

Doing politics within the confines of restrictive norms: The case of St Lucia

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ABSTRACT: This article shows that prevailing socio-political norms contribute to a political culture of corruption and clientelism in the small island state of St Lucia. Drawing on interviews with members of parliament and senators, the study brings to evidence how entrenched norms determine the room for manoeuvre for these individuals to conduct their work. A political landscape has developed in which corruption has taken root, and in which there is neither political incentive nor will, to come to terms with fraudulent behaviour. The article also suggests that, on the few occasions that political representatives have attempted to act against this culture, the socio-political costs for the individual have been quite high.

Keywords: corruption, clientelism, norms, parliamentary oversight commissions, St Lucia, small state

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Introduction

Small population size has political consequences. This has been brought to evidence not least in contributions to *Small States & Territories* journal. While various scholarly contributions share an empirical focus on the Commonwealth in general and on the small island states of the Eastern Caribbean region in particular (Veenendaal, 2013; Baldacchino, 2012; Duncan & Woods, 2007; Hinds, 2008; Stapenhurst et al., 2018; Girvan, 2015), St Lucia remains a relatively under-researched case in this part of the world (Saati, 2022; Barrow-Giles, 2021; Reynolds, 2021). This article seeks to address this empirical lacuna. It will also corroborate some of the findings of previous research on small island states and deepen our general understanding of the consequences of smallness.

When it comes to the political implications of smallness – be it in terms of advantageous or disadvantageous consequences – theories abound (Saati, 2022). One of the main postulates put forth in the literature is that social norms tend to be particularly strong in small states; to the extent that departing from, or even questioning, prevailing norms can come at a high social and political cost (Baldacchino, 2012). This article suggests that such theoretical notions have empirical merit in the case of St Lucia, and it also illustrates their real life implications. It does so by drawing on interviews with 19 members of parliament (MPs) and senators, conducted in the spring of 2022. Among other aspects, these interviews bring to evidence that the invisible, and often tacit, boundaries within which these politicians perform their work are both restrictive and encourage a political environment that condones clientelism and corruption.

This article is organized in four parts. The next section explores the theoretical claims that address how small states, in particular, develop social norms that are constraining for people who reside there. This theoretical notion has given rise to a number of other related postulates. These will also be elaborated in this section of the article since they resonate with the empirical reality of St Lucia. The third section then presents the materials and method for this article. It also discusses the challenges of conducting fieldwork in a small island state, especially in terms of how research results that are based on interviews are presented. This is an important matter that must be handled with caution. Seeing that the total number of MPs and senators is very low, the possibility of being able to identify respondents is quite high. Hence, complete anonymity is absolutely necessary. The article then proceeds to the empirical investigation in which the results from the interviews are presented, all the while relating back to the theoretical notions that were discussed earlier. The fourth and final section of the article discusses the implications of the results and suggests ways through which some of the dilemmas of smallness can be addressed, or at least, improved: that is, if the political will can be mustered.

Smallness, norms and conformity

Anckar & Anckar (1995) have theorized that smallness, especially when combined with islandness, gives rise to a certain type of mentality among its citizens. The sense of remoteness – both physically but also psychologically – from other countries, bonds people who reside in island states closer together. This particularity, it is hypothesised, creates a sense of cohesion and togetherness, which, in turn, reduces conflict and encourages cooperation and mutual understanding (Anckar & Anckar, 1995, p. 221). Furthermore, in a small island state, political representatives and constituents are likely to be in close proximity to each other. The likelihood that their paths cross when conducting everyday business is high, and it is common that citizens know their political representatives on a personal basis, i.e. they might be acquainted or even friends (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). Easy access runs both ways: constituents can easily convey their needs to MPs; and MPs can just as easily gauge the temperature of their constituents, thus also enhancing the prospects for a deepening of democracy (Rousseau, 1971; Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Anckar, 2010). Hence, the prevalent idea is that a small island state has a more “tolerant, considerate, understanding and moderate political climate” (Anckar, 2002, pp. 386-7). Though this notion might have some theoretical merit, its empirical value is hotly disputed (e.g. Baldacchino, 2012; Farrugia, 1993).

Another theoretical angle, primarily advanced by Baldacchino (2012), is that the political climate might indeed be more tolerant and conducive to compromise in small states, but *only* if one conforms to the prevailing socio-political norms of the society in question. If one, on the other hand, chooses to depart from these (often, invisible) norms, communal conformity is disturbed and the social cost for the individual can be high, even resulting in ostracism (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 109). The ideas concerning conformity are clearly shaped by social influence theory. Asch (1956) illustrates the power of the desire to conform for individuals in all societies, be they very populous or not. However, it would not be too farfetched to assume that such a desire is all the more pervasive in a small island state, simply because there are not many places one can turn to or hide if one is shunned from society. Indeed, emigration and exile (ex-isle) may be the only realistic ‘exit’ option (Baldacchino, 1997; Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2019). Hence, to stay within the confines of the prevailing norms and expectations would likely appear as the rational choice for most individuals in small island states.

The circumstances mentioned thus far lead to different political consequences, at least theoretically. To begin with, when social norms regarding what is expected and tolerated are so strong – one can even refer to this as the existence of a ‘single code’ of conduct (Dahl & Tufte, 1973, p. 92) – the political will to act against them is low, even when the individual politician *knows* that certain actions are not morally (or legally) justifiable. The fear of losing one’s position, both within the political party but also within the community, can hence produce fraudulent behaviour simply because the individual does not dare to disrupt the status quo. Secondly, the interconnectedness of people in small states adds another aspect to this predicament. As discussed by a number of scholars in this specific vein of research, small states in general – including small island states – tend to develop political landscapes that are characterized by personal relationships and personalization (Corbett, 2015; Veenendaal & Corbett, 2020; Farrugia, 1993; Duncan & Woods, 2007; Hinds, 2008; Veenendaal, 2013; Girvan 2015). Individuals are either directly related (kin), acquainted, co-workers, meet at recreational activities, have children that attend the same kindergarten, and so on (Farrugia, 1993). A network of relationships develop which gives rise to a reality in which ‘everybody knows everybody’ (Corbett, 2015, p. 51). Combine this interconnectedness with norms and expectations as to what political representatives should *deliver* to their constituents, and one will find that the stage has been set for corruption, patronage and clientelism.

Fieldwork in a small island state

The results of this article are based on in-depth interviews with 19 St Lucian MPs and senators. These were carried out during fieldwork in 2022. Interviews were undertaken by the author, and conducted with representatives from the two political parties that hold seats in parliament: *St Lucia Labour Party* (SLP) and *United Workers Party* (UWP), as well as with independent MPs/senators. The interviews followed an interview schedule so to make sure that the same questions were posed to all of the respondents.

Prior to arriving to St Lucia, the author contacted potential respondents and informed them about the purpose of the intended research. Everyone that was reached out to, except for one person, expressed a willingness to participate. The person who declined, however, changed their mind at a later occasion and wished to be interviewed but, unfortunately, by then all interviews had been scheduled and it was not possible to find an alternative time that suited this person’s itinerary.

Participation in interviews for this research project was voluntary and based on informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Consent forms were handed out by the author to the respondents, and each of them signed the form before the interview commenced. Before recording started, participants were once again reassured about their anonymity in research articles based on their answers. 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). Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed by the author herself; and they were done so in detail. This implies that every single word, laughter and hesitation was written down. This detailed account has been valuable for the subsequent analysis of the interview material.

Figure 1: Map of St Lucia.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saint_Lucia_map.gif (Public Domain)

St Lucia is a small state by any account: it has a land area of 617 km² and a resident population of around 183,600 (World Bank, 2022) (See Figure 1). By consequence, its legislature is also small: the lower house (the House of Assembly) has 17 elected seats; and the upper house (the Senate) has 11 appointed seats, for a total of 28. This suggests that any respondents would be easy to identify should the findings that are presented in this study not be completely anonymous. This implies that not only will political party affiliation/independent status not be disclosed when presenting the results, but neither will information as to whether the person is a senator or a MP. Gender, age or any other identity marker that could possibly identify the respondent will not be revealed either. During the interviews, respondents were quite outspoken. A number of them also underscored that their candidness was entrusted to me on the premise of being assured full 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 additional views from the UWP/independent MPs, two of the 19 interviews were conducted with individuals who were elected in the previous general elections (2016). It was, however, striking that, apart from a few exceptions, MPs and senators regardless of political party affiliation/independent status expressed very similar views and experiences of the challenges of conducting their work in a small island state. As far as differences are concerned, it was mainly in terms of how they, despite these challenges, attempted to manoeuvre the political landscape when doing politics in the ‘everyday’.

Secondary sources such as newspaper articles, election observer reports and academic work have also been used for purposes of triangulating the findings of the interviews. Although St Lucia has not received much scholarly attention, the contributions of Barrow-Giles (2015; 2021) and Reynolds (2021) have been valuable, primarily for purposes of gaining more

knowledge of the functioning of St Lucia's parliamentary oversight commissions, and a deeper understanding of the political history of the country. In the next section of the article, the results from the interviews with St Lucian MPs and senators will be presented. The presentation of the findings will be structured such that it relates back to the theoretical postulates highlighted earlier in the article.

A 'single code' of conduct: In practice

Dahl & Tufte (1973, p. 92) tellingly refer to a single code of values and behaviours as something that small island polities are prone to develop. To be more specific, a single code hence refers to norms that are so strong that they almost become entrenched. Though norms, both in the social as well as the political sphere, can be most useful for guiding the individual towards what is acceptable and expected behaviour, there is also a risk that deep-seated norms can become restrictive. There is also a risk that, if/when such norms are not obeyed, sanctions follow, which can have severe consequences, socially as well as politically, for the individual. The single code of conduct manifests itself in St Lucia in relation to several different arenas and issues (Saati, 2022). The most troubling from a legitimacy perspective, are norms and behaviours that have nurtured a political culture of clientelism and corruption. As expressed by most respondents, the small population size of the country brings political representatives and constituents close to each other. The upside of closeness in this respect is that politicians are very aware of the wants and needs of their voters, as the latter approach them without hesitation during office hours and beyond. As conveyed by one respondent:

You stand in constant interaction with the voters. You meet them at church every weekend, in the supermarket after work, you meet them on various events and you recreate together. It is easy for them to come up and talk to you about issues, and therefore we can fight for them in parliament.

However, the downside, as expressed by almost all of the interviewed MPs and senators, is that the same closeness which allows political representatives to gain a deeper understanding of the grievances of their constituents, has also led to the development of a culture of 'extreme expectations', as phrased by one respondent. Simply put; constituents envision that their vote shall translate to personal favours. As expressed by one of the interviewed: 'Voting has become transactional', continuing by stating:

You are expected to grant voters favours instead of working on policies that will benefit the whole community. It places you under great pressure and it also allows for corruption because of your closeness to the constituency and their trust in you. They expect you to do certain things, give them what they ask, which is unethical in some sense.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect is that a clear majority of the interviewed MPs and senators – regardless of political affiliation/independent status – acknowledged that even though it is not advisable, and even though they are fully aware of how their response feeds into a corrupt culture, they do in fact grant personal favours:

I have helped people with their student loans, their electricity bill, and given them financial support so that their kids can go to school. It comes straight out of my own

pocket. But you know, living conditions here are poor, social programs are lacking, and therefore I feel that I have to help.

This last aspect is important. Some of those who grant favours, do so mainly because they understand it to be a moral obligation. Others admit that it is only partly because the state apparatus is weak and cannot provide social welfare for all its citizens:

Another side of it is simply that if you do not help them, they will say ‘I will remember this’ or ‘You just lost my vote’. And so you end up granting them the favour, money or whatever it may be, anyway.

Hence, the granting of favours also occurs for purposes of securing the individual politician’s voter base. Regardless of MPs/senators granting favours because they see it as a moral responsibility or because they want to secure their future voter base, it is a behaviour that has taken root in the country and a conduct that encourages corruption. Thus, though it has been theorized that smallness and interconnectedness deepen democracy, the empirical reality of St Lucia illustrates that closeness creates transactional, *quid pro quo* situations that encourage clientelism, patronage and corruption, rather than enhance the quality of democracy. It also shows that the theoretical claim of personal relationships and networks as a characteristic feature of the political landscape of small island states does resonate with the St Lucian case.

Smallness and close social ties

The matter of smallness and close ties between individuals in small island states also gives rise to similar problematic occurrences within formal political institutions. As expressed by several of the respondents, it is common procedure that, when a new government takes office, it will ‘fill appointed positions based on friendship and family, not on merits’. Irrespective of political affiliation or independent status, the interviewed politicians readily acknowledged that this is a defining feature of how politics in St Lucia is exercised. Thus, this is the ‘single code’; the behaviour that is expected:

The office who comes into power will fill these positions with ‘their own’. Political friends, relatives, and so on.

This has further implications that are serious for the quality of democracy in St Lucia. According to the constitution of the country, the head of oversight commissions that are in charge of combating corruption – such as the parliamentary commissioner and the auditor general – are to be politically appointed (Constitution of St Lucia, 1978, sections 90, 110 & 112). If these commissions are to perform their work in a credible manner; if they are to look into the potential misconduct of political representatives, follow up such representatives if they do not submit information about their income, properties, etc., those who work within them ought to be professionals who have been appointed based on their qualifications. Inevitably, the possibility that they will perform their work in a neutral manner is compromised should they have been appointed due to family ties or due to being close friends to someone in government, or due to being outspoken party loyalists. To appoint members to these commissions on the basis of merit is however not the case. Rather, the precise opposite appears to be. Something

that most interviewed MPs and senators confirmed. The reason as to why is rather straightforward. Two respondents explained the situation in this way:

The administration of the day will want to have people there [in the commissions] that support its policies and that do not go after ‘their own people’. Therefore, you will by default have cases of corruption and patronage not being investigated properly.

There is not even a discussion of getting these institutions going in terms of them actually doing what they are supposed to be doing. No political party wants this, so no discussion is initiated. The reason is simply that every successive government has been guilty of doing something that it should not have been doing and therefore, of course, it does not want to have it investigated and brought into the daylight.

It is when political representatives actually have attempted to initiate a dialogue and direct focus to potential transgressions, that the norm to conform really becomes noticeable. A couple of the respondents had personal experiences of questioning the appointment of certain individuals to one or a number of the oversight commissions, and/or questioning the matters that were (or were rather *not*) investigated by these commissions. The consequence for the individual representative was that they experienced the rest of the political party turning their back on them, and a sense of not getting the support of the party to run in the forthcoming elections. Thus, it would seem that notion proposed by Baldacchino (2012) has merit; in the sense that smallness does not necessarily give rise to a political climate that is more tolerant or socially harmonious, and especially not if an individual chooses to depart from, or question, prevailing norms and procedures. The stories shared by the respondents that had personal experiences of this indeed indicate a sense of being rather exposed, and basically alone, due to having been – as expressed by one of them – ‘courageous enough’ to question the ways that oversight commissions are appointed and do their work. Unfortunately, the lesson learned for these representatives is that politicians are likely to turn a blind eye to potential future transgressions, and act according to the prevailing norms. The alternative is to risk one’s political career at best or be ostracised from the community at worst.

This culture to conform to dominant norms exacerbates clientelism and corruption even further due to a specific circumstance in St Lucia; namely, that the country lacks legislation that regulates electoral campaigns (Barrow-Giles, 2021). In other words, individual persons, companies, even foreign countries, can finance and support an individual MPs or political party’s electoral campaign with an enormous amount of resources, without these having to be disclosed, and even doing so anonymously. This was raised with the respondents during the interviews at which point it became clear that there is strong agreement concerning the fact that the lack of legislation *is* a huge problem. One respondent even expressed it in terms of:

This is the bedrock as to why corruption has taken root. Everything goes ‘Do what you want, get however much from whoever’. You don’t have to declare anything.

Another respondent echoed this sentiment and added that this is something that all politicians, past and present, within the ruling SLP, the oppositional UWP as well as independents are well aware of. Hence, there is broad agreement concerning the fact that the lack of legislation in relation to electoral financing can lead to corruption; but still, there is no political will to come to terms with this issue by introducing suitable legislation. Several of the

respondents were frank in explaining why the situation has not been remedied. It appears that the status quo benefits all political players, all the while also being aware of the inherent harms of the system. As phrased by one of the interviewed:

You might complain when you're in the opposition, but in a couple of years that might change and then you will benefit by things being kept as they are. Therefore, there's no incentive to change it.

At the same time, it is a problem that people fund electoral campaigns not because they agree with the policies. Rather they do it because they see it as a business decision.

In relation to this last point, a number of respondents also explained that, after an election, it eventually becomes obvious who and what companies have supported a specific MP or political party campaign. Tendering processes that must be adhered to before any given person or company is granted a government contract are abandoned, or disguised as procedurally fair:

All of the sudden, contracts are drawn up and certain people get these contracts. It's not difficult to connect the dots.

Thus, individuals and companies, perhaps not exclusively but probably not rarely either, give financial support for purposes of getting something back after the elections, provided that the MP that they have supported gets into parliament. Several electoral observer reports during the course of years have directed attention to this very aspect, i.e. how the non-existence of electoral campaign regulation is a serious issue that St Lucia ought to deal with urgently (Commonwealth Observer Group, 2021; Organization of American States, 2011). Adding to that, there are also voices within the country – primarily expressed on the editorial pages of the newspapers – that express the need for reform in this regard (The Voice, 2018; 2021). Even so, no such legislation has been introduced. During the interviews, two of the respondents did suggest that there should be a law that 'limits how much you can receive without it being recorded somewhere', and that 'this is something that we eventually should look over'. However, relating it back to the previous theoretical discussion about how norms can control the room for manoeuvre that individuals in small island states have, it might just be too difficult to voice this opinion in parliament. When *quid pro quo* has established itself as the common way of procedure, even as part of the 'social fabric of our country' as expressed by one respondent, it becomes an entrenched norm. Such norms can be very difficult to question or dislodge if one wants to remain within the ranks of the political party and in the good books of the community at large.

Conclusion

The findings from St Lucia support a number of the theoretical postulates raised in the literature concerned with the political consequences of smallness, especially when it comes to how social norms restrict the boundaries within which political representatives perform their work. These tendencies can be detected in other cases in the Eastern Caribbean region (Veenendaal, 2013; Duncan & Woods, 2007; Hinds, 2008; Stapenhurst et al., 2018; Girvan, 2015), as well as beyond, particularly among small island states in the South Pacific (Corbett, 2015; Veenendaal & Corbett, 2020; Corbett & Wood, 2013). The interviews with St Lucian political representatives in this study, however, deepen our understanding of this issue and add new insights. The pressure to respond to the individual voter's needs, wants and desires appears

to have a social as well as a political dimension. Whereas it would seem that many of the interviewed politicians feel a moral obligation to grant voters personal favours, some of them also admit that doing so has a political dimension that concerns the individual politician's political career. In other words, the 'single code' of conduct that has developed is that of dispensing personal favours, but the individual politician justifies their action to pursue this conduct from two different positions: first, that of being an honourable person who helps his/her fellow citizen since the state apparatus is not strong enough to support everyone in need; and second, that of wanting to secure one's own voter base and improve electability. Though the first appears to be a more praiseworthy approach compared to the latter, the question is; does it really matter when the result is the same? The act of granting favours creates a political environment in which corruption can thrive, regardless of the reason for which the granting occurs.

Perhaps even more problematic is that the closeness and interconnectedness of people in St Lucia brings the corrupt and client-driven culture into the formal institutions of the country as well. The fact that appointment procedures to various parliamentary oversight commissions are based on personal relations and family ties rather than on merits is cause for serious concern. Of course, there is no denying that small island states, in general, are characterized by the interconnectedness of people. This is a feature that is difficult to circumvent; it is a matter of fact. Even so, there is nothing that predetermines small island states to become safe havens for political corruption. Indeed, there are institutional and legal, methods to forestall such occurrences. And members of oversight commissions, in spite of being politically appointed, may still be meritorious candidates to the post and – to the chagrin and horror of politicians – can become quite fearless and outspoken in their scrutiny of the government's actions.

The appointment procedure for parliamentary oversight commissions is worth mulling over. Considering, as conveyed by most respondents, that these appointments are customarily made by the ruling party of the day, based on friendship and family ties, the appointment procedure needs to be reformed. The heads of these commissions should preferably be appointed by an independent body of experts, its members chosen on the basis of objective qualification. Of course, somebody will say that in a small island state, the individuals in such an independent body of experts would also lean towards certain applicants due to family or friendship ties; the only difference being that someone else is doing the appointing, not politicians. Conclusion: corruption and clientelism will remain rife. This could, however, to some extent be improved if one carefully takes into consideration the composition of such an independent body, and also – perhaps – include a number of members from abroad; individuals who do not have any ties to St Lucia. A free and critical press can also expose such behaviour and helps to facilitate a situation where reform does become politically feasible.

Regardless of the specific set-up, the point being made is that appointment procedures need to be reformed and de-politicised. To initiate such a reform, however, requires political will. Judging by the interviews, there is far from unanimous support for such reform since political representatives, across the board, understand that having things continue as they are serves their political party well (when they are in government). The same applies to the matter of introducing legislation that aims to regulate electoral financing. There is broad agreement among St Lucian politicians that the lack of legislation in this regard fuels corruption and clientelism in the country. International electoral observer reports have also pointed to this very

fact as a troubling feature of the political landscape. The Organization of American States (2011, p. 19) noted in its report that the fact that the entirety of campaign finance is of private origin and essentially unregulated jeopardizes the equity of electoral competition and the independence of political parties; it also poses a risk for the possible infiltration of illicit funds into politics. The Commonwealth Observer Group echoed this sentiment in its 2021 report and advised the country to introduce campaign financing legislation to strengthen accountability and transparency (Commonwealth Observer Group, 2021, p. 23).

Still, political will to do so remains scant. Though a few of the respondents admitted that, eventually this is a matter that ought to be addressed, the question is whether they are bold enough to put their political career at risk and propagate this in front of their party colleagues. The personal experience of going against the norms and confines of what is accepted to say/do, as conveyed by a couple of the respondents, paints a dire picture of the future. To be excluded from the political party for taking a stand for what one believes to be morally just, might simply be too high a cost to pay. Perhaps there needs to be a critical mass, i.e. more than just two or three, representatives that are courageous enough to voice their opinions and go against the current (self-serving) norm. Until that time comes, continued international pressure combined with domestic pressure from civil society and media, can help pave the way for bold political representatives who aspire to break the cycle of corruption and clientelism in St Lucia.

Funding: This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council: Grant 2020-03991.

Disclaimer: The author reports no conflict of interest in developing this article.

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