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Timothy S. Rich Ph.D.

Western Kentucky University, timothy.rich@wku.edu

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Integrating Microstates into Cross-National Research:
An Exploratory Analysis

Timothy S. Rich, PhD
Western Kentucky University
timothy.rich@wku.edu

Abstract

How do microstates potentially challenge our understanding of international and comparative politics? Microstates comprise as many as one-fifth of all sovereign states yet are rarely incorporated into cross-national research. cursory analysis suggests that microstates challenge the conventional wisdom in several ways. This paper highlights some of these challenges and presents preliminary quantitative evidence suggestive of a microstate divergence. Ultimately the evidence here makes the case for increased consideration of the theoretical and empirical leverage attained by analysis of microstates.

Introduction

The literature in both comparative politics and international relations relies heavily on states that, on one measure or another, are considered politically or economically influential. Terms like “great power” and “middle power” abound with some level of consensus. Microstates on the other hand largely are ignored in part due to their small geographic size, a geography that largely coexists with limited economic and political clout. When referenced, research highlights microstates’ vulnerability, with an assumption that their inherent weakness in one dimension translates to a more universal weakness, rather than considering the potential positive ramifications associated with their status. Microstates often do not fit comfortably within broader theories in international and comparative politics and it remains understudied whether insight can be gleaned from these cases that would be relevant to a broader literature. In other words, rarely explored is how microstates potentially challenge our understanding of international and comparative politics. Instead, such states are treated often more as objects rather than subjects (e.g. Neumann and Gsthol 2004). This article calls for the need to integrate evidence from microstates into cross-national works as well as show how evidence from microstates may help in theory generation in international and comparative politics.

The term “microstate” admittedly lacks definitional clarity. For example, microstates can be defined by land area or population. While often defined as states with less than 1 million inhabitants or as less than 1,000 square kilometers of land, wide variation exists (Anckar, 2004; Anckar, 2008; Commonwealth Advisory Group, 1997; Raadschelders, 1992). Using 1,000 square kilometers leaves 24 countries (excluding the Holy See) and increases to 29 and 32 respectively if the cutoff is 5,000 or 10,000 square kilometers. Using 2009 population estimates, 42 countries have less than a million people, dropping to 32 and 31 respectively if the cutoff is dropped to a half million, a standard used by Grydehoj (2012), or a quarter million. For this analysis, I primarily rely on geographic size rather than population as geography arguably plays a larger role in defining microstate behavior.

These numbers exclude subnational jurisdictions with significant autonomy and dependencies that choose to remain part of another country (e.g. Isle of Man, Guernsey, Hong Kong, Macau, Gibraltar) which share many characteristics with microstates. However, sovereignty should matter in this discussion if microstates are to contribute to international and comparative politics literatures that commonly rely on claims of sovereignty. Furthermore, comparable statistics for non-sovereign entities are rarely available to the same extent as sovereign states.

Economic realities for these countries vary considerably. For example, of the 24 sovereign states that are 1,000 square kilometers or smaller (excluding the Holy See), nine have a per capita GDP of under \$10,000 US¹ (roughly the global average), with six above \$30,000.² Microstates, even with a broader definition, are commonly associated with vulnerability in a global economy, many with limited goods for exports or lacking the geographical positioning to be the next Hong Kong or Singapore. Neuman and Gsthol (2004) point out the tendency for studies of microstates to be primarily descriptive in nature and often available only in the local language, rather than in broader cross-national analyses for a broader audience. This routine exclusion from cross-national studies is

problematic, presuming either that the exclusion of these cases (Marshall and Jagers, 2002; Minorities at Risk Project, 2005) does not affect the overall generalizability despite eliminating, depending on the definition, as high as one-fifth of all independent countries, or that microstates constitute a distinct class of countries with which comparisons with larger states would be misleading. Either assumption is risky in the absence of empirical testing. This treatment differs considerably from other countries commonly lumped into the nebulously defined “small states” (e.g. Hinsley 1963; Neuman and Gsthol 2004), which may have similar structural challenges as microstates, but commonly are included in cross-national studies.

Table 1 illustrates indirectly the neglect of microstates in the broader literature by comparing Google Scholar hits since 2010 which include “microstates” in connection to several terms related to international relations and comparative politics. For a baseline, hits within the same time period for Guatemala are also included, since Guatemala is neither a microstate under any definition nor is it a major world power.³ Under each selected term, the literature on Guatemala alone dwarfs that mentioning microstates, with similar patterns seen if countries similar or even smaller to Guatemala in size or political clout are substituted in for comparison. Admittedly these patterns may in part be due to some microstates avoiding the term “microstate” in favor of variations of “small state,” but this does suggest a limited literature of a class of sovereign states.

**Table 1: Google Scholar Hits
Containing Microstates or Guatemala and Selected Terms (2010-)⁴**

Microstates		Guatemala	
and “elections”	653	and “elections”	17600
and “democracy”	1130	and “democracy”	35600
and “corruption”	738	and “corruption”	26600
and “international relations”	283	and “international relations”	6660
and “international trade”	215	and “international trade”	8680
and “economic growth”	1220	and “economic growth”	19800

I suggest that microstates provide fertile ground for theory testing. This area of research highlights a common problem in modern political science—the growing availability of data surpassing similarly rich theory generation. While structural conditions may appear stacked against microstates, institutional mechanisms have developed to largely counteract many of these challenges. As such, this paper in part acknowledges Baldachinno and Milne’s (2000: 3) plea to challenge the conventional wisdom that “smallness equals weakness.” This paper first addresses how microstates potentially challenge our understanding of international relations. Next a comparison of domestic politics reveals where analyses of microstates may give us greater insight into comparative politics. Finally, this paper suggests future research opportunities to integrate the findings of microstates into the larger political science literature.

Microstates in International Politics

There appears no uniform origin for microstates. In Europe, several continental microstates are the remnants of principalities that avoided absorption into larger states, although San Marino has been a republic since the year 301 and recognized by others as such since at least the 17th century. Their endurance is peculiar in that theories on state building and expansion (Tilly, 1985) would presume such vulnerable political units to be easy targets for invasion and eventual absorption, and yet several remain. In contrast, microstates in the Pacific and Caribbean primarily are island states and may not have faced the same existential threat of immediate invasion. While most did not avoid colonization, and in many cases exist as separate entities largely because of their colonial experience, the geographic distance between islands (especially in the Pacific) has provided additional protection from external threats. Despite geographic conditions that would suggest a precarious existence in the international system, microstates endure.

For most of the post-war era, the international system grappled with how to address microstates. Until 1965 only one of these entities, Luxemburg, had membership in the United Nations (UN), where a proposal to seat the Maldives ignited a debate as to whether microstates even deserved full member status (Harden, 1985). Furthermore, most microstates reached independence in the past 40 years, commonly holding off the breaking of colonial ties, in part due to the economic benefits accrued⁵ but also likely due to the mixed results from decolonization in larger territories. In fact one of the islands comprising the former French colony of Comoros (Mayotte) opted to remain under French rule while its neighbors gained independence in 1975.

Most microstates also have limited if any armed forces, leading to questions of statehood. For example, Liechtenstein's application to the League of Nations was denied because of its lack of an army (League of Nations, 1920; Ware, 2005), introducing an implicit requirement for statehood based on realist terms. San Marino and Monaco did not pursue membership in large part due to this denial of Liechtenstein's application. Realist theories expect states in an anarchical international environment to respond by developing military capabilities or at the very least by establishing alliances for protection (Morgenthau, 1948; Mearsheimer, 2001). Some clearly do rely on others for military or police services, yet these contingents often appear as token offerings. For most microstates, concerns of international military conflict are minor, despite what may initially appear as territorial vulnerability. Threats of course remain. In some cases neighboring states, if not explicitly claiming the territory of the microstate, expect eventual unification (e.g. Senegal's view of The Gambia, Somalia's initial views of an independent Djibouti). Still, the general lack of military focus in microstates suggests limits to realist concerns about the anarchical international environment. In other words, as Wendt (1992) suggests that anarchy is what states make of it, microstates in large part have managed to avoid the security concerns one would expect based on their size.

Microstates also confound liberal views of the importance of interaction and institutions for mutual benefits. Diplomatic recognition is near universal for these countries, yet signs of substantive relations with most countries are not as evident. Using Europa World data from 2009, the average number of embassies in countries of 10,000 square kilometers or less was 10, dropping to seven for those under 1,000 square kilometers. This compares to 44 embassies on average for all countries, 51 if microstates

are excluded. In addition, the hurdles for microstates to enter international organizations, including the United Nations, have largely eroded, yet their substantive influence is poorly understood. For example, whether microstates meaningfully contribute to the UN (for example by their simple presence in regards to environmental issues) or whether they simply use their minimal UN influence in exchange for economic incentives is unclear. Microstates have been more likely to maintain relations with Taiwan (Republic of China) instead of recognizing the People's Republic of China. Of the 21 countries currently recognizing Taiwan (excluding the Holy See), 10 qualify as microstates even at the most restrictive 1,000 square kilometers definition. The diplomatic actions of many of these countries include periodically pushing for Taiwan's return to the UN, usually after Taipei offered additional assistance packages.⁶ Microstates also appear disproportionately represented among countries that did not vote in favor of Palestine's upgrading to non-member observer status in the United Nations on November 29, 2012. Of the nine rejecting the upgrade, this included the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru and Palau—countries arguably concerned about future aid from the one of the most vocal opponents of the upgrade: the United States. While the UN operates largely on the notion of equality of states, microstates rarely perform functions here suggesting an independent or even collective interest separate from a more powerful state.

The economic weakness of many microstates is also well documented (e.g. Jackson, 1990; Armstrong and Read, 2000; Bertram and Poirine, 2007; Baldacchino, 2010). With the relative isolation of many of these states and few exports, plugging into the global market has been fraught with difficulties. Not surprisingly many (e.g. Nauru, Vanuatu) have battled accusations of assisting in money laundering, much like foreign assistance has been accused of hampering economic growth in Africa. Even if it arguably does little to provide long-term sustainability, for microstates such assistance is vital for the continued existence of the state itself. The strategic importance of many microstates perhaps may justify their disproportional aid per capita (Poirine, 1999). Microstates may also view economic development differently, with a greater conception of a community interest, as competition is viewed at the national level rather than at the individual business level (Rebollo 2001) and sustainability viewed in terms of the ability to export, not in the access or preservation of natural resources.

With very few exceptions, most microstates are presented as politically and economically insignificant in contemporary challenges in international relations, at best the pawns in a larger strategic environment. Others may view this as strong justification to ignore this subset of countries entirely. In contrast, I contend that the problem lies in our narrowly defined expectations of states and the types of resources valued. Instead microstates in part should lead us to question the nature of conflict in the international realm where many microstates are not preoccupied about absorption and commonly extract assistance from more powerful states. For example, the remoteness of many such states provides ample incentives for others to view these areas as fertile grounds for military exercises, acquiring fishing rights, and illicit activities such as money laundering. Microstates also benefit greatly from technological advances from profiting off web domains (e.g. Tuvalu's .tv) to providing areas to launch satellites. A broader view suggests greater agency among microstates, rather than treating them as simply bystanders.

Microstates in Comparative Politics

Another question emerges: how do domestic political structures shape microstate behavior? Waves of democratization did not skip over microstates, and a sizable literature suggests a link between size and democracy (Srebrnik, 2004; Diamond and Tsalik, 1999; Ott, 2000). Small state size has often ignored ramifications, affecting citizen participation and relations with the state, security, and economic development (Dahl and Tufte, 1973; Bartmann, 2002). Admittedly microstates vary greatly in historical experiences. As Rustow (1970: 345) suggested, there exists “many roads to democracy” that may not always involve “the same social classes, the same types of political issues, or even the same methods of solution.” Even a cursory view highlights one way in which these states may differ from others: the linkage between economic development and democratization. Despite a long history of economic modernization arguments suggesting that economic development encourages democratization, some go as far as to see it as a pre-requisite; the weak economies of most microstates seem to undermine such claims.

Admittedly, viewing microstates at only one moment in time ignores historical trends and risks assuming greater innate abilities to democratize than larger states. Ankar (2008: 77) suggests that microstates (defined by population) do not show a greater tendency towards democratization until the 1990s. Many microstates eschewed democratic reforms as a means to preserve traditional culture or used international assistance as a means to placate public demands rather than democratize. Brunei, for example, remains one of the few sovereign states to not have elections of any sort, free or not, in its history. Others had extensive democratic self-rule before independence. For example, Barbados gained independence in 1966, but had an active Westminster-style parliament in practice since 1639 (Ankar, 2004). Ankar (2008) in particular suggests that microstates historically connected to the United States or the United Kingdom were more likely to develop into democracies post-independence. In contrast to bitter decolonization elsewhere, few microstates engaged in a bitter struggle for independence, often choosing to extend their protectorate status and seeing independence as an economic suicide (Watson, 1982; Baldacchino, 1993).

All caveats aside, structural conditions in microstates may encourage democratization. For example, a comparatively small geographical and population size potentially provides a more direct connection between ruler and ruled and a lower likelihood to view the state as a distant abstract entity, democratic or not. Many microstates average a population-to-national-legislator ratio of less than 5,000 citizens, with San Marino at roughly 500. To put this into perspective, the global average was over 81,000 citizens per legislator, with the US at 570,000 and India at nearly 1.5 million per legislator. Similarly, several island microstates intentionally seek means to define rights to the island within democracy-enhancing designs (Clark 2013).

Promoting democratic engagement may also be aided. Blais and Dobrynska (1998) find voting in particular is generally higher in smaller units than larger units, perhaps in part because of the reduced distance between voters and level of government as well as a greater potential for an individual vote to be decisive (Baker, 1992; Blais and Dobrynska, 1998). Malta for example traditionally exhibits exceptionally high turnout, even with the absence of compulsory voting laws (Hirczy, 1995). Similar arguments can

be made for the implementation of a federal or devolved system or for carving small districts. In addition, because of geographical proximity, representatives in microstates, even those not directly elected, are seldom seen as disconnected to their purported constituency as those from larger countries. In many cases nationally elected officials live in the same towns, creating the potential for frequent formal and informal interaction with constituents. Microstates thus may provide a form of “direct” democracy seldom seen at the national level elsewhere. Many microstates also display patterns of widespread consent, either due to attempts at moderation or the role of tribal or ethnic elders, making potential electoral losses less conflictual. For example, Nauru and Kiribati both use the Borda Count system for legislative seats, which allows voters to rank order candidates, generally resulting in candidates with broad support. In areas of dispute, the comparatively low threshold to effect change and the ability of leaders to personalize relations within any collective action may otherwise undermine the general irrationality of joining such activities (Lichbach, 1990; Heath et al., 2000), providing an institutional challenge to the foundations of democratic rule.

Table 2: Freedom House Scores by State Size

	<1,000km ²	<5,000 km ²	<10,000 km ²	Above
Freedom House	10.8	10.8	9	6.2

Summary statistics provide additional evidence of a correlation between size and level of democracy. Table 2 summarizes Freedom House scores broken down by the size of the state. While often criticized for a variety of reasons, Freedom House provides a measure that includes all microstates unlike other options (e.g. Polity) and remains a commonly employed measure in cross-national studies (Lijphart, 1999). For simplicity, Freedom House scores were recoded so that higher scores equate to greater freedom, thus ranging from least free (2) to most free (14). Here we find clear differences. Under the most restrictive definition, (under 1,000km²), microstates averaged a recoded Freedom House score of 10.8, with a same average for states under 5,000km². This drops to an average score of 9 for those under 10,000. In contrast, states larger than 10,000km² averaged a much lower score (6.2).

Table 3 goes further, presenting the results of a simple bivariate regression with country size (in the log of square kilometers) on combined 2012 Freedom House scores for political rights and civil liberties (M1). The results find a negative correlation between the two, significant at the .001 level. In other words, as the geographical size of a country increases, the existing evidence suggests the likelihood of greater political freedom declines. Three additional models (M2-M4) using dummy variables for each commonly used geographical threshold for microstates are also tested. In all three, dummies for microstates positively correlate with a Freedom House boost between 2.8 and 4, consistent with expectations about conditions in small countries promoting democratization. Defining microstates by population produces similar results. Countries with a population over a million have an average Freedom House score of 7, compared to 9.5 for those under.⁷ Admittedly these are overly simplistic models and open to omitted variable bias, but the findings suggest a relationship between size and democratization.

Table 3: Bivariate Regressions Between Country Size and Levels of Freedom (N=198)

Model	Independent Variable			Constant		Adjusted R ²
		Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	
M1	Size in km ² (logged)	-0.5279***	0.092	13.3833***	1.0615	0.1394
M2	<1,000km ²	3.7809***	0.7185	6.9883***	0.2889	0.0983
M3	<5,000km ²	3.9691***	0.71853	6.8433***	0.2889	0.1360
M4	<10,000km ²	2.7896***	0.5341	6.1887***	0.3641	0.1177

***p<.001

To overcome concerns of over-relying on one time period to make inferences about microstates, Table 4 uses data from Rich (2009) that includes Freedom House scores from 1984 through 2008 for all countries but China and Taiwan⁸, a total of 4,311 country years. Generalized linear regression models (to account for serial correlation) produces similar results. Size in general correlates with a decline in political freedom (M1), while dummy variables for each geographic threshold for microstates positively correlate with a boost between two and three and a half points.

Table 4: Bivariate Regressions Between Country Size and Levels of Freedom (N=4,311)

Model	Independent Variable			Constant		Overall R ²
		Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	
M1	Size in km ² (logged)	-0.4692***	0.0919	11.9898***	1.0695	0.0804
M2	<1,000km ²	3.5616***	0.8037	6.2669***	0.2759	0.0599
M3	<5,000km ²	2.2438***	0.554	5.9388***	0.3199	0.0497
M4	<10,000km ²	3.3654***	0.6934	6.1346***	0.2809	0.0751

***p<.001

Turning to demographic stability, microstates provide fresh means to test long-held assumptions. For example, high population density common in many microstates would seem conducive to testing relative deprivation theory as those who see their group as deprived would be more likely to come in contact with those perceived as better off (Gurr, 1970). The population density as based on population divided by km² finds a global average of about 258 persons per km², while rates in microstates average over 1,100 in those under 5,000 km² as well as under 1,000 km². These same constraints may also provide a means to test resource mobilization theories as the resource threshold for viable protest may be lower in microstates (McCarthy and Zald, 1977).

Domestic challenges are also commonplace in many microstates, in part due to the lower threshold as seen in the coup attempts in Grenada, Comoros, Maldives, and Seychelles. Since independence, Comoros has endured three successful coups, including one less than a month after independence, and over a dozen unsuccessful attempts (Rich, 2008). A force estimated at only 50 successfully overthrew the Grenadian government in

1983 (Quester, 1983: 161), after the island's government disbanded their own military in 1981. Suriname, democratic at independence in 1975, suffered a military coup in 1980 led by 16 sergeants (Dew, 1994). Fiji's ethnic conflicts have resulted in four coups, two in 1987 alone. The increase of one person or dollar to an anti-state cause should have a much larger effect on a state with small population than with a larger one. Similarly, secessionist movements seen in larger countries are also seen in microstates. For example, Tuvalu opted for separate administrative status from Kiribati after 86 years of combined rule under British colonialism. While the Tuvalu case is partially influenced by the distance between Tuvalu and Kiribati (nearly 1,800 miles), similar debates occasionally flare up in places such as St. Kitts and Nevis, with the latter island claiming economic discrimination.

Emigration options, for example, provide one explanation. Emigration arguably allows those most dissatisfied with the state to leave and is commonly viewed as a response to population pressures. The literature primarily focuses on economic improvements decreasing emigration (Bohning, 1972), instead of the reverse, that emigration reduces domestic competition for scarce employment. Emigration thus could be viewed as a safety valve against anti-state action (Levine, 1995; Ware, 2005; Rich, 2008). Gershenson and Grossman (2000: 819) argue that emigration is not a viable option for most because of lack of resources (Gershenson and Grossman, 2000). This is especially true for citizens of island microstates where attractive destinations are thousands of miles away and where nearby countries are often themselves vulnerable microstates. Despite this hurdle many microstates retain beneficial emigration policies with former colonial governments or regional powers which the microstate encourages, often for the remittances that can augment the local economy. Migration and the continued flow of remittances encourage the development and maintenance of "transnational corporations of kin" (Munro, 1990: 63-66). Cape Verdean communities abroad have been viewed as crucial in securing development aid (Carling, 2002). In many cases, including Cape Verde, emigrant communities can be as large as the home country. Unlike most states where emigration is largely a result of short-term political or economic crises in the home country, emigration is far more routine among microstates.

Finally, microstates also potentially shed light on measures of corruption. Previous work suggests that microstates, especially in the Caribbean, are highly susceptible to elite manipulation and corruption (Hope, 1986; Richards, 1990; Ott, 2000). Yet a broader analysis suggests less corruption in smaller countries. Table 5 regresses Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) on country size. The CPI rates countries on a 100 point scale, with 100 being the least corrupt. While a crude measure that also fails to score many microstates, the overall statistical pattern is consistent with expectations. For each increase in size, the CPI decreased by nearly two and a half points (M1). The relationship between size and corruption is more apparent when just using dummy variables (M2-M4). Bivariate models find that countries under 10,000 square kilometers correlate with a 12 point increase in the CPI measure, with an 18 point increase for those under 5,000 square feet and almost 20 point increase for those under 1,000 square feet (significant at .001). Summary statistics produce similar results. Among all countries, the CPI averages a score of 43, dropping to 38 for those over 10,000km². Microstates average considerably higher scores, 62 for those less than 1,000km², 60 for those under 5,000km², and 50 for those under 10,000km². Focusing on

population sees a similar pattern, with an average CPI score of 55 for those with a population under a million, compared to 41 for those over. A bivariate regression with a dummy variable for countries with less than a million people correlates with a 13 point boost, significant at .01. The underlying mechanism is unclear, but may be related to the greater ease of oversight. In sum, multiple measures at the domestic level suggest a far less negative political environment than the conventional wisdom would presume.

Table 5: Bivariate Regressions Between Country Size and Corruption
(N= 174)

Model	Independent Variable			Constant		Adjusted R ²
		Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	
M1	Size in km ² (logged)	-2.4828***	0.6609	72.3254***	7.9461	0.0705
M2	<1,000km ²	19.8444***	6.5425	41.9333***	1.4879	0.0453
M3	<5,000km ²	18.4993***	5.4777	41.5776***	1.4972	0.0567
M4	<10,000km ²	12.2191***	2.8939	38.1143***	1.8224	0.0886

***p<.001

Concluding Remarks

Cursory empirical evidence suggests that microstates can provide theoretical leverage and should not be excluded from cross-national comparisons. Many microstates have deep structural obstacles, yet conditions are not uniformly all doom and gloom. This preliminary analysis of microstates suggests at both the international and domestic levels an ability to adapt to the environment, often in ways that challenge the assumptions of such state behavior. In addition, this analysis suggests a reconsideration of the nature of conflict and the assumption that microstates have not found the means to tackle some of their domestic problems. At its most basic, microstates appear to challenge realist conceptions of international relations as well as common arguments of democratic prerequisites.

Future cross-national work is necessary for the integration into the larger literature. Data sources such as Freedom House, however open to criticism, remain rare in their inclusion of all microstates. To conduct fieldwork in multiple microstates for individual research may be prohibitive in terms of time, money, and language skills. Still, integrating individual efforts to better understand how leaders in these countries view the conception of the national interest and state-society relations more broadly is crucial. Similarly, regional cross-national studies that include evidence from microstates may provide leverage. While our traditional conceptions of states and sovereignty may be challenged by microstates, this should not preclude greater efforts for broad theory building and empirical testing. Cursory analysis suggests that, borrowing from professional boxing lingo, many microstates fight above their weight.

Notes

¹ These include Palau, Maldives, Kiribati, Tonga, Nauru, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Sao Tome and Principe.

² These are Liechtenstein, Singapore, Andorra, Bahrain, San Marino, and Monaco.

³ Guatemala is slightly under 109,000km² with a population of over 15 million.

⁴ Date accessed: February 5, 2014.

⁵ Vanuatu was a colony of both the UK and France simultaneously in a condominium arrangement, with France initially opposed to the UK's plans to promote independence.

⁶ Despite considerable efforts by Taiwan, only about half of their diplomatic allies ever supported the proposals (Rich, 2009: 181).

⁷ A bivariate regression with a dummy variable for countries with less than a million people positively correlates with a 2.5 point increase in recoded Freedom House scores (significant at .001).

⁸ These countries are absent as the original dataset focused on whether a country had diplomatic relations with Taiwan or China.

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