

Social Cohesion Survey Curaçao: A view of political engagement and trust

Nicole Wever & Ellen Maduro

From November 2015 to January 2016 a Social Cohesion Survey (SCS) was conducted for the first time in Curaçao. The idea behind this study was to gather a view of the state of key aspects of social cohesion in Curaçao. In other words, the study's focus was on whether the society works towards the well-being of all its members, promotes inclusion, creates social involvement, stimulates participation, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility.

A series of articles will be published on different aspects of social cohesion. In a previous edition of the Modus Magazine (Modus, 'Jaargang 14 nummer 3') the aspect of inclusion was examined in relation to interpersonal trust. The current article will elaborate on some aspects of political engagement and trust within the Curaçao context. A theoretical overview of the main concepts will be given, followed by a description of the methodology, the results and conclusion.

Engagement in political activities enables citizens to implement change in the society and tackle issues that are relevant for the society in general, including individual needs. Some common forms of political engagement are voting, participating in demonstrations and strikes. These actions are seen as actions that can influence the existing political order towards an order closer to one's ideas or expectations. Trust is an important aspect when it comes to activating individuals towards political action as it may be the pushing power to engage with politics. Before one is willing to invest time and effort in such an endeavor one has to have a certain level of trust in the political system.

Theoretical reflections

In debates on the condition for democracy several political scientists, scholars and authors¹⁵ have argued about the relationship between political engagement and the status of democracy. The interest in political engagement was fed by a growing concern about the lowering electoral turnouts, a weakening confidence in institutions, lack of trust in politicians and political parties, etc., which are aspects that are considered to put democracy at risk¹⁶. On the other side some scholars have been stating that “the

¹⁵ Putnam, (1993); Berger, (2009); Ekman, J. & Amnå (2012); Verba et al. (1995); From Berger 2009: Tocqueville, Adler & Goggin, Report of the American Political Science Association's Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement (2004)

¹⁶ Report of the American Political Science Association's Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement (2004)

development of “critical citizens” is not the same thing as the erosion of democracy and the assumption of the decline and fall of civic engagement is, at best, premature” (Norris, 2002, Stolle & Hooghe, 2005: in Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Berger, 2009).

In Berger’s view, political engagement has to do with the *attention* or *activity* or a combination of both attention and activity that directly or indirectly may influence governmental policy (Berger, 2009). In other words, political engagement goes beyond the kind of activities that are normally considered as political participation, such as cooperative voluntarism, neighborhood watches and giving money for charity. Political engagement also includes interest in politics, discussing political issues, voting, signing a petition, participating in a demonstration.

Ekman and Amnå (2012) also give a discourse on the concepts used to identify shifts in the way citizens engage and participate in society and politics. They propose that political participation consists of different forms of involvement and participation behavior. These distinctions are latent vs manifest, individual vs collective, formal vs informal, legal vs illegal. The relevant distinctions for this article are the latent-manifest and individual-collective distinctions.

Latent activeness refers to the sort of involvement that can be seen as pre-political; the state of a citizen informing him- or herself about politics and staying interested. When they view it as necessary or urgent, they will come into action. These citizens are also called monitorial citizens. This kind of engagement has to do with activities that cannot be denominated as manifest political participation (Schudson 1996 and 1999, in Ekman and Amnå, 2012). Furthermore, a subcategory that also belongs to this category is what Ekman and Amnå (2012) call social involvement. Social involvement has to do with citizens being interested in and attentive to social and political issues. Interest is a precondition for someone to pay attention to political and social issues.

Manifest activeness involves observable and measurable rational actions, aimed at influencing governmental decisions and political outcome. Examples of such actions are voting or participating in a demonstration.

Individual activeness is for example the act of voting in elections and referenda. This is viewed as political participation on individual level. Even a blank vote or completely restraining oneself from voting is considered as a form of participation, as it is a form of protest or an expression of dissatisfaction.

Collective activeness entails people undertaking actions as a group or collectivity with the objective to influence politics. Activities that fall in the scope of collective activeness are for example mass demonstrations and strikes.

Additionally, Ekman and Amnå (2012) present a category which they label “non-participation”. Non participation encompasses nonvoting behaviors such as political passivity, political dissatisfaction, not reading or talking about nor watching political issues.

Aalberts (2004) identifies four indicators of political engagement that show some resemblance to Ekman and Amnå’s work. These indicators are 1. knowledge, 2. interest, 3. cynicism and 4. participation.

Political knowledge is defined by Aalberts as the amount of factual political information a citizen has retained on long term. This view corresponds with Ekman and Amnå’s latent or pre-political involvement.

The second indicator, interest, coincides with what Ekman and Amnå consider a prerequisite for social and political activeness. Political interest is defined as a feeling of curiosity for political issues. This indicator is measured by asking the respondent about his or her interest in political issues and to take into account such behavior as e.g. reading about politics in newspapers (Aarts & Thomassen 2000, in Aalberts 2004).

Cynicism refers to certain political viewpoints the citizen may have about the effectiveness and efficiency when it comes to politics, in the sense of being able to influence government policies. It concerns the degree in which politicians take citizens ideas and viewpoints into consideration, citizens may have any influence on the government’s policy and their vote has any meaning. Political cynicism can have either a positive outcome or a negative one. It may result in the person seeking association with a social movement or deciding not to vote. Important in this context is the person’s degree of political trust. Aalberts states that a low degree of political trust may induce political cynicism.

Lastly, political participation is often considered as an indicator of political engagement. The definition of political participation applied by Aalberts and formulated by Van Putten coincides with that used by the other abovementioned authors, i.e. all citizen activities that are aimed at influencing government policy (Van Putten 1994, in Aalberts, 2004). Birch (1993) accentuates the social dimension linked with participation, in the sense of citizens associating with each another to undertake action. Again the collective aspect (coming together as a group) is accentuated. While emphasizing the collective aspect, Aalberts recognizes voting as a form of political participation as can be seen in table 1. Voting, as the most conventional form of political participation is considered an act by private or individual citizens directed at influencing the construction of the governmental apparatus and its policy.

Table 1. Forms of political participation			
Conventional	Unconventional	Illegal	Violence
Voting Campagne activities Lobbying Interest groups Etc.	Petitions Boycots Legal strikes Legal demonstrations	Illegal strikes Illegal demonstrations	Occupations Vandalism Violence Sabotage Murder Bomb attack Kidnapping, Etc.

Dalton 1966, (with adjustments by Aalberts)

Participation is seen as a producer of social cohesion as it eases cooperation between citizens and institutions. According to Jenson (1998), citizens in a cohesive society should participate broadly in political and social organizations, rather than have an attitude of indifference towards them. However, a prerequisite for achieving any type of interaction is that a certain degree of trust exists, as trust is crucial for social interactions, (Costa, Roe & Taillieu, 2001; Misztal, 1996; Putnam, 2000). Cooperation is impeded when individuals have the feeling that others cannot be trusted. This lack of trust may hinder efforts towards political engagement.

Based on the theoretical reflections we have come to the following argumentations. As is theoretically stated trust is an important component with regard to political engagement. A certain level of trust precedes any action or activity. In this context actions or activities refer to those directed to influence politics and governmental decisions and are labeled as political engagement.

In this article political engagement is defined as latent (attention) and manifest (activity), individual and collective behavior that directly or indirectly may influence governmental policy. Furthermore, Aalberts conceptualization identifying four indicators for political engagement is adopted. However, since this article is based on the results of the social cohesion survey we lack information about the first indicator, political knowledge. Nevertheless it is still worth the effort to look into Aalberts theoretical reflection, since this exercise is still able to give an indicative view of the situation regarding the political engagement in Curaçao.

Method

In order to acquire a good view of social cohesion this study focused on investigating the perceptions, opinions and experiences of people on the subject, as attitudes and behavior of individuals and groups in a given society reflect the level of cohesion (Deragolov, Ignácz, Lorenz, Delhey & Boehnke, 2013).

Instrument/Operationalization

The SCS consisted of eight modules each containing questions relevant to one of the concepts of social cohesion. These modules were; I. Socio-economic characteristics, II. Subjective well-being, III. Trust and Political participation, IV. Inclusion, V. Social mobility, VI. Social involvement, VII. Norms and values, VIII. Environment, Health, Material deprivation and Obtaining information. The whole questionnaire will not be discussed in this article. For more information concerning the operationalization see “First results of the social cohesion survey 2015” (CBS, 2016). The relevant modules for this article are: Trust and Political participation.

Political engagement entails the degree in which individuals are interested in politics, have knowledge about politics, have opinions about politics and participate in politics.

The questions that were used to measure these different aspects are;

Interest: “Could you tell me how interested you are in politics?”, “How often do you discuss political issues?” and “Do you look up information about politics in the media?”

Cynicism: “Do you feel that you can exert influence on politics?”

Participation: “If elections were held tomorrow, would you vote?”, and several questions concerning intention to vote and taking part in political actions for example “Have you ever signed a petition?”, “Have you ever participated in a demonstration?”.

Knowledge: no questions concerning knowledge of politics were included in the survey.

One variable was constructed out of the different questions by means of coding. All the positive answers on the questions received the code “1” and the negative questions stayed blank. The new coded variables were summed up and became a new variable of political engagement. This new variable consisted of scores ranging from 0 (extremely low level of engagement) to 9 (extremely high level of engagement). This range was transformed into 3 categories for interpretation purposes; Low level of engagement, medium level of engagement and high level of engagement.

Trust entails in this article the degree in which individuals trust political institutions. The statements that were used to measure political trust are “How much trust do you have in the following organizations/ institutions?”. The relevant institutions are; political parties, the parliament and the government. The participants answered these questions on a 5-point Likert like scale that ranged from a negative to a positive reaction.

Sample

A stratified random sample was drawn from the addresses in the population registry of the Civil Registry office of Curaçao (“Kranshi”). A total of 3600 households were selected to participate in the survey of which a total of 2626 households actually participated. Table 2 shows some statistics pertaining to the sample of the study. For more information see “First results of the social cohesion survey 2015” (CBS, 2016).

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the sample			
		Frequency	Percentage
Total	2626	100%	
Gender			
Male		1029	39.2%
Female		1597	60.8%
Age			
18-29		283	10.8%
30-49		713	27.2%
50-64		871	33.2%
65+		759	28.9%
Level of education			
Low		1305	49.7%
Medium		638	24.3%
High		541	20.6%
NA		142	5.4%
Economic position			
Inactive		1267	48.2%
Active		1353	51.5%
Unknown		6	0.2%

Results Political engagement

Firstly, figure 1 shows that the level of political engagement of the respondents in the survey tends to be low. Of the respondents, 66.5% show a low level of political engagement, 29.4% of the respondents show a medium and 4.1% of the respondents show a high level of political engagement.

Figure 1. Frequency of political engagement

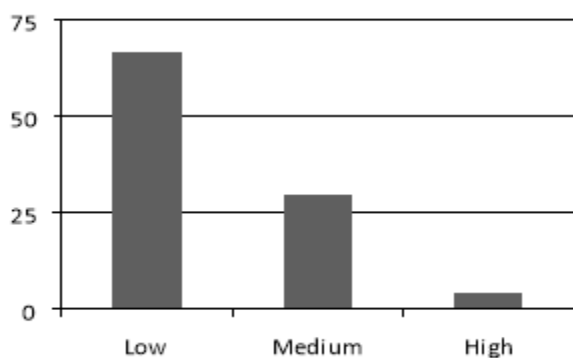


Table 3 shows the composition of political engagement of the respondents of this survey on different demographic characteristics. According to these results, most respondents show a low level of political engagement regardless of their demographic characteristics. Nevertheless, some differences are seen. Vecchione and Caprara (2009) depict gender, age and education as significant factors affecting participation levels. According to them more educated people, along with males and older people are more likely to engage politically compared to the other categories.

Table 3. Political engagement by social economic characteristics				
Political engagement				
	Total	Low	Medium	High
Gender				
Male	1028	59.0%	34.8%	6.1%
Female	1596	71.3%	25.9%	2.8%
NR	2			
Age				
18-29	283	74.6%	23.7%	1.8%
30-49	713	61.4%	35.2%	3.4%
50-64	870	64.6%	29.4%	6.0%
65+	758	70.4%	26.1%	3.4%
NR	2			
Level of education				
Low	1305	77.8%	20.3%	1.9%
Medium	638	65.6%	30.5%	3.9%
High	541	39.1%	51.1%	9.8%
NA	142			
NR	2			
Economic position				
Inactive	1267	71.5%	25.1%	3.4%
Active	1353	61.8%	33.4%	4.7%
Unknown	6			
NR	2			

According to Conway (2001) although gaps between men and women regarding political participation are diminishing, it can be noticed that the male population still has a higher degree of engagement than females. The results of this survey show that men have a higher percentage of the categories of medium as well as high political engagement compared to women. This while women show a higher degree of low political engagement compared to men.

Age as an indicator of political involvement is normally included in participation research. When looking at the age composition of respondents who have a low level of political engagement it seems that more respondents of the age groups 18-29 and 65+ show a low level of involvement compared to the other age groups. The opposite is seen among respondents with a medium level of political engagement. People between the ages of fifty and sixty-four are the most politically engaged. The meager engagement of young people in politics has been explained as a result of young people possibly feeling isolated and excluded from politics. Lister (2007) states that young people are often considered immature and to be

financially dependent on their parents, therefore they are often not treated as equal members of the planning process and power arrangements. Smit, Lister, Middleton and Cox (2005) argue that many young people get the idea that political participation is predominantly the province of adults.

When looking at the distribution of level of education among the different levels of involvement it can be noted that respondents with a low educational level tend to be less politically engaged.

Economic inactive respondents show a higher percentage of low political engagement compared to the economic active respondents while the opposite is seen among the other levels of political engagement.

Trust in political institutions and political engagement

When looking at the relation between trust and the different aspects that constitute political engagement some interesting results were found.

Positive relationships were found between trust in political institutions and political interest ($r = .20, p < .01$), feelings of exerting influence on politics ($r = .18, p < .01$), intention to vote ($r = .14, p < .01$) and following politics through the media ($r = .10, p < .01$), see table 4. A positive correlation means that both aspects move in the same direction, for example either the more one trusts the political institutions the more one is inclined to vote, or the less one trusts the political institutions the less one is inclined to vote.

Table 4. Correlation between trust in political institutions and political engagement

	Trust
Interested in politics	.20**
Can exert influence on politics	.18**
Intention to vote	.14**
Sign a petition	-.00
Participate in a boycott	-.04*
Participate in a demonstration	-.05*
Participate in a strike	-.05**
Occupy a building	-.04
Talk about political issues	.01
Following politics through media	.10**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

couple of negative relationships were also found between trust in political institutions and the willingness to participate in a boycott ($r = -.04, p < .05$), willingness to participate in a demonstration ($r = -.05, p < .05$) and willingness to participate in a strike ($r = -.05, p < .01$), all three forms classified by Aalberts (2004) as unconventional forms of political participation, which is considered as an indicator for political engagement. A negative correlation means that the aspects move in opposite directions, for example either the more one trusts the political institutions the less one is inclined to participate in a strike, or the less one is inclined to participate in a strike the more one trusts the political institutions. A

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore some aspects of political engagement and trust. The Social Cohesion Survey (SCS) in Curaçao has provided relevant data to show an overall medium to low level of political engagement among the majority of the respondents of the survey. Gender, age, education and economic status are factors affecting participation levels. Men tend to have a somewhat higher level of engagement than women. Young respondents seem to have less interest in politics, according to their lower level of engagement in politics compared to older aged ones. Another finding is that a low level of political engagement can be observed for all age categories. With regard to educational level, the figures show that the higher the level of education, the higher the level of political engagement. Moreover, economically active respondents show a higher degree of engagement in politics than the inactive ones.

Furthermore, relations were found between trust in political institutions and aspects of Aalberts political interest and cynicism. Conversely, the more the respondents trusted the political institutions the less they would display in unconventional forms of political participation or vice versa. Political knowledge was, as stated earlier, omitted from the analysis due to lack of information. Nevertheless it is important to underline the importance of adding items concerning this aspect in a future SCS.

Reference

- Aalberts, C. (2004) Politieke betrokkenheid en politieke sensitiviteit onder Jongeren.
- Berger, B. (2009) Political Theory, Political Science, and the End of Civic Engagement. – Perspective on Politics. Volume 7, Issue 2, 335-350.
[http:// works.swarthmore.edu/ fac-poli-sci/ 7](http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-poli-sci/7)
- Birch (1993). The Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracies. London, Routledge.
- CBS Curaçao (2015). Intern document: Onderzoeksopzet sociale cohesie.
- CBS Curaçao (2016). First results of the social cohesion survey 2015.
- Conway, M. M. (2001). Women and political participation. *Political Science and Politics*, 34(2), 231–3.
- Costa, A.C., Roe, R.A., & Taillieu, T. (2001). Trust within teams: The relation with Performance Effectiveness. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 10(3), 225-244. doi: 10.1080/ 13594320143000654
- Ekman, J. & Amnå, E (2012). Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology.
- Jenson, J. (1998) Mapping Social Cohesion: The State of Canadian Research, CPRN Study F03, Ottawa.
- Lister, R. (2007). Why citizenship: Where, when and how children? *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, 8, 693–718.
- Misztal, B.A. (1996). *Trust in modern societies: The search for the bases of social order*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Putman, R. (1993). *Making Democracy Work*.
- Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Report of the American Political Science Association's Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement (2004). Democracy at risk: Renewing a political science of citizenship.

Smith, N., Lister, R., Middleton, S., & Cox, L. (2005). Young people as real citizens: Towards an inclusionary understanding of citizenship. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8, 425–443

Vecchione, M., & Caprara, G. V. (2009). Personality determinants of political participation: The contribution of traits and self-efficacy beliefs. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 46, 487–49.