

Saint Kitts and Nevis: Secessionism and the Federal Experience

Policy Brief



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THE ISSUE

Secessionist movements are no stranger to federations. Despite many states being federal for the very purpose of stemming centrifugal pressures, in some instances these movements have brought a federation to the brink of disintegration. In liberal-democracies this typically occurs through self-determination referendums. For the small two-island federation of St Christopher and Nevis (Saint Kitts and Nevis, population 46,000: 35,000 on St. Kitts and 11,000 on Nevis) where only Nevis has a parliament and government to make its own laws and policies, that day was August 10th 1998 when the people of Nevis were invited to answer the following question: “Do you approve the bill entitled the Nevis Constitution (Secession) Order, 1998, to allow the island of Nevis to secede from the federation of Saint Christopher and Nevis?” The result was a strong endorsement of secession with 61.7 percent in favour; however, it fell short of the required two-thirds, as per the secession clause (section 113) in the Constitution.

That referendum and its result were the culmination of decades, even centuries, of a tense relationship between the two islands. Saint Kitts and Nevis have been linked intermittently since the European settlement in the early 17th century. Starting in 1882, the two islands, along with Anguilla, formed a single colonial unit, with its administration in Basseterre, Saint Kitts. From the Nevisian perspective, the historical relationship with Saint Kitts has been marked by domination, oppression, and discrimination ([Midgett 2004](#)). In the contemporary period, the sinking of the ferry M.V. Christena on August 1st, 1970, when 223 people (most of them Nevisians) lost their lives, was a key event in the genesis of the Nevis secessionist movement (Smithen 2020)¹. Indeed, the ferry, owned and operated by the Saint Kitts and Nevis government and used primarily by Nevisians working or visiting family and acquaintances in Saint Kitts, was widely suspected to be unsafe; as such, the tragedy was widely interpreted in Nevis as a symbol of a Kittitian carelessness for the health and safety of Nevisians.

Independence through the creation of a federal state (without Anguilla) in 1983 did not immediately quell this general view of the marginalization of Nevis by Saint Kitts. The Nevis Reformation Party (NRP), created in 1970 with an explicitly secessionist agenda, put such an agenda on the back burner in the early 1980s when it formed a government with the Saint Kitts-based PAM (People's Action Movement); however, it did successfully push for inserting a secession clause in the constitution. The return to power of the Saint Kitts and Nevis Labour Party (SKNLP) in 1995 did nothing to help the relationship between the two islands. Despite its name, the SKNLP never won a seat in Nevis.

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Not only did its class-oriented politics fit much better with Saint Kitts' historically dominant sugar industry, which produced trade unionism, than Nevis' peasant economy, but the party's most famous leader, Robert Bradshaw, often had harsh words for Nevisians, for example, vowing to put bones in their rice and pepper in their soup ([Midgett 2004](#)). In its return to government, the SKNLP announced that it would establish a federal office on Nevis and proceed with a centralization in the management of financial services, two initiatives viewed in Nevis as an infringement upon its autonomy ([Corbett and Byron 2024:8](#)). These announcements prompted the Nevis Island administration, then controlled by the Concerned Citizen Movement (CCM), Nevis' rival party to the NRP, to trigger the secession clause and hold a referendum.²



The strong result of the secessionist side could have foreshadowed a prolonged period of secessionist pressure in the small federation and even a second referendum. In reality, no such referendum has occurred and the secession issue has largely disappeared from the political agenda.³

How can we explain such a surprising development?



THE FINDINGS

The weakening of the secessionist movement in Nevis owes to many different factors, linked to institutions, politics, the economy, and society. **In my discussions with prominent Nevisians from different walks of life, a variety of factors were invoked to account for the marginalization of secessionism on the island.⁴ Parsing through these factors with guidance from the literature on secessionism, a few stand out.**

01

A first is institutional and corresponds to the longer-term effect of federalism. At the time of the 1998 referendum, Nevisians of age to vote had been socialized in narratives of oppression and marginalization at the hand of the larger island, a common occurrence in archipelago political unions.⁵ Nationalism and secessionism ebb and flow through generations, as different cohorts are exposed to both different political realities and discourses (Gagnon and Turgeon 2026). The creation in 1983 of an autonomous Nevis Island Administration represented a transformative event for the Nevis secessionist movement whose full effects were felt only much later. In other words, **federalism, over the longer term, has considerably attenuated the old narratives, rendering them less attractive and relatable for younger generations who have been socialized in and have witnessed the autonomous political action of Nevis.** In addition, the federal government has generally shown more respect for the autonomy of Nevis since 1998 than immediately before the referendum.

Still on federalism, there has gradually been a better relationship between the federal government and the Nevis Island administration and also greater inclusion of Nevisian politicians in the federal government after 1998. The leaderships of the SKNLP and NRP became less antagonistic towards one another. For example, the SKNLP government featured a NRP politician in its cabinet in the early 2010s, for the express purpose of inclusion rather than out of electoral necessity (Corbett and Byron 2024: 17).

THE FINDINGS

02

Another factor is **political competition between the NRP and the CCM.**⁶ At first glance, with the two parties of an essentially bipartite system having favoured secession in the past, the structural conditions would appear to be favourable to the ongoing strength of the secessionist movement and perhaps a second secession referendum. Yet, **in a micro-state context, political competition often takes the form of highly adversarial political, even personal, rivalry** ([Veenendaal, 2013: 344](#)), fostering an element of antagonism that prevents one party from supporting the initiative of the other. **The personalized relationships that tie voters to politicians in such micro-states then serve to create blocks of voters trapped in a logic of partisan opposition, even on questions of self-determination.** Analyses of the defeat of the secessionist side in 1998, widely considered a surprise at the time, have among other things emphasized this rivalry between the NRP and the CCM, as they found that the vote against secession was mostly amongst supporters of the former ([Corbett and Byron, 2024: 8](#)). The threshold for secession to be triggered in a referendum (two-thirds of the vote) being very high would, in the context of this rivalry, work to deter the holding of another referendum, considering how hard it would be to get the required level of support.

03

Finally, although the distinctiveness of Nevis in relation to Saint Kitts is grounded in both history and geography, the potential to politicize such distinctiveness has been in recent decades attenuated by a convergence of political economies and an easier commute between the two islands ([Corbett and Byron 2024](#)). Uneven economic development in archipelago states often leads to narratives of oppression and domination conducive to secessionism ([Byron 1999](#)). Saint Kitts' economy was historically stronger and almost entirely driven by the sugar industry until the early 2000s while Nevis' was weaker and less sugar-oriented, featuring cotton and other agricultural goods. In the last couple of decades, these economies have largely converged around tourism, offshore finance, and the federally-administered Citizenship by Investment Program. As such, economic development and other types of public policies are less likely to sharpen divisions between the two islands. In addition, the development of the ferry services, and more specifically the establishment in 2019 of water taxis (operated by Nevisians) has considerably shortened and simplified the trip across 'the Narrows' (the three kilometre strait separating, at the shortest point, the two islands) and arguably brought the two societies closer together.

POLICY LESSONS

The surprising disappearance of an active secessionist movement in Nevis brings some useful **insight for the management of national diversity**. Despite the absence of hard cultural markers differentiating Kittitians from Nevisians, there is no doubt that, shaped by history and geography, these are different, albeit intertwined, political communities.

Federalism is Generational

The case of Nevis suggests that the effect of federalism is generational: citizens socialized in the context of federalism may understand the position of their community in relation to the other and to the state differently from their predecessors. It is already understood that federalism is not a panacea insofar as it is not always successful in diminishing centrifugal pressures and improving inter-community relations and certainly not on its own. To this caveat, we can add the notion that the positive effects of federalism, if they in fact do happen, take time.

How Federalism is Practiced Matters

As a microstate where personal and personalized relationships are crucial, Saint Kitts and Nevis offer a particularly strong illustration of how changes in the practice of federalism can transform the outcomes of the relationship between different political communities and between the minority political community and the state. After the 1998 referendum, Kittitian politicians gradually grew more respectful of Nevisian autonomy and, perhaps even more importantly, made more room for Nevisians in the governance of the federation, either through a certain opening in the SKNLP or the Team Unity coalitions.

Federalism Alone Cannot Diffuse Secessionism

The case of Saint Kitts and Nevis is a useful reminder that neither as an institutional structure nor political practice does federalism alone diffuse secessionist tendencies. Sociological developments can bring communities closer together, and transformations in political economies can reduce social-economic divergence. Saint Kitts and Nevis is a peculiar federation since only Nevis has its own autonomous political institutions. This institutional configuration is akin to a statute of autonomy similar to what can be found in many other states that are not necessarily federations ([Barter 2026](#)), including, in the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago. As such, the lessons from Saint Kitts and Nevis may take us beyond the world of formal federations and into states where political autonomy is a key principle and a central feature of institutional organization.

NOTES

[1] Source not available online. See: Smithen, Farrel. 2020. "Introduction," in Nevis Island Assembly: Special Sitting Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the M.V. Christina Disaster, Friday July 31. Charlestown: Nevis Island Assembly.

[2] Thus, despite a high degree of consensus between Kittitians and Nevisians on a Westminster-style liberal democracy ([Griffin, 1998: 159](#)), tensions between the two islands remained after independence.

[3] Although it is not seriously invoked, Nevisian political parties "still genuflects to a hypothetical secession," ([Bishop et al., 2021](#)) as a reminder of the enduring difference between the islands and their political communities.

[4] This section draws in part on half a dozen semi-structured interviews conducted with political actors and observers in Saint Kitts and in Nevis in February 2026.

[5] On the relationship between Aruba and Curacao, see [Lecours, 2025](#).

[6] I thank Terence Byron (former Attorney General of St. Kitts and Nevis) and Everette Webb (broadcaster at VON radio) for having drawn my attention to this point.



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