloped social welfare programmes in combination with the effects of the pandemic resulting in a very difficult situation for Saint Lucian citizens. These respondents would habitually give money out of their own pocket, but also call on people in their network to assist. This, however, also comes with a price, as expressed by one politician:

I often call someone who I know can assist in some way, but of course this creates breeding ground for corruption. These people you call on for favours will one day want something back from government and you find yourself in a situation where you are indebted. But since the state apparatus cannot provide for all social needs, it forces you to put yourself in a position that is not the most advisable but ... that is just a structural deficiency that we have.

Among the MPs and senators who never grant favours, the common understanding was that, in its essence, doing so would encourage fraudulent behaviour. Many argued that granting favours had created a culture in which politicians start to believe that if they are going to be able to stay in office, they must grant favours and thus the cycle of favours becomes self-enforcing. Another said that 'I am walking a very thin line here in regards to my political career', suggesting that *not* granting favours could easily lead to the loss of support in the next elections. Nevertheless:

I will not do it. It leads to corruption and there is no other way of expressing it. I have had people coming up to me and blatantly saying to my face "I voted for you to get personal favours". So maybe I will never be re-elected again, but this is a risk I am willing to take. I am sick of seeing all of this corruption and the level of personal favours that is being granted to individuals.

Judging by the experiences of Saint Lucian MPs and senators, closeness and personal relationships bring with it certain disadvantages that, as just described, are cause for concern in terms of creating and encouraging patronage policies, and *quid pro quo* situations. Close bonds also affect how politics is practised in formal institutions. Several of the respondents were very open about the commonness of patronage and various types of friendship corruption, for example stating that:

It is just a reality. It is a part of the political fabric of our country because we are so small. After elections, a new government comes in and the people and the

companies who assisted you in getting power, expect to get jobs, contracts, and more. That is just the way it is.

Most of the MPs and senators – regardless of political affiliation – were straightforward in acknowledging that it is common to ‘bring people around you based on friendship and family, and not on merits’, as stated by one respondent. What exacerbates the situation of corruption is that Saint Lucia does not have a single piece of legislation that is dedicated to regulating electoral financing, something that has been pointed out as a specific area of concern (Organization of American States, 2011; The Voice, 2018; Barrow-Giles, 2021; Commonwealth Observer Group, 2021; The Voice, 2021). In other words, aspiring MPs can receive whatever amount of money from whoever, without having to disclose this information. According to one respondent:

The very fact that we do not have laws on campaign financing is the genesis of corruption. This issue, honestly, has never been raised, not for a second. It is not on the agenda, and it is simply because when you are in opposition you cry “foul”, but when you are in government, you just push the issue aside.

Although disclosure is not required by law, and therefore no official documentation as to who received how much from whom exists, respondents tell of how it nonetheless becomes obvious eventually. Most of the interviewed politicians emphasised that almost everyone, be they individuals or companies, give something with the expectation of getting something back. Therefore, though government contracts ought to go through certain tendering processes, ‘after an election, you will find that all of the sudden certain contracts are drawn up and given to certain people and companies’, as expressed by one politician. Such occurrences would inevitably indicate that those being granted contracts are the same persons/companies who have funded a specific MP’s election campaign. Thus, perhaps Kitschelt’s (2000) ideas about how clientalist politics brings with it a degree of accountability and responsiveness has merits – evidently, patrons and clients know what they need to bring to the table to make deals happen. Even so, it is for one, a highly volatile form of cooperation, since informal agreements can surely be abandoned for one reason or the other. Secondly, even if agreements are respected, and the politician in question can be held accountable by the person/company who has invested in his/her campaign, the system as such does not serve to hold the MP accountable to the broader public who voted for him/her. Hence, it is a very limited and specific form of accountability that does not serve to strengthen democratic processes and procedures.

The lack of regulation concerning campaign financing in combination with a culture of appointing/surrounding oneself with individuals based on friendship and family bonds rather than merit, makes an already precarious situation even worse. This since state institutions, such as the parliamentary

commission, the auditor general and others, which are set up for purposes of combating corruption, are headed by individuals who are politically appointed (Constitution of Saint Lucia, 1978, sections 90, 110 & 112). A clear majority of the interviewed MPs and senators acknowledged that these institutions simply do not work, and it is furthermore *their* perception that citizens do not trust these state institutions to be effective in combating corruption either. This is problematic from a legitimacy perspective, particularly since the voters rank combating corruption as one of the main issues that the country must address (Reynolds, 2021, p. 177). Hence, citizens most definitely care, and would likely be rather keen on these institutions functioning as they are supposed to. It is also well worth noting that the other issue that voters rank as equally urgent is that of quality of leadership (Reynolds, 2021, p. 177). Undeniably, these two issues go hand in hand. Even so, the common course of action following every election is that the incoming administration appoints the heads of these commissions from among 'their own', and there is nothing that the citizenry nor the opposition can do about it. The reason for doing so is obvious, as expressed by one respondent:

When a government appoints the head, of course they will appoint someone who they know will *not* go after or highlight the alleged accusations of corruption that may have taken place during the tenure of that government.

Interviews with the MPs and senators made it apparent that most of them are in agreement about three things. For one, state institutions that are supposed to combat corruption do not function as they should. Secondly, everyone knows that they do not function as they should. Thirdly, there is no real desire or incentive to make them function as they should. Two of the respondents formulated this particularly well, stating that:

All political parties prefer it this way. Even though you might complain while you are in opposition, you know that in a matter of years, your own party will be in power again and you will benefit by those commissions being set up as they are. This is why you do not work towards changing the legislation around them or how the people in them are chosen.

No one wants these commissions to function properly because everyone knows that at some point their own tenure will be investigated. Having things as they are is politically convenient for both sides.

From personal experience, one of the respondents also conveyed that if one sets out to protect the integrity of the office in question and hence go against the (implicitly or explicitly) outspoken wishes of the government who appointed him/her, the cost can be quite high. This person – now a politician but previously a public officer – did exactly that; investigated matters that was not advisable, and was therefore not endorsed to stay for a second term in office. Another politician told of a similar experience;

of trying to be ‘courageous enough’ to go against the party line and what was expected, to instead follow their own moral compass. This person was excluded from the party and from the community, and is exploring whether to relocate from the island altogether. Though these two instances may be anecdotal, they indicate that the before mentioned theoretical notions of the socio-political costs being particularly high in small states, have merit (see for example Baldacchino, 2012). Once you are exiled, you are ex-isled.

Conclusions

You must understand that smallness affects *every* aspect of political life in Saint Lucia.

This statement by one of the interviewed politicians captures, and answers, the question that was posed at the very outset of this article. There is no getting around the fact that smallness *has* political implications, both good and bad. Just as there is no getting around that dense social bonds create a special type of dynamic between constituents and politicians. As emphasised by most of the MPs and senators, closeness is beneficial as they find that they are very much in tune with what the needs of the people that they represent actually are. At the same time, closeness leads to an overwhelming pressure to listen, respond, alleviate and accommodate the needs of the constituents with immediacy. Though not all MPs and senators grant favours, material and other types of benefits, to constituents – many of them do. During the course of interviews, many respondents expressed a sense of uncertainty concerning when and how the culture of granting favours developed. Did it start by voters approaching MPs, asking for favours in exchange for their vote, or did MPs approach voters and offer favours in exchange for getting their vote? Whatever the case may be, a self-reinforcing cycle is now a matter of fact. That many citizens are currently facing economic hardship due to the Covid pandemic, plays into this cycle and reinforces it even further. As illustrated by a number of quotations, MPs and senators, even though they know that it is not advisable, cannot help themselves from reaching into their own pockets and giving people money and other material favours. There is no reason to believe that the act of doing so stems from anything else than a desire to help those who are in real need. Even so, though this might not be the intended effect, it creates patron-client relationships. These relationships can become even more problematic, when politicians – in their turn – call on people in their network to assist *them* to assist constituents. These people/businesses might eventually call in these favours from government. Thus, the field has been prepared for corruption to take root and thrive.

When it comes to the matter of patronage and corruption within formal institutions, however, this appears to occur with intent. Something that many of the respondents – straightforwardly – acknowledge. That willingness to remedy the situation by reforming the appointment procedure for the head of commissions such as the auditor general and the parliamentary commission, is lacking sends a clear signal of a desire to keep the status quo. Likewise, the reluctance to put the matter of electoral campaign financing on to the political agenda, reveals a desire to keep things as they are for self-serving purposes. MPs and senators appear to turn a blind eye to both scholarship as well as election observer reports by international organisations that emphasise that this very aspect – regulating electoral campaign financing – is crucial in order for the country to come to terms with corruption. Paradoxically, though cooperation and preparedness to see eye-to-eye on bills that could be for the benefit of the entire country rarely ever happens, politicians in the SLP, the UWP and independents however seem to be very much in agreement when it comes to upholding processes and procedures that contribute to patronage practices and corruption. Seeing that Saint Lucian citizens view corruption and leadership quality as the two most pressing issues to address, this stance appears misplaced and not at all in agreement with the voters' priorities. This is also a paradox, because MPs and senators consistently pride themselves on being aware of their constituents' wishes. Why not take advantage of the foremost virtue of being a small state and take to heart – and make policies – that actually *do* address what the citizens apparently desire?

Notes

1. When referring to the term 'small', this vein of research is concerned with population size. Scholars in this field commonly draw a cut-off point for 'smallness' somewhere around populations below 1 million or below 500,000 (see for example, Ott, 2000; Srebrnik, 2004; Veenendaal, 2015).
2. It must, however, be known that in 2004 a constitutional review commission was established, and its report published in 2011 (Report of the Saint Lucia Constitutional Review Commission, 2011). The recommendations that were suggested therein, among others, concerned substantial revisions in order to assure greater accountability and to strengthen checks-and-balances between the legislature and the cabinet, the latter of which was seen as holding too much power. These suggestions have, however, not been implemented.

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