Governance in small state legislatures
A theoretical framework and the case of Liechtenstein

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1 Introduction

Small countries and particularly microstates are still a rather neglected field of research in Political Science and the social sciences in general (Kirt and Waschkukhn 2001, p. 23). So far, it seems that scholars from International Relations have more often dealt with specific features of small states and very small countries than other subdisciplines (see e.g. the compilation of respective key studies by Ingebritsen et al. 2006). Scholars with an interest in Comparative Politics have frequently focused on questions of democracy in small political systems (for an overview see Veenendaal 2013a). Nevertheless, the academic literature on political decision-making in diminutive countries remains thin. Especially theoretically driven case studies of microstates with a sound empirical basis are rare – though there is a constant trend of proliferation of small political systems (Geser 1992, p. 627). One may add that many studies which deal more or less with small countries cannot be seen as contributions to “small state research” in the narrow sense of the word since their authors do not pay much attention to smallness as a distinct independent variable or to small state theory. As a small state expert has put it roughly 30 years ago, “The small state approach never became a ‘hit’, i.e. that sort of fashionable approach which attracts the attention of the ‘big shots’ within the discipline” (Christmas-Møller 1983, p. 39).

Contrary to small state research, numerous scholars from many disciplines have published countless studies on various aspects of governance in contemporary societies and political systems in recent years (for an overview see e.g. edited volumes like Benz and Papadopoulos 2006; Bevir 2011; Levi-Faur 2012). In the last two decades or so, “governance” has become an ubiquitous and interdisciplinary buzzword of the social sciences (von Blumenthal 2005, p. 1150; for a critique see Offe 2008). Researchers have focused on, inter alia, descriptions, reasons, and ef-
ffects of shifts in governance, the raise of governance networks (or network govern-
ance) and other non-hierarchical modes of governance despite the persistence of
hierarchical government, and the appearance, interdependencies, prospects and
limits of different patterns of governance in various areas of both public and pri-
vate sector. However, the specific modes of governance in small states – if there are
any – still seem to be underresearched.

Against this background, this chapter seeks to combine approaches from small
state literature with selected governance typologies to explore an important area
of domestic small state politics. Assumptions regarding certain patterns of public
governance in the legislatures of small countries will be deduced from both small
state theory and governance theory. These hypotheses will be preliminary tested
by means of an in-depth case study of Liechtenstein based on a comprehensive
data set on decision-making in the principality’s parliament. Liechtenstein is such
a diminutive country that small state characteristics can be supposed to have par-
ticularly strong effects on politics (cf. Geser 1992, p. 631). The next section deals
with the combination of small state theory and governance theory and outlines
rather general presumptions. On that basis, in section 3 concrete hypotheses on
modes of governance in the legislatures of small states are formulated. The fourth
section gives a short overview of the parliament of Liechtenstein. In section 5 the
assumptions are preliminary tested with regard to the principality’s legislature.
The concluding section summarizes the results and elaborates on the combination
of governance research and small state theory.

2 Small state theory meets governance research

Theoretically oriented small state research is usually characterized by the key as-
sumption that “size” is an important independent variable that directly or indi-
rectly impacts on various social and political phenomena: “It seems to be assumed
that given a satisfactory definition of an independent variable, viz. size, it is also
possible to predict something about some dependent variable, viz. the ‘behavior’
of small states” (Amstrup 1976, p. 165). However, it is not easy (if not impossible)
to give a satisfactory definition of a small state. Smallness is an elusive concept or
category, especially when it comes to small states (Maass 2009). There is no con-
sensial or authoritative definition of a small state; every definition (based on e. g.
population, geographical size, economic indicators, military power, or a combi-
nation of selected factors) is arbitrary to some extent (Anckar 2013, p. 13). Ac-
cording to a very broad definition, small stateness is characterized by a structural
scarcity of certain (significant) resources within a (sovereign) country (Wolf 2013,
p. 13) from a substantialist, relational, and/or attributive point of view (Geser 1992,