

Small State Studies: Austria's Bid to get Elected on the UNSC

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of small state studies and offers a comparative study of the respective 2008 United Nations Security Council campaigns by Austria and Iceland. It examines how quantitative and qualitative characteristics between small states play a decisive role in mounting successful UNSC bids. The analysis indicates that Austria's 'smallness' did not significantly impact the country's ability to garner votes towards a seat, and that its size and status was utilised in concurrence with skilful diplomacy to meet objectives. Iceland, on the other hand, was thwarted not only by its limited size, but also by a lack of political and diplomatic commitment to the cause, and an inability to 'absorb' an untimely exogenous shock that damaged the country's reputation.

Keywords

Small States, Austria, United Nations, UN Security Council, Iceland, Strategy

Small State Studies: Österreichs Bewerbung für die Wahl zum UNSC

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel gibt einen Überblick über die Small State Studies und bietet eine vergleichende Studie der österreichischen und isländischen Bewerbungen für die Wahl zum Sicherheitsrates der Vereinten Nationen im Jahr 2008. Er untersucht, wie quantitative und qualitative Merkmale zwischen kleinen Staaten eine entscheidende Rolle in der Durchführung erfolgreicher UNSC-Bewerbungen spielen. Die Analyse zeigt, dass die geringe Größe Österreichs die Fähigkeit des Landes, Stimmen für einen Sitz zu sammeln, nicht wesentlich beeinflusst hat, und dass seine Größe und sein Status zusammen mit geschickter Diplomatie genutzt wurden, um Ziele zu erreichen. Island hingegen wurde nicht nur durch seine begrenzte Größe ausgebremst, sondern auch durch einen Mangel an politischem und diplomatischem Engagement und die Unfähigkeit, einen vorzeitigen exogenen Schock zu verkraften, der dem Ruf des Landes schädigte.

Schlüsselwörter

Kleine Staaten, Österreich, Vereinte Nationen, UN Sicherheitsrat, Island, Strategie

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1. Introduction

The increasing relevance of international organisations, and the potential for impactful agenda-setting within them, has rendered supranational institutions attractive in the eyes of small states. Examining the campaigns of small states to get elected to multilateral structures provides insight into nuances and differentiation between their foreign policy agendas, and capacities to pursue them. In the interest of contributing to the development of a more international and comparative perspective of Austrian foreign policy, this chapter will inquire how Austria, as a small state, pursued its goal of attaining a seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in relation to another small state; Iceland. Comparing Austria's and Iceland's respective UNSC bids in 2008 outlines not only the relatively wide range of agency that small states have at their disposal when pursuing foreign policy objectives, but also highlights both the quantifiable and qualitative differences between them that are important factors when discussing foreign policy outcomes.¹ In relation to the 'avenues for further research' as outlined in Senn et al. (2023), this chapter aims to contribute to Austria's use of supra- and international institutions as 'amplifiers of foreign policy'. As its 2008 UNSC campaign exhibits, Austria's transnational body of work goes beyond the scope of humanitarian arms control, and its activity in, for example, the fields of peacekeeping operations and developmental aid highlight a relatively extensive history of influence within supranational networks, especially when examined comparatively to other small states.

This chapter finds that small states, due to their limited administrative capacities need to maintain concentrated political and diplomatic momentum to construct successful UNSC campaigns. However, there are quantitative and qualitative differences that may impact, both positively and negatively, the ability to reach this goal. Of course, small states vary in their quantitative capacities to devote resources to the UNSC cause, yet there are also qualitative differences, such as a state's history, reputation, and/or status that may affect the campaign in one direction or the other. Comparatively, Austria enjoyed not only a quantitative advantage in terms of its capacity to devote resources to the bid, but also had a history of a great power that aided its strategy, a reputation as a devoted United Nations (UN) security provider, and held an esteemed status that it both employed in its quest for a seat and aimed to maintain through work in the UNSC. Iceland's

campaign, on the other hand, was not only challenged by a lack of available personnel and resources, but was also damaged by a lack of continuous political and diplomatic backing from home and abroad. Furthermore, the bid was thwarted by limited previous UNSC contributions, and a reputation/status that was damaged by the so-called Ice-save dispute during the 2008 Financial Crisis.

2. Overview of Small State Studies

The method of characterising 'smallness' in relation to states continues to be a subject of discussion in International Relations and Small States Studies. Quantifiable criteria, such as population size, size of the economy, size of the military, size of the public administration/foreign service and territory are frequently introduced to establish state categorization. Conveniently, such dimensions offer concrete answers to the problem at hand. For example, most studies in political science and economics conclude that small states have resident populations below 10 or 15 million (Armstrong/Read 2000; Katzenstein 1984; Vital 1967). Problematically, however, quantifiable measurements also introduce debatable and arbitrary 'cut-off' points and are moreover not particularly useful in explaining accurate behavioural patterns of small states. As an alternative, qualitative criteria are introduced in an effort to group states together based on how they behave in the international realm. For example, one suggested qualitative definition holds that small states should be understood as those who desire to 'restructure the international environment', but in contrast to larger states, are unable to do so (Vital 1971). The pursuit of a universal definition of size may indeed be impossible, and perhaps rather trivial. Those who subscribe to this belief may find comfort in a relative explanation of state size, which proposes that smallness should be understood relationally (Mouritzen/Wivel 2005). This explanation posits that states vary comparatively in dimensions that attribute to their ability to function domestically and internationally, and that their size should be perceived within this context. In other words, a state may be weak in one aspect but concurrently powerful in another.

A prominent and debated aspect of small states studies is concerned with their ability, or lack thereof, to impact policy from within these international organisations. Limited administrative resources, weak bargaining power and biased institutional arrangements define the inherent structural weaknesses that small states face within large international structures. However, by prioritising core interests, leaning on the informality and flexibility of their diplomatic corps, relying on the expertise of institutional bodies and other states, and shaping images of themselves as neutral, trustworthy,

¹ Our two cases (Austria and Iceland) draw extensively on Thorhallsson/Eggersóttir 2020 and Thorhallsson et al. 2022. These two articles are a part of a research project The Quest for Power in International Politics initiated by Ann-Marie Ekengren and Ulrika Möller at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

honest, and useful brokers and contributors, small states have the potential to wield influence and shape outcomes among larger states within multilateral frameworks. It is in small state activity within international organisations that we are also reminded of the recent theoretical developments and contributions to the study at large: status-seeking and shelter theory (Thorhallsson 2000; Panke 2010; Gron 2015; Thorhallsson/Steinsson 2017).

Status-seeking

The theory of status-seeking posits that small states are fixated on achieving status in the international realm, not with attaining practical benefits and physical security (de Carvalho/Neumann 2015). Much of International Relation's literature highlights that great powers are driven by status concerns, but the discourse often ignores small and medium states in the debate or assumes that these states are uninterested with such pursuits. Recent contributions have argued that the 'status game' is equally, if not more important to small states because they cannot adequately compete or interact with other states without some semblance of status. Because there is a given status associated with being a great power, such states do not have to compete to get noticed. Small states, on the other hand, simply will not be noticed unless they purposely seek to be noticed. To this end, small and middle powers seek status by engaging in admirable tasks or shining in a particular field. Small states also gain moral authority by aiding the great powers in maintaining the existing international order through mediation services, peacekeeping, and humanitarian missions (Wohlforth et al. 2018).

Shelter theory

Shelter theory is based on the premise that small size is associated with inherent disadvantages (in terms of small populations, economies, public administrations, and limited military capacities), and that these disadvantages are mitigated by seeking shelter through alliances with larger states and joining international and regional organisations. Small states search for political, economic, and societal shelter provided by larger entities in connection to protect themselves from their own structural weaknesses and hostile international conditions. Political shelter encompasses diplomatic or military backing by another state or international organisation. Furthermore, it can refer to the way small states rely on international law and norms. Economic shelter may assume the form of direct economic aid, help from an external financial body, a common market and favourable market access (Thorhallsson 2011). Finally, the theory posits that small states seek societal shelter to circumvent isolation and social stagnation, and to tackle issues rooted in a lack of native knowledge (Thorhallsson 2019).

Status-seeking and shelter-theory are two examples of more recent fruitful contributions to the field of small state studies. Gradually more nuanced factors, such as perception, image, expertise and reach of public administrations are being worked into the discussion regarding small states and its opportunities and challenges (Bartmann 2012). Given the circumstances, small state studies continue to increase in relevancy, particularly within the context of the record number of smaller states in the international arena, and the growing number of small territories vying for independence. With this in mind, examining the cases of Austria and Iceland in securing a seat in the UNSC is both indicative and exemplary of modern small state ambitions, and provides a sound comparative backdrop for understanding both the challenges and opportunities for small states in the international arena.

3. Austria

Austria's size, if examined comparatively in relation to other UN states (especially larger players with veto powers) can rather comfortably be considered a small state by most quantifiable metrics. Austria's smallness, however, if examined through the lens of traditional variables identified in small state literature, did not impede the country from mounting a successful UNSC campaign in the early 2000s. The country, having already been a member in the UNSC twice, mobilized an effective campaign that displayed ideational commitment and expertise in both hard and soft security fields, which proved to be valuable assets in its mission for votes. Importantly, the case of Austria highlights that small state commitment to the time consuming and costly venture involved with pursuing a seat in the UNSC is not always an effort to improve status but can also be an effort to maintain status in the eyes of policymakers in the international arena.

Campaign Strategy

The main emphasis in Austria's campaign was reaffirming its commitment to protecting and strengthening the rules-based international system, and the rule of law (Plassnik 2005; 2006). Moreover, Austria highlighted itself as a strong proponent of multilateral co-operation and displayed willingness to solve global challenges through multilateral structures (Plassnik 2008). To this end, Austria had a strong track record of initiatives that served as proof of successful practical commitment to the UN charter. Accordingly, work in the fields of both hard and soft security issues were underscored to communicate a strong understanding of the mission of the UNSC, and subsequently Austria's value in contributing to the work of the Council.

Specifically, Austria had a proven history of active engagement in UN human rights bodies and directed focus towards these efforts in its campaign. The importance of civilian protection in armed conflict was elevated as a key issue, especially regarding women and children, and Austria was able to showcase its commitment to this matter through its previous work in the EU's implementation of UNSC Resolution 1612 on the Protection of Children and Armed Conflict, as well as UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. In terms of hard security, Austria emphasised its contributions to international peacekeeping missions and commitment to development aid, bringing attention to both the number of Austrians who had served under the UN flag in war-torn areas, and Austria's numerous development aid projects (Ferrero-Waldner 2004; Parlamentsdirektion der Republik Österreich 2006).

In conjunction, Austria's commitment to security issues, both ideologically and in practice, combined with successful communication of past achievements in both hard and soft security fields, upheld a certain status in the international community of the country as a devoted security provider that was ultimately conducive to its bid for a seat on the UNSC.

Political Consensus

Austria's campaign bid was also successful in part due to continuity in domestic political prioritisation. Austria had two governments from the time the decision was made to seek UNSC candidacy in 2005 until the election in the UN General Assembly in 2008. Despite the change in coalition governments during this time, there was little opposition to the pursuit of a seat in the Security Council, and candidacy was understood as a top priority not only for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but the entire government throughout the process.

The political consensus that formed allowed the Austrian government to activate its experienced diplomatic network and devote significant administrative resources towards the UNSC bid. To this end, substantial focus was placed in areas where Austria's diplomatic presence was weaker, namely Africa, the Caribbean states, and the Pacific islands. Specific actions were taken to strengthen relations with these regions. A special Africa division was created within the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a conference on peace and security in West Africa was established in collaboration with Burkina Faso's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Austria and countries in the Caribbean region with a focus on supporting them in dealing with the effects of climate change. More generally, numerous meetings were held with UN state groupings in order to rationalise the advantages of Austria's UNSC membership within each regional context (Der Standard 2008).

Status

Despite typically being described as a small state, a change can also be identified in how Austrian officials referred to the country's size as the UNSC elections drew nearer. Austria deliberately engaged in a process of rebranding, whereby officials moved away from describing the country as a 'small-state', and instead labelled themselves as a medium-sized power. This was done in conjunction with a push to group small- and medium-sized states together as a cohesive collection of important states. The deliberate recategorization allowed Austrian authorities to cater to a larger group of countries in its pursuit for support. By describing itself as a medium sized state, Austria was able to disassociate itself from the idea that its size would be an obstacle to independent and careful work within the UNSC. Yet, at the same time, by linking small- and medium-sized states together, Austria maintained an important and relatable connection with smaller states, effectively advocating itself as a bridge between small- and large state interests within the UNSC. The strategy aimed to showcase Austria's value to larger states, while still maintaining the sympathy and crucial support from smaller states in its bid for a seat. The efforts by Austria to recategorize itself were quite successful. It is possible that Austria's history as a former empire is likely to have aided its officials in the efforts to recategorize, as the small state status is perhaps simply not fitting when contextualised with the country's past.

Summary

In conclusion, Austrian officials used its 50 years of work in the UN to show that it could be counted on as a devoted and reliable Member State that was active in the international community and took initiative when needed. Indeed, Austria's small public administration, compared with larger public administrations, was evidently not a hindrance in the campaign to be elected to the Security Council. The country not only communicated its ideological preference for multilateral cooperation and strengthening the rules based international order, but also had a history in practical involvement and dedication to such matters. Austria showcased competence, at home and abroad, in being an efficient international actor, highlighting the importance of perception for small states in the eyes of domestic and international actors. Domestically, the Austrian political elite had confidence in the country's ability to fulfil international endeavours, and internationally the candidacy was well received. Austria's diplomatic network, a product derived from centuries of experience, was utilised efficiently, and expanded through new relations in Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean. Internationally, Austria was able to alter perceptions of its size from a small state to a middle

power, giving the country a different reach and status, which perhaps was already bolstered by a long history as a prosperous empire.

4. Iceland

Iceland's motivation to obtain a seat on UNSC was consistent with the importance for small states to seek status. Icelandic diplomats and politicians viewed membership as a means to bolster the country's status among states around the world and within international organisations. Iceland's UNSC bid was also tied to prospects of long-term economic benefits, and network-building was therefore considered as an opportunity to lobby for important national interests and benefit from financial gains.

Challenges

The reasons for Iceland's unsuccessful UNSC bid in 2008 were intrinsically tied to challenges associated with the country's lack of experience, limited human resources, and inability to protect and shield itself and its reputation from exogenous shocks; all factors related to the smallness of the state.

To begin, the domestic debate surrounding UNSC candidacy did not enjoy the same level of continuous political support in Iceland as it did in Austria. At the outset of the campaign, the idea was generally met with optimism and positivity (Gisladottir 2007; Sverrisdottir 2006, Asgrimsson 1998). However, with time discussions turned more doubtful, as the campaign's financial costs were raised as a key issue by the influential centre-right Independence Party (Morgunbladid 2005). The voices of doubt would grow so loud that the entire campaign was effectively frozen for almost a year, leaving it without political leadership and financial backing. Eventually, in September 2005, after considerable pressure from Iceland's Nordic colleagues, the campaign resumed alongside newfound optimism (Frettabladid 2005, 2006). However, challenges abound.

First, because candidacy was organised by public officials, political involvement was extremely limited. No politician, aside from the Minister for Foreign Affairs, had any direct or formal connection to the bid. Due to the lack of political support, the uncertain campaign was prone to recurring criticism regarding its financial costs. These worries were amplified when Turkey announced candidacy in 2003, which indirectly suggested that more financing was required to compete for a seat.

Second, Iceland, like Austria, put a large emphasis on small island developing states in the Pacific and Caribbean, and provided them with financial support through a special development fund during the duration

of the UNSC election. Special attention was also placed on the 53 African states in the UN. This strategy ultimately failed due to Iceland's comparative disadvantage in providing concrete overseas development assistance. Austria and Turkey were better equipped to provide and promise the island states with the monetary aid that they were accustomed to receiving during UNSC election campaigns. Iceland simply did not have sufficient resources to match its larger counterparts.

Third, to compensate for Iceland's own limited human resources and experience, the country received significant support from its Nordic partners, who pushed to legitimise the campaign by vouching for Iceland's cause. The strategy, while rather successful, was damaged in 2008 when Iceland would be the first state hit by the devastating financial crisis. Iceland did not have the capacity to withstand the collapse of the financial market, and the fall of its banks made international headlines around the world. The infamous Ice-save dispute, where Britain and the Netherlands demanded full compensation for lost capital, was followed by an intense diplomatic attack by the British on Iceland's UNSC bid. Britain claimed that Iceland could not be counted on as a reliable and rule-following state, which hit Iceland's campaign message of a small trustworthy state particularly hard. The Ice-save dispute also caused Iceland's Nordic allies to distance themselves from the UNSC bid, which left Iceland particularly isolated in its efforts.

Summary

Overall, Iceland's campaign was plagued by a general lack of contributions, competence, and ideational commitment. Iceland fell short of successful demonstration of contributions as they depended heavily on their Nordic partners due to their own limited UN record of accomplishment, scarce financial resources, and administrative capacity. In regard to ideational commitment, Iceland did simply not have the experience in the traditional working fields of the UNSC to display itself as a well-rounded candidate. Instead, the country shaped its image around domestic performance in soft security fields that partially related to the work of the UNSC. Ultimately, claiming competence proved most troublesome for the Icelandic campaign, as the country failed in some respects to display leadership skills and prove domestic political ownership. This, coupled with the Financial Crisis in 2008, which damaged Iceland's reputation internationally, worked in conjunction to thwart the country's UNSC membership bid.

5. Conclusion

The cases of Austria and Iceland, especially when examined comparatively, indicates that election in the UNSC depends more on past performance than on promises for the future, though both are important. Small states are required to engage in substantial activity in the UN prior to UNSC candidacy, as election to the council is heavily dependent on the culmination of a period of substantial national activity in the UN. Prior to UNSC candidacy, small states do not only have to prove themselves as devoted UN members, but simultaneously need to have a reputation within the UN that has granted them status. Within this context we find substantial differences between Austria and Iceland's campaigns. Despite both being considered small states, there are of course clear differences in the quantitative characteristics between the two countries. Austria is significantly larger in most traditional metrics, and has considerably larger administrative capacity, diplomatic network, and economic capacity to pursue foreign policy goals. Additionally, Austria's former status as an empire, combined with its capacity to contribute to the work of the UN, influenced its candidacy and campaign strategy. Moreover, Austria's ideational commitment, backed in practice by numerous initiatives to the UN cause, established a successful foundation for its campaign. Austria's small size was not a hindrance to its campaign: in fact, as a small state, the country gained prestige for its outsized competence and contributions to the UN, which helped the country in influencing outside perceptions away from a small state and to a medium-sized power. This reality underpins a fundamental difference between Austria and other small states, such as Iceland: a UNSC seat for Austria was not a question of a small state seeking status but was a quest for remaining relevant and maintaining status in a changing world system. Iceland, on the other hand, was motivated by a desire to increase international status, but did not have significant previous contributions or domestic support to establish momentum in its campaign. This, in addition to its comparative disadvantage in offering overseas assistance, and its inability to adequately protect itself (and subsequently its reputation) from an untimely exogenous shock, ultimately led to a failed campaign.

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