



Populism in the Caribbean: A case study of Curaçao

Journal:	<i>International Journal of Development Issues</i>
Manuscript ID:	IJDI-May-2012-0022.R1
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Curacao, Populism, Caribbean

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to describe an example of populism in the Caribbean. Populism is a worldwide phenomenon but little has been published about the development of populist politics in the Caribbean region, where it may find a unique expression.

Methodology/Approach – This study is based on an analysis of the popular media, which were monitored from January 2010 until October 2011. The discourse and presentations of politicians were examined and analyzed. The resulting analyses were shared and debated with political observers and other stakeholders. An early draft of this paper was reviewed by a number of peers who added some critical insights.¹

Findings – Populism in the Caribbean is an important phenomenon, because the region has all of the conditions that are necessary for it to thrive.

Originality/value of paper – The paper contributes to the analysis of populism in small Caribbean islands.

Key words Curaçao, Populism

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Populism is the conviction that the people should rule society directly. Populist leaders view themselves as the chosen ones, through whom the will of the people is expressed, while the elites and institutions stand between these leaders and the people – or the will of the people (Vossen, 2009).

Populism is a global phenomenon. There are forms of populism in Europe, in Latin America and in the Caribbean. Populist leaders attempt to make a direct appeal to a supposed majority of the public, over the heads of intervening elites or political institutions. In this way they seek to circumvent the restrictions of those institutions. The distrust of institutions is a very strong factor (Doyle, 2011).

Populism presents a paradox. On the one hand, it is highly democratic, to the extent that it takes into account the views of the people. On the other hand it is a threat to democracy because it is intolerant to people or groups who think differently. Frissen (2009) refers to this as dictatorship by the people. This is the dark side of populism.

¹ I thank the following peers for their contribution: Miriam Sluis Bac, Michiel van der Veurt MSc, Gerda Fokker MSc, Michael Sharpe PhD, Mike Jacobs MSc, Prof. Dr. Roel in 't Veld, Prof. Dr. Paul Frissen, Prof. Dr. Leo Huberts, Prof. David Turner.

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3 The result of populism is a split in society, with two distinct groups opposing each other: the
4 populists and institutionalists. The institutionalists defend existing institutions, while the
5 populists try to tear them down so that they can represent the will of the people directly.
6 These two groups fight each other on every front.
7

8
9 Populism is a thin, or empty, ideology. It can be combined with other ideologies of left or
10 right that are more firmly based on values. Populists of various types can be identified, mixing
11 populism with nationalism, socialism or liberalism. Other ideologies do not crowd out
12 populism, but are complementary to it (Ramirez, 2009; Vossen, 2010).
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15 Populists avoid taking office; once a populist takes office he or she becomes routinized
16 (Ramirez, 2009), and his or her populist appeal, as the voice of the people challenging the
17 institutions, is diminished.
18

19
20 There has been a worldwide rise in populism. Society functions 24 hours a day, seven days a
21 week, and 24 hour rolling news programmes and social media mean that there are increased
22 opportunities for populist voices to appeal directly to “the people”. Time and space have
23 become irrelevant, and institutions have been eroded. Individuals need a guide, and populists
24 offer a simple solution to all their problems. All political parties and politicians are forced to
25 adopt a somewhat populist style (Crick, 2005).
26

27
28 The efforts of populist leaders depend on their being able to construct a “public”, or an in-
29 group that they can appeal to, and this process is often helped by the identification of an out-
30 group, or opposition that is held up as the personification of everything bad in society. This
31 process of creating an in-group may use culture, religion, ethnicity or social class, depending
32 on the specific context. Exactly what the populists uses to form the basis of their appeal
33 creates a distinction between the way that populism is expressed in different locations.
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37 According to Frissen (2010), in Europe today, culture is a specific factor in populism.
38 Populism in Europe is promoted by an appeal to a potential clash between cultures. European
39 populism makes a distinction between the pure people on the one side and the immigrants,
40 criminals and perverts on the other. The divide between the well educated and the less
41 educated is also a factor, as is the difference between the cosmopolitan and the nationalist.
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45 Religion plays an important role in populism in Latin America and the Caribbean. Populists
46 often state that they are on a mission from God. In Europe this factor plays a much smaller
47 role, although it may be implicit in the idea of a “clash of civilizations”.
48

49
50 In the Caribbean and Latin America populist socialism is a key factor. Populism is mainly a
51 strategy of the left, although historically a more right wing ideology has been blended with
52 populism, as was the case in Argentina. In Europe populism is normally combined with a
53 right wing agenda (Economist, 2006).
54

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56 Ethnicity plays a strong role in the Caribbean. This is a legacy of colonization, or more
57 particularly of slavery. The social lines are more or less drawn by ethnicity. To be black
58 means to be poor. In Latin America a different form of ethnicity plays a role, and appeals are
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3 often made to indigenous identities. For example, President Chavez of Venezuela refers to his
4 indigenous background to relate to the poor people in his country. The same is the case in
5 Bolivia with President Evo Morales (Madrid, 2008). In countries like France and the
6 Netherlands ethnicity is also a factor. Foreigners are blamed for not integrating and causing
7 social problems. The populists state that these citizens should be deported to their country of
8 origin.
9

10
11 In the Caribbean and Latin America there are often references to the colonialism, although the
12 precise references are different. Often the colonial past is blamed for the problems in
13 Caribbean nations. In Latin America the former mother countries are a limited factor because
14 these countries achieved their independence a long time ago. In the case of Venezuela,
15 President Chavez blames American policy for the problems of the continent. However, the
16 fact is that often the members of the elites are descendants of the colonists.
17

18
19 These various factors intertwine and are difficult to separate. No two places have exactly the
20 same admixture of elements in their particular brand of populism. Millett (2003, p. 314) states
21 that decolonization, populist movements and the formation of new nations came together in
22 the period from 1945 to 1970 in the Caribbean. Caribbean populism is a combination of
23 ethno-nationalism, a brand of populism and state intervention. However, it should also be
24 recognized that there are several Caribbeans: Spanish, British, French and Dutch. The factors
25 of populism are to a certain extent different in the different Caribbeans.
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29 In Jamaica, Manley's administration (1972-1980) was widely acknowledged to be populist,
30 especially during his first term. The administration wanted a more just distribution of income,
31 and the public sector was expanded at the expense of the market. Vital parts of the market
32 were also nationalized. Nationalism, socialism and ethnicity were important factors in this
33 form of populism. In 1980 the new administration implemented a much more neoliberal
34 programme²³.
35
36

37
38 According to scholars, there are several conditions that favor the rise of populism: poor social
39 and economic conditions, erosion of institutions, especially political institutions, and the
40 presence of charismatic leaders (Deiwiks, 2009). Poor education of large parts of the
41 population can also contribute to the rise of populism, although research of the Dutch case
42 (and the populist Geert Wilders) has shown that the more educated are well represented in the
43 growing populist voting base.⁴ Lately, wide access to media has been added to the list of
44 favourable conditions. The media make it possible for populists not only to send their
45 simplified messages, often a set of one-liners, to the people, but also make it possible to hear
46 the voice of the people (Castells, 2009).
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52 A further factor promoting the rise of populism is a pronounced gap between the wealthy and
53 the less well off. Although appeal to this gap may form part of the populist construction of an
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56 ² <http://countrystudies.us/caribbean-islands/27.htm>

57 ³ <http://www.eclac.org/publicaciones/xml/7/4587/lc11361i.pdf>

58 ⁴ [http://www.elsevier.nl/web/10224505/Nieuws/Politiek/Geert-Wilders-steeds-populairder-bij-hoger-](http://www.elsevier.nl/web/10224505/Nieuws/Politiek/Geert-Wilders-steeds-populairder-bij-hoger-opgeleiden.htm)
59 [opgeleiden.htm](http://www.elsevier.nl/web/10224505/Nieuws/Politiek/Geert-Wilders-steeds-populairder-bij-hoger-opgeleiden.htm) (Accessed on 12 October 2011)
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in-group, populist governments have not necessarily been successful in reducing that gap. The large inequity and the rich natural resources create a fertile ground for populism in Latin America. Demagogic leaders, fostering a direct tie with the masses, promise that they will bring rapid change. These leaders often have a military background and profess nationalism, pushing foreign interests out. While they preach anti-capitalism they make deals with capitalism. Populists in Latin America advance redistribution of growth and income, while often ignoring inflation (Economist, 2006). But the inequity remains. Studies show that social democratic programmes score better than populist programmes. The reduction in inequity brought about by populist government is attributed to luck (Economist, 2006; Birdsall, 2011).

Although the rise of populism has been widely discussed and debated in the Caribbean context, little has been published about it. One possible reason for this apparent lack of interest in the subject in the Caribbean is that populism in this setting is often mistaken for patronage and nepotism. Although these two factors add a specific dimension to populism in the Caribbean, they do not define populism.

The present study is an attempt to overcome that apparent shortcoming in the literature, and to present a description of the way in which populism finds expression in the context of Curaçao.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative case study of the discourse and presentations of politicians in Curaçao. It is not a content analysis, as content analysis often involves a great deal of counting and coding that can obscure the context. The results and conclusions of this investigation are drawn from an interpretative analysis of the patterns that characterize the pronouncements of politicians in Curaçao over a period, focusing on similarities and differences between these politicians. Ultimately, the methods used in developing this thesis involve a great deal of intelligent reading. The investigation is an observational test of theory, without imposing external values.

Based on a review of the literature review, it can be assumed that every politician is, by definition, a populist to a certain extent. In that context, a politician is classified as a populist if he or she scores higher than his or her peers on the variable factors presented in the matrix in Table 1. Two sets of factors are identified: basic or universal factors of populism and local factors related to the Caribbean.

Table 1: Matrix for scoring politicians in terms of their populism

	Politician 1	Politician 2
<i>Basic factors:</i>		
Denunciation of the		

1			
2			
3	elites: the elites as part of		
4	the discourse		
5	Glorification of the		
6	people		
7	Inclination to conspiracy		
8	theories		
9	Preference for direct		
10	democracy		
11			
12			
13	<i>Local factors:</i>		
14	The mother country as		
15	part of the discourse/ Colonization		
16	Ethnicity: race as part of		
17	the discourse		
18	Socialism		
19	Religion		
20			
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23			

24 The media were monitored from January 2010 to October 2011. The discourse and
 25 presentations of politicians were recorded and analyzed. The media were sampled according
 26 to the following schedule. The news and talk shows on three of the twenty-six radio stations
 27 were monitored daily. The news and talk shows on two of the three local television stations
 28 were monitored daily. All nine newspapers were monitored daily. Interviews with and
 29 presentations by politicians were carefully examined. Not only was the content observed but
 30 also the style of presentation. The texts were studied looking for the following key words or
 31 equivalents associated with populism: “The people”, “The elite”, “The establishment”,
 32 “Networks”, “Colonists”, “Corruption”, “God”, “Socialism” and “Neoliberalism”.
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 36

37 There is always a chance of inaccurate sampling, and this arises from two sources: the data
 38 collected may not be representative of the universe from which data is sought, and in the
 39 process of analysis there may be a focus on a section of the data that is not representative of
 40 the whole body of data collected. To reduce the likelihood of the former source of error, all
 41 other media were also randomly sampled during the period of the investigation. To avoid the
 42 latter, analyses were shared and debated with political observers and other stakeholders. The
 43 draft of this paper was reviewed by a number of peers who added some critical insights.⁵
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48 The value of this kind of case study is that studying several case studies can contribute to
 49 theory and hypothesis development.
 50
 51

52 Curaçao

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 57 ⁵ I thank the following peers for their contribution: Miriam Sluis Bac, Michiel van der Veurt MSc, Gerda Fokker
 58 MSc, Mike Jacobs MSc, Prof. Dr. Roel in 't Veld, Prof. Dr. Paul Frissen, Prof. Dr. Leo Huberts, Prof. David
 59 Turner.
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3 Curaçao is an interesting location for the study of populism. With its 444 square kilometres,
4 Curaçao is inhabited by approximately 149,679 inhabitants of over forty nationalities. This
5 means that it has tremendous heterogeneity in a population and geographical location that is
6 comparable in size with a small city.
7

8
9 Since 10 October 2010 it has been an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the
10 Netherlands. It has three official languages: Dutch, Papiamentu and English.
11

12
13 The island of Curaçao was “discovered” in 1499 by the Spanish and went through several life-
14 cycles. The social and economic structure of Curaçao was formed over time, creating a
15 complex, traditionally segregated and partially rational western society. There are deep social
16 divisions, and the various actors do not trust one another. The heritage of slavery means that
17 ethnicity plays an important role (Goede, 2008). The main stages in the island’s development
18 were:
19

- 20 • An agricultural period from the seventeenth century until 1863, which was dominated
21 by slavery;
- 22 • The oil era started in 1918 and lasted until it went into decline in the 1960s. This was
23 an industrial period. The refinery is still operating and is a hot issue on the political
24 agenda, in connection with sustainability;
- 25 • The financial services era started began in the 1960s and went into decline in the
26 1980s. This was the early post-industrial period;
- 27 • Tourism started early in the 20th century, and since the late 1980s has grown to
28 dominate the economy. It is currently in a phase of accelerated growth.
29
30
31

32
33 Curaçao has not done too well socially and economically over the last twenty years. In other
34 words the conditions for the rise of populism have existed for a prolonged period. The
35 indications are that the economy is now coming out of those depressed conditions, having
36 finally taken off in 2006 and 2007, and Curaçao partially escaped the global financial crisis of
37 2008 and after. This was the result of special local conditions, including debt relief by the
38 Netherlands which was offered as part of the process of constitutional change in October
39 2010. But on the negative side it also indicates that the local economy is not very well
40 integrated into the global economy. The most recent figures from the Central Bank of Curaçao
41 and Sint Maarten⁶ indicate that the economy came to a halt again, as a consequence of poor
42 government policies and excessive spending.
43
44
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46
47 In very general terms, the conditions are favorable for the development of populism in
48 Curaçao. The elites are under heavy pressure. Established political parties no longer appeal to
49 the voters and institutions are heavily criticized. Young people have no interest in history.
50 This has all lead to the growth of populism. The conditions of depressed social and economic
51 development, the erosion of trust in political institutions, the presence of charismatic leaders
52 and the spread of modern media are all pronounced elements in the society of Curaçao. In the
53 following sub-sections, these conditions will be set out in detail.
54
55

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57
58 ⁶ After the constitutional changes Curaçao and Sint Maarten shared the institution of the Central Bank and that
59 institution is now called: Central Bank of Curaçao and Sint Maarten.
60

Social and economic conditions

The distribution of income in Curaçao is uneven and the cost of living is high. Unemployment is high. The proportion of highly educated citizens is relatively low. Poverty is a great concern (Vierbergen, 2004). The cleavage between the “haves” and “have nots” is, to a certain extent, the divide between “white” and “black”.

The population is relatively small. Consequently there is no critical mass or economy of scale. The small scale also forges relationships that are extremely close, so that objectivity is almost impossible. This means that there is a tendency to nepotism and patronage. People have a preference for hiring and contracting people they know. People they know personally are considered not only loyal but also more knowledgeable⁷.

Erosion of institutions

The institutions of Curaçao have been rapidly eroded by several factors. First, there was a lack of financial resources, because of the poor economy and the high national debt in the recent past. Secondly, all attention and resources have been dedicated to the constitutional changes, especially between 2005 and 2010, after the referendum held in 2005 which started the process of constitutional change. This has resulted in institutional problems in the civil service, healthcare system, educational system and judicial system, while there has also been a general deterioration of the infrastructure.

Charismatic leaders

Most leaders in Curaçao, as in other parts of the Caribbean are charismatic and to a certain degree populist (Allahar, 2011). The leaders appeal directly to the people. They have good verbal and nonverbal presentation. They play the media very well. One can say that leaders in the Caribbean have always been charismatic (Goede 1999; Goede, 2004). But only a few of them have fully embraced a populist agenda.

In this context the erosion of established political parties should be mentioned. This creates the space for the emergence of populist leaders and movements.

The proliferation of media

The proliferation of media in Curaçao has been notable. The number of media in proportion to the population is extraordinary (Goede, 2006). This has become one of the most important factors for populists to gain ground. Despite having the population of a moderately sized city, Curaçao has 26 radio stations, three television stations and nine newspapers.

There has been an explosive growth of the use of social media, like Facebook and Twitter. Smart phones are an important aspect of the technical platform for the development of the social media. Public demonstrations are often organized via these media. Although figures are

⁷ <http://www.commissieonderzoekcuracao.info/wp-content/uploads/DOE-HET-ZELF-30-september-2011.pdf>
(Accessed on 12 October 2011)

1
2
3 not available, one gets the impression that access to social media is universal. Combined with
4 the small scale of society, this interconnectedness gives an additional dimension.

5
6 The media are dependent upon the sponsorship of the private sector and state owned
7 enterprises. These sponsors are also the sponsors of the political parties.
8

9 10 **The Extent of Populism**

11
12 Populism in Curaçao exhibits the universal features shown in Table 1, such as the
13 denunciation of the elites and the glorification of the people. The media are an important
14 channel for these elements of populism. It also has some local features, including the
15 inclination towards conspiracy theory, a preference for direct democracy, anti-colonialism,
16 and a dependence upon the rhetoric of ethnicity, socialism, religion, patronage and nepotism.
17 The populists draw inspiration from President Chavez of Venezuela and to a lesser extent
18 Geert Wilders, the populist in the Netherlands who followed in the footsteps of his
19 countryman Pim Fortuyn. The example of Wilders is ironic, because part of Wilders' agenda
20 is to get rid of Curaçao and the other Dutch islands. It is also very critical of migration from
21 the islands.
22
23

24 25 *The inclination towards conspiracy theory*

26
27 Populists in Curaçao promote theories about how elites construct networks. They argue that
28 the elites use these networks to extract wealth from society systematically, especially by
29 sponsoring political parties and the media in order to gain control over the government
30 apparatus and state owned companies. These are the methods that the elites are supposed to
31 use to maintain the *status quo*. The explicit objective of the populists is to free these
32 institutions, especially the state owned companies, and give them back to the people.
33
34

35
36 Patronage and nepotism is part of this theory. Populists state that the elites have gained
37 control over these institutions and organizations by appointing loyalists. Ironically the remedy
38 the populists offer is the same; they appoint persons loyal to the populist.
39

40
41 The process of constitutional change has made it easier for populist politicians to remove
42 persons that they regarded as disloyal. Most senior civil servants have been removed
43 immediately and new ones appointed, as were members of supervisory boards. Many chief
44 executive officers of state owned enterprises have also been removed by the newly appointed
45 supervisory boards and are under political pressure.
46

47 48 *A preference for direct democracy*

49
50 The populists communicate their message that they want to be closer to the people, and that
51 they want to change the electoral system to involve neighborhoods in government, although
52 this is not a claim that is exclusive to the populists. All notions of democracy that are based on
53 the principle of sovereignty of the people share this ideal.
54

55 56 *Local factors*

57 58 *Anti-colonialism*

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2
3 Most populists want Curaçao to become independent from the Netherlands. They say that the
4 people are second class citizens within the Kingdom of the Netherlands Antilles. There are
5 several arguments supporting this claim. First, the welfare arrangements within the Kingdom
6 have great discrepancies. Second, citizens from the island do not enjoy equal rights in the
7 Netherlands and are stigmatized.
8

9
10 The ideal of independence is not the exclusive domain of populists; others also share this
11 ideal, but they do not denigrate the mother country.
12

13 *Ethnicity*

14
15 One of the populists, atypically, discriminates against colored people, calling the elite the
16 *black jetset*. But, in general, the populists also hate the Dutch government. This is an example
17 of their discourse about culture and history. Ethnicity is a sensitive topic that has to be
18 handled with care, because populists do not want to scare off minorities.
19

20 *Socialism*

21
22 Most populists state that the poor are poor because they are robbed by the elites. They declare
23 that wealth should be taken from the rich and given to the poor.
24

25 *Religion*

26
27 The populists claim that they are sent and guided by God. In their discourse they often refer to
28 God and recite from the bible. They associate the elite with evil and the devil.
29

30 *Patronage and nepotism*

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32 Patronage and nepotism have already been discussed. The populists create jobs for the people,
33 especially those who are loyal to the leader and the party or who are responsible for
34 mobilizing votes. Also relatives are often accommodated. The objective often extends beyond
35 securing votes. The objective is also to gain control of institutions and organizations.
36

37 **Politics in Curaçao**

38
39 In Curaçao the political spectrum can be described as follows. None of the parties claim to be
40 right wing. Adversaries place the Partido Antias Restuktura (PAR) (established in 1993) to
41 the right of centre, but PAR claims to be a Christian party. The Frente Obrero (FOL) and the
42 Movimentu Antias Nobo (MAN) are established socialist parties. The Partido Nashonal
43 (PNP) is one of the oldest political parties, a traditional Christian party. (Niun Paso Atras)
44 NPA and Pueblo Soberano (PS) are relatively new parties. They are on the extreme left wing.
45 They are inspired by, among others, President Chavez. The Movimentu Futuro Korsou
46 (MFK) is a brand new political party established in 2010. The programme of the MFK places
47 MFK on the right of the spectrum.
48

49
50 Populism is a part of politics and should be analyzed as part of the election results over the
51 years. All parties are to some degree populist. But the most populist parties today are the PS,
52 NPA, MFK and certain activists in the PAR. In the recent past the FOL was a successful
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3 populist party. The populism of the PAR is partly a response to the success of other populist
4 parties.
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6
7 *The rise of modern populism in Curaçao*
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10 Nelson Pierre's NPA was the first to utilize the populist agenda as we now know it in
11 Curaçao. He invented the modus operandi of hosting a daily talk show to inform the people of
12 the wrong doing of what he called 'the prophets of evil' and their networks, who rob the poor
13 and create an industry of poverty. He stood for election for the first time in 2003. He received
14 5.7% of the votes and obtained representation. Pierre went on to participate in a government
15 coalition and became an elected executive.
16

17
18 Very early on, NPA split because of disagreements between Pierre and his colleagues. Pierre
19 is a successful, recovered drug addict. This is often exploited by his adversaries. It is stated
20 that soon after the elections of 2003, Pierre had a relapse and this led to Helmin Wiels, the
21 deputy leader, leaving the NPA and starting Pueblo PS. The agenda of PS is very similar to
22 that of the NPA with an emphasis on the independence of the island. Also, the methods,
23 strategy and tactics are the same. The discourse of PS is a blend of socialism, anti-
24 colonialism, slave heritage or race and Christian religion, with a touch of misogyny and pro-
25 masculinity. PS stood for election for the first time in 2006. Both NPA and PS obtained a
26 significant number of votes in 2006 (5.5% and 9.8%), but neither of them obtained
27 representation at that time. From then on PS continued to grow and entered the Island Council
28 in 2007, becoming a force to be reckoned with in the opposition. The PS became a governing
29 party in the first government of the new country, Curaçao, on 10 October 2010.
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34 The noticeable growth of populism can be explained as part of the process of constitutional
35 reform in the context of decolonization (Millett, 2003). In a constitutional referendum in
36 2005, 68% of the voters voted for the island to have autonomous status within the Kingdom of
37 the Netherlands. As part of the process PS demanded an additional option on the ballot paper:
38 Curaçao should have the status of Freely Associated State. This entails a transitional stage
39 towards full independence. From that point PS became the main movement in favour of the
40 independence of the island. During the whole process of implementing the preferred option of
41 the majority, namely that Curaçao would be an autonomous country within the Dutch
42 Kingdom, PS opposed the process and the outcome. The first indication of the strength of the
43 movement was the rejection of the covenant between the Kingdom partners by the Parliament
44 of Curaçao in November 2007 and the subsequent upheaval and social protest. The
45 movement reached a new height during the referendum of 2009, when the arrangements for
46 the new constitutional status were accepted by a slim majority of only 52%. This result
47 indicated that there was great dissatisfaction among the voters with the process, the outcome
48 and the established politicians who were responsible. This dissatisfaction was exploited, and
49 reinforced, by the constant opposition of a number of opposition parties, including the PS.
50 The opposition argued that the constitutional change was a process of re-colonization, because
51 the Netherlands would have a greater say in matters of finance and justice. The members of
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3 the coalition were labeled as “bende patria” (sellers of the country). On several occasions
4 there were small but rather violent demonstrations in the streets.
5

6 In August 2010, the MFK of Gerrit Schotte fielded candidates in the elections for the first
7 time. Schotte started his political career in the FOL party, led by Anthony Godett, also a
8 populist in his own right, who obtained 33.9% of the votes in 2003. After wandering around
9 in the political world, Schotte ended up in the MAN party, where he became the main vote
10 winner. After much deliberation about becoming the party leader, he left the MAN four
11 months before the next elections. Schotte was a proven fundraiser. He ran an aggressive and
12 very personal electoral campaign.
13
14

15
16 After the election, a coalition of the MFK, PS and MAN was formed with a narrow majority
17 of one seat, like the PAR, FOL and PNP government before it. The three parties combined
18 obtained 49% of the votes but as an effect of the electoral system they still had 11 of the 21
19 seats. The coalition was formed by the socialist MAN, the more radical left PS and the rightist
20 MFK. It was said that the only unifying factor of the coalition was their resentment of the
21 PAR. The new coalition agreed that the PAR, which they argued represented the elite, should
22 never govern again after staying in power for 16 years. The PS claimed that they had a
23 preference for the opposition benches in parliament and that they joined the coalition under
24 pressure to collaborate to keep the PAR out of government. Wiels did not accept a post as a
25 minister in the government headed by Schotte. This is typical of populists (Ramirez, 2009).
26 He headed the party in parliament, criticizing everyone, including his coalition partners and
27 his own ministers. Within a few months he fired four of the ministers of from his own party.
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32 The coalition accommodated their own people in the civil service apparatus⁸ and in the state
33 owned companies to an even greater extent than had happened previously. This expansion of
34 the state is also typical of populism (Millett, 2003). The civil service was under
35 reconstruction, due to the constitutional change process, and in a way this made it relatively
36 easy to appoint new people. In the state owned companies all supervisory board members
37 were replaced. This was in direct conflict with new legislation designed to inhibit such
38 activity⁹. The new coalition started a process of scrutinizing CEOs, suspecting them of bad
39 management and corruption, and starting investigations on their doings in the past¹⁰. These
40 investigations are called operational audits and forensic investigations. In this very public
41 process senior managers in state owned enterprises were described as the *black jetset*, and
42 were accused of having acquired wealth by stealing from the companies of the people¹¹. Some
43 of the institutions bedeviled by this patronage are the Homeland Security Service, the Central
44 Bank, the utility company, the state owned telecom company, and the state owned company
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51 ⁸ <http://www.amigoe.com/english/72810-cabinet-chooses-for-political-appointments> (Accessed on 27 September
52 2011)

53 ⁹ <http://www.soab.an/files/20101201%20Advies%20inzake%20collectief%20ontslag%20commissarissen.pdf>
54 (Accessed on 27 September 2011)

55 ¹⁰ <http://www.thedailyherald.com/islands/1-islands-news/20398-a-number-of-probes-at-government-companies.html>
56 (Accessed on 27 September 2011)

57 ¹¹ <http://amigoe.com/english/83884-martinas-departure-does-not-lead-to-exodus-of-man-members> (Accessed on
58 27 September 2011)
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3 that operates the harbour. These actions were justified on the grounds that the existing heads
4 of state enterprises constituted a conspiracy against the people, a tactic that has been identified
5 as typical of populists (Vossen, 2010).
6

7
8 State owned enterprises were considered to be a result of neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism is
9 condemned, together with everything and everybody associated with it. The more populist
10 parties framed the PAR as a neo-liberal party, and people associated with or sympathizing
11 with them are investigated. People with unknown affiliations are investigated as well. People
12 who are able to think for themselves, if they are in key positions are also scrutinized.
13

14
15 Parallel to this process, the names of institutions were changed as an act of nationalism
16 (Millett, 2003). Names that were linked to colonialism were replaced by names that were
17 declared more patriotic. The two most visible cases were the change of names of the National
18 University and Peter Stuyvesant College.
19

20
21 A climate of fear was created. This is the effect of the vilification of the elites and institutions
22 through the media. In August 2010 the media itself became the target of the populists. The PS
23 accused the media of being biased and against the government, mainly against the PS. Wiels
24 called for his followers to boycott the sponsors of the media. Observers state that PS was
25 becoming paranoid and was becoming like a religious cult. This led to furious reactions from
26 the PS. The PS correctly referred to cases from the recent past where media personalities had
27 been fired because they sympathized with the opposition, and nobody had protested then.
28
29

30
31 At the end of August 2011 a parliamentary investigation of the judicial system was
32 announced. The atmosphere was hostile because of the verbal aggression on the part of the
33 protagonists. Crime was on the rise. Some linked these two phenomena.
34

35
36 At the end of September 2011 Curaçao was audited by the IMF. The IMF was concerned
37 about the financial and economic development of the island. Shortly afterwards the judicial
38 institutions expressed their concern about the widespread verbal aggression and intimidation
39 by the populists¹². This led to an attack on these institutions by the PS. This attack extended
40 and developed the conspiracy theories that had been advanced by the populists (Vossen,
41 2010).
42

43
44 Schotte traveled as much as possible, especially in the Caribbean region, to portray himself as
45 a statesman. In a short period he visited Brazil, the Netherlands, Trinidad, the United States,
46 Cuba, Spain, Peru, Barbados and Haiti, sometimes at the request of the Netherlands as a
47 representative of the Kingdom. At the end of September 2011 Schotte was part of the Dutch
48 delegation attending the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York. Schotte gave
49 interviews for Fox News and CNN. These activities are examples of Schotte's populist tactics.
50 He raised his personal profile, mainly abroad through the international media and
51 domestically through photographic reports by his personal photographer.
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58 ¹² <http://amigoe.com/english/85286-attorney-general-piar-concerned-about-increasing-verbal-assault> (Accessed
59 on 28 September 2011)
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3 In the meanwhile Omayra Leeflang of the PAR and Nelson Pierre of NPA started talk shows
4 in the same format as Wiels to fight back. In a sense Leeflang had no option, given the
5 success of the PS. Pierre returned from Colombia, coming out of retirement.
6

7
8 Facebook plays an important role in this whole process. Voters exchange ideas using social
9 media.

10
11 There was constant conflict within the coalition. This resulted in a decrease in trust and a
12 subsequent cessation of economic investment, which had a severe and negative impact on the
13 projected economic growth for 2011; the island experienced negative growth. In the
14 meantime, a significant number of civil servants were employed, leading to budgetary
15 problems for the government. A group of 38 representative organizations, ranging across the
16 business community, labor unions, NGOs and churches, united to express their concern over
17 the situation on the island¹³. CEOs and civil servants were going to court to protest the fact
18 that they had been passed over. To date the government has lost all these cases in the courts.
19

20
21 Many new projects are distrusted and discredited as being schemes of the elites to enrich
22 themselves. The opposition accuses the government of corruption and of taking over the new
23 country by removing CEOs and top civil servants to appoint their own people, who are loyal
24 to the party. Meanwhile, in August 2011 an international investigation involving the United
25 States authorities was started, into financial activities that the brother of the Minister of
26 Finance (a member of the MFK)¹⁴. All this contributes to the reduction of trust on the part of
27 investors in the island, again producing negative economic growth and stimulating a rise of
28 social tension¹⁵.
29

30
31 As an illustration of the conspiracy theories of the populists (Vossen, 2010), in September
32 2011 the second Curaçao North Sea Jazz Festival was held¹⁶. The organizer was accused of
33 money laundering by the leader of the PS. The truth of the matter is that the organizer is part
34 of the elite creating added value for the community, but the populists do not believe that such
35 a thing is possible.
36

37 38 39 40 *The populist leaders in Curaçao*

41
42 The leaders of Curaçao can be compared, and by looking at the basic factors and the local
43 factors we can judge the extent of their populism.
44

45
46 The rating of political leaders is based on the monitoring of the media described under
47 methodology above. Each political leader was ranked (either one, two or three plus signs) on
48 each of the dimensions identified in the matrix developed as part of the theoretical framework.
49 +++ indicates that the politician was consistent and gave strong expression to a specific aspect
50 throughout the whole period of the investigation. In practice this meant that they made a
51

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54 ¹³ <http://korsou-uni.org> (Accessed on 28 September 2011)

55 ¹⁴ <https://www.thedailyherald.com/islands/1-islands-news/18695-rst-raids-robberies-lottery-in-curaçao-and-st-maarten.html> (Accessed on 8 September 2011)

56 ¹⁵ <http://www.imf.org/external/np/ms/2011/091911.htm> (Accessed on 28 September 2011)

57 ¹⁶ <http://www.curaçaoorthseajazz.com/nl/> (Accessed on 8 September 2011)
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reference to that aspect daily. ++ indicates that the politician frequently mentioned that case during the period when monitoring was being undertaken. + indicates that the politician mentioned that element of their political platform regularly during the period.

Table 2: The political leaders compared

	PS Wiels	NPA Pierre	FOL Godett	MAN Cooper	PNP Davelaar	PAR de Jongh- de Elhage (Leeflang)	MFK Schotte
<i>Basic factors:</i>							
Denunciation of the elites: the elites as part of the discourse	+++	++	+		+	++	
Glorification of the people	+++	++	++	+	+	+	+
Inclination to conspiracy theories	+++	+++	+	+	+	++	+
Preference for direct democracy	++	+	+	+	+	+	++
<i>Local factors:</i>							
The mother country as part of the discourse	+++	+	+	++	+	++	+
Ethnicity: race as part of the discourse	+++	+					
Socialism	+++	++	+	+	+	+	+
Religion	++	++	+			++	

Table 2 is inspired by the table of Vossen (2010). Caribbean factors have been added. The number of plus signs indicates how strongly this element is present in the discourse and presentation of the politician and the organization. The political organizations are ordered according to their position on the political spectrum. To some extent all political leaders are populist (Crick, 2005). But Wiels and Pierre score very strongly. While many denounce the elites, Wiels addresses the old elites and Pierre and Leeflang address the new elites who sponsored the PS and MFK election campaign. The PAR is headed by the charismatic Mrs. de

1
2
3 Jongh-Elhage, but its day-to-day spokesperson is Mrs. Leeflang. Leeflang defends institutions
4 and therefore cannot be labeled as a populist, in that sense.
5

6 All political leaders glorify “the people” and incline toward conspiracy theories. Where the
7 coalition of PS, MAN and FMK aims for independence, the other parties, to different degrees,
8 value the relationship with the Netherlands, at least for the time being. Where Wiels plays the
9 racist card, Pierre and Leeflang play the anti-racism card, arguing for inclusiveness in a multi-
10 cultural Curaçao.
11

12
13 There have been several changes in the discourse of Pierre of the NPA. He is more in favour
14 of the mother country and promotes a more Christian agenda rather than a socialist agenda.
15 All the politicians to some extent play the socialist and religious card.
16

17
18 Godett of the FOL was a very successful populist who reached his summit in the elections of
19 2003. His slogan was “solo el pueblo, salva el pueblo” (only the people, save the people). He
20 was the opposition to the PAR, who he labeled as the party of the establishment. When he was
21 freed after serving a prison sentence for corruption, the people supported him in a big way. He
22 lost his position after forming a coalition with the PAR and others.
23

24
25 The career of Cooper of the MAN is in decline. In the last election he remained the political
26 leader but did not head the party into the election. His greatest achievement was the
27 improvement of infrastructure in the poor neighborhoods. This formula was invented by
28 Godett in his better days, but Cooper lost ground because of his many opportunistic moves to
29 remain part of the governing coalition.
30
31

32 Davelaar emerged suddenly from obscurity to be elected the political leader of the PNP. The
33 party has been declining for years. The party is trying to rejuvenate itself, but has not been
34 successful at the present time.
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39 **Conclusions**

40
41 Populism in Curaçao is a correction to the liberalism that sometimes become isolated from
42 public opinion and the views of the common people. But it is also a consequence of the debate
43 on decolonization. In Curaçao the conditions for populism to develop are present. The elites
44 are under heavy pressure. The great majority is poor and institutions are heavily criticized.
45 The media in Curaçao are pervasive and invasive. Populism is growing. But the practical
46 answers that populists provide appear to perpetuate the weaknesses of the original system, or
47 reinforce them, while only the occupants of various positions change. This appears to be a
48 feature of populism all over the world.
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52 Populism in Curaçao includes a powerful combination of a number of generic and local
53 factors, namely the inclination to conspiracy theories, a preference for direct democracy, anti-
54 colonialism, ethnicity, socialism, religion, patronage and nepotism.
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3 Further research could focus on comparing several case studies (comparative crucial case
4 studies) and further develop the theories of populism. One interesting comparable case would
5 be that of Surinam. Surinam shares much of its history with Curaçao. Both were colonies of
6 the Netherlands and Surinam is now an independent republic, having obtained its
7 independence from the Netherlands in 1975. Surinam and Curacao are former partners within
8 the Kingdom of the Netherlands. So there are also important differences; Surinam is in South
9 America. However, from the point of view of political organization, the comparison may be
10 instructive, because Surinam is currently governed by a populist president, elected in 2010.
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