

# Is Small Beautiful?

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How important is the size of a community, city, or country for the functioning of democracy? The question is neither new nor easy to answer. Both theorists and practicing politicians have tried throughout history to find an optimal territorial size, but have proven unable to come to a conclusive, universally valid answer. On the one hand, there is a lack of consensus over how to determine the quality of democracy. On the other hand, structural, cultural, and historical circumstances make evaluative comparisons anything but easy. Nevertheless, as will be argued here, the question itself generates valuable insights into the history of democracy, and the question posed above can be partly answered, at least for clearly delimited areas of inquiry.

**THE SIZE OF THE CITY IN ANCIENT GREECE: LARGE ENOUGH TO BE INDEPENDENT BUT SMALL ENOUGH FOR CITIZENS TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER**

What the ideal size of a city might be was a question that already preoccupied the philosophers of ancient Greece. After power shifted in Greece from the hereditary kingdoms, which had exercised a feudal form of rule over an extensive territory, to the city-states, in which a select group of male inhabitants had political rights, the question soon arose as to what size of the *polis* would be ideal to best organize and realize their political self-determination.

Plato, for example, thought the citizenry should be small enough that one could still know everyone else personally, and be kindly disposed to one another. In his view, it was even possible to calculate an upper limit: 5,040 heads of families (see his *The Laws*, fifth and sixth books). Aristotle, in turn, thought the *polis* ideally should be small enough that its members would still know each others characters. Furthermore, it should be possible for every-

one to gather in a square and yet still be able to hear each speaker in a discussion. The minimum size, to Aristotle, should be determined by the community's ability to provide for itself (see his *Politics*, second and seventh books).

Beyond the practical question of how many people could gather together in a square and be able to debate among one another, two important challenges to democracy arise here. Democratic self-determination presupposes a degree of economic independence, and it requires a degree of familiarity with the nature of other citizens, and with how they think.

**FROM ASSEMBLY DEMOCRACY TO REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY**

The modern era, as a consequence of the Enlightenment and the abolition of absolutism, has once again grappled with the question of the optimal size for a democracy. However, the challenges are fundamentally different. Evolving nation-states are now the focus, and no longer the Greek city-state. For that reason, the issue is no longer assembly democracy but instead how to represent the people, and in some cases also represent the various regions of a country, in a democratically legitimated parliament. On the one hand, the ability of a government to act needed to be ensured, and on the other hand there was a desire to prevent the emergence of an overly powerful, no longer controllable central authority. This problem could not be readily resolved.

Rousseau, in his *Social Contract*, bemoans that the ability of citizens to effectively participate in politics stands in inverse proportion to the size of the state. Put another way, the more citizens there are living in a nation-state, the smaller the share any specific individual has in a political decision. Equality, political participation, control of the government, political rationality, friendliness, and consen-

sus among citizens decrease, in this view, in proportion to the degree the population and territory of a nation-state increase.

Yet greater size was desirable if a political entity was to survive or play a role on the international political stage, at least for Montesquieu, even when that carried dangers: "If a republic be small, it is destroyed by a foreign force; if it be large, it is ruined by an internal imperfection" (see his *The Spirit of Laws*, Book 9, Chapter 1). From this perspective, the separation of powers, federalism, and representative democracy are in the end nothing more than institutional provisions intended to give a democracy leverage in larger contexts. Yet the ideas of the Greek philosophers, as well as Rousseau and Montesquieu's musings, on "true," small-scale democracies in manageable structures have never entirely gone out of fashion.

**THE QUESTION OF IDEAL SIZE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY**

The ideal size of a community, following democratic premises, has been repeatedly discussed in recent

years. The 1970s saw predictions of a sharply rising global population and fears of the limits to growth. Increasing urbanization and the trend towards megacities also led to renewed attention to ideal size. What effects enlargement of the local unit will have on the quality of democracy is also a question in land reform or when the fusion of communities is contemplated. A return to the grassroots, to smaller organizational units, is often called for, especially to encourage political participation and to draw more citizens into the process of making political decisions, not least to try to stem increasing disenchantment with politics and halt falling voter turnout. Decentralization trends observable in various countries are heading in the same direction. They can be understood as a reaction to the tendency to increasingly make decisions in international and supranational organizations, one consequence of globalization. Here, too, there are questions about the limits to, or possibilities for, exercising democracy in larger contexts.



**VILLAGE MEETING** Curva, Bolvien: Philosophers from Plato to Rousseau, and political scientists even today, have asked how many people can or should participate in democratic decision-making. Should all who make such decisions also know one another? Panos/Arabella Cecil

### WHAT CAN RESEARCH CONTRIBUTE? DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SIZE AND THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

Political science has repeatedly raised questions about the influence size has on the quality and functioning of democratic institutions. Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte published their classic study *Size and Democracy* in 1972, and it remains a standard work, even though they did not and could not come to a conclusive, and more importantly, an empirically-based, answer to the question of what the ideal size of a democracy might be.

There are various reasons why the question is difficult to answer. One is the difficulty in measuring. Should one measure a political unit by the physical size of the territory it occupies or instead by its number of residents? Another difficulty is how to measure the quality of democracy. If one considers only voting participation rates, that neglects other significant aspects. Yet which aspects should, or must, be taken into consideration? There is also a question how, and where, one can measure and compare differences in quality. There are numerous, and at times striking, institutional and cultural differences between countries, which makes comparison anything but easy. Participating in an election, to take just one example, may simply not have the same significance everywhere.

Speaking theoretically, one can address the relationship between size and democracy in three ways. A first group of approaches assumes increasing community size has a negative effect on the functioning of democracy. Closely related to this is the idea that “true democracy” can only be practiced in small, readily grasped units, as anything larger will lead to a diminished sense of community. A second group of approaches thinks size can have a positive effect, for only above a certain community size are structured political discussions—where organized political actors mobilize and inform the citizens—even possible. The first approach is called the *decline of community* model, the second the *mobilization* model. A third group of explanations takes the stance that there simply is no connection between the size of a community and the quality of democracy.

Four arguments can be discerned in this discussion. The first is that small size is associated with a

closeness between residents, or also between residents and political authorities, and such closeness is assumed to have either a direct or an indirect effect on the quality and functioning of that democracy. Hence, if politics in small communities is more readily understood and community ties and social control are greater, this argument has it. The second argument circles around the degree of politicization. Larger communities have more political competition because more actors participate, and in that sense political differences are also greater. The media also highlight these political differences and make them more interesting and more transparent. The third argument focuses on the composition of the population. Here the assumption is that social heterogeneity increases with increasing community size. Social problems increase particularly in the cities, which in turn has an effect on the intensity of political debates. The final argument emphasizes the range of government services. Larger communities must, or can, offer more services. That leads to more political decisions on the one hand, but also awakens more expectations of politics on the other.

However, as noted, some studies suggest size effects might not exist at all. Thus, one can show, among other things, that what is key to the ability to take part in political decisions is not community size but education. If the size of the community itself does not have a direct influence on the quality of democracy, but it is instead other factors that directly, if to a larger or smaller extent, connect to size that matter, then it becomes still more difficult to answer our question. Even if we find differences between large and small communities, that does not yet mean the community’s size is the reason. Instead it is possible, and not wholly implausible, that there are more people with systematically diverging views and interests who live in large communities than who live in small ones.

### AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

In the context of a large, internationally comparative study, researchers from the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, and Switzerland tried to establish what influence the size of a political unit had on democratic quality, and investigated communities of differing sizes in all four countries. The advantage of this approach is that the cultural and institutional

differences within the individual countries are relatively small, and it is possible to investigate whether interconnections found in one country are also evident in the others. Efforts were made to control for other potential influences and confounding factors, such as the differing composition of the population in large and small communities, the varying social and political challenges, and differing lifestyles and attitudes.

No general indicator of quality was used to measure the quality of democracy. Rather, various preconditions for a well-functioning democracy were investigated, ranging from political interest, to how satisfied residents were with the local authorities, to participation in local elections.

The main findings of the investigation can be readily summarized. There was no empirical evidence that the quality of democracy increases with increasing community size. The notion that democracy functions better in smaller communities, by contrast, did receive at least some support, though it was limited to a few of the indicators investigated.

The direct (and negative) effects of size were seen in contacts with local authorities and in involvement in local parties, both of which shrank as community size increased. Also, people in small communities tend more to feel they have enough personal skills and the needed information to participate in local political decisions. Their trust in local politicians was also greater, and satisfaction with the performance of local government tended to fall as community size increased. The observed size effects were greatest in small communities; differing numbers of inhabitants have hardly any effect in the cities.

The willingness to participate in local elections, interest in local politics, or knowledge about politics was unrelated to community size in most of the countries studied. People in larger communities, despite better media coverage, are no more interested in local political issues, and also no better informed about them, than those who live in smaller communities.



**EVERYONE IN THE SAME BOAT?** Lüttschental, Schweiz, 2008: In the global era, numerous decisions are made at international or national levels, far from the individual citizen. But local problems are usually addressed locally. In communities whose size permits direct interpersonal communication, citizen engagement and political participation is easier than in communities where people do not know one another personally. Keystone/Rainer Drexel

Finally, the study showed that the quality of democracy increases primarily through social integration. Membership in clubs and associations, ties and bonds to the community of residence, neighborhood integration, and trust in fellow citizens is greater in small communities, and that has positive effects on most of the other indicators used to measure the quality of democracy.

#### **OVERALL, RESPONSIVENESS TO CITIZENS CREATES TRUST IN POLITICS**

So what practical lessons can one draw from the results of this research project? One can hardly argue that by creating larger communities through fusion one will also create better preconditions for a well-functioning local democracy. There may be other good reasons for amalgamating communities, such as because tasks can be addressed more efficiently, because one can better take account of changed habits among the population, or because larger units allow for more sensible regional planning and development. Yet if one undertakes such fusions, then an effort should be made to prevent the loss of trust, as

well as loss of closeness, to officials and decision-makers. By the same token, efforts should be made to maintain the attachment of the population to their community of residence and to the social networks they belong to.

More generally, in this globalizing era, more efforts should be made to make political decisions that involve citizens as much as possible, and to do the utmost to strengthen trust in politics and politicians. Transparency and comprehensive information are just as important as integrating those affected by decisions into the process of making those decisions, or even letting them make their own choices. In that sense, it is worth remembering the ancient Greeks, who were convinced that a degree of familiarity with the characters and lifestyles of others is necessary in order to understand their issues and demands. A democracy can function only when it is not just the benefit of individuals but also the benefit of an entire community that determines the guidelines.

Yet what was found at community level in this study cannot be simply transferred to other con-

texts: Further research is necessary. It also is not possible to start from scratch with the world, and one must deal with the entire world as it is. Finally, one should not simply judge democratic systems as better or worse, but instead keep in mind that particular goals can be reached in quite different ways. There are conflicts between the goals pursued by

the various aspects inherent to democracy, so it is not possible to improve all its aspects simultaneously. Nevertheless, we believe the attempt to investigate the connection between community size and the quality of democracy has led to important insights into how democracy functions.



*Demokratie ist im Grunde genommen die Anerkennung, dass wir, sozial genommen, alle füreinander verantwortlich sind.*

Heinrich Mann

**NEIGHBORS** Great Britain, 2003: Whether democracy functions better in small or large communities cannot be determined for all areas of life. However, citizens trust the local authorities and politicians more in smaller communities, and the knowledge of local problems is also greater. Magnum Photos/Chris Steele-Perkins