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'We Take Care of Our Own': The Origins of Oligarchic Politics in St. Maarten

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the origins, development, and consolidation of political oligarchy in the Caribbean island nation of St. Maarten. It investigates why oligarchies develop in small settings despite the democracy-stimulating tendencies of smallness posited by the academic literature. It offers an historical analysis of St. Maarten politics, and investigates how the smallness of St. Maarten has contributed to oligarchies on the island. The article analyses the political dynamics that buttress and sustain oligarchic rule in small island societies. St. Maarten is an interesting case study because it is typical of the islands of the Eastern Caribbean, including historically high levels of migration, and is understudied. Additionally, the island has experienced oligarchic politics for centuries, which makes St. Maarten a perfect case to study the link between smallness and oligarchy. Finally, because St. Maarten is non-sovereign, our analysis could yield insights into the effects of non-sovereignty on the formation of oligarchies. *Keywords:* oligarchy, St. Maarten, St. Martin, Caribbean, politics, history, small island societies, non-sovereign territories.

Resumen: 'Nos ocupamos de lo nuestro': Los orígenes de la política oligárquica en Sint Maarten

Este artículo investiga los orígenes, el desarrollo y la consolidación de la oligarquía política en la nación insular caribeña de Sint Maarten. Analiza por qué las oligarquías se desarrollan en escenarios pequeños a pesar de que la tendencia, según la bibliografía académica, es que el tamaño pequeño de una jurisdicción estimule la democracia. Ofrece un análisis histórico de la política de Sint Maarten e investiga hasta qué punto las dimensiones pequeñas de Sint Maarten han contribuido a las oligarquías en la isla. El artículo profundiza en la dinámica política que refuerza y mantiene la oligarquía en sociedades insulares pequeñas. Sint Maarten es un estudio de caso interesante porque es característico de las islas del Caribe oriental, incluidos los niveles históricamente altos de migración, y porque es un tema que se ha estudiado poco. Además, la isla ha experimentado una política oligárquica durante siglos, debido a lo cual Sint Maarten es un caso perfecto para estudiar el vínculo entre el tamaño peque-

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ño de la isla y la oligarquía. Por último, puesto que Sint Maarten no es una isla soberana, nuestro análisis podría ofrecer una visión de los efectos de la no soberanía en la formación de las oligarquías. *Palabras clave:* oligarquía, Sint Maarten, Saint Martin, Caribe, política, historia, sociedades insulares pequeñas, territorios no soberanos.

In the academic literature, oligarchy is commonly defined 'a form of government in which political power is in the hands of small minority' (Smelser & Baltes, 2001). While oligarchy is traditionally perceived to be an undemocratic type of political regime, oligarchic tendencies within democracies have long been recognized in the academic literature. According to Schumpeter's classical model of democratic elitism (1943), democracies are essentially characterized by alternating political elites competing for power, while the participation of citizens is basically limited to casting a vote during sporadically-held elections. Whereas the presence of competition for political office and the participation of citizens in this competition unquestionably entails that such systems can be labelled democratic, these institutional benchmarks do not preclude the domination of politics by a handful of powerful individuals (Best & Higley, 2009). Indeed, according to Robert Michels' famous 'iron law of oligarchy', the logistical necessities for coordination and administration entails that every organization, regardless of its political structure and democratic credentials, is spearheaded by some oligarchy. In many of the world's contemporary democracies, the existence and significance of such ruling elites can hardly be denied – family dynasties like the Bushes and Clintons in the United States, the Ghandis in India, and the Santoses in Colombia demonstrate that democracy and oligarchy indeed often appear to coincide (Bandiera & Levy, 2011).

Whereas examples of elite domination in larger democracies are thus relatively well-known, for a variety of reasons oligarchic tendencies in small jurisdictions have so far been largely ignored in the scholarly literature. In the first place, this is a result of the broader exclusion of small states from comparative research (Veenendaal & Corbett, 2014). In the second place, the academic literature on the political influence of a small population size has generally highlighted that small states are more inclusive, liberal, and democratic than larger ones, and offer augmented opportunities for citizens to participate in politics, thereby supposedly reducing oligarchic tendencies (Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Srebrnik, 2004; Congdon Fors, 2014). Yet, to a large extent this literature is incongruent with the political reality in small island nations where political power is clearly wielded by a small number of individuals and families. In the Eastern Caribbean, where many of the world's smallest states are located, examples of elite domination abound in spite of the fact that all states in this region are consistently classified as democracies (Peters, 1992; Freedom House, 2015). In the beginning of 2015, the Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis, Denzil Douglas, was voted out of office after ruling his country for twenty years, and winning four elections in a row. In neighbouring Antigua and Bar-

buda, Prime Minister and National Hero Vere Bird remained in office for over thirty-four years, and in 1994, he was succeeded by his son Lester Bird, who ruled the country for another ten years until the 2004 elections for the first time brought victory to the opposition.

In order to find out why oligarchies develop in small settings despite the democracy-stimulating tendencies of smallness that are highlighted in the academic literature, this paper investigates the origins, development, and consolidation of political oligarchy in the Eastern Caribbean island nation of St. Maarten, which has been administered since 2010 as an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.[1] By offering an historical, in-depth analysis of St. Maarten politics, the article investigates how the smallness of St. Maarten has contributed to the political domination of this island nation by a handful of individuals. By means of this in-depth analysis of a single case, the article aims to sort out the political dynamics and patterns that buttress and sustain oligarchic rule in small island societies. St. Maarten is an interesting case study because it is, in many ways, typical of the islands of the Eastern Caribbean, including historically high levels of emigration and immigration, while also being understudied by both historians and political scientists. In addition, evidence shows that the island has experienced oligarchic politics for centuries, which makes St. Maarten a perfect case to study the link between smallness and oligarchy. Finally, because St. Maarten is a non-sovereign island jurisdiction that is constitutionally part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, our analysis might also yield insights into the effects of non-sovereignty on the formation of oligarchies.

Our interdisciplinary approach, in which we combine insights and theories from history and political science, allows us to situate current political trends in a broader historical context, thereby offering a long-term perspective. Our results feed into broader discussions about the fusion of democratic and oligarchic politics, the effects of smallness on politics and democracy, and historical explanations of regime formation and regime change. In addition, our analysis links up with the growing trend to incorporate geographical and, particularly, regional perspectives in analyses of historical and political processes.

Theory: How smallness could influence the development of oligarchies

Statistically, small states are much more likely to have democratic political systems than large ones (Freedom House, 2015). This correlation has figured prominently in the academic literature, and in recent decades a number of explanations for the link between size and democracy have been proposed. In their seminal volume *Size and Democracy* (1973), Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte examine a number of ways in which smallness influences politics and democracy, and conclude that smallness confers mixed blessings: on the one hand it improves the opportunities for political representation due to the possibilities for reciprocal communication between citizens and politicians, but on

the other hand it hampers the prospects for political opposition, because in small settings it is harder to oppose the political views of the majority (Dahl & Tufte, 1973, p. 108). Inspired by the statistical correlation between smallness and democracy, later studies have primarily highlighted the democratic credentials of small states, for example by emphasizing higher levels of political participation and political awareness among citizens of small jurisdictions (Diamond & Tsalik, 1999; Anckar, 2002; Srebrnik 2004; Congdon Fors, 2014). Most of these studies are not, however, based on qualitative research in small states, and primarily draw conclusions on the basis of scores of aggregate indices of democracy such as Freedom House (2015).

One key explanation for the impressive democratic performance of small states is that the proximity between citizens and politicians in these settings prevents the formation of political elites. According to Dag Anckar for example, in small states 'the distance between those who govern and those who are governed is lessened as the two share a frame of reference which has emerged from shared problems and problem conceptions' (2002, p. 387). As a result of these more egalitarian relationships between politicians and their constituents, politicians are supposed to be more aware of the political preferences and demands of their supporters, thus enhancing the quality of political representation (Congdon Fors, 2014, p. 36). Furthermore, as a result of the fact that political leaders of small jurisdictions are not as detached from society as their counterparts in larger states, they are assumed to be more accountable to their constituents, thereby further decreasing elitist tendencies (Srebrnik, 2004, p. 332). Whereas these hypothesized elements of small state politics do not necessarily preclude the development of oligarchies, they do stipulate that politics in small settings is likely to be more egalitarian, inclusive, and accessible than in larger countries.

While most statistical studies on the relationship between size and democracy thus conclude that smallness primarily stimulates the development of a democratic political system, the more case-oriented literature highlights a number of ways in which a small population size could undermine democratic development and consolidation. In the first place, various studies stress that politics in small settings tends to be strongly person-oriented and non-ideological (Farrugia, 1993; Veenendaal, 2013). The smallness of electoral districts allows politicians to develop personal relationships with their constituents, and personal connections with politicians strongly determine the voting behaviour of citizens. The 'excessive personalism' (Sutton, 2007) of small state politics entails that individual politicians and their families may come to dominate the political environment, and that persons rather than policies and ideologies determine political decision-making. Furthermore, political leaders in small states have been found to remain in office for longer periods of time than their colleagues in larger states. As Paul Sutton underscores, 'small states can be dominated by one or several individuals and … they can be difficult to remove from office, particularly when they have assembled powerful patron-

age machines and/or have concentrated the coercive power of the state in their hands' (2007, pp. 203-204).

Indeed, patronage, clientelism, and nepotism provide another explanation for the development of oligarchies in small settings. Due to the proximity between citizens and politicians, there is a greater tendency to develop particularistic relationships, in which political support is exchanged for material benefits (Lowenthal, 1987). In the first place, in small societies citizens have unrestricted access to their political representatives, and therefore have the opportunity to constantly ask them for various kinds of favours. Secondly, due to these social pressures, but also because of their electoral dependence on a relatively small number of voters, politicians are more tempted to attract voters by promising or offering material rewards. This can either be in the form of direct material benefits such as money, a permission to build a house, or a scholarship, but it may also be a more durable form of support, such as a job in the public sector. The fact that the governing party and its politicians control state resources gives them a major advantage at the polls, creating a strong incumbency effect (Peters, 1992, p. 112). The pervasiveness of patron-client relations in small settings may thus allow politicians to accumulate vast powers, thereby inspiring the formation of oligarchies.

Due to the invariably limited pool of talented people in a small settings, and the fact that one person can and sometimes does hold several positions in both the public and private sector at the same time, those who are able to attain these positions are in a prime position to be 'gatekeepers'. These gatekeepers are individuals who control access to positions of power and regulate the flow of information and political influence (Lewin, 1947, p. 147). The absence of high-quality education in small states has meant that the government is commonly the only professionally managed (semi-) public institution (Farrugia, 1993, Sutton 2007). As a consequence, the legislature, the civil service, the media, the private sector, and the judiciary are likely to be either overshadowed or controlled by the executive. Due to political appointments, the public administration of small states is not only likely to be oversized, but also likely to be filled with political supporters of the governing party, who are regularly appointed because of their political allegiance rather than their professional skills and capacities (Chittoo, 2011). Regarding the media, the absence of professionally trained journalists, the lack of resources, and the ensuing dependence on donors with extensive political interests all constitute major obstacles with regard to independent news reporting. The relative weakness of these institutions and their limited capacity to function as a check on executive power further increases the supremacy of political elites in small settings.

While most of the literature on the political effects of smallness focuses on sovereign states, publications on politics in non-sovereign territories tend to observe a number of similar dynamics (Aldrich & Connell, 1998; Oostindie & Sutton, 2006; Bonilla, 2015). With the exceptions of Hong Kong and Puerto Rico, all non-sovereign territories have populations under 1 million, and an

overwhelming majority of them are island territories. Non-sovereign territories are clustered in a relatively limited number of world regions, among which the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific are the most prominent. In fact, approximately half of all jurisdictions in the Caribbean are non-sovereign, and retain some form of constitutional relationship with either France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, or the United States. Since these metropolitan powers at least formally retain some form of oversight on the protection of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law, in theory the political problems caused by smallness could be expected to have a more limited influence in overseas territories. In the case of St. Maarten, the provisions of the Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands (1954) entail that the (European) Netherlands is responsible for the protection of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (De Jong & Van der Veer, 2012).

However, the available evidence suggests that problems related to conflicts of interest, patron-client linkages, executive dominance, personalized and polarized politics, and weak media also surface in small non-sovereign jurisdictions in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Among the British Overseas Territories (BOTs), the Turks and Caicos Islands stand out as an example of governance deficits, but according to Clegg and Gold, in all the BOTs the 'record of achievements in the area of governance, democracy, and rule of law is patchy' (2012, p. 23). Similar observations are made for the French *Départements d'Outre-Mer* (DOMs) and *Collectivités d'Outre-Mer* (COMs), in which extensive social welfare provisions have resulted in a culture of dependency and a tradition of bad economic policies (Daniel, 2001). In the scarce literature on politics in the Dutch Caribbean islands, problems in the sphere of good governance are recurrently observed and emphasized, and the former country of the Netherlands Antilles had a notoriously bad reputation for governance performance (Nauta, 2011). In short, while the enduring constitutional and political association with a larger and democratic metropolitan power might be supposed to improve governance performance in comparison to fully sovereign small states, this expectation is certainly not corroborated by the available literature on non-sovereign jurisdictions.

Approach, definition, and introduction to St. Maarten

Building on our definition of oligarchy, we employ approaches drawn from both political science and history in order to analyse the emergence of oligarchy in St. Maarten. The sources upon which we base our arguments are historical and are housed in the National Archives of The Netherlands in The Hague, the Royal Dutch Library, also in The Hague, as well as in the National Archive of Curaçao in Willemstad. We pay particular attention to sources that not only attest to the presence of oligarchic rule in St. Maarten between 1800 and 1970, but that also provide clues about the origins of oligarchy. Subsequently, we compare the evidence stemming from these sources with the abovementioned

theoretical suggestions about the relationship between smallness and oligarchic rule, in order to find out to what extent oligarchy on St. Maarten can indeed be related to the small dimensions of this island.

With a population of approximately 40,000, St. Maarten is a relatively small Eastern Caribbean island jurisdiction that has been an autonomous 'country' within the Kingdom of the Netherlands since 2010. Increasing migration has not only resulted in strong population growth in recent decades, but has also created a very heterogeneous society; at present, close to 70 per cent of the population of St. Maarten was not born on the island. About a quarter of these immigrants were born on the island of Hispaniola, of which the majority are most probably from the Dominican Republic. There is also a sizable group of Haitians. Another quarter comes from the (former) British islands, especially the nearby Leeward Islands, and Jamaica. Around 20 per cent comes from the other Dutch Antillean islands or Suriname.

Because the focus of this article is on the origins and development of oligarchic politics on the island, the chronology we will cover begins in 1800 and ends in 1970. The population boomed from 1960 when it was 2,728 to nearly 40,000 in 2013. What, if any, influence this population explosion has for the continuance of oligarchy will not be discussed in this article but is an interesting topic for future investigation. St. Maarten is an interesting case because it is, on the one hand, a representative case for the Eastern Caribbean region, and, on the other hand, a non-sovereign island territory. The prevalence of oligarchic politics in St. Maarten is intriguing because of the island's non-sovereign status and its continuous political and constitutional attachment to the Netherlands, which would presumably have provided another obstacle to the development of oligarchies.

The historical foundations of oligarchy in St. Maarten

There seems to be an almost inherent tension between the function of democracy in small settings and the development of oligarchies. In the specific case of St. Maarten, this is a tension that is evident in high voter turnout – sometimes close to 70 per cent – and yet it also has a history of oligarchic rule by family dynasties such as the Van Romondts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the Watheys in the twentieth century and into the present day.[2] The current oligarchic tendencies on the island have their origins in inherited circumstances. First and foremost amongst these inherited circumstances was – and is – the small demographic and geographic scale of the island. Our analysis confirms Paul Sutton's observation that in small states, individual politicians and their families may come to dominate the political environment. On St. Maarten this small scale, in turn, helped to dictate a pattern of migration that was likely at least partially linked to the emergence of oligarchic politics. Last, but certainly not least, we suggest that the electoral system of St. Maarten

instituted by The Netherlands has exacerbated the already-existing tendencies towards oligarchy.

The small demographic scale of St. Maarten has led almost inevitably to a limited pool of qualified people to fill crucial positions on the island. This small group of people with the skills, training, education, or status to take on certain jobs or positions were thus in a prime position to be gatekeepers. There has been a long history of gatekeepers on the island, but it is with the Van Romondt family that we can clearly trace the link with the emergence of oligarchy (Hartog, 1964, pp. 203-205; Hartog, 1981, p. 63; Teenstra, 1836, p. 280).[3] The first of the family on the island was Diederik Johannes van Romondt, from Amsterdam, who arrived on the island between 1801 and 1803 (accounts differ as to the exact year) when he was twenty. He came at a time when the economy of the island was past its peak and was entering a long period of decline. There had been ninety-two plantations on St. Maarten in 1789, while there were only twenty-three (with nineteen owners) by 1830 and sixteen by 1860 (Keur & Keur, 1960, p. 68). Likewise, the population of the island, which had stood at around 5,500 in 1790, had dropped to 3,500 by 1816, and still further to around 2,100 in 1858.[4] At least in part because of this decline, Diederik Johannes was able to acquire both property and political power rapidly, the former because estate land was coming up for sale cheaply, and the latter because of the growing shortage of people considered qualified for government and administrative positions. For instance, though a newcomer, Diederik Johannes van Romondt nevertheless became military and then civil Governor on the island from 1820-1840. Although the civil Governor was appointed by the Dutch government, the choice was almost invariably the selection of the island elite who had suggested him to the colonial officials.

In 1804, Diederik Johannes married Ann Hassell, the daughter of a landowner, thus establishing an alliance with the governing planter class. They had eight children and the shortage of qualified people allowed the family to accumulate a considerable amount of political power by holding more than one government post apiece. For instance, the eldest son, Johannes Willem, succeeded his father as Governor (*gezaghebber*) of St. Maarten and served until his own early death at forty-five in 1849. His brother, the second son, Diederik Christian van Romondt, at various times administered the finances for the island, was Colonial Secretary, and Crown Prosecutor, an office also held by the third son, George Illidge van Romondt (Hartog, 1964, p. 310). The youngest son, August Alexander also served on the local council. With seventy-two grandchildren, it could be expected that many stayed on the island and occupied positions of power, including an almost perpetual place on the local council – an influential position which included the right to suggest individuals for public functions and a large say in the allocation of resources, including land use, not least of which was the salt pans, the rights for which were bought in 1907 by Louis Alexander, one of these grandchildren, and the issuing of permits for trade.

Some of the other grandchildren were also active in government. In 1857 the above-mentioned John George Louis Illidge van Romondt became Court Recorder at the Court of First Instance in Philipsburg. In the nineteenth century, the office of Court Recorder involved more than merely noting what happened during court proceedings. It also involved interpreting the judgments that would be used in setting precedents; thus it was a position of influence and some power (Popkin, 2007, p. 82). Robert van Romondt was Acting Governor in 1870 and upon his death in 1878 was a local councillor. John Diederik Charles van Romondt was Acting Governor in 1874-1877, 1883, 1893 and from 1900-1902 (Hartog, 1964, p. 311). For thirty-three years he also served as a local councillor and American Consul. He was knighted six years before his death and was succeeded in the very same year by the younger of his two sons, D. C. van Romondt, Jr., who was elected local councillor on 19 July 1904 (Hartog, 1964, pp. 402-404; Johnson, 1987, p. 131).

Due at least in part to these gatekeeping functions, it was relatively easy for the Van Romondt family to gradually acquire wealth and property. The Van Romondts owned the largest of the merchant firms, A. A. van Romondt and Company, which was run by August Alexander, the youngest son of Diederick Johannes, in partnership with his cousin, Willem Henrik Rink van Romondt. The business was incorporated for *f.* 250.000, a considerable sum in 1917, when only around 10 per cent of the population earned more than *f.* 500 annually (Hartog, 1964, p. 383). Other branches of the family were involved in diverse merchant firms. At one time or another the Van Romondts owned every major estate on St. Maarten, as well as the Isle of Tintamarre, a small island off the coast. Moreover, they were the owners of many large schooners as well as most of the two-story dwellings in Philipsburg (Lowes, 1978; Johnson, 1987, pp. 55-56). The A. A van Romondt Company had bought or acquired through mortgage default thirty-five of these properties immediately before and after emancipation in 1863, a time in which many property owners were selling out and leaving the island (Lowes, 1978, p. 28).

Yet by the late 1930s, there were only two major property-holding Van Romondts left on the island, Nora and Louis Auguste, and they were in dire financial straits. By 1948, the last Van Romondt property had been sold and there was no one left on the island with this last name. What happened to this oligarchic family who had dominated the commercial, political, and social life of the island for almost a century and a half? Their gradual disappearance from St. Maarten was connected to the small-scale of the island – a small scale that, ironically, had helped the family gain prominence – and, in turn, helped to dictate a pattern of migration to and from the island.

The economy of St. Maarten when Diederik Johannes van Romondt arrived at the beginning of the nineteenth century was in decline. Sugar production faded into insignificance after the abolition of slavery in 1863, though slavery had been *de facto* abolished in 1848 after emancipation on the French side of the island. After that date, slaves were largely treated as free. Modest and ulti-

mately unsuccessful attempts to plant cotton followed earlier attempts to cultivate tobacco and lemons as alternatives to sugar. The islanders survived by subsistence farming, keeping small herds of cattle and goats, and on the income generated by the salt pans (Hartog, 1964, pp. 446-449). However, by 1900, income from the salt pans, always relatively small, had also begun to decline due to competition from the neighbouring islands (Hartog, 1964, p. 435). Salt exports decreased, falling by almost half between 1910 and 1920 (Hartog, 1964, p. 456). It is hardly surprising, then, that labour migration began in earnest at the end of the nineteenth century when islanders were recruited for six-month stints in the phosphate mines in Sombrero and in Connatable, French Guiana. In the early 1900s most males of working age went to Cuba or the Dominican Republic to work, often seasonally, on the sugar estates; a few others, including some women, went to St. Kitts to reap salt, which was ready earlier there than in St. Maarten (Hartog, 1964, p. 394). This labour migration was occasioned by the low wages and limited economic opportunities on St. Maarten. The population was living at the subsistence level of around *f.* 500 per year (Hartog, 1964, p. 383). The island exported *f.* 45,847 worth of goods and imported *f.* 235,403 in 1923, which demonstrates the untenable economic conditions (Hartog, 1964, p. 455).

After about 1920, people began to go to the United States, where they were able to find low-skilled jobs. Around the same time, in the mid-to-late 1920s, migration to Aruba and Curaçao also began. Oil refineries had opened up on these islands and the Lago refinery on Aruba, owned by Standard Oil, an American company, was particularly eager to hire English-speaking workers. As a consequence of this labour migration, in 1920 there were only 2,600 people on the island and 2,335 in 1930 (Hartog, 1964, p. 704). By the 1940s the island had become in large part dependent on remittances from migrants, most of whom were working on Aruba, and on subsidies from The Netherlands. In 1950 the population of St. Maarten was down to a meagre 1,484, with 627 people designated 'St. Maarteners' (not including dependents) working in Aruba (Hartog, 1964, p. 419). In the 1951 elections, there were 599 qualified voters on the island, 492 of whom voted, but over 1,611 who were qualified to vote in St. Maarten were living in Curaçao and Aruba (Hartog, 1964, p. 419).

The Watheys and the Van Romondts had both been actively engaged in asserting their respective influence over the island from at least the early part of the twentieth century. For instance, D. C. van Romondt and J. J. Wathey had served on the island council together in the early part of the twentieth century.[5] John William Wathey's son, Albert Coenraad Wathey bought three Front Street and three Back Street properties in Philipsburg between 1913-1924, which helped propel the family up the social ladder on the island, as evidenced by the fact that he gained a place on the island council in 1922.[6] In any case, the Watheys, like the Van Romondts before them, began their ascent at a time when the rest of the people around them were experiencing economic hardship. Like the Van Romondts, one part of their power came from fulfilling gatekeep-

ing functions, and another part came as a consequence of the out-migration of so much of the population – an out-migration occasioned by the small size of the island and the concomitant limited economic opportunities.

The out-migration was beneficial to the people who stayed. Opportunities opened up to step into gatekeeping functions and, thereby, build up or extend political and economic power in the mid-1950s. Local business leaders, including Claude Wathey, began to promote tourism in the islands and those few people who had not migrated were well-positioned to extend family businesses as tourism developed. Meanwhile, the automation of the Lago refinery in Aruba in the 1950s and 1960s meant that there was a growing return migration to St. Maarten, which fuelled the labour force for the burgeoning tourist industry and, in turn, helped the people who had not migrated away.

Few of these gatekeepers' children had migrated to Aruba, presumably because there was no driving economic need. That the gatekeepers such as the Watheys (and other families such as the Buncampers, Cartys, Conners) were well-positioned to take advantage of the new opportunities was recognized very quickly. An editorial in *The Windward Islander* declared that,

> St. Maarten has improved [since the institution of limited self-rule], FOR A CHOSEN FEW, for the friends and families of the ones in power, YES, for the public in general, and for the poor in particular, NO!
>
> Self-government is proving a blessing for a chosen few who, because of the opportunities offered by self-government, can take advantage of the positions they occupy to feather their own nests…. THE PEOPLE, not the representative's own little clique only were meant to profit from self- government.[7]

This illustrates that at least some people on the island were well-aware that political and economic power continued to accumulate in the hands of a few 'gatekeeping' families. The importance of the 'gatekeeping' function in the maintenance of oligarchy on the island intensified with the growth of the tourism industry, an industry promoted by Claude Wathey. Control of land access became of even greater importance when he set up a tourist commission in 1951. This was because the government owned some of the best land on the island, such as the Lowlands, Point Blanche, and Little Bay Point. Leases and permission for sale of government owned property had to be obtained through gatekeepers such as the Watheys.

The Wathey family also owned various businesses that they had acquired from the Van Romondt estate. These businesses were particularly well-positioned to benefit from the growth of the tourist industry. For instance, Claude Wathey's brother, Chester, owned the Lido, one of the few hotels. They also owned or had interests in businesses such as the first gas station. Demand for fuel for private cars and taxis to ferry tourists around was increasing, and fuel for electric generators for the new hotels and the desalinization plant that

helped provide water for the growing number of visitors was also needed. The Wathey family's ownership of, or interest in, businesses such as the formerly small banking agency that became a full-fledged bank helping to encourage investors in the island became profitable. The increased demand for cars, construction vehicles, trucks and taxis was beneficial to their car agency. Their KLM agency profited from the increased number of visitors, and their various shipping agencies benefitted from the increased demand for food, tourist store items, and so on (Lowes, 1979, p. 22).

It was certainly not disadvantageous that Claude Wathey held a position on the island council and was the elected senator for the Windward Islands in the Netherlands Antilles parliament (*Staten*) in 1962. Constitutional democracy based on universal suffrage had been instituted in 1948. Institutionally, the position that Claude Wathey held in the *Staten*, along with The Netherlands' desire to move the island toward some measure of self-sufficiency, helped make money available for infrastructure. The airport runway was extended, a desalinization plant built, roads upgraded, new housing areas developed, and schools constructed (Lowes, 1979, p. 25). As a Member of Parliament for the Windward Islands, Claude Wathey was often in an extremely favourable position, holding the balance of power in successive coalition governments, all of which reinforced his power and influence on St. Maarten.

To take just one example, in the 1950s and 1960s, the budget of the Windward Islands produced a persistent and large annual deficit. A favourite ploy of the combined island councils was to overestimate the deficit for the coming year, accept the budget proposal and pass it on to the central government in the expectation of pruning. Budget cuts were decided upon in the *Staten*, with the central government bearing the ultimate political and financial responsibility for the budget deficits of the poorer islands. After the budget was accepted, the island councils had the right to dispose of the money as they pleased. They could change every single item in their original proposal, provided they remained within the bounds of the accepted deficit. In practice, this system enabled the island councils to consolidate their position with their supporters and clients (Tjon Sie Fat, 1986, p. 196). The island councils were able to continue with this ploy because of the fragmentation of politics within The Netherlands Antilles. The Member of Parliament from the Windwards could often tip the balance within fragile coalition governments, giving him or her a great deal of power.

Claude Wathey even admitted that, 'On the island the people vote more for the person' (Badejo, 1989, p. 42). The worth of any politician in the Netherlands Antilles, in general, and on St. Maarten, specifically, is measured by how well he or she meets the personal needs of the individual voter, which is not surprising given what we described above about particularistic relationships in which political support is exchanged for material benefits (Lowenthal, 1987). Whether the problems that are brought to him or her for solutions should have existed or not in the first place becomes irrelevant to the person who wants a

problem solved. Therefore, a politician is seen by the voters as the shortest cut and the surest means to a speedy resolution of their problems (Badejo, 1989, p. 114). A politician who can give voters what they want, by any means necessary, will very likely stay in power.

Conversely, the only secure way for a politician to hold on to his or her following and even consolidate his or her position in St. Maarten was to be consistently on the winning side. Staying on the winning side, at least once a politician had gotten elected in the first place, was relatively easy. Although the electoral system was based on proportional representation – a system that tends to favour smaller parties – the dominant larger parties such as Claude Wathey's Democratic Party (DP) were able to dominate St. Maarten politics because of the so-called incumbency effect: the party winning the island council elections by a simple majority chose the two island commissioners and thus gained control of the executive council and the redistribution of island resources. In practice, the majority faction of the five-member island council always combined the legislative and executive functions by proposing two of their own members as deputies. As the office of Member of Parliament was also compatible with a seat on the island council, by concentrating the political power adhering to different positions and institutions, a three-person faction could easily dominate all levels of local island politics and gain direct access to the arena of Antillean politics which then enabled him or her to distribute favours to voters and, thereby, to continue to get elected (Tjon Sie Fat, 1986, p. 196).

The very electoral system of the former Netherlands Antilles was not designed to foster unity and, by extension, helped to support oligarchical tendencies. In the 1950s and 1960s, each candidate or party leader wanted to head the electoral list to make sure that he or she, and not necessarily the party, would be elected. But these lists did not represent stable political groupings. A leader considered asking other persons to make up his or her list on the basis of the personal following they were able to recruit: relatives, neighbours, friends, clients and dependents, which underlines the personalization of politics in small places. Yet as the form and content of interpersonal networks shifted, persons previously on the same list could have become opponents by the time the next election came around (Tjon Sie Fat, 1986, p. 196).

The size of the island's population during which oligarchic tendencies became entrenched was such that not only did everybody know everybody but, frequently, relatives found themselves in opposing political camps either as candidates or as supporters, particularly in the 1950s. It was not unusual, for example, to find two siblings or cousins on competing electoral lists. For instance, in the 1959 elections, Clem Labega, who was third on the DP list, faced off against his sister, Jas Bryan-Labega, the number three Windward Islands People's Party (WIPP) candidate. In the same election, Sam Hazel, the DP's sixth candidate, ran against his mother, Louisa Hazel-York, who ran in the fourth slot for Nationale Volkspartij (NVP) (Lynch and Lynch, 1999, p. 39). The fact that close relatives were active in different parties is not contradictory

to the notion of oligarchic families. Indeed, it illustrates the point that certain families tended to dominate politics – full stop – on St. Maarten. The electoral system has tended to support choices based on differences between styles and personalities, not between varying visions of how the society ought to be structured. Thus, as the Anthropologists John and Dorothy Keur described in 1957, after two island council elections and one additional election for the *Staten* had been held:

> The two political parties on the islands are named Democrat and Nationalist. No one, in 1957, could furnish a satisfactory explanation of the difference between them. Several of each said, 'We (Democrat or National) are the friends of the poor. We help the common man' or 'They (Democrat or National) are corrupt; they stoop low and buy their votes'. It is not surprising, under such circumstances, then, that persons, including candidates, quite readily shift from one party to another before election time (Keur & Keur, 1960, p. 48).

Despite this relative frequency of shifting between parties, it has been difficult to form an effective opposition on St. Maarten. This is in contrast to other small Eastern Caribbean islands such as St. Kitts and Antigua, where there is a long-established effective two party system in which the opposition wins an election and becomes the governing party. This is, in large part, due to the difference in electoral systems. The 'first past the post system' in place on many other islands with a British colonial heritage favours a two party system, while proportional representation in The Netherlands Antilles tends to lead to a multi-party system. Claude Wathey's charisma, populism, and personalist brand of politics also served as a formidable force in thwarting the emergence of an effective opposition.

Opposition leaders on St. Maarten in the 1950s and 1960s were in an unenviable position. By definition, they were not in power. They may have sought to win over the electorate by pointing to instances of corruption and blatant favouritism by the ruling politicians. However, to a large extent, their own followers would only pledge support with the expectation that they, in turn, would receive similar preferential treatment if and when their leaders were voted into office. After an unsuccessful bid for power, the personal following of an opposition leader tended to evaporate, with some ex-supporters seeking an accommodation with the leaders of the (re)elected party (Tjon Sie Fat, 1986, pp. 196-197).

Fabian Badejo opines that the opposition on St. Maarten has been, 'Unimaginative … crippled by personality clashes, political amateurism, lack of a real lust for power, and above all, the lack of a solid and distinct ideological identity….' (Badejo, 1989, p. 34). Badejo could well be correct in his assertions, but the influence of the history of migration on the island should not be forgotten as a factor. The decades in which the Wathey dynasty was entrenching itself in St. Maarten's political structure – the 1950s and 1960s – were also

the decades in which there were many people returning to the island (Lynch & Lynch, 1999, p. 20; Lake, 2004, p. 23; Badejo, 1989, p. 34).[8] These predominately middle-class returnees largely came from Aruba and Curaçao but also from The Netherlands where they had gone to study. They tended to oppose Claude Wathey politically as they had come back to the island with more education and political and cultural awareness (Lake, 2004, p. 23). Moreover, they were not invested in the personalistic structures of politics on the island and they decried what they perceived to be the Wathey administration's corruption.

These were politicians such as James Theophilus Priest who first went to the Dominican Republic as a young boy and then to Curaçao and Aruba, only returning to St. Maarten in his late 50s. He ran as the second candidate for the Independent Progressive People's Party (IPPP) in the 1975 island council election but it was his first and last election (Lynch & Lynch, 1999, p. 83). The best-known opposition politician on the island in the 1950s and 1960s was Jose Husurell Lake, Sr. He was born in the Dominican Republic, then went to Aruba to work and study. He returned to St. Maarten in his mid-30s where he founded the *Windward Islands Opinion*, a newspaper devoted to being a 'means of helping to improve the social, economic, educational and political condition of the Windward Islands, by advocating against the cause of injustice and oppression'.[9] Yet despite these laudable aims, he was unsuccessful in elections. As the third candidate for the NVP in 1963, he did not get a seat on the island council. Only when he switched parties and ran on the DP's list did he obtain a seat, first in 1967 on the island council, and then in 1969 on the Legislative Council (Lynch & Lynch, 1999, p. 84). Many of these opposition 'returnees' were viewed as being elitists and out-of-touch with the lives of most of islanders who were enjoying relative prosperity after having so recently lived in poverty – a period these opposition politicians had missed by having left the island (Badejo, 1989, pp. 34-35). This would to bolster the assertions of Baldacchino, Dahl and Tufte in which they posit that the political opposition in small states will tend to be cast as outsiders and/or as supporters of some foreign agenda.

Conclusion

This analysis posits that oligarchic tendencies on St. Maarten have their origins in a few distinguishing factors. The small demographic and geographic scale of the island helped to dictate a pattern of migration that was partially linked to the emergence of oligarchic politics. It led to the out-migration of many inhabitants who sought opportunities elsewhere. In turn, this meant that those who remained on the island were in a prime position to become gatekeepers. The gatekeeper families such as the Van Romondts or the Watheys controlled access to positions of power and regulated the flow of information and political influence. Once they had achieved these positions, they continued to bolster their power and wealth and were able to (re)distribute resources in clientage

relationships, further allowing them to cement their power. Migrants who returned to the island and attempted to form an opposition to the ruling oligarchs have largely been ineffective because they were viewed as out-of-touch elitists. Finally, the electoral system of the former Netherlands Antilles which was based on proportional representation was not designed to foster unity and, by extension, has helped to support oligarchical tendencies.

This analysis is in line with the academic literature about the correlation between smallness and oligarchy discussed in the theoretical section. It confirms the existence of close and personal connections between citizens and politicians on St. Maarten, and points to the pervasive patron-client relations between citizens and politicians, 'excessive personalism' (Sutton, 2007), the concentration of power in a handful of politicians, and the lack of institutions or actors that can function as a check on political power. Indeed, to a large extent, the smallness of St. Maarten can explain the persistence of oligarchic rule under different political arrangements. In addition, the findings of this article would suggest that the non-sovereign status of St. Maarten and the historical legacies of migration might very well have exacerbated the influence of smallness on the development of oligarchic politics.

While St. Maarten may be an extreme case, evidence from other small island territories in the Eastern Caribbean points in a similar direction. On all of these islands, politics is characterized by pervasive patron-client networks and the political domination of a few individuals (Peters, 1992; Duncan & Woods, 1997; Veenendaal 2013). As such, the political dynamics and patterns discussed here can in all likelihood also be found in other small island jurisdictions in the Caribbean and around the world. Nevertheless, an interesting avenue for future research would be to compare the 'Dutch' and 'French' parts of the island in order to observe the extent to which different political statuses and political institutions on one island might affect the development of oligarchic politics on the other, or to compare St. Maarten to the British Overseas Territory of Anguilla located just to the north of the island which has also faced a variety of problems in the sphere of good governance. In conclusion, while we have suggested that non-sovereignty and intensive migration might stimulate the establishment of oligarchies, more research needs to be conducted in order to be able to verify this hypothesis.

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Notes

1. St. Maarten comprises the southern half of the island of St. Martin. The northern half of this island constitutes the French overseas collectivity (*Collectivité d'Outre-Mer*) of St. Martin.
2. The last election before this article went to press was in 2014, the first since the reorganization of the former Netherlands Antilles in 2010, and the first in which St. Maarten was a constituent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Voter turnout was at nearly 70 per cent. http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2795/

3. National Archives of The Netherlands, [hereafter NL-HaNA] Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), nummer toegang 1.05.01.02, inventarisnummer 637, 15 January 1791.
4. National Archive of Curaçao (hereafter AN NAC) 3757 – Brieven van de gezaghebber van St. Maarten; Johan Hartog, *De Bovenwindse Eilanden*, 228.
5. NL-HaNA, Collectie G.J. van Grol, 2.21.075, 56. They served together in 1917-1918.
6. NL-HaNA, Collectie G.J. van Grol, 2.21.075, 56. He served at least through 1928.
7. *The Windward Islander*, *Organ of the Windward Islands Progressive Party,* 1, no. 3, Wednesday 7 April 1954.
8. When people started returning from Aruba and Curaçao around 1950, registration procedures were imprecise. Returnees were registered as they came into the census office to register births and deaths, making an exact figure impossible to calculate.
9. *Windward Islands Opinion*, 1 July 1959.

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