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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Secessionism in Nevis: Why Have Tensions Eased?

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Existing studies of secessionism focus predominantly on why these movements gain momentum and persist. A subset of work focuses on why secessionist tensions cease. We contribute to these latter studies by adapting the main theories developed to explain why secessionist agitation occurs, to account for abatement. We focus specifically on the island of Nevis in St Kitts and Nevis, a country that should be a "least likely" case for secession, given its small population, territory, and economy, yet has experienced secessionist agitation for much of the second half of the 20th century. Since the late 1990s, momentum for secession has subsided. We explain why by reference to rationalist, culturalist and institutionalist arguments. We use an in-depth case study method, drawing on a range of sources, that foregrounds equifinality and concatenation across more than a century of inter-island politics. The findings suggest that all three types of arguments have some explanatory value but each fall short of fully accounting for the ebb and flow of secessionist dynamics. The findings may be of particular interest to multi-island states and territories in the Caribbean. They also offer practical lessons about the importance of policies that promote sectoral integration, encourage sociological linkages, and provide scope for dynamic political settlements.

Introduction

The fragmentation of the state has been a key concern of political actors and social scientists throughout the post-Second World War period. The long-standing fear is that downsizing will generate instability, especially for large states, and lead to the creation of numerous unviable micro jurisdictions (e.g. Vital, 1971). This can explain why the UN Committee on Decolonisation opposed splitting newly independent nations and why existing states tend to club together to deny recognition to secessionist movements (Coggins, 2014). Following this imperative, much of the literature is devoted to explaining why these movements arise, and the

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conditions under which they succeed and fail. Comparatively less attention is paid to why secessionist tensions ease, even though arguably this is a more salient question for unionists in particular (Crepaz, 2016).

This article contributes to the small number of studies about why secessionist tensions abate. The country we consider—consisting of the two islands of St Kitts and Nevis, population 53,000—should be a 'least likely' case (Eckstein, 1975) for secession due to its small population size, territory and economy, the combination of which should theoretically motivate unity to increase economies of scale. And yet secessionist tensions were the prime feature of the country's politics for much of the 20th Century, with a third island, Anguilla, breaking away from St Kitts and Nevis between 1967 and 1971 at the start of the pre-independence phase of associated statehood. In the consultations leading up to independence, Nevis representatives negotiated a secession clause for the island of Nevis which was enshrined in the 1983 federal constitution. The clause was invoked in 1998, leading to a referendum which fell only a few hundred votes short of the required two-thirds majority required for Nevis (population now 11,000) to become independent. Several studies have sought to explain the persistence of this unlikely secessionism (see, e.g. J. Byron, 1999; Midgett, 2004, 2005; Premdas, 1998). They highlight that existing theory does not adequately account for the parochialism of small island politics, the limited political experience of territories recently independent or on the brink of attaining independence, and, of course, the weight of history and island exceptionalism. Since 1998, however, secession has fallen down the agenda. We seek to investigate and explain this abatement trend.

To do so, we adapt theories that explain the formation and persistence of secessionist movements—rationalist, culturalist and institutionalist—to account also for abatement (for review, see Hale, 2008; Lecours, 2021; Lluch, 2014; Siroky & Cuffe, 2015). The research consisted of extensive content analysis of archival and secondary materials over several decades. We find that all three explanations have some empirical purchase. Rationalist explanations foreground economic issues and changes in the two islands. Culturalist explanations highlight sociological shifts, which foreground the way 'islandness', while remaining central to the way politics is conducted, is no longer so strongly embraced that separation tops the political agenda on Nevis. Institutionalist explanations underscore the importance of a dynamic, inclusionary political settlement for continued unity. Cutting across all three explanations is the importance of migration and mobility. On the one hand, sections of the Nevis diaspora fiercely keep alive separate island identities and suspicions. On the other, contemporary residents of Nevis participate in constant daily movement and exchange between the two islands, resulting in more societal integration than ever before.

These findings offer two general lessons from the St Kitts and Nevis case, both for the wider Caribbean but also other multi-island states. The first is that we contribute to the literature on why secessionist tensions ease by

showing that the explanations for why such movements arise—rationalist, culturalist and institutionalist—can be repurposed to explain why they may decline. The second is that our analysis highlights the merits of an in-depth case study-based qualitative method vis-a-vis statistical analysis that seeks to isolate specific causal mechanisms. Our approach instead foregrounds equifinality and concatenation across more than a century of inter-island politics. We therefore support those who argue for the value of descriptive analysis (e.g. Gerring, 2012).

To substantiate these claims, the article is structured as follows. The following literature review is spread over two sections. We first discuss the literature on secession, highlighting both theoretical explanations and regional studies. We continue by providing background on the case of Nevis within the Federation of St Kitts and Nevis. The third section briefly outlines the data we draw on and our approach to analysis. The bulk of the article considers the plausibility of successive explanations—rationalist, culturalist and institutionalist. The conclusion returns to the main themes and considers lessons for both scholars and policymakers.

Explaining Why Secessionist Movements Rise and Fall

Secession is defined as "the voluntary withdrawal of a political territory from a larger one in which it was previously incorporated" (Bauböck, 2019, p. 227). It is a topic that continues to preoccupy political scientists because it seems to contradict the rationalist assumption that states act like firms engaged in competitive selection, with smaller units merging to benefit from economies of scale (Alesina & Spolaore, 2005). This view is premised on claims that larger states are advantaged by being better able to protect themselves from external threats. They also benefit from larger domestic markets that stabilize economic growth and they generate increased tax revenue that bolsters administrative capacity. The imperative to upsize should be especially pertinent for very small islands because in addition to diseconomies of scale, island geography is said to increase isolation and remoteness (Alesina & Spolaore, 2005). According to rationalist theories, small island states, of which St Kitts and Nevis is an emblematic example, are 'least likely' cases (Eckstein, 1975) for secession.

By and large the literature on secession is designed to explain why, in the face of rationalist imperatives that favour large size, fragmentation remains relatively common. The post-Second World War period has been defined by an increase in the number of states and a corresponding fall in their average size, despite growth in total world population (Lake & O'Mahony, 2004). The United Nations had 51 members in 1945. Today, it has 193. Decolonisation and the break-up of the Soviet Union are key catalysts for this trend. But fragmentation persists in both old and new states regardless of levels of economic growth (Griffiths, 2016).

There are three dominant explanations for this trend (for review, see Hale, 2008; Lecours, 2021; Lluch, 2014; Siroky & Cuffe, 2015). The first revises the above rationalist assumptions by emphasising how economic incentives

can favour secessionism in some cases. These might refer to resource rich provinces, for example, Katanga in the Congo or Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. But this argument could be adapted to include other small states because a permissive liberal order that protects sovereign equality and neutralises the threat of military conquest also reduces the costs of statehood by ensuring survival despite limited military or economic strength (Coggins, 2014). The second is a culturalist account that emphasises social identity, including language, ethnicity, and religion. This account often turns on a 'head versus heart' dilemma in which actors pursue 'non-rational' values like freedom and dignity for their community irrespective of economic costs (Grydehøj, 2020; Veenendaal & Oostindie, 2018). What makes small islands in the Caribbean significant cases for this explanation is that most do not have the types of stark linguistic, ethnic, or religious cleavages that mainstream theory predicts would motivate secession. The third is a capability or institutionalist account that emphasises the ways in which context constrains individual decision-making. Here again, however, it might be assumed that the key context—small 'islandness'—should promote integration rather than fragmentation.

Most studies seek to explain why secessionist movements arise, succeed, or fail. There is less discussion on why these tensions ease. But we can adapt the above three explanations for this purpose. Rationalist accounts presume that the 'head' will prevail over the 'heart' and so when secession eases the assumption is that a cost-benefit calculation has prevailed (e.g. Bartkus, 1999). Culturalist accounts increasingly favour social constructivism (see Ozkirimli, 2017) and in this view identity is malleable and subject to change. By implication, from this perspective we might expect that if secessionist agitation eases this means that identities have shifted or are less strongly held. Institutionalists have paid the most attention to why secessionist agitation fades because they are most interested in the interaction between rules and agents. Lecours (2021), for example, distinguishes between 'static' and 'dynamic' autonomy, with the latter more likely to ameliorate secession than the former because the political settlement can be adjusted as circumstances change. The key point, from this perspective, is that political settlements are complex. They incorporate unique combinations of incentives and identities that are embedded within geographic and institutional contexts. If the existing systems provide room to manoeuvre, actors will continue to negotiate. But if the prospect of increased autonomy is denied altogether, political opposition will harden.

Secession in the Caribbean

The literature on secession in the Caribbean generally and St Kitts and Nevis specifically provides empirical support to each of these theories (see Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012; Bishop et al., 2022; J. Byron, 1999; Clegg, 2012). In line with rationalist assumptions, a federation was favoured as the best institutional arrangement for decolonisation of the Commonwealth Caribbean on the grounds that it would enable a region of small islands to

benefit from economies of scale. But after only four years (1958-1962) the Federation dissolved, with the largest states (Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, followed later by Barbados) leaving. Explanations for this failure abound, some of which adapt rationalist arguments—the larger states did not want to be burdened by the poorer and smaller and Britain was not prepared to provide the subsidies to make the arrangement work—while others argue that distinct island identities ultimately proved too strong (Mawby, 2012; Mordecai, 1968; Payne, 2008).

The latter argument can help explain why the spectre of separatism continues to stalk the region. Anguilla rebelled against the rule of St Kitts and Nevis in 1967 and ultimately opted to remain British (Clarke, 1971; Phillips, 2002). A short-lived rebellion on Union Island in the Grenadines was quashed in 1980 (Campbell, 1980). Barbudans continue to chafe at their appendage to Antigua (Corbett, 2020; Lowenthal & Clarke, 1981). They negotiated their own island council at independence, and won further devolution, especially as it relates to land, in 2006, but these powers are currently being reversed. Tobago has negotiated increased autonomy from Trinidad since independence in 1962 (Dumas, 2012; Luke, 2007; Ryan, 1985).

The potential for fragmentation in the Caribbean does not mean that the 'heart' unequivocally wins out over the 'head' due to the strength of island identities. Anguilla separated from St Kitts and Nevis, ultimately opting to remain British and leverage the advantages of non-sovereignty. This included security protection, the potential to access financial budgetary support during emergencies, freedom of movement to the UK and formerly to EU territories including those in the Caribbean (now compromised by Brexit). Anguilla was also able to become an Associate Member and beneficiary of the functional cooperation provided by the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and by CARICOM. Within the OECS, Anguilla has access to a common currency and a sub-regional judiciary but has thus far chosen not to ratify the Revised Treaty of Basseterre and the Economic Union Protocol which would enable reciprocal market access and freedom of movement, work and residence possibilities for its people across the OECS (J. Byron & Lewis, 2018; P. Lewis, 2002).

The point is that secessionists in the Eastern Caribbean usually seek to balance the 'head' versus 'heart' dilemma by pursuing forms of political autonomy that are rendered viable by functional integration, either with a larger state or groupings of neighbouring small islands (Payne, 2008). Interestingly, the presence of a multi-level alternative to the unitary state can encourage fragmentation. This has been more prevalent in the non-sovereign French and Dutch Caribbean territories of Saint Martin/Sint Maarten, Saint Barthelemy and Bonaire (for further discussion see Bishop et al., 2022).

The Rise of Secessionism on Nevis

The political history of St Kitts and Nevis, both pre and post decolonisation, is emblematic of these broader Caribbean trends. The two islands were governed separately for much of the colonial period. In 1882 Nevis was joined with St Kitts and Anguilla (these latter two islands were governed together from 1825) in one administrative unit under the auspices of the Federation of the Leeward Islands, the capital of which was St Johns, Antigua. Administrative efficiency was the main reason for the merger. In the early colonial period Nevis—famed as the 'Queen of the Caribees'—had been one of the wealthiest islands in the region. Through the 17th and 18th centuries it fell on hard times due to a combination of earthquake, hurricanes, war and disease, sugar production dwindled, and its economy fell behind that of St Kitts. This ultimately led colonial officials to append the smaller and poorer to the larger (Olwig, 1993). Nevisians were never happy with this merger, believing it contributed to further economic decline, and they repeatedly lobbied for their autonomy—and legislature—to be reinstated.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the prospect of decolonisation added impetus to debates about the island of Nevis' status vis-à-vis the island of St Kitts. As outlined, the initial model for independence of the Commonwealth Caribbean was as a federation first mooted in 1947 and brought into being in 1958. This project collapsed in 1962 when first Jamaica and then Trinidad seceded to become independent. Barbados followed in 1966. This left the islands of the Eastern Caribbean in limbo (W. A. Lewis, 1965). Both the British government and many among the local elite considered them too small for complete independence. The alternative, modelled on an arrangement designed by New Zealand for the Cook Islands and accepted by the United Nations Committee on Decolonisation, was a form of 'free association' in which the islands were granted internal self-government, but Britain retained control of external affairs and defence (Gilmore, 1978). In anticipation of this arrangement, a constitutional conference for St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla was held in 1966 at which both Anguilla and Nevis pushed for greater autonomy. For the Eastern Caribbean territories as a whole, Associated Statehood became an intermediate stage of autonomy while their political and administrative leadership, as well as regional academics, continued to envisage the eventual goal of unitary statehood buttressed by regional and sub-regional integration/cooperation arrangements (V. Lewis, 1993).

Both St Kitts and Nevis saw themselves as neglected, economically underdeveloped and politically marginalised. Essential government services were based in St Kitts and most infrastructure spending was centred on that island. Migration was the main means by which Anguillians and Nevisians were able to make economic advances for themselves and their families. But migration also heightened awareness of the disparity in living conditions between Anguilla, Nevis and other wealthier parts of the Caribbean. This

situation was widely blamed on the Premier of St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla, Robert Bradshaw, and his autocratic leadership style. Bradshaw was a former sugar factory worker, trade union leader and West Indies Federation cabinet minister who led the St Kitts and Nevis Labour Party (SKNLP), then the dominant force in the colony's politics. The dominance of Bradshaw and the SKNLP became a fulcrum for secessionist agitation.

When Associated Statehood came into being in 1967, Anguilla rebelled and became a de facto state between 1967-69, before returning to British rule and eventually becoming what is now called a UK Overseas Territory, in 1980 (Mitchell, 2007). Secessionist discussions and occasional agitation on the island of Nevis took place throughout the 1960s. For example, in 1961 a large crowd assembled at Grove Park, Charlestown, the capital of Nevis, to demonstrate against being forced into the union with the island of St Kitts (Archibald, 2010, pp. 38–39). At the first constitutional conference for St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla in 1966, Eugene Walwyn, a Nevisian politician, was expected to carry a secessionist message. Instead, he had a change of heart and signed on to the UK's plan for a three-island associated state (Midgett, 2004, p. 52). After elections in 1966, in which Walwyn narrowly regained his seat, he was appointed as the first Attorney General of St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla. Nevisian voters would react by replacing him with a candidate from the newly formed pro-secession Nevis Reformation Party (NRP) at the next election in 1971 (see Midgett, 2004).

The secessionist movement was further galvanised by tragedy. The two islands were linked by an ageing, poorly maintained and often over-crowded ferry—the M.V. Christena—which sank in August 1970. At least 240 passengers perished, the vast majority being from Nevis (Browne, 1985). Nevisians blamed Bradshaw who held the ministerial portfolio for Transport and Communications in addition to being Chief Minister, for the disaster and general neglect of their island. In response, they formed the NRP, led by Simeon Daniel, a lawyer whose policy platform at that time is remembered for one line: "Secession at all costs" (see Archibald, 2010). But despite considerable support for secession by the Nevis population during this period, as evidenced by the newly formed NRP winning a seat in the 1971 elections, Bradshaw, the British government, and the international community remained opposed to any further fragmentation of already small island territories. Indeed, Bradshaw insisted throughout the 1970s that Anguilla remained part of the unitary state, long after the UK and the rest of the world had effectively accepted its secession. Britain for its part refused to consider any movement by the government based on the island of St Kitts to proceed to full independence until the relationship between the three islands was resolved.

Bradshaw's death in 1978 broke this impasse. His successor, Lee Moore, was willing to acknowledge that Anguilla had seceded and would remain part of Britain, thereby removing the first obstacle to independence. In the 1980 election, the SKNLP won 58 percent of the vote, but the People's Action

Movement (PAM) emerged with enough seats to break their stranglehold on the St Kitts constituencies and the party formed a coalition government with the NRP (Political Database of the Americas, 2000a). The latter received two key ministries: finance and public works. Despite having campaigned against independence in 1980, the PAM leader and new Chief Minister, Kennedy Simmonds, took the opportunity provided by the coalition to push forward with the final phase of decolonisation in 1982 (Simmonds, 2019, ch. 74-76). The independent state of St Kitts and Nevis came into being in September 1983. Crucially, however, in a concession to Nevis, independent statehood was achieved via the negotiation of a federal constitution in which Nevis was granted its own legislature, administration, and control over key policy areas, as well as a clause (Section 113) that guaranteed their right to secede should such a proposal receive two-thirds majority support in a referendum (*The Saint Christopher and Nevis Constitution*, 1983).

With Nevis at the heart of the national government, and a federal constitution with the escape clause of a referendum, momentum for secession eased during the 1980s. This was helped by the fact that the now autonomous Nevis economy experienced a boom generated by growth in tourism and a nascent financial services sector. Some instability in the coalition emerged after PAM won an outright majority on the island of St Kitts in the general election of June 21, 1984 (Political Database of the Americas, 2000b). On Nevis, the NRP's dominance was challenged in the late 1980s by the rise of the newly formed Concerned Citizens Movement (CCM), while by the 1993 national election, PAM was in trouble. The drugs trade had infiltrated St Kitts, and there was evidence of involvement of family members of some public officials. Violent crime and public security became a major issue. The St Kitts economy was also in trouble as it struggled to diversify away from a collapsing sugar industry. The 8 parliamentary seats on St Kitts were split between SKNLP and PAM. On Nevis the three parliamentary seats were shared with CCM winning two and NRP just one. The CCM decided to remain neutral, and the former NRP/PAM coalition cobbled together a minority government. However, the ensuing two years witnessed ongoing instability. In November 1994, the Barbados/OECS Regional Security System forces were deployed on the island of St Kitts, in response to a prison riot. The events of 1995 that led to an early general election included protests by the SKNLP over the failure to hold fresh elections after the tied results of 1993 and the ensuing imposition of a State of Emergency by the caretaker government (see J. Byron, 1997 for discussion).

The 1995 election saw the return of a SKNLP federal government after 15 years (Political Database of the Americas, 2000a). Two initial policy decisions reignited secessionist agitation. The first was the establishment of a federal office on Nevis. The SKNLP saw the office as a means of further integrating the two islands (Douglas, 2009, pp. 252–259). But in Nevis, it was perceived as an attempt to undermine the Nevis Island Administration (NIA). The

second was a bid to centralise the management of the financial services sector, pioneered by Nevis, in St Kitts. The SKNLP claimed that they were forced down this path by international regulations (Douglas, 2009, pp. 274–284). Nevisians saw it as an attempt by Kittitians and their old enemy the SKNLP to undermine their newly won economic strength. In this context, Premier Vance Amory, widely considered a reluctant secessionist, felt compelled to trigger Section 113 of the constitution. A referendum was held in 1998, with secession tipped to prevail (an unofficial vote in 1977 had passed by a massive margin). But turnout was low (57 per cent) and the movement ultimately fell a few hundred votes short of the required two thirds majority despite Nevisian-born residents of St Kitts being excluded. Explanations for the failure to achieve the two-thirds majority include the deep economic and familial connections between the islands, international opposition and rivalry between the NRP and CCM, with much of the anti-secession vote concentrated among supporters of the former. In addition, there was the failure of CCM to provide a clear scenario for ongoing relations between the islands, including international transport, the EEZ and border questions, citizenship rights, and access to goods and services (see J. Byron, 1999; Midgett, 2005). All such questions aroused a quiet but deep-seated anxiety.

These events leading up to and including the 1998 referendum have been heavily theorised. A rational actor model can explain key aspects of this story, with Veenendaal (2013), for example, highlighting that the 1980 coalition and the subsequent constitution literally emerged out of bargains struck among the three key players: PAM, NRP and the British government. More generally, secessionist agitation has increased when economic times have been tough or the livelihood of Nevisians has been threatened by policies that appear to favour the island of St Kitts. By contrast, the period of economic growth in the 1980s and early 1990s saw secession fall down the agenda. Explanations that revolve around identity have considerable empirical purchase, too. Premdas (1998) highlights that a key part of the secessionist narrative on Nevis is the loss of past autonomy. The restoration of that autonomy in 1983 and the perceived threat to it in the mid-1990s can explain the fluctuating momentum in favour of secession, just as strong island identities can explain the continued support for the 1983 constitution despite mooted reforms in the late 1990s. Finally, the context in which this has taken place is important. Small island geography influenced the merger of the two islands in 1882 and ongoing opposition to fragmentation emanating from the UK government, in particular, forced NRP leadership to back away from outright secession a century later. The historical juncture of decolonisation nevertheless provided an opportunity to restructure the institutional instruments that govern the islands, including the adoption of a federal constitution with a secession clause (e.g. J. Byron, 1999). This institutional structure enabled the 1998 referendum to occur even while

concerns about the risks associated with Nevis becoming an independent state of roughly 10,000 people was a factor for many of those who voted against or who opted not to vote at all (J. Byron, 1999).

Data and Methods

The key contribution of this article is to update the analysis and to investigate why secessionist agitation has eased since 1998. We draw on two primary forms of data: 1) publicly available sources, including newspapers and government documents; and 2) around 20 primary interviews conducted in 2021 with politicians and other politically significant persons. The publicly available material is extensive and is used selectively. The interviews were conducted by the first author who gave a commitment to participants that they would be de-identified. The second author is a long-time observer of St Kitts and Nevis politics and thus our analysis also draws on countless informal conversations with key actors. The most accurate way to describe our method is that our themes have been developed via deep immersion. Our description is a synthesis of this material and thus our findings do not rest on a particular interview or document but rather reflect the patterns observed across multiple forms of data over a sustained period. For this and other reasons related to de-identification we do not attribute claims to particular interviews. Key documents are cited where relevant.

Following the conventional logic of a single case study, the analysis is exploratory and open-ended. We seek to assess how plausible each of the main explanatory theories is for this case. Our account is thus predominantly descriptive, with our emphasis on the context in which secessionism occurs (see Burgess, 2012). Such work is increasingly derided in political science by those who favour a mechanistic form of causal analysis. By contrast, we follow the logic of area studies and Gerring's (2012) claim that the task of description is important in its own right and should not be relegated to the role of handmaiden to causal theorising. In doing so we provide a more holistic account that foregrounds equifinality and concatenation across more than a century of inter-island politics. Our claim that each of the three mainstream theories has empirical purchase when seeking to explain this case, but that no single one can fully answer our question, is a key contribution of the analysis.

Explaining the Abatement of Secessionism Post-1998

Rationalist Explanations

A key explanation for the ongoing tensions between the two islands relates to their economic development trajectories. Nevis was once the 'Queen of the Caribbees' but since then, the island experienced periods of marked economic decline and persistent underdevelopment. In the late colonial period, Nevisians blamed their fortunes on Bradshaw's leadership and his tendency to concentrate services and infrastructure development on St Kitts. Bradshaw's defenders argue that this perception is unfair (see e.g. Browne, 1992; Inniss,

1983) and Kittitians were themselves a neglected and underdeveloped community. In this view, the British colonial government is largely to blame for the situation on Nevis due to its failure to provide adequate resources for the development of its colonies. In either case, the key point is that secessionist tensions have been heightened in the past by economic disparities between the islands and, during the 1990s, magnified by the threat that developmental gains might be undone. From this perspective, the settlement that produced the 1983 constitution is a bargain in which the interests of the three major parties—PAM, NRP and the British Government—were balanced and a compromise negotiated (Veenendaal, 2013).

Underneath the cut and thrust of political debates about the economy, however, a deeper set of rationalist forces are at play that can help us understand why secessionist tensions have abated over the last two decades. The disparity between the economies of St Kitts and Nevis is as much to do with sector specialisation as infrastructure investment. The island of St Kitts remained a plantation economy during and after the colonial period whereas sugar production began to decline on Nevis during the 19th century and ended completely by the 1960s. Over the years it had been replaced by a metairie—crop sharing—system in which land was leased to or purchased by small holders who in turn cultivated cotton and other agricultural produce (Besson & Momsen, 2007; Hall, 1971). The upshot is that by the time the SKNLP came to power Nevisians may have had limited access to waged labour, but they had access to land, whereas many Kittitians were wage earners but most of the land belonged to the sugar estates or was owned by the state. This influenced the culture of the two islands—discussed below—and it also shaped their development trajectories.

In the 1980s, politicians in Nevis used their newly won political autonomy and the key government ministries they had negotiated at the start of the PAM-NRP coalition to pursue two key development strategies: tourism and offshore finance (Phillips, 1999). Both were successful. On the back of this, the Nevis economy grew. By contrast, the St Kitts economy remained wedded to sugar until 2005, the production of which received preferential access and guaranteed prices in the EU market under the Lomé Conventions' Sugar Protocol. The establishment of the WTO trade regime in 1994 eventually led to the loss of such concessions between 2005 and 2009. When sugar production became increasingly unsustainable in the early 2000s, the St Kitts economy pivoted towards the economic sectors that had been so successful on Nevis: tourism and financial services. These sectors had not been hitherto absent on St Kitts but now they came to dominate the economy on the larger island also (Douglas, 2009, pp. 76–124).

As a consequence, the economic fortunes of the two islands are more integrated than before. Tourism operators work across both islands to maximize activities and experiences for their clients, and in general, both public and private sector employees and the general public have adjusted to living, working, delivering and accessing goods and services across the two

islands. When cruise ships dock in Basseterre or in Nevis, the passengers have the opportunity to visit attractions on either island. Likewise, tourists staying on St Kitts may take day trips to Nevis and visit the attractions there, while those staying on Nevis visit the attractions in St Kitts. People on either island can take a water taxi to dine at a restaurant or attend events on the other island, and return home the same day. Wholesalers, car rental firms, building contractors and architects, technicians, health and wellness professionals, and entertainers service clients on both islands. Moreover, the higher wages available in a services-based economy have encouraged demand for domestic tourism, with Kittitians in particular taking day trips or weekend holidays in Nevis. The upshot is that where once the islands operated parallel economies, they are now increasingly intertwined.

Reliance on tourism and financial services also has downsides—both sectors are highly vulnerable not only to natural disasters, but to global market fluctuations and in the case of financial services, global regulatory clamp downs. The 2008 global financial crisis, the ever-increasing black lists, grey lists and threats of economic sanctions, the shocks to travel and tourism generated by the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic, all illustrate these risks. But from the vantage point of secession, the fortunes of the two economies are now tied closely together and this should reduce the perception that one is disadvantaged vis-à-vis the other.

Political and economic irritants remain, however, that ensure that the risk of secessionist agitation may never entirely go away and may re-emerge in the future. A key feature of the 1983 constitution was a revenue sharing formula that dictated the allocation of the federal budget on the basis of population size on both islands (see Corbett, 2023, ch. 7). The formula was informally abandoned in the early 1990s when the growth of the Nevis economy meant that the island would, for the first time, become a net contributor to, rather than merely a beneficiary, of federal funds. Nevisian politicians argued at the time that this would be unfair given the historical neglect of their island. Fast forward to the present, however, and Nevis is again a net recipient of federal funds (Nesheim, 2022). But since there has never been the renegotiation and legislative ratification of an updated constitutional formula, the allocation is negotiated from budget to budget and is dependent on the vagaries of coalition politics or other types of political bargains, rather than transparent institutional regulation.

This tension sharpened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Growth in the financial services sector slowed in the early 2000s with the rise of the global Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and the panoply of Anti-Money Laundering/Counter-Terrorism Financing and Proliferation (AML/CFT) regulations that have been imposed and enforced by OECD member states and the international financial institutions (Marshall, 2003; Vlcek, 2008; Zagaris, 2021). However, St Kitts and Nevis also has had, since 1984, a Citizenship by Investment programme (CBI) which is a sub-sector of the

global financial services industry. The CBI programme was initially low-key, but its significance grew after the collapse of the sugar industry, various natural disasters and rising levels of sovereign debt in the 21st century (Corbett, 2023; Xu et al., 2015). During 2020-21, when the entire tourism economy came to a standstill, St. Kitts-Nevis experienced negative GDP growth of 14.5 percent (IMF 2023). Still, the government was one of only two CARICOM countries that did not resort to emergency IMF support during this period. It kept the economy going, funding social and economic support measures and additional health expenditure with its substantial CBI reserves. CBI fees have contributed approximately 15 percent of GDP (IMF 2017, IMF 2023). But at the same time NIA revenues dropped and Nevisian politicians claimed that this was because the CBI funds which accrue to the federal government are not fairly distributed across the islands (Nesheim, 2022). The then Prime Minister Harris, by contrast, maintained that the Nevis allocation has increased and is proportionate (Harris, 2022). The key point in either case is that there is conjecture about the process by which CBI funding is distributed and the proportion that each island receives, and this has contributed to heightened political tensions.

In sum, rationalist explanations can account for significant parts of this story. They explain the initial motivation to join the islands together to generate administrative efficiencies, the deeply felt Nevisian grievances about underdevelopment, and the negotiated outcome that produced the 1983 constitution. They also explain Nevisian fears that economic gains made post-1980 would be undone by SKNLP policy in the 1990s, the reduced tensions resulting from subsequent economic integration, and they highlight the potential for budget allocations to become a flashpoint in the future. What they cannot explain is why a small population on Nevis would ever countenance taking on the disproportionate economic costs of full statehood given the considerable self-governing autonomy they enjoy under the 1983 constitution. Nor can they explain the timing of key decisions and the dynamic nature of the political coalitions that have had such a marked impact on the fortunes of secessionist politics. To account for these trends and events we need to turn to alternative theorisations.

Culturalist Explanations

A key reason for secessionist agitation on Nevis is that the two communities have historically held distinct island identities. Part of this stems from land tenure practices and associated economic activity, as outlined above. Another key reason is the physical separation of the islands by a three-kilometre stretch of ocean called 'The Narrows'. At face value the idea of cultural differences between two islands with no major religious, ethnic, or linguistic cleavages separated by a short distance might sound absurd. But, as Premdas (1998) highlights, that perception is misleading because island identities are strongly held across the region irrespective of cultural, religious, or ethnic homogeneity (cf. Corbett, 2023). 'Islandness' is thus a key

motivator of secessionist agitation. So, we would expect that if momentum for secession has abated over time, the sense of a distinctive Nevis identity vis-à-vis St Kitts might have evolved also.

The two islands have certainly become closer over time, in part due to improvements in the quality and frequency of transport linkages. The idea of improving the ferry system between the islands in order to increase political integration is not new; then Secretary of State for the Colonies, Winston Churchill, prescribed a new boat as the key to improving relations between the islands in the 1920s (see Daniel, 2001, p. 18). Yet, the ferry service remained limited until the late 20th Century. In recognition of this and its impact on national unity, there has long been talk of constructing a physical bridge between the islands. But those in favour have struggled to raise the necessary capital investment to turn this dream into a reality. In both cases, the main issue is return on investment given the small volume of traffic—by ferry or bridge—to an island with a population the size of Nevis. Also, in addition to the possible ecological and maintenance challenges of having a physical bridge, its existence would damage the economic prospects of those who have invested in and operate marine transport between the two islands.

The increase in tourism, both international and domestic, has altered this balance. There are now almost hourly regular services between Basseterre and Charlestown. There is also a ferry service for vehicles, and water taxis that run a 10-minute commute between the two closest points between the islands. These changes have effectively reduced the distance between the islands. Some national government services may remain concentrated in Basseterre, but commuting is now a viable option for business and social activities, and the traffic flows both ways.

To some extent, the changes are an extension of the rationalist arguments outlined above, but they also have important sociological implications. The two communities have long been linked by inter-marriage and kinship networks. Historically, the concentration of government services, including schools, in St Kitts meant that Nevisians and Anguillians seeking education and career progression would spend time in St Kitts and many would settle there. Thus far, the country has not had a Premier or Prime Minister from Nevis, but several leaders have strong familial connections on both islands. There have been numerous public and private sector leaders in St Kitts, during both the colonial and independence periods who originate from either Nevis or Anguilla. Likewise, Ivor Stevens, a leading NRP politician in the 1980s, was born and raised in St Kitts. Such connections matter in weaving social cohesion. A key explanation for the failure of the 1998 referendum to achieve a majority for secession was low turnout, partly attributed to those with strong family ties to both islands deciding to boycott the ballot (see J. Byron, 1999).

The key point is that improved transport links have further strengthened the sociological linkages and may have somewhat diluted strong island identities, especially among a younger generation of Nevisians with no

memory of Bradshaw and the underdevelopment of the late colonial period. These links among younger people on both islands are further amplified by the uptake of mobile phone technology and social media in particular (see Eastern Caribbean Telecommunications Authority, 2023). It is now easier than ever to maintain familial and friendship networks across the two islands—and indeed beyond St Kitts and Nevis—and this sociological shift has tempered the sense of difference between the two communities, which in turn can explain why the secession issue has fallen down the political agenda.

That is not to say that ''islandness' no longer matters, or that the island is no longer the primary unit of politics in St Kitts and Nevis. Elections are still contested by island-based parties and there is no sign of a return to the 1950s and 1960s when some parties aspired to field candidates and win seats in both islands. 'Islandness' remains central to political discourse, with Nevisian politicians arguing for the distinct interests of their island while Kittitian politicians continue to express frustration at the lopsidedness of the current federation and the inefficiencies created by satisfying Nevisian agendas.

The dynamics of identity politics are rendered more complex by the influence of St Kitts and Nevis diasporas and by local migrant communities. The diasporas have a significant influence in St Kitts and Nevis political and socio-economic life. They are the source of remittance flows, commercial investments, political campaign contributions and natural disaster relief support. Electoral laws and practices facilitate the participation of overseas-based voters in national elections (M. Byron, 2000; Veenendaal, 2013). The political identities of some sectors of overseas nationals and their children can be more static than local identities, locked into the historical narratives that emphasise the differences and suspicions between the islands. However, the diasporas can equally inject new, less insular perspectives and approaches and build development capacities in both islands. Migration flows from the Dominican Republic and Guyana to St Kitts and Nevis since the early 1980s, and more recently OECS and CARICOM freedom of movement policies have also shaped identity politics and local cultural activity, as has the presence of a resident North American and European expatriate community that is particularly visible during the winter months in Nevis. All these groups inject their perspectives and concerns into the cocktail of local political and inter-cultural dynamics.

These trends mirror the tensions inherent in regional integration more generally, with the economic arguments favouring closer ties in order to offset diseconomies of scale, but identity politics favouring autonomy with each island seeking to have its special circumstances recognised and addressed by local representatives. Island identities still matter, and communities and leaders are prepared to incur considerable economic costs in order to accommodate them. But the strength of feeling has dissipated significantly, especially among younger generations, and this can help to explain why secessionist agitation is not as strong as it used to be.

Institutionalist Explanations

Institutionalist explanations emphasise how the form and function of formal rules—constitutional and legislative—shape secessionist tensions and, more recently, how they are likely to be eased by a 'dynamic' political settlement (e.g. Lecours, 2021). This echoes earlier arguments about the variety of institutional forms that communities seek: from full independence to non-sovereignty and federalism (e.g. Lluch, 2014; Rezvani, 2014). The key point of this recent work is that when the community seeking greater autonomy feels it faces a binary 'stay' or 'go' choice—referred to as a 'static' settlement—then momentum for separation increases. But if there are viable alternatives that balance the desire for increased autonomy with the benefits of unity, then in many cases communities will opt for the middle path over a decisive split. The logic of this argument is that to preserve unity it is best if political actors ensure that the relationship between the two islands remains dynamic.

This explanation can help us understand why secessionist tensions abated during the 1980s. Decolonisation provided a window of opportunity for the political settlement between the two islands to be renegotiated. This culminated in the 1983 federal constitution with its secession clause. Many on St Kitts—then and now—argue that this clause is unjust, since St Kitts cannot vote to leave the state of St Kitts and Nevis. In fact, St Kitts does not exist as a political entity in the constitution; Nevis is federated with St Kitts and Nevis. They also claim it motivates secession because it enables Nevis actors to threaten exit whenever they feel they are not getting a fair deal, as exemplified by the 1998 referendum. However, what Nevis' power to threaten exit does, is to ensure that the settlement remains dynamic by forcing politicians to remain at the negotiating table. The upshot is that while secession is unlikely to ever completely disappear from the political agenda, the chance of a definitive split is reduced, providing elites remain committed to a politics of inclusion, which arguably has been the status quo for the last two decades.

Coalition dynamics are key to explaining fluctuations in secessionist agitation pre-1998. Under the Bradshaw pre-independence administration, the SKNLP could govern both islands without ever winning a seat on Nevis. The SKNLP made attempts to include Nevis. Nevisians were often favoured for top civil service appointments. Moreover, after the 1966 election Nevis politician Eugene Walwyn was co-opted and appointed Attorney General in the SKNLP government, a move that contributed to him losing his seat in the subsequent 1971 election. The 1980 coalition between PAM and the NRP was different because NRP leaders gained key economic portfolios which allowed them to deliver the economic development that Nevisians craved. The combination of a more inclusive government and a growing economy reduced the demand for secession. In fact, NRP leader, Simeon Daniel, who

remained a committed secessionist throughout his life, was increasingly at odds with a younger generation of politicians within his party who favoured unity.

There is a tendency to interpret the success of the 1980s coalition, compared with the previous decades, as a straightforward case of PAM being more inclusive than the SKNLP. There is some evidence to support this—many older Nevisians still mistrust the SKNLP because of its association with Bradshaw—but an institutionalist explanation highlights that there is more to the story. The key is electoral arithmetic. St Kitts elects eight members to the national legislature while Nevis elects three. The SKNLP is the only party perceived as having a legitimate prospect of winning all eight seats on St Kitts. By contrast, PAM has never won more than six seats. PAM has a greater incentive to be more inclusive of Nevis politicians because they are more likely to need them to form a government. The SKNLP has courted Nevis politicians for the same purpose. But due to their numbers on St Kitts they do not have the same imperative to pursue inclusion. The party has also had a segment of its membership who resent the perceived special treatment of Nevis in the 1983 constitution (see Inniss, 1983). This dynamic can help us explain the events that led to the 1998 referendum, which occurred under a SKNLP majority, and also the subsequent report on constitutional reform (Phillips, 1999). The overall point is that the institutional configuration of eight-three seats can go some way to explaining why secessionist tensions rise and fall and why coalition politics have been prominent in St Kitts and Nevis political party culture.

The SKNLP and NRP grew closer in the 2000s. Prime Minister Douglas in St Kitts enjoyed a good working relationship with then NRP leader and Premier of Nevis, Joseph Parry (WIC News Reporter, 2020). The two were known to hold joint Cabinet meetings, for example, and in the early 2010s Douglas brought a member of the NRP, Patrice Nisbett, into his Cabinet even though he held a majority without Nevis. The point is that in this case inclusion was based on personal regard rather than electoral arithmetic or a formal coalition. The lesson is that while electoral incentives can motivate inclusive coalitions, they are not the only pathway by which this occurs. Ideological alignment is the oft-cited alternative theoretical explanation, but it does not fit this case. Rather, personalities and interpersonal relationships are key factors, especially in small island states where politics tends to be hyper-personalised (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018; Veenendaal, 2013). They are thus important for explaining any shift to a more inclusive political settlement and highlight the extent to which all three explanations are intertwined.

All of which leads us to the 2015 to 2022 'Team Unity' government. This coalition was forged before the 2015 election, which it then won. It comprised three parties—PAM, CCM and the People's Labour Party (PLP). The smallest party, PLP, whose leader was Prime Minister during that period, was formed when a group of sitting and former MPs left the Douglas-led SKNLP which had been in power since 1995. 'Team Unity' was not held

together by a strongly shared ideology, as defined by a conventional left-right spectrum. Harris has had long experience in representational politics and as a minister of government with the SKNLP. His roots are in labour politics in an island where the political culture of the organised labour movement has been significant since the 1930s. PAM has long been a more business-oriented party and CCM is grounded in Nevis politics. Each of the three leaders—Harris, Brantley and Richards—came from a younger generation than the leaders who dominated SKN politics during the 1990s and 2000s. They managed to work together for a significant period but in mid-April 2022, 'Team Unity' began to implode under the weight of growing divisions and recriminations among the leadership of the three participating parties. The outcome was a general election on August 4 2022, in which the St Kitts Labour Party won all but two seats in St Kitts (the remaining two seats being retained by the leaders of the PLP - Timothy Harris, and PAM - Sean Richards, respectively). In Nevis, Mark Brantley's CCM won all three seats (Salmon, 2022). A new generation of Labour politicians, led by Dr. Terrance Drew, did not need to negotiate alliances with other parties, and St Kitts and Nevis, for the time being at least, is no longer viewed as the Caribbean poster child for successful coalition governments.

It would be premature to analyse the policy directions of the current new administration. However, it is significant that in presenting the 2023/2024 national budget, Prime Minister Drew emphasised that the administration's national development goals and strategy are organised around the construction of a "Sustainable Island State" (SKNIS Editor, 2023). New areas for St Kitts and Nevis cooperation have been signalled, most notably the joint approach by the national government and the NIA to the Caribbean Development Bank to fund the infrastructural development required for the geothermal generation of electricity, which would be sourced from Nevis and would serve both islands. This would also entail the construction, for the first time, of an integrated electricity grid across St Kitts and Nevis and a joint approach to the development and management of renewable energy resources (Caribbean Development Bank, 2022; Joseph, 2022). Likewise, the coalition collapse underscored the need for institutional and administrative process reforms, particularly in the key areas of financial governance, coordination of major areas of public policy, transparency and accountability. The new Attorney-General, in collaboration with the NIA, has announced the establishment of a Joint Constitutional Reform Committee to discuss elements of constitutional reform (TimesCaribbeanOnline, 2022).

Whatever eventuates, the important point is that the political settlement between St Kitts and Nevis remains dynamic, and this can help explain why secessionist tensions have eased. In fact, some reformers may argue it is too fluid, with the imperatives of personality-driven politics ensuring that there is little ideological alignment between the parties, with governments rising and falling based on personal affinities and electoral arithmetic rather than strong institutional structures and policy agendas. The strength of such a settlement

is that there is always the potential for Nevis to play an important role in national politics. When combined with the level of autonomy granted to the NIA by the constitution, and the perceived "safety net" of the secession clause, it is very difficult to see a return to the pre-1980s era of complete Kittitian dominance.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that all three explanations have some empirical purchase in this case. Rationalist explanations foreground changes in the political economy. Specifically, they point to the importance of sectoral changes away from sugar production on St Kitts and the integration of both islands into the tourism, financial services and CBI sectors. They also highlight why CBI allocations became a major issue and why resource distribution via the budget remains a potential flashpoint. Culturalist explanations highlight sociological shifts, many of which are intimately intertwined with infrastructure development, whether via improved transport links or internet access. 'Islandness' remains central to the way politics is conducted but identities are not so strongly held that separation tops the political agenda on Nevis. Finally, institutionalist explanations highlight the importance of a dynamic, inclusionary political settlement to continued unity. The institutionalist lens also suggests the need for greater transparency where budgetary consultations and allocations, financial management and parliamentary reporting are concerned.

Our analysis has broader theoretical implications. The first is that we add to the literature on why secessionist tensions ease by showing that the explanations for why these movements arise—rationalist, culturalist and institutionalist—can be repurposed to explain why they fall. The second is that our analysis highlights the merits of in-depth case study-based description vis-à-vis statistical analysis that seeks to isolate specific causal mechanisms. As we have shown, equifinality and concatenation is the norm across more than a century of inter-island politics. Each of the theoretical explanations matters but it is easier to distinguish them analytically than it is empirically. For example, sector specialisation and infrastructure development can be interpreted as promoting sociological linkages yet at the same time the companies that grasped these opportunities often drew on existing familial connections. We thus support those, like Gerring (2012), who argue that descriptive analysis offers important insights independently of studies that seek to isolate causal mechanisms.

There are important practical lessons we can draw from this analysis too, which might be summarised as follows. First, unionists should promote economic integration and sectoral alignment because too much variation between communities has the potential to exacerbate divergent developmental trajectories. An added benefit of economic integration is that it creates a cadre of business elites—and political donors—who have a vested interest in unity. Second, investment in key infrastructure—physical and digital—has important sociological effects. Better and more regular marine

transport, combined with social media connections, have mitigated the tendency towards identity politics based on 'islandness'. Likewise, the move towards an integrated renewable energy sector may well generate major economic, institutional and sociological effects. Third, dynamic political settlements may seem messy and unnecessarily costly. They involve institutional duplication and increase the political energy expended on seemingly never-ending negotiations between shifting coalitions. But the political payoffs can be high because they ensure that actors are not forced into a 'stay' or 'go' choice.

None of these lenses should be perceived as necessary or sufficient conditions. The secession movement could still be revived. While it is convenient to label the pre-1980s period as a 'static' settlement compared to the more 'dynamic' post-1980 era, the mechanisms propelling the shifts are incredibly complex. Our findings should thus be treated as a heuristic—a rule of thumb (see Corbett, 2023, p. 258)—rather than as an attempt to create a generalizable or predictive theory. They nevertheless provide an important basis from which to understand and analyse the fluctuating fortunes of secessionist movements in St Kitts and Nevis, the wider Caribbean, and beyond.

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