

# Electoral politics, party performance, and governance in Greenland: Parties, personalities, and cleavages in an autonomous subnational island jurisdiction

Yi Zhang

School of Public Administration, Jilin University, China

[zyi13@mails.jlu.edu.cn](mailto:zyi13@mails.jlu.edu.cn)

Xinyuan Wei

School of Public Administration, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China

[weixy@scut.edu.cn](mailto:weixy@scut.edu.cn) (corresponding author)

Adam Grydehøj

Research Center for Indian Ocean Island Countries, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China

[agrydehoj@islanddynamics.org](mailto:agrydehoj@islanddynamics.org)

**Abstract:** Greenland is a strongly autonomous subnational island jurisdiction (SNIJ) within the Kingdom of Denmark. This paper takes its point of departure in studies of politics in small island territories to ask to what extent Greenland matches findings from other small island states and SNIJs in terms of personalisation of politics, party performance, and political cleavages that do not follow left-right divides. Even though Greenland possesses a strongly multiparty system, supported by elections involving party-list proportional representation within a single multimember constituency, a single political party, Siumut, has led the government for all but a brief period since the advent of Greenlandic autonomy in 1979. By considering Greenland's political ecosystem, spatially and personally conditioned aspects of voter behaviour, and coalition-building processes, paying particular attention to the 24 April 2018 parliamentary elections, we argue that it is inappropriate to study Greenland as a monolithic political unit or to draw oversimplified analogies with party politics from large state Western liberal democracies. Instead, Greenlandic politics must be understood in relation to the island territory's particular historical, geographical, and societal characteristics as well as its electoral system.

*Keywords:* cleavages, electoral politics, governance, Greenland, party performance, subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs)

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## Introduction

This paper analyses electoral politics and the political party ecosystem in Greenland, an autonomous subnational island jurisdiction (SNIJ) within the Kingdom of Denmark. Taking our starting point in studies of politics in small island territories, we ask to what extent Greenland matches findings from other small island states and SNIJs in terms of personalisation of politics, party performance, and political cleavages that do not follow left–right divides. We argue that it is inappropriate to study Greenland as a monolithic political unit or to draw oversimplified analogies with party politics from large state Western liberal democracies. Instead, Greenlandic politics must be understood in relation to the island territory’s particular historical, geographical, and societal characteristics as well as its electoral system.

With a total land area of 2,166,086 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of around 56,379 (1 October 2020; Grønlands Statistik, 2020), Greenland has far and away the lowest population density (0.026/km<sup>2</sup>) of any country or autonomous territory in the world. Around 3500 km separate Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, from Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, on the other side of the Atlantic. In common with many other small island territories (here including both small island states and SNIJs) located a considerable distance from their metropolises, Greenland possesses (1) a high degree of economic specialisation, (2) a large public sector relative to population, and (3) a small number of highly influential economic and political actors. This tendency among SNIJs is attributable to complex social and natural processes, including the association between distance from the metropole and high level of self-governance; limited quantity and diversity of natural and human resources; high unit costs for supplying goods and services; small population size; and histories of colonisation and/or resource extraction to the metropole (Baldacchino, 2020; Grydehøj, 2018).

Greenland is becoming increasingly important within international discussions concerning Arctic politics. This heightens the need for research that deploys a nuanced understanding of Greenland’s own politics. There has been substantial and high-quality research concerning Greenland’s role in Arctic politics, including studies of Greenland’s relationship with Denmark, its prospects for political independence, and its status as an object of contention among more powerful nations (Olesen, 2020; Rahbek-Clemmensen & Nielsen, 2020; Shi & Lanteigne, 2019; Zeuthen & Raftopoulos, 2018; Krabbe, 2018; Jacobsen, 2016) as well as concerning economic and societal conditions within Greenland (Cambou, 2020; Steenholdt, 2019; Bianco, 2018; Snyder et al, 2017). However, although many researchers possess considerable knowledge of Greenlandic politics, electoral politics and party political discussions are rarely granted much attention in the literature (with exceptions including Ackrén, 2019a, 2019b; Ackrén & Sundberg, 2019; Jacobsen & Gad, 2017; Gad, 2017; Gad, 2016).

One result is that, even as numerous scholars highlight the importance of recognising differences in lifestyles and livelihoods within Greenland, much of the academic literature treats Greenland as a single, monolithic political unit. Such a perspective has its uses, but it can be misleading when trying to determine why Naalakkersuisut (Greenland’s national government) makes the decisions that it makes, why Greenland’s prime minister acts in certain ways, why particular policy directions persist despite apparent widespread opposition in Greenland, and how Greenland’s government or individuals in different parts of Greenland might react to certain external events or developments. Studies of politics and policies that

neglect the manner in which Greenlandic politics functions in practice also risk reducing Greenlandic agency in questions of international relations.

This paper's methodology consists of a combination of document review and data analysis. We undertook an unsystematic review of Danish-language articles on the websites of both Greenlandic and Danish popular media (*Sermitsiaq.AG*, *KNR*, *Kamikposten*, *Information*, *Altinget*, *Politiken*, *Weekendavisen*, etc.) concerning elections and/or key political issues in Greenland. We also reviewed all available publications by Inatsisartut (Greenland's national parliament), Naalakkersuisut, and individual political parties regarding the nature of individual parties and party politics in Greenland. Finally, we analysed voting data derived from the 24 April 2018 nationwide elections to Inatsisartut. Our perspectives are informed by ethnographic research by Adam Grydehøj (totalling 22 weeks, between 2014–2018), but because this ethnographic research did not focus on party politics as such, we can at most present its findings of relevance to the present paper as being anecdotal in nature.

It is important to note that the public administration and, in particular, media organisations in Greenland are dominated by Danish editorial functions and processes. As a consequence, even when Greenlandic journalists or writers are involved, it can be difficult to escape Danish perspectives, especially when Greenlandic terms and conceptualisations end up being translated into Danish words and worldviews before being translated back into Greenlandic and mediated to the Greenlandic public (Villadsen, 2016). This study is thus limited by its lack of linguistic access to Greenlandic-language political discussions, as for example appear in social media and online discussion forums.

Next, we provide a brief overview of theories of small island politics. This is followed by an overview of Greenland's history, geography, and economy and then a description of Greenland's electoral system. We then briefly describe the various Greenlandic political parties and consider cleavages in Greenlandic politics. This is followed by an analysis of the 24 April 2018 elections to Inatsisartut, then an analysis of the role of stability in diversity in Greenlandic politics. The paper ends with a brief conclusion.

### **Theories of small island politics**

Over the past decades, various theories have been developed to explain the interconnected social, economic, and political processes involved in small island politics.

Even though the terms 'small island' and 'small state' are commonly used in both scholarship and practice, for example, among the United Nations' Small Island Developing States (SIDS) grouping, smallness is a relative characteristic, and there are no universally accepted definitions for it (Mounsey & Singh, 2018; Corbett, 2015; Baker, 1992; Raadschelders, 1992). As Baldacchino (2018, p. 6) notes, the labelling of island territories as 'small' is both inconsistent and unscientific, with the SIDS category including Cuba and the Dominican Republic (both with populations well above 10 million) as well as Papua New Guinea (population 8,935,000, 462,840 km<sup>2</sup>), none of which would necessarily be regarded as 'small' if they were located on continental mainlands rather than islands. Grydehøj (2018, pp. 71–72) argues that "the very smallest of polities in terms of population size seem to be subject to different economic dynamics related to trade openness and governmental status than are larger – but still small – polities," justifying a maximum population of 100,000 in studies of extremely small island states and territories. The present article examines Greenland

in relation to studies of island territories that likewise have very small populations, while recognising that, although this analytical strategy it is not arbitrary, neither is it incontestable.

There has been considerable research into economic decisionmaking in small island territories (e.g. Grydehøj, 2020, 2018; Bertram, 2015; Tita, 2014; Baldacchino, 2010, 1993; Overton & Murray, 2014; Briguglio et al, 2010; Armstrong & Read, 2003). There has also been important research into the manner in which governance occurs in small island contexts. Baldacchino (2012), for example, notes a disconnect between a tendency in the scholarly literature to associate smallness with democracy and the seeming reality of small island spaces being characterised by personalistic politics and conformity-enforcing political systems.

Indeed, the strand earlier literature against which Baldacchino was reacting (e.g. Anckar, 2008, 2002; Srebrnik, 2004; Anckar & Anckar, 1995; Hintjens & Newitt, 1992) has lost some of its lustre in recent years, as newer island- and microstate-focused research has shined a spotlight on the practical limits to formal democratic institutions in small polities. Veenendaal has shown in a succession of articles how small island states frequently possess democratic government structures that are, however, undermined by social processes:

One consequence of the higher levels of community cohesion and attitudinal homogeneity in small islands is that there can be a lack of political diversity and alternatives, and that there may be strong pressures to conform to dominant norms and conventions. In practice, this means that small islands have a natural inclination to oligarchy and power concentration. Within the framework of representative democracy, individual political leaders in small islands can acquire vast powers, to the point that they dominate the entire political arena. [...] In other islands, such as Greenland or Samoa, politics is very much dominated by a single political party, which despite the presence of free and fair elections continues to remain in office. [...]

As a consequence of increased social intimacy and the absence of strong ideological divisions that result from higher levels of attitudinal homogeneity, politics in small islands largely focuses on personalities and personal relationships. [...] In contrast with dominant assumptions in the academic literature, however, the absence of ideological or substantive politics does not produce a more consensual or harmonious political environment. In fact, many small islands have strongly polarised or even “tribal” politics, with fiercely antagonistic relations between political parties.

[...] Due to the greater social proximity and the prevalence of multiple role relationships, citizens and politicians in small islands meet and interact with each other on a daily basis. This “reciprocal communication” (Dahl & Tufte, 1973, p. 87) has often been linked with increased representation and responsiveness, but also can promote conflicts of interest, favouritism and clientelistic politics. The case study literature on individual small island territories corroborates the prevalence of patron-client networks in small island societies around the globe. (Veenendaal, 2020a, pp. 33-34; see also Veenendaal, 2020b; 2015; 2015)

In the below discussion of Greenlandic politics, it will be easy to see some of these problems at work. Such findings have been supported by a wealth of case study research (e.g. Phillip-Durham, 2020; Sanches, 2021; Corbett, 2015). Some of these same political phenomena can, however, be interpreted in a more positive manner. Grydehøj (2018; 2016; 2013) has, for

example, argued that many (though not all) perceived political problems in small island territories are in fact a result of the inappropriate imposition of large state understandings of legitimacy, good governance, and conflicts of interest.

All this points to the subjectivity of assessments of responsible and receptive government and the need for careful qualitative analysis of specific cases (Veenendaal, 2013).

### **Overview of Greenland's history, geography, and economy**

Indigenous Inuit (hereafter, Greenlanders) today comprise around 89% of Greenland's population, with most of the rest being ethnic Danes. In precolonial times, extended family groups were the key social and economic unit, dependent on subsistence hunting activities.

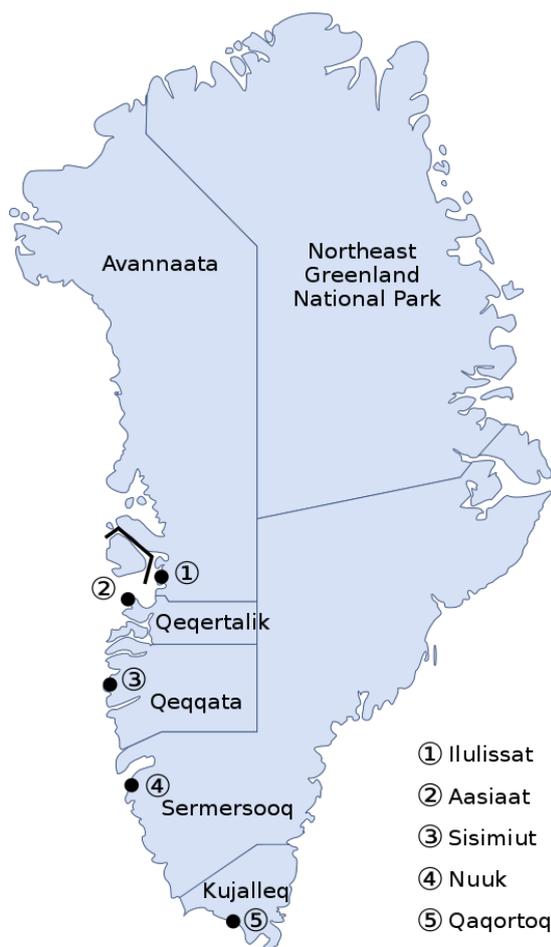
The Danish-Norwegian colonial project in Greenland began in the 1720s and came to focus on natural resource extraction in the form of seal products (blubber and skins). The seal fishery required highly skilled but solitary and spatially dispersed labour, contributing to the entrenchment of a widely distributed settlement pattern, with 'colony towns' being established along the coast to support industry. These activities were organised through *Den Kongelige Grønlandske Handel* (hereafter, KGH), a Danish SOE that possessed a monopoly over trade involving Greenland from its establishment in 1776 until 1950. Besides organising trade, KGH sought to manage relations between Greenlanders and Danes and manage structures of settlement, economy, and sociality so as best to achieve the needs of this trading enterprise (Gulløv, 2017, pp. 115-121). The involvement of Greenlanders in formal decisionmaking processes occurred only gradually and at a relatively superficial level (Rud, 2017; Gulløv, 2017, pp. 218-223). In 1911, the administrative councils were replaced by municipal councils (composed solely of Greenlanders), which themselves elected representatives to two provincial councils. There were no Greenlandic political parties at the time, and the elected representatives had limited influence relative to KGH and the colonial administration. The emergence of the export-oriented whitefish fishery in the early 1900s (Gulløv, 2017, pp. 260-264) altered economic practices and infrastructural needs, but subsistence hunting remained and continues to be important today, especially in smaller towns and settlements.

In 1950, in the runup to the territory's formal decolonisation, KGH lost its monopoly over exports but retained responsibility for supplies to Greenland. In 1953, the Danish government decided to change Greenland's status from that of a colony to that of a normal Danish municipality. Hansen (2017, p. 61) sees this as a shift from open colonialism to 'hidden' colonialism, and genuine political decisionmaking by Greenlanders themselves increased only gradually. Greenlandic Home Rule was introduced in 1979, a decision influenced by Greenlandic ambivalence to Denmark's joining of the European Economic Community, partially due to reasons related to national sentiment and partially due to concerns over Greenland's control of its fisheries (Gad, 2014). Following a referendum in Greenland, the territory left the EEC in 1985.

In 1985-1986, ownership of KGH was transferred from the Danish state to the Greenlandic state, and over the years, the former monopoly was split up into smaller Greenlandic SOEs, including Royal Greenland (formerly, Proeks), a fisheries company; Royal Arctic Line, a shipping and marine transport company; and the retail companies Pisiffik and Pilersuisoq, which despite their state ownership engaged in unhealthy competition with one another until the sale and privatisation of Pisiffik in 2001. Other remnants of KGH live

on as the Greenlandic SOE Kalaallit Niuerfiat, presiding over the reacquired Pilersuisoq, which provides subsidised retail services in many of Greenland's smaller towns and settlements; Polaroil, a supplier of liquid fuels; Neqi, a processor and supplier of local meat products; KNI Ejendomme, a property manager and developer; and KNI Engros, a wholesaler to companies and institutions. In 2019, the Greenlandic government bought out its Danish partners to become sole owners of Air Greenland, provider of the SNIJ's lifeline air transport services, both within Greenland and between Greenland and Copenhagen (Sermitiaq.AG, 2019, May 29). Greenland also has numerous municipal SOEs. Greenlandic Self-Government was introduced in 2009 following an act of Danish parliament (Lov om Grønlands Selvstyre, 2009). The Greenlandic government today has authority of most policy areas, with defence and foreign policy being the key areas remaining under Danish control.

From colonial times until today, the state has played a strong role in Greenland's economy, and SOEs have been vital for supplying services that would be unviable on market terms. Around 95% of Greenland's 56,379 residents live on the island's west coast. Nuuk, Greenland's capital and largest town, is home to 17,848 people, representing over 30% of the SNIJ's population. After Nuuk, the largest towns are Sisimiut, Ilulissat, Qaqortoq, and Aasiat, with populations of between 5500 and 3000 (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Map of Greenland, showing the five municipalities and the largest towns within the municipalities. Source: © Qaasuitsumiinnngilanga, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=66578943>

Greenland has over 60 other smaller towns and settlements, including dozens with populations below 200. Transport between towns and settlements occurs by plane, boat, helicopter, dogsled, snowmobile, or a combination of these. As a result, even though Greenland is frequently envisioned as a single large island, it in some respects more closely resembles a widely dispersed archipelago, with numerous islands of settlement.

Up until local government consolidation in 2009, there were 18 municipalities in the SNIJ, which were reduced to four (Grønlands Hjemmestyre, 2007). Following an additional reform in 2018, Greenland has been divided into five municipalities, in addition to the Northeast Greenland National Park, which has no permanent population. The municipalities have limited powers, and even these overlap substantially with that of the national government.

### **Greenland's electoral system**

Greenland possesses an electoral system modelled after that of Denmark but adapted in some respects to Greenland's small population.

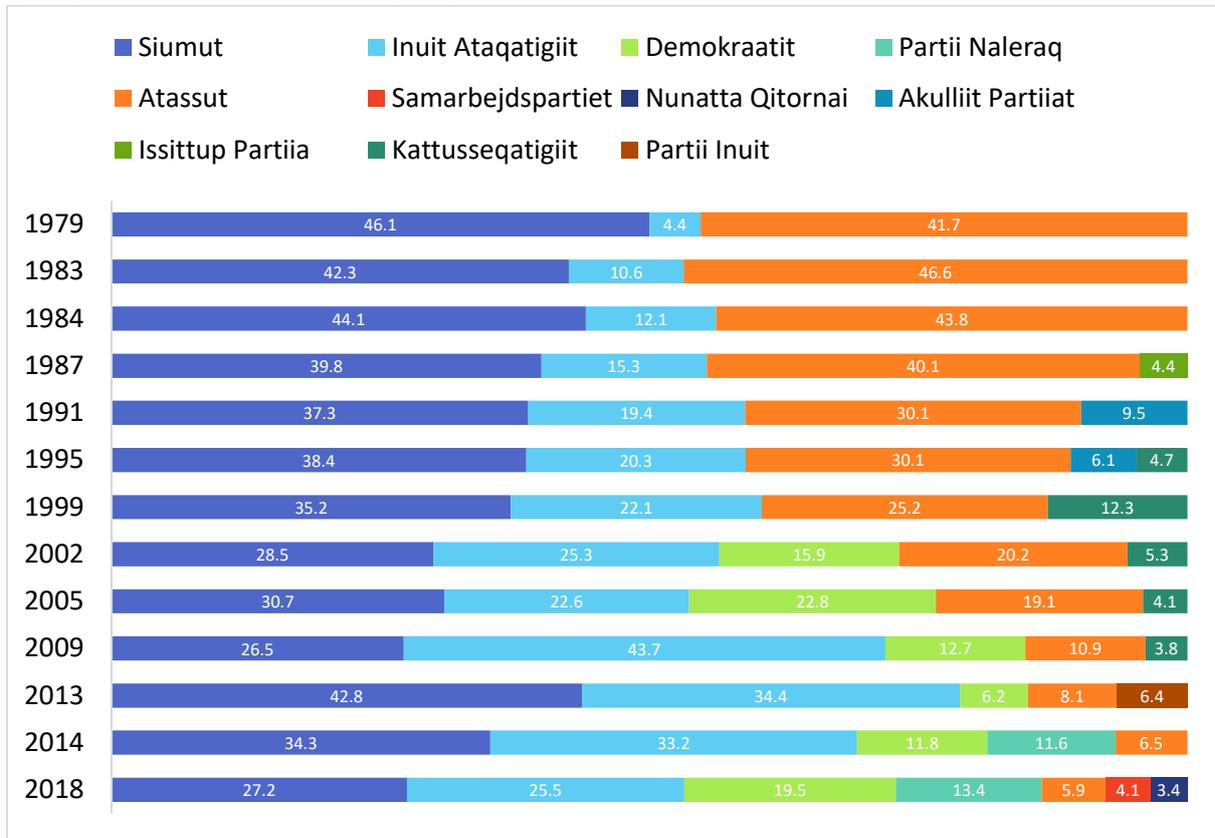
#### *Inatsisartut*

Inatsisartut, Greenland's national parliament, consists of 31 members, elected by party-list proportional representation within a single multimember constituency. Voters usually cast ballots for an individual candidate on a party's open list, with excess votes pooling into the party and benefiting candidates from the top of the list on down. This allows candidates who have not received many personal votes to come into Inatsisartut on the coattails of more popular candidates. It is also possible for voters to cast non-personalised ballots for the party itself.

Although the electoral system is modelled after that of Denmark, including in its encouraging of multiparty politics through open party-list proportional representation, the use of a single multimember constituency makes the system exceptionally proportional. Although an individual candidate may receive a majority of their personal votes from a particular town or municipality, politicians enter Inatsisartut as representatives of Greenland as a whole, rather than as representatives of a specific locality. Members are elected for terms of four years, though Inatsisartut can vote to hold early elections. Inatsisartut holds legislative power over a wide range of issues. In order to win a seat in Inatsisartut, a political party must receive at least 3% of the vote in an election.

Greenland's party system began in the run-up to Home Rule in the late 1970s. Four parties contested this first election: two pro-independence parties (Siumut and Sulisartut Partiiat), one autonomist party (Inuit Ataqatigiit), and one party supporting close relations with Denmark (Atassut). While Atassut's popularity has dwindled over time, Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit have for most of the past two decades been the most popular parties in Greenland. Sulisartut Partiiat failed to win seats in the early elections and was absorbed by Inuit Ataqatigiit in 1983. Over the years, various small parties have come and gone from Greenlandic politics, often though not solely seeking to occupy a more economically right-wing space in the party ecosystem.

**Table 1.** Party performance (vote percentage) in elections to Inatsisartut, 1979–2018, including all parties that have historically won seats but excluding parties receiving <3% in a given election. *Source:* © Yi Zhang, Xinyuan Wei, & Adam Grydehøj, 2021; data derived from *Valg.gl* (2021) and Grønlands Statistik (2016).



As Table 1 shows, despite the truly multiparty nature of Greenland’s electoral system, there has been a degree of stability from the advent of Home Rule until today. Among the most marked of developments have been:

- Siumut’s steady performance as one of the two top parties
- Reversal of the roles played by Atassut and Inuit Ataqaqtiit, with the latter gradually rising to become one of the two top parties
- Demokraatit’s emergence as a fixture of the political scene since its founding in 2002
- The system’s resilience even in the face of splinter parties, noting however that the two top parties’ combined vote share has been in decline since 2009.

Siumut has held the premiership for all but four years since 1979, with the exception being the Inuit Ataqaqtiit-led government formed in 2009, at the start of the Self-Rule period. However, this has not resulted in incredibly lengthy periods in office by any one prime minister: if one excludes the nearly 12-year term (encompassing four elections) by Jonathan Motzfeldt (Siumut) between 1979 and 1991, at the very beginnings of Greenlandic electoral democracy, six different prime ministers have held office between 1991–2020.

Multiparty politics encourage the building of formal and informal coalitions among parties. Naalakkersuisut, Greenland’s national government, depends on the support of a

majority of the members of Inatsisartut or on lack of opposition by a majority of members of Inatsisartut. It is only the inaugural election to Inatsisartut in 1979 (which occurred under a less proportional electoral system, with only two parties winning seats) that produced results permitting a single party (Siumut) to form a majority government. The subsequent Inatsisartut election in 1983 produced a Siumut minority government, despite Atassut winning significantly more votes (42.3% for Siumut, 46.6% for Atassut, and 10.6% for Inuit Ataatigiit). However, already following the 1984 election, Siumut joined a coalition with the then-much smaller Inuit Ataatigiit.

Since that point, Naalakkersuisut has typically been the product of formal coalitions, supported by coalition agreements. Up until 1995, Siumut always chose Inuit Ataatigiit as its coalition partner, with Atassut being the principal opposition, but as Inuit Ataatigiit grew, and Atassut dwindled in importance, coalitions became more conditional upon specific issues, personalities, and election results. Between 1995–1999, the situation was reversed, and Siumut was in coalition with Atassut. In 1999–2001, Siumut was once again in coalition with Inuit Ataatigiit, before entering into a new coalition with Atassut. In the 2000s, even as Siumut usually remained at the head of Naalakkersuisut, the governing coalitions became more diverse. The 2005–2009 electoral period included a number of coalitions by Siumut, Inuit Ataatigiit, and Atassut. Inuit Ataatigiit's phenomenal performance in the 2009 election, at the start of the Self-Government era, saw this nominally socialist party form coalitions with the nominally right-wing Demokraatit and Kattuseqatigiit parties. Between 2018–2020, all but one party currently sitting in Inatsisartut (Samarbejdspartiet) has been included in a government. This might at first glance indicate instability, but notwithstanding the constant churn of support parties and the ebb and flow of the electoral calculus, Naalakkersuisut has been able to accumulate knowledge and experience as well as draw upon skills from different sources over time.

As the above account makes clear, governing coalitions are subject to change between elections. Thus, for example, the 24 April 2018 election to Inatsisartut (considered in detail below) resulted in a government comprised of a Siumut-led coalition of four parties (Siumut, Partii Naleraq, Atassut, Nunatta Qitornai) holding a total of 16 out of 31 seats. Turmoil among coalition partners caused the departure of Partii Naleraq from what became a minority government on 5 October 2018. On 9 April 2019, Atassut departed the government as well. This minority government persisted until 29 May 2020, when, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, a new Siumut-led majority government was formed (Siumut, Demokraatit, Nunatta Qitornai) (Indenrigsafdelingen, 2020, November 6).

Although changes in governing coalitions are not typically seen as requiring new elections, replacement of the prime minister is perceived as necessitating this, for example after current prime minister Kim Kielsen replaced Aleqa Hammond as prime minister and leader of Siumut in 2014. At the time of writing in January 2021, Kim Kielsen remains prime minister despite having been replaced by Erik Jensen as leader of Siumut in November 2020, highlighting the complexity of Greenlandic politics: even though many politicians from within Siumut and other parties, including coalition partners, have regarded Kielsen's decisionmaking processes as overly opaque and top-down, it is felt that replacing him as prime minister would require a new election, which few desire at present.

Minority governments, formed after the breakdown of coalitions between elections, are rare but not unprecedented, occurring in 1987–1988 (with Siumut governing alone), in 2007–2009 (with a Siumut-Atassut minority government), and in the aforementioned period in

2019–2020. Generally speaking, Greenland's approach to formal coalitions and minority governments resembles that in Denmark.

#### *Municipal councils and Danish parliament*

Greenland's electoral system offers voters and parties many possibilities and pathways for directing their local and national politics when it comes to elections to Inatsisartut, municipal councils, and Danish parliament. Competing in Inatsisartut elections may require different strengths and attributes of a party than competing in municipal elections, even though both involve elections through open party-list proportional representation in a single multimember constituency. Whereas Siumut has led all but one national government since 1979, recent municipal elections have produced municipal council coalition governments led by alternatively Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit.

In common with Faroe, another autonomous SNIJ within the Kingdom of Denmark, Greenland contributes two representatives to Danish parliament (179 members in total). This election too is held using open party-list proportional representation in a single multimember constituency, but since only two members are elected to Danish parliament (as opposed to 31 members to Inatsisartut), the elections are not particularly proportional. As a result, even though all Greenlandic parties put up candidates, it is in practice only the larger parties that can truly be competitive in sending individuals to Danish parliament. Surprisingly though, there is only evidence of limited adjustment in voting behaviour between the highly proportional Inatsisartut elections and the essentially two-party Danish parliamentary elections: in the last two Inatsisartut elections (2014/2018), for example, Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit received 34.3%/27.2% and 33.2%/25.5% respectively, while in the last two Danish parliamentary elections (2015/2019) the parties received 38%/29.5% and 38.4%/33.4% respectively. That is, votes are indeed more concentrated in the two largest parties in the Danish parliamentary elections, but the smaller parties continue to receive substantial numbers of votes.

Danish parliamentary elections do not seem to have much influence on the balance of power and political discourse in Greenland, perhaps because it is at present almost taken as a given that the two available seats will be filled by one candidate each from Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit. the substantial autonomy held by Greenland's own government, there is a lack of clarity for all parties involved—the Greenlandic public, Greenlandic politicians, and Danish politicians—as to what role Greenland's members of Danish parliament ought to play. The members of Danish parliament are, however, significant figures in Greenlandic politics, including past prime ministers (Aleqa Hammond, Lars Emil-Johansen), current political heavyweights (e.g. Aaja Chemnitz Larsen), and potential future stars and leaders (e.g. Aki Mathilda Høegh Dam, Sara Olsvig, Julianne Henningsen).

### **Greenland's political parties**

Below, we briefly describe the seven parties currently represented in Inatsisartut. These are listed below in descending order by the number of votes they received in the 2018 elections.

#### *Siumut*

Siumut, one of Greenland's three original parties, is often characterised as a social democratic party that aims for eventual political independence from Denmark, and its opponents

sometimes accuse it of populism. However, Siumut is a ‘big tent’ party, and there are significant ideological and strategic differences between its various wings. Siumut enjoys a degree of popularity across Greenland, but its core of support is seen as residing in the smaller towns and settlements.

Siumut’s Kim Kielsen became party leader and prime minister in 2014, taking over from Aleqa Hammond, a personally popular firebrand politician, who stepped down as prime minister following a public expenses scandal. Although initially credited with being a skilled manager, Kielsen has faced accusations of top-down, opaque decisionmaking, and following years of open internal party conflicts, Siumut elected a new party leader Erik Jensen and party committee in November 2020 (Svendsen, 2020, November 30). The new leadership seems set to alter Siumut’s operational methods and potentially pull the party leftward, following a drift to the right under Kielsen’s leadership. For the time being, Kielsen remains prime minister and leader of the governing coalition.

All parties compete over talented young graduates, but Siumut, which many have come to see as the natural party of government, remains especially successful at attracting—or perhaps co-opting—rising stars. This has possibly exacerbated internal party disputes, as private correspondence suggests that some influential younger individuals affiliated with Siumut have felt let down by the party’s internal governance and wider decisionmaking processes under Kielsen’s leadership.

#### *Inuit Ataatigiit*

Inuit Ataatigiit, one of Greenland’s first three parties, initially trailed behind both Siumut and Atassut. By 2002, it had overtaken Atassut to become Siumut’s major competitor, including a period of leading the government (2009–2013). Inuit Ataatigiit is often characterised as a socialist party that aims for eventual political independence from Denmark, and it is strongest in Greenland’s larger towns. Anecdotally, Inuit Ataatigiit seems to be more popular among ethnic Danes and non-Greenlandic language speakers than are the other strongly pro-independence parties. The party is also more popular among younger Greenlanders than is Siumut.

Josef Motzfeldt led Inuit Ataatigiit from 1994–2007 and was followed by Kuupik Kleist, who led the party to enormous electoral success and acquired the premiership in the 2009 election. Sara Olsvig took over the party leadership in 2014 but stepped down as leader for personal reasons in 2018, succeeded by current leader Múte Bourup Egede, who ran for the post unopposed.

#### *Demokraatit*

Since its founding in 2002, Demokraatit has emerged as one of Greenland’s three largest parties, alongside Siumut and Inuit Ataatigiit. Demokraatit “is a liberal party that seeks the greatest possible degree of personal freedom for each resident,” leading to the belief “that all taxes and duties should be kept to a minimum, so that residents and businesses have the freedom to dispose of their own money as they see fit” (Bureau for Inatsisartut, 2019, p. 14; translation our own). Although Demokraatit is mildly in favour of political independence from Denmark, it believes that “political efforts should focus on minimising social problems, raising education levels, and creating best possible conditions for the business community”

(Bureau for Inatsisartut, 2019, pp. 13–14; translation our own). Demokraatit argues strongly for the privatisation of some of Greenland’s large SOEs.

Demokraatit was founded in 2002 by former-Siumut politician Per Berthelsen, who was toppled from his post by Jens B. Frederiksen in 2008 and subsequently returned to Siumut. A conflict of interest scandal in 2014 caused Jens B. Frederiksen to step down. The subsequent years have seen changes in leadership in rapid succession, with Anda Uldum, Randi Vestergaard Evaldsen, Niels Thomsen, Randi Vestergaard Evaldsen (acting), Nivi Olsen (acting), and Jens-Frederik Nielsen all taking turns at the helm and frequently departing politics on personal grounds.

#### *Partii Naleraq*

Partii Naleraq was founded in 2014 as a splinter party from Siumut, led by former prime minister Hans Enoksen. Partii Naleraq seeks “establishment of a Greenland state, respect for people within society, and the will to create equal opportunities for all.” Emphasis is placed on “a self-sufficient economy, the country being governed as an open democracy,” on Greenlandic involvement in the “extraction of natural resources,” and on “creating better conditions for those who lack resources” (Bureau for Inatsisartut, 2019, pp. 14–15; translation our own). Partii Naleraq is often characterised as strongly pro-independence and engaging in populist politics. The party’s profile is in practice rather mixed, combining a focus on livelihoods in settlements (especially in fishing and hunting) with a tendency to argue for a more internationally engaged and industrially advanced Greenland. Although often spoken of alongside the small new party Nunatta Qitornai (discussed below) as an ethnonationalist populist party, Partii Naleraq’s positioning is in some respects closest with that of Siumut.

#### *Atassut*

Atassut, one of Greenland’s three original parties, has gone from being Siumut’s main competitor at the start of Home Rule to being a relatively minor party in Greenlandic politics, with its vote share declining in every Inatsisartut election since 1983. Atassut “is a liberal conservative party” that places “people at the centre,” making a point of prioritising the needs of families and the elderly as well as promoting the interests of “independent entrepreneurs and working for the population being able to support itself” (Bureau for Inatsisartut, 2019, p. 13; translation our own). This positioning highlights the party’s dependence on older voters in small towns and settlements. Atassut initially took a strong unionist stance but has gradually transitioned into a pro-independence party. Whereas the other two parties with an economic liberal orientation (Demokraatit and Samarbejdspartiet) are somewhat metropolitan in their politics and base, Atassut is seen as a defender of traditional lifestyles.

Atassut has had 11 leaders since its founding in 1979, with Daniel Skifte’s 1993–2002 leadership being the longest. Aqqalu Jerimiassen has led the party since 2019, moving the party rightward following years of leftward drift as a frequent Siumut coalition partner.

#### *Samarbejdspartiet*

Samarbejdspartiet is the only party currently in Inatsisartut that takes an unambiguously unionist stance. Like Demokraatit, Samarbejdspartiet is a social liberal, economically right-wing party, but unlike Demokraatit, Samarbejdspartiet is very weak outside Nuuk and is anecdotally dependent upon votes from ethnic Danes.

Samarbejdspartiet was founded in 2018 by former members of Demokraatit, Michael Rosing and Tillie Martinussen. A party expenses scandal involving leader Tillie Martinussen has caused serious conflict within the party, and it is uncertain how this will affect the party in the longer term.

#### *Nunatta Qitornai*

Nunatta Qitornai was founded in 2018 by former foreign minister Vittus Qujaukitsoq (Siumut). He was later joined by former prime minister Aleqa Hammond, who had been expelled from Siumut in 2016. Nunatta Qitornai “represents itself as an independence movement, in which freedom, happiness, and growth are the point of departure [...] Greenlandic independence is the party’s most important goal. Nunatta Qitornai believes that self-sufficiency in all respects is a vital precondition for Greenlandic independence” (Bureau for Inatsisartut, 2019, p. 14; translation our own). Nunatta Qitornai is often characterised as strongly pro-independence and engaging in populist politics. It is differentiated from Partii Naleraq on an ideological level inasmuch as, although both parties (like many parties in Greenland) argue for economic self-sufficiency, Nunatta Qitornai’s vision is radically localised and decentralised, in contrast to Partii Naleraq’s tendency toward economic openness.

While Nunatta Qitornai has not suffered the same internal turmoil as has Samarbejdspartiet, both parties are struggling and risk losing their places in Inatsisartut at the next election (Lindstrøm. 2020b).

### **Cleavages in Greenlandic politics**

Greenlandic politics is influenced by a number of significant cleavages, especially in terms of differing conceptions of centre and periphery interests as well as ethnic and linguistic divides.

#### *Centres vs peripheries*

Although Greenland as a whole has a small population, the wide dispersal of this population contributes to divergent interests among individuals in various parts of the SNIJ, and conflicts arise over differing perceptions of what is best for both local residents and the SNIJ as a whole. In addition, different kinds of economically valuable natural resources (e.g. fisheries resources, mineral resources, tourism resources) are located in different places, and their exploitation requires different infrastructural, policy, and labour frameworks.

Ever since Greenland’s formal decolonisation, debates over and decisions to evacuate, stop providing services to, or otherwise ‘close’ towns and settlements have periodically been topics of enormous political contention. Thus, for example, the 1968 decision to close the mining town of Qullissat (then the third-largest town in Greenland), including forced relocation of remaining residents in 1972, has come to serve as a popular symbol of what is perceived as Danish and Greenlandic government obsession with centralisation as a means of achieving economic efficiency and viability (Andersen et al, 2016; Hendriksen, 2013, p. 22; Grydehøj, 2020, p. 225; 2014, p. 212). As recently as October 2020, controversy arose when Inuit Ataqatigiit’s Aaja Chemnitz Larsen, one of Greenland’s two representatives to Danish parliament, spoke out in favour of concentrating the population in ‘viable’ settlements and allowing other settlements to close (Nørrelund Sørensen, 2020, October 9). Some responses

to these statements raised the spectre of the population concentration policies that Denmark pursued in Greenland in the 1960s (Kristiansen, 2020, October 10).

A political split can be perceived between a centralising desire for Nuuk to become a more metropolitan and more populous capital and a decentralising desire for greater distribution of jobs, services, and opportunities elsewhere in Greenland. Both these positions have their own adherents, and both can be said to be backed up by reasonable arguments, which are reflected in the diverse positionings taken by Greenlandic political parties. Indeed, some initiatives, such as an ongoing major airport construction project, can potentially be harnessed by advocates of both positions for different reasons (Grydehøj, 2018). As such, although these two positions (centralisation and decentralisation) may not be mutually incompatible, the gaps between them have proved difficult for parties to navigate.

Fisheries have proved critical to both advocacy for a more centralised and efficient, export-maximising Greenland and to advocacy for livelihoods in Greenland's smallest communities. As Greenland has developed under the Home Rule and Self Government systems, and as the government has set its sights on eventual political independence from Denmark, developmental focus has shifted from fisheries to other industries, such as tourism and mining (Committee for Greenlandic Mineral Resources to the Benefit of Society, 2014, p. 11). Against this backdrop, with dubious equivalences being drawn between political and economic independence, the Greenlandic government has promoted tourism development, and Sermersooq Municipality has envisioned a centralised, service sector-focused economy (Grydehøj, 2020; 2018). Such efforts are not necessarily bad in themselves, but their focus on boosting exports for Greenland as a whole and improving government finances does not always match up with the present needs of the residents of Greenland's small towns and settlements.

Reliable data is only available for Greenland's formal economy, which can be calculated on the basis of tax returns and official accounts. However, the informal economy is significant for understanding the functioning of Greenland's settlements in particular. The informal economy includes hunting and fishing (1) for private consumption, (2) for distribution within the settlement, and (3) for informal sale locally or elsewhere in Greenland (Hendriksen, 2013, p. 54). Many small settlements are virtually self-sufficient in food, to the extent that three settlements possess no shops or retail establishments of any kind (Thorin, 2020, September 7). However, the absence of this subsistence and otherwise-informal catch from official calculations leads to a dramatic undervaluing of local economic activity (Hendriksen, 2013, pp. 75-79). There is no correlation between the ability to undertake subsistence fishing and hunting on the one hand and the ability to engage in fishing and hunting as part of the formal economy on the other, yet on a formal level, most of Greenland's settlements appear almost inherently economically unsustainable, helping to buttress arguments for centralisation. Furthermore, as Snyder et al (2017) argue, the same subsidised SOE activities that enable (apparently economically unsustainable) livelihoods in small settlements also prevent business innovation. These tensions are real, and there are no clear-cut solutions. Differences emerge between the ways in which different parties with different ideological perspectives deal with questions of business rationality, efficiency, freedom of choice, Inuit tradition, and social welfare in a Greenlandic context.

The precise balancing of centre and periphery interests ends up being a more significant cleavage within Greenlandic politics than the left-right spectrum through which commentators frequently seek to understand Greenlandic parties. Even the shorthand in

which we have engaged here, which reflects the parties' own self-representations (for example, distinguishing between Siumut as a social democratic party, Inuit Ataqatigiit as a socialist party, and Demokraatit as a liberal party), is of doubtful significance.

All the parties to some extent accept that Greenland's geographical peculiarities—a small, dispersed population; the great distance from economic hinterlands; a difficult climate and landscape—require special policy approaches. Demokraatit and Samarbejdspartiet, with their desire to reduce the role of government and their opposition to state intervention in major industries, seem at first glance to match up well with broader international assumptions regarding parties on the economic 'right', yet these two parties also represent positions that are strongest in Nuuk and other larger towns and that require greater centralisation of services in practice.

As Demokraatit's (2018; translation our own) election manifesto states:

Demokraatit believe that everyone should have the freedom to decide for themselves where and how they will live. The state should stay out of this. People need to understand though that it will usually be more expensive to live in small places due to poor economies of scale, and people also need to understand that public services will, all else being equal, be worse in a sparsely populated area than in a big town.

Instead of focusing on whether investments should be made in settlements or towns, we should to a much greater extent focus on investing in those places where there are commercial and growth opportunities.

Whereas economic liberal/small government stances in Danish politics are electorally associated with rural districts where public services are limited, Greenland's economic liberal/small government parties depend on votes from places in which public services are already and will continue to be strongest. Demokraatit and Samarbejdspartiet are, generally speaking, solidly focused on the formal economy and associated assessments of profitability, with less interest in the informal economic and subsistence activities. Atassut, with its emphasis on tradition and its strength in the small towns and settlements, is capable of taking a different view of 'self-sufficiency'.

The longstanding desire on the part of Demokraatit to privatise the large fishing and fish processing SOE, Royal Greenland (Schultz-Nielsen, 2020, April 26), has been criticised by other parties because those aspects of Royal Greenland's business that are least profitable and might not make sense to a private owner (for example, the SOE's maintenance of operations in a large number of small towns and settlements) are precisely what makes life possible across much of Greenland (Schultz-Nielsen, 2020, May 03). Under pressure from Demokraatit, the current Siumut-led government indeed considered privatisation of Royal Greenland, prompting the current Inuit Ataqatigiit leader Múte B. Egede to argue, from outside the government:

Royal Greenland is our biggest company, and they generate income for the national accounts, to finance our welfare. We cannot go along with a whole or partial privatisation because it is important for the politics of the sector that we are able to spread the fishing industry across all of Greenland" (qtd. in Lindstrøm, 2020c, November 25; translation our own).

For similar reasons, even though Siumut, Partii Naleraq, and Atassut are all popularly regarded as parties of the small towns and settlements, and even though they all oppose further consolidation and centralisation in Nuuk as a result, these parties are also (generally) defenders of the powerful SOEs that keep the small towns and settlements running. Nunatta Qitornai leans into its economic liberalism in proposing that SOEs such as Royal Greenland, KNI, and Royal Arctic Lines be sold off in order to establish a fund to support new businesses, but its struggle to gain electoral support suggests that balancing small government stances with a focus on small towns and settlements may be difficult to achieve, especially with Atassut (less radical on the question of political independence) already filling part of this ideological space but with more apparent openness to traditional livelihoods.

Furthermore, the local branches of the various parties can and do frequently diverge from their parties' national profiles. For example, Siumut Nuuk has embraced policies that favour further centralisation in Nuuk, while the wider party is a champion of the periphery (Grydehøj, 2018). Likewise, Demokraatit means something quite different in Ilulissat (where it benefitted, as we shall see, in the 2018 Inatsisartut election from its connection with a local fisheries company) than it does in Nuuk (where it presents a distinctly metropolitan worldview). In addition, many members of Inatsisartut are also elected members of municipal councils: in 2019, eight out of 31 Inatsisartut members held such a so-called 'double mandate' (three politicians from Inuit Ataqatigiit, three from Siumut, and two from Demokraatit; Kristiansen, 2019, July 3).

#### *Ethnic and linguistic cleavages*

As noted in the party descriptions above, and as discussed in the existing literature (e.g. Gad, 2017), ethnicity plays a role in political positioning and performance in Greenland. Although around 89% of Greenland's population can be characterised as Inuit Greenlanders, this figure includes a great many people from ethnically mixed families, who identify to different degrees with both Greenlandic and Danish culture, in a manner that is neither generalisable nor captured by formal statistics.

There has been heated political debate concerning issues of self-identification and language use, particularly given that people from mixed families, especially in Nuuk, often grow up primarily speaking Danish and may lack Greenlandic language skills. Such individuals (self-identifying at least in part as Greenlanders but mainly speaking Danish) sometimes regard themselves as disadvantaged in and discriminated against in Greenlandic society. These feelings of alienation from Greenlandic society tend to be even more strongly felt by ethnic Danes. By the same token though, because Danish language skills remain associated with higher educational achievement and career opportunities, and because monolingual Danish-language speakers typically come from better-off family backgrounds, these individuals are disproportionately likely to belong to the societal elite. That is, both monolingual Danish speakers on the one hand and bilingual or monolingual Greenlandic speakers on the other hand may feel disadvantaged relative to the other.

It is thus unsurprising that the three parties that are not typically characterised as engaging in populist politics and that are seen as somewhat metropolitan in mindset (Demokraatit, Inuit Ataqatigiit, and Samarbejdspartiet) are anecdotally especially popular among ethnic Danes and among Greenlanders with higher educations and strong Danish

language skills. Such assessments must remain anecdotal at present due to the lack of ethnically and linguistically sensitive quantitative research into political affiliation in Greenland.

This is not to say that the other political parties lack support from educated, Danish-speaking Greenlanders. Prominent figures in all parties possess higher educations, strong Danish-language skills, and/or backgrounds in the business community. As Fischer Sivertsen and Grau Larsen (2020) note, while Greenland's societal elite is more diverse than the Danish societal elite in terms of gender balance, education, and income, the fact that Greenland's overall levels of income and educational achievement are so much lower than that in Denmark means the Greenlandic elite is less representative of the Greenlandic public as a whole in these respects.

These kinds of ethnic, educational, and economic tensions are important to bear in mind when considering the manner in which Greenland's political parties interact with one another and with the electorate.

### *Politics of independence*

Debates concerning political independence tend to be prioritised in the scholarship concerning Greenlandic politics. Political independence is indeed an important topic in political discussions in Greenland today, but its electoral salience comes down to which parties are trusted to move Greenland toward eventual independence rather than to debates over whether independence will occur.

Siumut, Partii Naleraq, and Nunatta Qitornai are all commonly discussed as 'populist', 'ethnonationalist', and 'separatist' parties in much of the scholarship and Danish media. However, Siumut's push for political independence is not reliably stronger than that of Inuit Ataatigiiit (which is rarely discussed as 'populist' or 'ethnonationalist'), and Partii Naleraq and Nunatta Qitornai possess quite different visions for Greenland's political and economic future. The fact that the academic literature is so often oriented toward either/or questions of independence likewise complicates matters, for few leading Greenlandic politicians actually suggest in their statements a desire to pursue political independence anytime soon. Emphasis is instead usually placed on deepening autonomy and establishing more equal relations with Denmark and other countries (see also Bonilla, 2015). Vittus Qujaukitsoq, founder and leader of Qitornai Nunatta, is among those Greenlandic politicians most closely associated with the desire for a rapid movement toward independence. He argues that international media focus on independence is misguided:

The vision of independence is the fuel that gets us all to fight for a new and different society. A society we have built ourselves and over which we decide ourselves. A society where the constitution is written by us in our own language. A society that we finance ourselves and for which we, as citizens, are proud (Qujaukitsoq, 2018, August 24; translation our own).

Qujaukitsoq's argument, which resembles that of many Greenlandic politicians from across the political spectrum, is thus that independence is less a topic of political contention than it is a rationale for practicing successful politics.

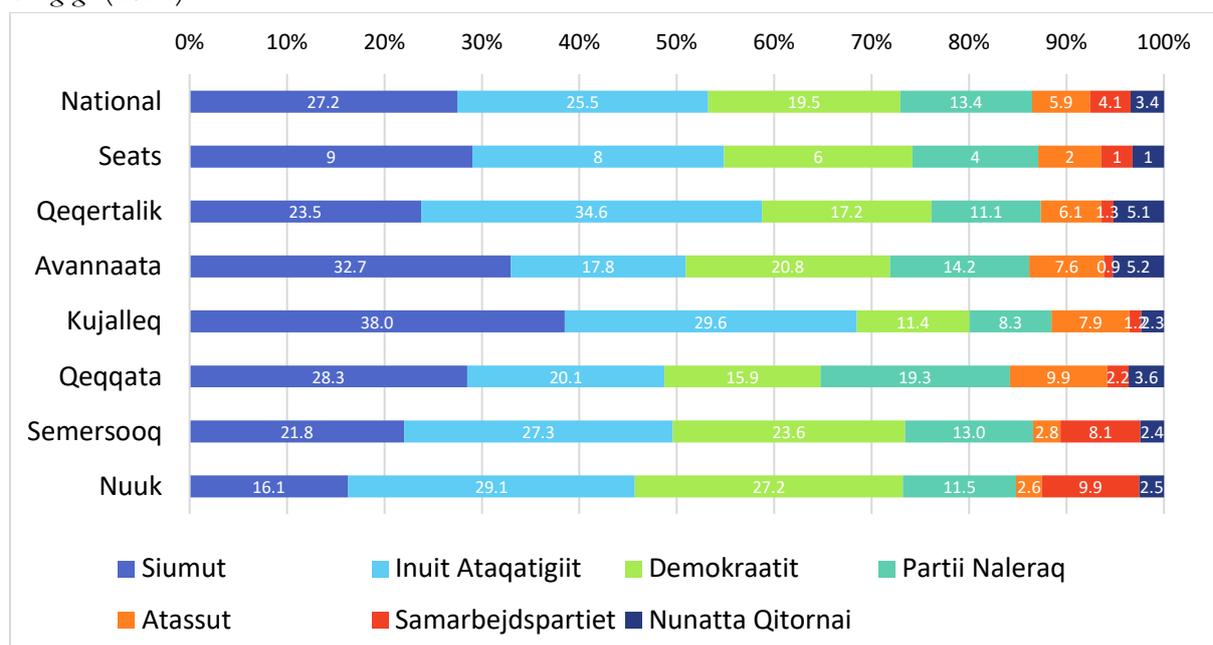
### Informal politics in focus: 24 April 2018 election to Inatsisartut

We have up to now focused on a formal analysis of party politics. This is, however, only part of the story. Informal elements of political competition are likewise important. A more localised and personalised approach is necessary to better understand these processes. We take a close look at the 24 April 2018 election to Inatsisartut (the most recent election at the time of writing) in order to gain greater insight. Unless otherwise noted, the data and figures in this section are derived from *Valg.gl* (2021). Because the relationships between individual politicians, parties, and localities are temporally specific, the precise situations considered here are not necessarily relevant now and will not necessarily be relevant in future elections. They serve, however, to illustrate more general informal aspects of Greenlandic politics.

Key to understanding the manner in which individuals are elected to Inatsisartut is understanding that, within Greenland’s system of open party-list proportional representation in a single constituency, it has become common for all parties to run far more candidates than can possibly be elected, with some parties even running more candidates than the total number of seats in Inatsisartut. This strategy allows parties to capitalise on personal ties as votes for individuals are transferred from both highly successful candidates and from unsuccessful candidates to other candidates within the same party, working down the party list from the top.

As noted above, there are geographical, cultural, and economic patterns in the support for Greenland’s various parties. Generally speaking, it is popularly understood that Siumut, Atassut, Partii Naleraq, and Nunatta Qitornai are strongest in Greenland’s smaller towns and settlements, whereas Inuit Ataqatigiit and Demokraatit are strongest in larger towns, and Samarbejdspartiet is strongest in Nuuk. These popular understandings are confirmed by the results of the 24 April 2018 election to Inatsisartut, shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Distribution of votes by party and municipality in the 24 April 2018 election to Inatsisartut. *Source:* © Yi Zhang, Xinyuan Wei, & Adam Grydehøj, 2021; data derived from *Valg.gl* (2021).

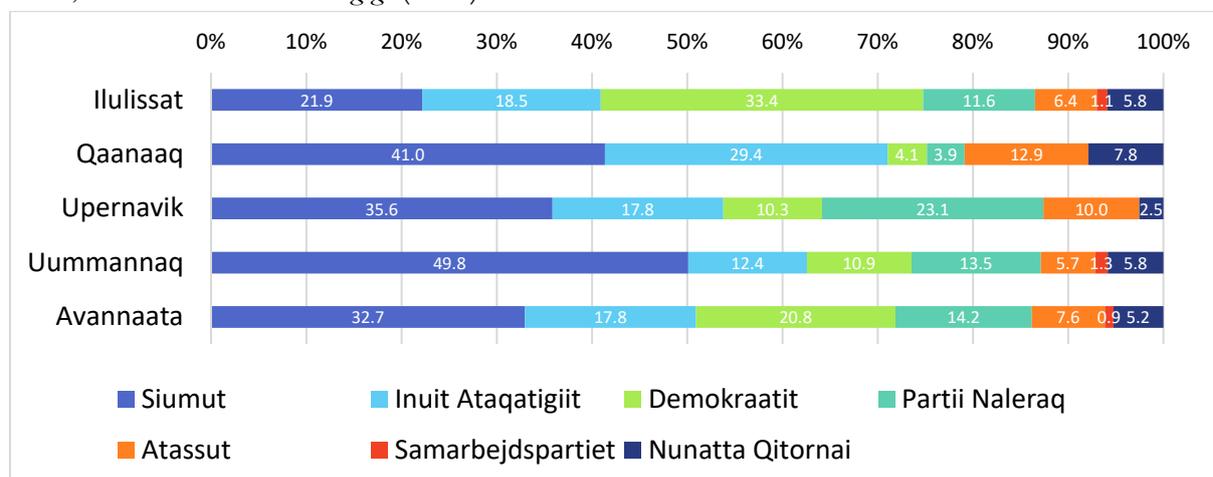


There is a popular and commonsense understanding that certain parties are appealing to and competing with one another over the same voters nationwide. For example, Partii Naleraq and Nunatta Qitornai are popularly said to hold similar positions as one another and to be strongest in the settlements. It is perhaps noteworthy that Kujalleq Municipality (in South Greenland, far from the hunting communities and cultural heartlands above the Arctic Circle) presents the weakest performances for both Partii Naleraq and Nunatta Qitornai, yet this municipality is also where Siumut (the other party most firmly rooted in claims regarding Greenlandic culture and nationality) performs strongest. Demokraatit and Samarbejdspartiet, the two somewhat metropolitan economic liberal parties, both perform well in Nuuk (and as a result, in the wider Sermersooq Municipality), but Demokraatit also performs well in Avannaata Municipality, where Samarbejdspartiet records its weakest performance. Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit both record some of their best results in Kujalleq Municipality.

*Personal votes and party votes*

Tempting though it may be to explain these results on the basis of nationality alone, Demokraatit’s performance in the 2018 national elections offers an excellent example of the importance of connections between individual politicians and individual places. Demokraatit received 19.5% of the votes nationwide. It was the second-most popular party in Sermersooq Municipality (23.6%), largely as a result of its popularity in Nuuk (27.2%). However, Demokraatit is also strikingly popular in Avannaata Municipality (20.8%). This is a consequence of the extreme popularity of a particular candidate in the electoral district that includes the town of Ilulissat, in which Demokraatit won 33.4% of the vote: Niels Thomsen, a native of Ilulissat and CEO of the Ilulissat-based fish processor Halibut Greenland ApS, received 627 votes in the Ilulissat district, representing nearly a quarter of all votes cast in town. The next-most popular candidate in Ilulissat was Sara Olsvig (a native of Nuuk and then-leader of Inuit Ataqatigiit), who received 276 votes. In contrast, the most popular Siumut candidate was the prime minister Kim Kielsen, with just 168 votes. Yet Siumut actually accrued 88 more votes in Ilulissat than did Inuit Ataqatigiit; it is simply that Siumut’s votes were more dispersed among a greater number of candidates.

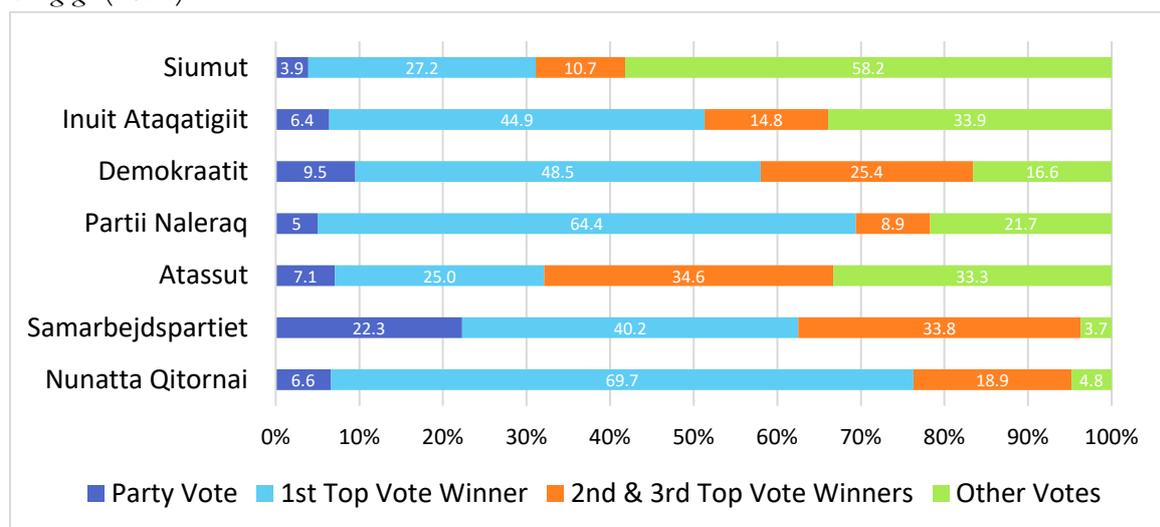
**Table 3.** Distribution of votes by party and electoral district in Avannaata Municipality in the 24 April 2018 election to Inatsisartut. *Source:* © Yi Zhang, Xinyuan Wei, & Adam Grydehøj, 2021; data derived from *Valg.gl* (2021).



This also means that a reading of the municipal results alone could be misleading. Demokraatit may have won 33.4% of the vote in Ilulissat, but its numbers elsewhere in the Avannaata Municipality are far less impressive (see Table 3). The big winner in the other Avannaata Municipality electoral districts is Siumut, but in these cases the personal votes are highly localised. One Siumut politician, Jens Danielsen, a native of Qaanaaq, received 31.8% of all votes cast in the Qaanaaq district. In contrast, even though Siumut convincingly won the vote in Upernavik, personal votes there were more evenly distributed among a number of Siumut politicians (Susanne K. Eliassen: 93, Jens Imanuelsen: 82, Kim Kielsen: 76, Thimotheus Petersen: 60, Meqo Jensen: 51, *etc.*).

Similar processes occur elsewhere. Tillie Martinussen, who became the sole representative from Samarbejdspartiet in Inatsisartut, received 76.2% of her 480 total personal votes in Nuuk’s electoral district alone. In the entirety of Avannaata Municipality, Tillie Martinussen received just 13 votes. On the other end of the political divide, Partii Naleraq’s highest vote share comes from Qeqqata Municipality, where party leader Hans Enoksen’s home settlement of Itilleq is located. Hans Enoksen received far and away the highest number of personal votes (649) of any candidate in the municipality, even though his party as a whole trailed behind both Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit in the municipality. Among the most high-profile figures in Partii Naleraq is Pele Broberg, a candidate who grew up in the small town of Qeqertarsuaq in Qeqertalik Municipality. However, Pele Broberg won just 18 personal votes (3.5%) in Qeqertarsuaq and only 31 (0.8%) in the municipality as a whole; his combination of local connections and high profile could not compete with that of his party’s leader. Pele Broberg and two other Partii Naleraq colleagues nevertheless managed to gain seats in Inatsisartut on the coattails of Hans Enoksen’s own strong performance—though one of these Partii Naleraq politicians, Henrik Fleischer (143 personal votes), jumped ship and joined Siumut less than a month after the election.

**Table 4.** Distribution of votes (%) by party and vote type in the 24 April 2018 election to Inatsisartut. Source: © Yi Zhang, Xinyuan Wei, & Adam Grydehøj, 2021; data derived from *Valg.gl* (2021).



A close look at the data reveals significant differences in the ways in which various parties’ votes were distributed among candidates and the party as a whole (Table 4). Voters

are permitted to cast ballots for a party rather than for an individual candidate, but relatively few people do so: at the 24 April 2018 election, out of a total of 29,003 ballots cast, 1950 votes (6.7%) went to parties rather than to individuals on the party lists. The relationship between distributions of personal votes and party votes is complex. It might be hypothesised that parties with star politicians who attract a high proportion of the party's votes would be less dependent on non-personalised votes party votes and parties that without outstanding attractors of personal votes would be more dependent on non-personalised party votes, but this is not straightforwardly the case.

As mentioned above, Siumut's votes in Avannaata Municipality were widely distributed among a number of candidates. This holds true for Siumut's votes at a national level as well. Siumut's top vote winner was party leader and prime minister Kim Kielsen, whose personal votes accounted for 27.2% of Siumut's total. This is the lowest percentage of votes going to a top vote winner of any party except for Atassut. The second and third top vote winners in Siumut (Hermann Berthelsen and Erik Jensen) received personal votes amounting to 10.7% of the party's total, the lowest percentage for any party except for Partii Naleraq. Despite this, Siumut received the lowest proportion (3.9%) of non-personalised party votes. Votes for Siumut were dominated by personal votes for candidates who were not among the top three vote winners (58.2%). Such has not always been the case. Although Kim Kielsen received just 2163 personal votes in 2018, he received 4608 in the 2014 Inatsisartut election, and his predecessor as party leader Aleqa Hammond received 6818 in the 3012 Inatsisartut election. That is, Siumut voters are perfectly happy targeting their votes on particular star candidates if they are sufficiently popular. Yet dissatisfaction with Kim Kielsen's leadership already in 2018 did not lead to votes being directed to the party but instead to votes being distributed among the party's numerous down-list candidates.

The candidate who acquired the most personal votes nationwide was Inuit Ataqatigiit's Sara Olsvig, whose 3360 personal votes represented 44.9% of all votes for her party. Inuit Ataqatigiit's second and third top vote winners (Aqqaluaq B. Egede and Múte Bourup Egede) received only 14.8% of the party's votes, with the result that, despite the then-party leader Sara Olsvig performing so strongly, 33.9% of the party's votes were distributed among less prominent candidates, a number second only to that of Siumut.

As noted above, Demokraatit had a very strong performer in Niels Thomsen, whose 2773 votes represented 48.5% of all those cast for the party. The second and third top vote winners (then-leader Nivi Olsen and Randi Vestergaard Evaldsen) contributed an impressive 25.4% of Demokraatit's votes, while 9.5% of the votes were non-personalised party votes, the second highest figure, after that of Samarbejdspartiet. What this means though is that just 16.6% of Demokraatit's votes came from the party's numerous less popular candidates, the lowest proportion for any of the established parties.

64.4% of all votes for Partii Naleraq came from party leader and former Siumut prime minister Hans Enoksen's 2531 personal votes, a performance so dominating that the second and third top vote winners (Pele Broberg and Henrik Fleischer) contributed just 8.9% to the total.

The distribution of Atassut's votes is unusual for several reasons. Then-party Siverth K. Heilmann contributed just 25% of the party's votes, a lower proportion than that of any other party's top vote winner. Perhaps as a result, the second and third top vote winners (Aqqaluk Jerimiassen and Bentiarq Ottosen) provide 34.6% of the party's vote. It is noteworthy that

7.1% of Atassut's votes came in the form of non-personalised party votes, the highest figure for any party associated with small towns and settlements.

Possibly the most striking results are those of Samarbejdspartiet, which received 1193 total votes. Tillie Martinussen's 480 personal votes accounted for 40.2%. Then-party leader Michael Rosing received 321 personal votes, and Looqi Sigurdsen received 82. All other candidates combined received 44 votes (3.7%). Samarbejdspartiet truly stands out for its 266 (22.3%) non-personalised party votes, a far higher proportion than for any other party. This suggests that the party, which is most popular in Nuuk and anecdotally most popular with ethnic Danes and non-Greenlandic speakers, may attract high proportions of low-information voters who struggle to follow the political debate and/or individuals who sit outside the networks of sociality within which much Greenlandic political activity occurs. This may also explain the relatively high proportion of personal votes in Demokraatit's total: within Avannaata Municipality, where Demokraatit benefited from Niels Thomsen's special local appeal, 4.9% of the party's votes were non-personalised, but in Nuuk, which has far and away the highest proportion of Danish and non-Greenlandic speaking residents, 12.5% of Demokraatit's votes were non-personalised.

Party leader Vittus Qujaukitsoq provided 69.7% of Nunatta Qitornai's total. Hopes that former prime minister Aleqa Hammond past immense popularity for Siumut would carry over into a wave of personal votes for Nunatta Qitornai failed to come to fruition, and she received just 171 votes, though this was far more than the 18 votes received by the third top vote winner Anders Benjaminsen. Ultimately, a mere 4.8% of the party's votes came from less-popular candidates.

All this goes to show that personal votes are not simply interchangeable with party votes. Certainly, Demokraatit seems to have struggled as a party following the successive departures from politics of its star politicians (Nivi Olsen, Niels Thomsen, and Randi Vestergaard Evaldsen) (Lindstrøm, 2020a)—and the seeming dependence of the party of this personalised power perhaps also helps explain why the party's star politicians felt under such personalised pressure to perform. However, Siumut won the highest number of votes in the election despite a lacklustre performance by its party leader and indeed by its second and third top vote winners. Siumut's association with small towns and settlements could help explain its ability to collect votes targeted at particular local candidates in particular locations, but Partii Naleraq, Atassut, and Nunatta Qitornai are also associated with small towns and settlements yet display diverse distributions of votes among candidates.

Greenlandic politics is often said to be highly personalised, and this is no doubt true, but with a total of 233 candidates receiving votes in the 2018 election, it is not simply a case of voters casting ballots for people they know. Every voter will have personal relationships with multiple candidates from multiple parties, and it is not uncommon for close friends and family members to be candidates for or affiliated with different parties. This creates space for ideological priorities to flourish and may mitigate against certain kinds of political tribalism that are seen in many other SNIJs and small island states.

### **Stability in diversity**

Greenland possesses a complex political system. New parties arise on a regular basis, usually as splinters from existing parties, typically linked to specific policy disagreements. Such parties

are often short lived, suffering either electoral failure or being absorbed into larger parties. New parties, such as Demokraatit and potentially Partii Naleraq, nevertheless do sometimes manage to establish themselves as a lasting part of the political ecosystem.

Politicians also frequently switch parties ('ship-jumping'), even while they are currently in office, a practice that scholars studying other island communities have identified as problematic (Phillip-Durham, 2020). Ship-jumping could point to a strongly personalised political systems and weak party ideological foundations, but it is important to note that the practice is also common within Denmark's own similarly strongly multiparty political system. The nationwide proportional representation electoral system allows a wide range of perspectives to be included in Inatsisartut and ensures that even the residents of small settlements have their voices heard since such settlements might not count for many votes individually but add up to around 12.2% (6879 residents) of Greenland's total population (Grønlands Statistik, 2020, p. 37). The high degree of representativeness may encourage ship-jumping inasmuch as it allows electorally credible parties to be established in order to fill relatively narrow niches in the political ecosystem. It is noteworthy that, as in Denmark, ship-jumping is most common from established large parties to small parties or, in the event of internal disputes, from new small parties back to larger parties; that is, movement from one large party to another or from one small party to another is uncommon. Although the new parties established by ship-jumpers are not always wildly successful (for example, Samarbejdspartiet clearly hoped for a significantly better election in 2018 than it achieved with its 4.1% vote share and single seat in Inatsisartut), individual politicians do not seem to be punished for moving from established large parties to new small parties: former Siumut prime minister Hans Enoksen increased his number of personal votes by 289% between the 2013 and 2014 Inatsisartut elections upon switching to his new Partii Naleraq; Vittus Qujaukitsoq's vote total rose by 702% between 2014 under Siumut and 2018 under his new Nunatta Qitornai, and Tillie Martinussen's and Michael Rosing's vote totals rose by 674% and 215% respectively between 2014 under Demokraatit and 2018 under their new Samarbejdspartiet. At the same time though, individuals who are perceived as shifting political allegiance on personal rather than ideological grounds may be given short shrift by the electorate: Aleqa Hammond's candidature for Nunatta Qitornai in 2018, following her expulsion from Siumut, was catastrophic, with Hammond's vote share declining by 97.5% in 2018 relative to 2013.

Veenendaal (2016) has shown that ideology is often less significant than personal factors in small island politics. Our study of Greenlandic politics certainly confirms the importance of personal factors (e.g. connection to locality, star power, party leader status, ethnic identifications), but ideology is not necessarily less important as a consequence. The left-right divisions commonly applied to political systems does not seem to be the critical cleavage in Greenland: perhaps as a consequence of the two largest parties, Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit both self-identifying as being located on the left of the political spectrum, governing coalitions almost inevitably connect the nominal right and left. However, each of the seven parties currently represented in Inatsisartut possesses what is at least in theory an identifiable piece of ideological territory, even if parts of this territory may be contested by multiple parties. Particularly influential politicians may pull their parties in new directions, but this is hardly something that only occurs in small island states and territories. Demokraatit's difficulty retaining its political stars and its failure to capitalise on its 2018 electoral success may point

to the limits to personalised star power when seeking to navigate a somewhat internally contradictory party ideological positioning: in the 2018 elections, the lion's share of Demokraatit's votes came from metropolitan Nuuk, yet the party's proportionally strongest support was linked to Niels Thomsen in Ilulissat, contributing to tensions between centralising and decentralising impulses. Although voters are willing to follow individual politicians to new parties with new ideological positions, ideology may be the most significant factor in political affiliation. Five of the seven parties currently represented in Inatsisartut (Siumut, Inuit Ataqatigiit, Demokraatit, Atassut, and Samarbejdspartiet) have switched leaders since the 2018 elections, but only in the case of the tumult within Demokraatit has change in leadership *per se* been regarded as a critical problem.

Bearing in mind the large number of parties and the nationwide proportional representation electoral system, it is remarkable that Siumut has managed to dominate Greenlandic politics for all but a few years since the start of Home Rule in 1979. This is in part attributable to Siumut being a 'big tent' party that is well placed to form the centre of coalitions while also withstanding periodic splits. It is also important that Siumut is in some respects seen as the natural party of government. Beyond this, however, it is vital to recognise that, even though Siumut is not receiving spectacularly larger number of votes than its closest competitors (at present, Inuit Ataqatigiit and Demokraatit) and often trails behind Inuit Ataqatigiit in opinion polls, it is the closest that Greenland has to a party that transcends geographical divides: in the 2018 elections to Inatsisartut, Siumut was the only party to achieve over 20% vote share in all five municipalities. Furthermore, as noted above, Siumut seems especially skilled at recruiting talented young graduates. All this adds up to a peculiar Siumut strength at co-opting individuals and interests from various other parties and various groups across society.

The churn of support parties and continual reorganisations of governing coalitions between elections might at first glance indicate instability, but it is also indicative of the Naalakkersuisut's ability to accumulate knowledge and experience as well as draw upon skills from different sources over time. When nearly all parties have the opportunity to participate in government at one point or another, even if it is nearly always under a Siumut prime minister, then we are dealing with a system in which many voices have a chance to be heard and to have influence. Even the recent period of dissatisfaction with Siumut's perceived top-down leadership under Kim Kielsen ended in a return to consensus building, as open political manoeuvring within Siumut frequently involved and drew strength from interventions by politicians from other parties. Siumut is clearly a party of its own, and its political machine seeks to compete with Greenland's other parties. As a 'big tent' party with wings representing all parts of the political spectrum though, Siumut has also come to serve as a forum for wider ideological debates. In a sense, Siumut's relatively steady presence at the top of the Greenlandic political ecosystem offers a space in which the other smaller—or sometimes simply less 'central'—parties can engage in political contestation without fundamentally destabilising or disrupting the overarching governmental system. Whether this form of stability is seen as positive or negative depends on one's own perspectives.

Throughout this paper, occasional mention has been made of political scandals. Indeed, popular media and public opinion, especially in Denmark but also in Greenland, regards Greenlandic politics as rife with scandal and corruption. This discourse of scandal must, however, be seen in context. The scandals in question—variously involving alleged misuse of

public expenses, misuse of party expenses, sexual harassment, conflicts of interest, *etc.*—are of varying degrees of seriousness, but they are not necessarily more frequent or more scandalous than similar occurrences in Denmark. It may be that relatively small problems appear larger when seen in the context of small political environments, and in some cases politicians in Greenland seem to be held to higher standards than are politicians in Denmark.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have analysed Greenland's electoral system and party politics. Greenland's small population spread across many dozens of towns and settlements and this population's combination of extreme self-sufficiency outside the market and extreme dependence on state support contributes to a diversity of outlooks and interests. Meanwhile, Greenland's electoral system, derived from that of Denmark, is exceptionally proportional, with elections to Inatsisartut, the national parliament, in particular presenting opportunities for the representation of a wide range of perspectives.

There are currently seven parties represented in Inatsisartut, each with identifiable, if adaptable, ideological positions. Nevertheless, Naalakkersuisut, the national government, has since the advent of Greenlandic democracy in 1979 largely been dominated by one party, Siumut, which has built coalitions and cultivated support with parties from across the political spectrum. This political spectrum is often discussed in terms of left-right orientations, but as we have seen, the critical cleavages have more to do with differing perceptions of centre/periphery and national/local interests as well as ethnic and linguistic (and associated educational and occupational) divides.

Our focused exploration of the 24 April 2018 elections to Inatsisartut show that personal factors and local connections are extremely important in electoral politics, yet there is little evidence that personality trumps ideology. When satisfaction with prime minister Kim Kielsen declined, Siumut voters at the 2018 election did not switch to another party or even vote for Siumut's party list; they instead distributed their personal votes among a greater number of down-list candidates. Similarly, Demokraatit's association with individual political stars has not contributed to much stability or lasting success for the party. Siumut's ability to hold onto power risks concealing the considerable diversity of political perspectives that end up getting a seat at the table when it comes to the SNIJ's governance.

Veenendaal (2020a, pp. 33-34), drawing upon knowledge of a range of small island territories around the world, suggests that "a consequence of increased social intimacy and the absence of strong ideological divisions that result from higher levels of attitudinal homogeneity, politics in small islands largely focuses on personalities and personal relationships." The present study offers only limited support for this argument, at least as regards Greenland. Ideological considerations seem crucial in terms of the distribution of votes among parties, though personal considerations may matter most when it comes to the distribution of votes within parties—which does of course influence the direction and tone of politics in the long run. Furthermore, the multiparty system's encouraging of coalition governments, which can within a short period of years, at one time or another, include nearly all parties in Inatsisartut, places limitations on tribalism. As the two largest parties, Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit may often be at loggerheads, but they are also sometimes in coalition, and both collaborate with other parties across the political spectrum.

Tempting though it may be for researchers to treat Greenland as a monolithic political unit and focus on Naalakkersuisut's headline policies (whether these be pressure for political independence, plans to privatise Royal Greenland, or airport construction projects), Greenlandic politics can only truly be understood when electoral and party dynamics are considered as well. Such dynamics must furthermore be considered within the Greenlandic context, given that left-right categorisations drawn from Western liberal democracies often seem a poor fit for Greenlandic parties. This finding supports previous research that challenges the straightforward application of large-state political understandings to small island contexts.

Further research is needed to more fully understand the workings of Greenlandic politics. Significantly, additional research is needed concerning the roles of SOEs, major private businesses, and party organisations in Greenland's political processes. The present paper can at most represent a starting point for analysing Greenland's political system.

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