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Colombia: Democratic but Violent?[†]

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Colombia is a Latin American outlier in that it has traditionally been a very violent country, yet at the same time remarkably democratic. This chapter explores Colombia's puzzle from a political economy perspective, shedding light on the broader relationship between democracy and violence. The chapter studies some of the most important democratization reforms since Colombia's independence 200 years ago. It argues that the reforms often failed to curb violence and sometimes even actively, though perhaps unintendedly, exacerbated violent political strife. Democratic reforms were unable to set the ground for genuine power-sharing. They were often implemented amidst a weak institutional environment that allowed powerful elites, the reforms' ex-ante political losers, to capture the State and offset the benefits of the reforms for the broader society. We conclude by highlighting the implications of the argument for other countries facing democratic reforms, as well as for Colombia's current peace-building efforts.

Keywords: Colombia, democracy, democratization, conflict, violence, power-sharing, political institutions

JEL Classification: D72, D74, P48

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Colombia: democrático pero violento?[†]

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Colombia es un caso atípico en Latinoamérica porque tradicionalmente ha sido un país muy violento, pero al mismo tiempo notablemente democrático. Este capítulo explora esta paradoja desde una perspectiva de economía política, con una reflexión sobre la relación más amplia entre democracia y violencia. El capítulo estudia algunas de las reformas de democratización más importantes desde la independencia de Colombia hace 200 años. Argumenta que las reformas a menudo no lograron frenar la violencia y, a veces, aunque quizás sin querer, exacerbaron los conflictos políticos violentos. Las reformas democráticas no lograron sentar las bases para un verdadero poder compartido. Con frecuencia se implementaron en medio de un entorno institucional débil que permitió a las élites poderosas, los perdedores políticos ex ante de las reformas, capturar el Estado y contrarrestar los beneficios de las reformas para la sociedad en general. Concluimos destacando las implicaciones del argumento para otros países que enfrentan reformas democráticas, así como para los actuales esfuerzos de construcción de paz de Colombia.

Palabras clave: Colombia, democracia, democratización, conflicto, violencia, poder compartido, instituciones políticas

JEL Classification: D72, D74, P48

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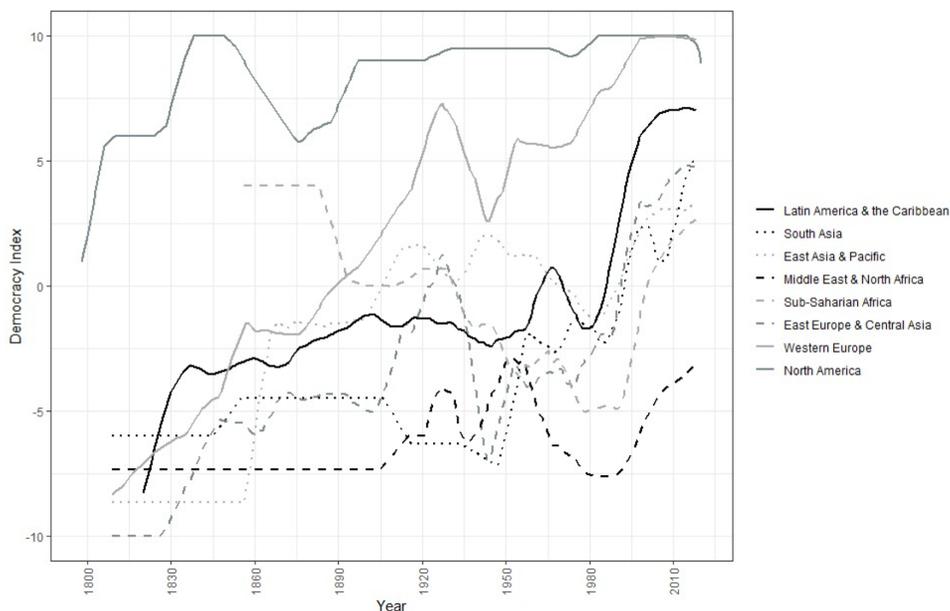
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1. Introduction: Colombia's puzzle

Ebbs and flows aside, over the last 200 years Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has steadily replaced authoritarian regimes with democratic ones and has strengthened its political institutions. Based on the democracy score computed by the Polity IV project, Figure 1 compares the democratic performance of LAC with that of the rest of the world from the early 1800s until today. Since the early 1980s, when Argentina got rid of the Military Junta and José Sarney became the first civilian president of Brazil after the 1965 military coup, only Western Europe and North America have had stronger democracies than LAC.¹

Figure 1. Evolution of the democracy score by world region



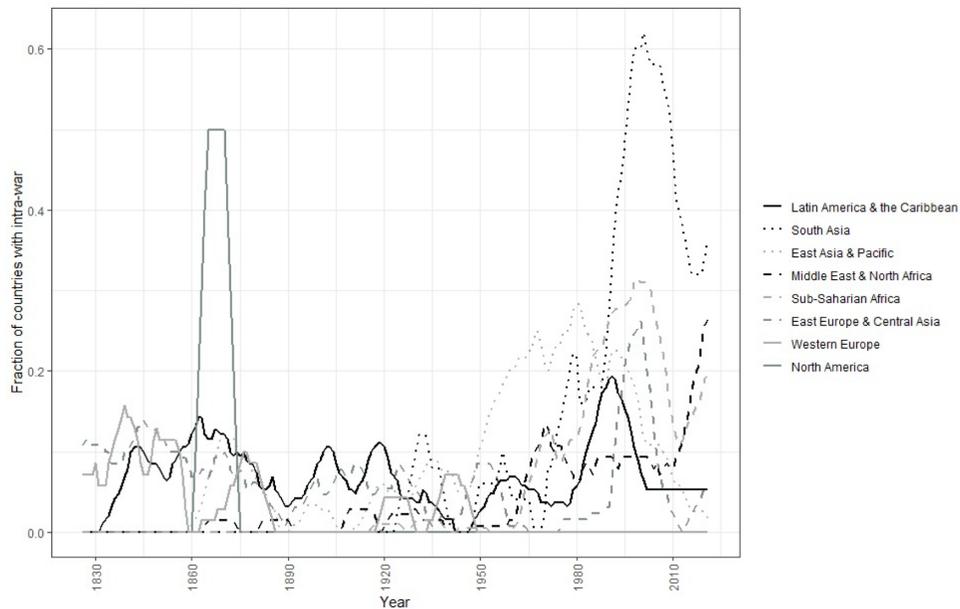
Source: The democracy score comes from the Polity IV project (Marshall et al., 2016). It varies between -10 (full autocracy) and 10 (full democracy). The categorization of countries into regions follows the regional definition of the World Bank except for the separation of Western Europe from East Europe and Central Asia. The Figure reports 10-year moving averages of the democracy score.

The evolution of internal violent conflict in LAC over the same period mirrors that of democracy. Except during the U.S. Civil War in the 1860s, LAC was the world's most violent region until the 1930s. Based on the Correlates of War (COW) dataset, Figure 2 reports the share of countries in each region that experienced intra-state war since 1820. Despite the ongoing Cold War, for most

¹ Note that the figure reports regional averages. Specifically, not all LAC countries were democratic by the 1980s and strong dictatorships were still in place in Chile, Cuba, and Paraguay.

of the second half of the twentieth century and during the last 20 years, only Western Europe and North America experienced fewer internal conflicts than LAC.²

Figure 2. Average incidence of intra-state conflict by world region



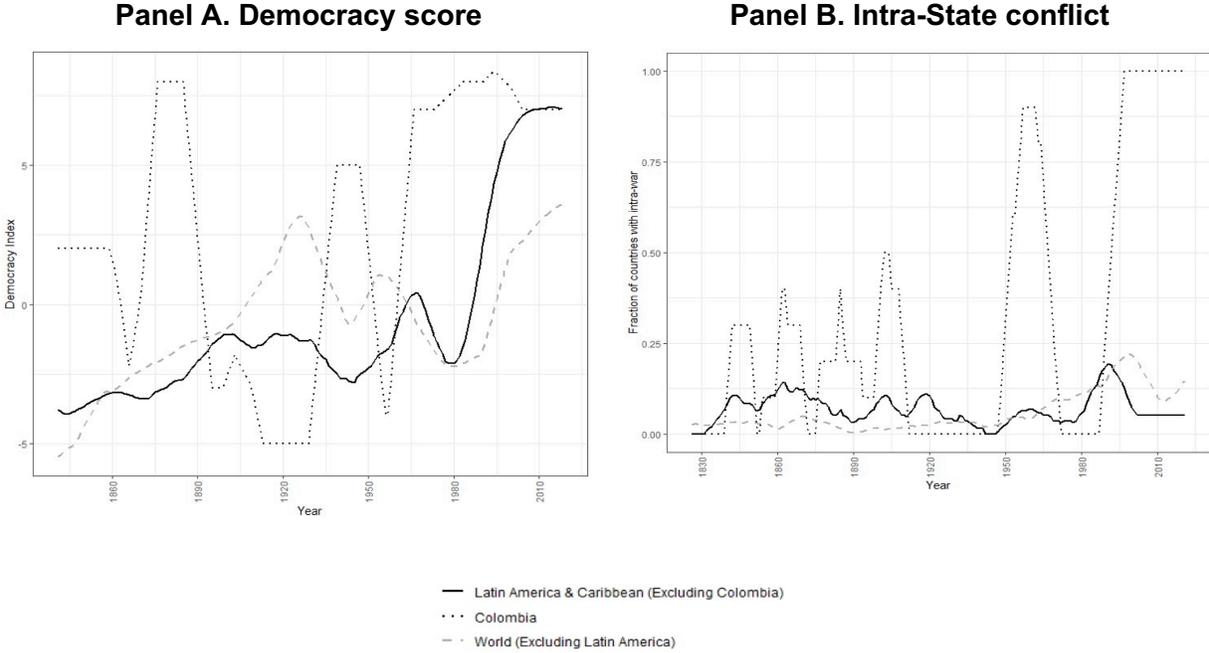
Source: The average incidence of civil war comes from the Correlates of War (COW) Intra-State War Dataset V.5.1 (Sarkees and Wayman, 2010). The categorization of countries into regions follows the regional definition of the World Bank except for the separation of Western Europe from East Europe and Central Asia. The Figure reports 10-year moving averages of the average regional incidence of intra-state conflict.

Within LAC, Colombia has almost always stood out as a democratic outlier and as one that is particularly conflict-prone. Colombia has been less democratic than the LAC average only twice (Figure 3, panel A). First, during most of the period called *Hegemonía Conservadora* (1886-1930), when the Conservative party governed unchallenged after rewriting, in 1886, the Federal Constitution of 1863, thus re-centralizing power to the national State. Second, during the short period between 1955-1960, primarily shaped by the short-lived dictatorship of general Rojas-Pinilla (the only non-democratic regime since 1830), who rose to power after a partisan civil war called *La Violencia*.

² Since the defeat of the Shining Path insurgency in Peru in 2000, the only intra-state conflict still ongoing in LAC is the Colombian Civil War. However, Latin America is today the most violent region of the world according to the homicide rate. 42 of the 50 most violent world cities are in LAC (see <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-43318108>, last accessed 08/07/2021).

At the same time, Colombia has been plagued by internal conflicts since its independence in 1819. Despite its outstanding democratic record, during the nineteenth century the country experienced nine national civil wars and scores of local political disputes that led to at least 250,000 casualties (Mazzuca and Robinson, 2009). Colombia’s track of violent internal unrest was substantial, even relative to its (quite violent) LAC neighborhood (Figure 3, panel B). After a four-decade-long peaceful interim in the first half of the twentieth century (which, incidentally, coincides with the *Hegemonía Conservadora*), Colombia once again experienced extensive periods of intrastate conflict, the last of which is still ongoing despite the peace agreement that the government signed with the FARC insurgency in 2016.

Figure 3. Evolution of the democracy score and the average incidence of intra-state conflict in Colombia, the rest of Latin America, and the rest of the world



Source: The democracy score comes from the Polity IV project (Marshall et al., 2016). It varies between -10 (full autocracy) and 10 (full democracy). The average incidence of civil war comes from the Correlates of War (COW) Intra-State War Dataset V.5.1 (Sarkees and Wayman, 2010). The categorization of countries into regions follows the regional definition of the World Bank. The Figure reports 10-year moving averages of the democracy score.

Colombia’s coexistence, and especially its long-term co-evolution of democracy and violence, is puzzling. Prominent scholars emphasize how democracy and conflict are strategic substitutes

and thus that democracy promotes stability. For instance, Przeworski (1991) argues that access to power through democratic elections and the alternation in office of different parties reduces the incentives of social groups to engage in violence, and thus the incidence of internal conflict. Democracy also allows for institutionalized channels of political dissent and therefore discourages social unrest (Davenport, 2007). Finally, granting political power to previously disenfranchised groups constitutes a credible commitment to future redistribution, which reduces the incentives to organize a revolution (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005). Some influential policymakers from the West seem to agree with the idea that democracy is an antidote for conflict: Founding Father Benjamin Franklin is attributed the aphorism “Democracy is two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch.” More recently, during his 1994 State of the Union Address, President Clinton famously said that “the best strategy to ensure (...) security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy.”

Precisely because Colombia looks so different to other Latin American countries --and to the world-- and so puzzling when confronted with some of the most dominant political economy theories, studying it can shed lessons for the broader relationship between democracy and violence.

This chapter studies the political economy of Colombia’s long history of democracy and conflict. We highlight two important reasons why some of the most ambitious democratization reforms of the past 200 years have often failed to reduce conflict in the long run and have even exacerbated it in some instances. First, we argue that when the nature of social conflict is ‘horizontal’ rather than ‘vertical,’ the democratic institutions need to ensure and emphasize credible power-sharing mechanisms instead of (or in addition to) a credible redistribution of the surplus. This is the case of partisan conflicts such as the one that shaped Colombian politics since independence and until the 1980s. Class conflict, on the other hand, can be appeased by democratic institutions that guarantee economic redistribution.³

As a corollary, we emphasize the importance of avoiding personalistic power-sharing mechanisms. When societies evolve and become more prosperous and complex, the number of

³ At the core of the distinction between horizontal and vertical political conflicts lies an underlying definition of who constitutes the ‘elite’. Broadly speaking, elites are groups that can mobilize for a common political purpose. Under this definition, that encompasses peasant leaders, union leaders, guerrilla commanders, etc., even vertical (class) conflicts can be understood as within-elite conflicts. We thus take a narrower definition of the elite and emphasize the role of the traditional urban and rural oligarchy, with access to legal but exclusive forms of political power.

groups that must access political power to promote stability increases. North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) call this the dominant coalition. But if power-sharing institutions are personalistic --that is, they rely on the identity of the pre-existing parties--these new groups are automatically excluded, threatening stability. We show that this was the case in Colombia during most of the twentieth century when power-sharing reforms were a common strategy to avoid conflict, but with a short-lasting success.

Second, we argue that the appeasing power of democracy also depends on society's general institutional strength. When key institutions such as the judiciary or the military are weak, captured by special interests, or just inexistent, democracy falls short in its promise of promoting "fair" and peaceful power-sharing and political inclusion. The institutional weakness allows state capture by few political and economic elites who often offset institutional checks and balances to favor their private interests and not those of the broader society. Such ability comes particularly handy in the face of democratic reforms that seek to empower traditionally excluded groups, especially if the latter have policy stances that threaten the status quo.

Colombia's long-standing institutional fragility and the vast amount of power that both urban and landed traditional elites concentrate, together with the accumulation of power in the hands of one ruling party or a small coalition, have constantly managed to get in the way of these reforms. A long history of well-intended democratization reforms implemented in Colombia since its independence illustrates this point. This chapter discusses these historical junctures and how a broader institutional weakness has served the interests of those who, ex-ante, would be political and economic losers of the reforms.

Our analysis is guided by a simple underlying definition of a "democratizing" reform as any change in the political regime that grants increased access to power to otherwise excluded groups. This minimal (and therefore hopefully relatively uncontroversial) requirement encompasses different sets of reforms. These range from the increase in voting rights through Constitutional changes, to the implementation of agreements among political elites to avoid excluding electoral minorities, to introducing democratic elections for offices previously reserved for political appointment. All these changes have at least the potential of granting access to political power to broader cross-sections of the population and, in this sense, are "democratic." This democratic potential, of course, is not always fully realized in practice. In fact, as we shall discuss, the struggle to avoid their full potential largely explains the implications for conflict.

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses how democracy can exacerbate conflict and under what conditions democracy is conflict-reducing or conflict-enhancing. Section 3 studies the most thorough democratization reform that Colombia experienced in the nineteenth century, namely the enactment of universal male suffrage, and how it managed to reduce violent political conflict, but only during a short period until new franchise restrictions were enacted. Section 4 describes how Colombia became the most peaceful country in LAC during the first half of the twentieth century by establishing institutionalized (and hence credible) power-sharing mechanisms. It also highlights the personalistic nature of the power-sharing reforms and thus their incapacity to build a stability-promoting coalition over time. Section 5 discusses other limits to power-sharing mechanisms, arguing that they fall short to avoid conflict if other underlying state institutions are weak. Section 6 develops that argument and shows that when traditional elites capture the State with enough *de facto* power to offset the potential changes that traditionally excluded groups bring to the political arena, then democracy may exacerbate conflict. Section 7 shows that these situations are hard to overcome because they directly create incentives to sustain conflict and institutional weakness. Finally, section 8 concludes.

2. Democracy can breed conflict

The common wisdom that democracy averts conflict by giving voice to groups of society with heterogeneous preferences, providing the institutional ground for power-sharing, and appeasing marginalized groups by credibly promising redistribution has been challenged by several scholars. One strand of this literature argues that democratic transitions may result in power vacuums if the central authority is weakened as new groups dispute political power. Under such circumstances, internal conflict may break (Sahin and Linz, 1995 and Casper and Taylor, 1996), especially in ethnically fragmented societies, as ethnic identity can encourage political mobilization (Huntington, 1991, Horowitz, 1993 and Snyder, 2000).

A second line of research argues that the inclusion of previously excluded groups in the political process threatens the monopoly of power of political elites. Indeed, by creating winners and losers, democratization may increase incentives for violent behaviors if the cost of exerting such

violence is sufficiently low. The violent reaction of traditional elites to the arrival of outsiders is not uncommon. In LAC, the military coups of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile were, to a large extent, the response of the elite to electoral victories of the left (Fergusson et al., 2020). In the US South, the elite also responded violently to the enfranchisement of slaves at the end of the nineteenth century (Naidu, 2012).

The elite response to the threat of change posed by political newcomers also includes nonviolent means. In addition to lynching, U.S. Southern elites also enacted literacy tests to de facto disenfranchise most slaves. After democratization in the 1980s, turnout patterns in Brazil revealed the manipulation of illiterate voters by elites aligned with the former dictatorship (Bruce and Rocha, 2015). Patron-client relations, common in unequal societies, also facilitate nonviolent electoral manipulation by the elite, particularly through labor coercion (Baland and Robinson, 2008 and Anderson et al., 2015).

Underlying these examples, it seems clear that the extent to which democracy or democratization curtails or exacerbates violent conflict depends on the underlying institutional equilibrium. A now-standard political economy argument, championed by Acemoglu and Robinson (2000, 2001, and 2005), argues that democracy (in the form of a broader franchise) is conflict-reducing as it provides a credible power-sharing and a commitment for future redistribution. This theory has a lot of predictive power. For instance, Acemoglu and Robinson substantiate their argument with a thorough historical account of several case studies, from Western Europe (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000) to Argentina, Singapore, and South Africa (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005).

In several other cases, however, the credibility of the commitment that the extension of the franchise can achieve critically depends on two key factors. The first is the nature of the social conflict. In the case studies analyzed by Acemoglu and Robinson, the source of the social strife that democracy seeks to appease is vertical. The power-holding elite is the oligarchy, and the disenfranchised mass is poor. In this setting, democracy constitutes a credible commitment to the future redistribution of the economic surplus, which fulfills the objective of the poor, and as a result, avoids conflict. In several other settings, however, the source of the social strife that democracy seeks to curb is horizontal and thus, what democracy needs to credibly guarantee is power-sharing. This implies that, unlike the environment studied by Acemoglu and Robinson, in cases of horizontal (e.g., partisan or ethnic) conflict, the extension of the franchise is insufficient

to avoid violent confrontations. Other features of democracy are much more critical, notably its capacity to secure legitimate and non-personalistic power-sharing mechanisms.⁴

The second is that, in democratic regimes, multiple institutional dimensions other than whether most people can vote are complements in the broader objective of reducing violent conflict and promoting a peaceful political debate. Put differently, the extent to which democracy, broadly defined (not only relative to the presence of election and the size of the franchise) favors or not the peaceful resolution of conflicts depends on the strength of the institutional environment. The institutional equilibrium makes democracy truly a credible commitment of future power-sharing, peaceful political transitions, and economic redistribution. As Przeworski (1995) puts it:

“What makes democracies sustainable, given the context of exogenous conditions, are their institutions and performance. Democracy is sustainable when its institutional framework promotes normatively desirable and politically desired objectives, such as freedom from arbitrary violence, material security, equality, or justice, and when, in turn, these institutions are adept at handling crises that arise when such objectives are not being fulfilled.”

Over the past 200 years, Colombia reflected what Acemoglu et al. (2004) describe as “weakly institutionalized,” in the sense that the institutional environment placed few constraints on the behavior of political and economic elites. Moreover, during the nineteenth century and part of the twentieth century, the primary source of violent conflict was the political disagreement between two elite parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives. More recently, after consolidating power-sharing among them, the main source of contention was the political exclusion of the left. The conflict, therefore, became more vertical, and the left remained de facto excluded until the late 1980s. When new political institutions offered a possibility of political inclusion, however, traditional elites reacted with the facto means to silence newcomers. In hindsight, and as this

⁴ Esteban and Ray (2008) make a similar point in a theoretical model motivated by the observation that since the late twentieth century most conflicts were horizontal in nature, driven by antagonisms along non-economic markers. While their narrative focuses on the salience of ethnic conflicts in Africa, their argument may apply to partisan conflicts in Latin America. Their focus is on how economic inequality within ethnic groups makes ethnic conflict more salient, mainly because it allows members of the ethnic groups to specialize with some providing resources, and others labor, for conflict. It is possible that a similar mechanism arises along political-partisan lines, with rich members of a partisan coalition providing resources and poorer members labor and these tensions overshadowing vertical conflict between economic classes.

chapter argues, Colombia is a hallmark of the failed efforts to consolidate a conflict-reducing democracy.

3. Democracy and conflict in nineteenth-century Colombia

Most LAC countries became independent from their colonial ruler (the Spanish Empire in most cases, including Colombia) at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As reported in Figure 2, after independence LAC became a particularly conflict-prone neighborhood and remained so for over a century. According to Centeno (1997), the weakness of LAC states and their propensity to engage in violent conflict was a natural result of their colonial history. In most LAC, colonization was shaped by plunder and resource extraction, which hindered their capacity to build strong states and organized taxation systems. Acemoglu and Robinson (2002) argue that the extractive colonial model was likely to be implemented in places rich in natural resources and had established hierarchical indigenous societies. LAC met these two criteria. Independent former colonies inherited such an extractive institutional environment, which facilitated the emergence of strong regional elites violently competing for rents.

This contrasts with the European experience. In most Western Europe, the conflict helped consolidate strong states (Tilly et al., 1992). According to Centeno (1997), this discrepancy reflects that LAC's colonial experience left the region without the necessary preconditions (such as a strong bureaucracy and the corresponding administrative capacity) to capitalize conflict for state consolidation. Also related, Genniaoli and Voth (2015) show that the standard prediction (mainly associated with Tilly) according to which war can foster state building largely depends on how initially fragmented a society is. Fragmentation of regional elites might have also therefore been another obstacle to state building in LACs.

Over the nineteenth century, Colombia experienced constant political turmoil, with frequent revolts and mutinies and four coup d'états, nine full-scale civil wars, and several constitutional changes (Deas, 1996; Mazzuca & Robinson, 2009). Violence was the main strategy that opposing political factions had to compete for power rents. Indeed, during the entire nineteenth century, Colombia's democracy was shaped by a majoritarian rule that favored the monopolization of power by the incumbent party, completely excluding the opposition. For instance, incumbents in this sort of

winner-takes-all equilibrium could appoint all provincial and municipal executive authorities. According to Bushnell (1984):

“Political struggles in Colombia revolved around competition for control of the bureaucratic positions, that is, for the meager booty contained in the public treasury or simply for the social status that official positions conferred.”

This motivated the opposition to organize insurrections and the government to engage in violent repression. The Liberal and Conservative parties were partly electoral and partly military organizations (Mazzuca and Robinson, 2009). Violence shaped power transitions, and private armies flourished throughout the country’s territory.

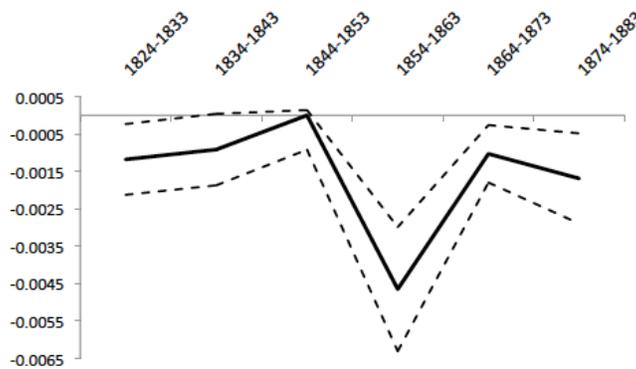
However, in the middle of the century, an unprecedentedly ambitious democratic reform disrupted the equilibrium of constant political turmoil. In 1853, Colombia enacted a new constitution (one of seven implemented since independence and until 1886). The Constitution of the New Granada abolished slavery as well as literacy and wealth requirements for voting, thus effectively transitioning from giving voting rights to a small minority of citizens to universal male suffrage.⁵ For reference, universal suffrage among white men was not established in the US before 1856, and in the United Kingdom it came to be only in 1918. Thus, the 1853 Constitution made Colombia one of the world’s forerunners in the extension of the franchise.

Notably, the large franchise extension allowed political factions to recruit voters instead of soldiers, thus gaining institutionalized power through a much more legitimate democratic process and making it harder for political losers to challenge the election results violently. Moreover, the ability of parties to amass a sizable number of voters made them attractive political allies, which encouraged a more balanced distribution of appointed executive positions. Finally, the 1853 Constitution also introduced direct elections, making the competition for votes more salient by eliminating the political middleman. In short, by giving political voice to a broader base of society and at the same time strengthening the legitimacy of electoral institutions, the 1853 Constitutions shifted political disputes away from the battlefield and onto the political arena.

⁵ Colombia’s previous constitution, the 1843 Political Constitution of the New Granada Republic, restricted the franchise to free men who were literate and owned real estate or had sufficient annual rents.

We study the effect of the 1853 Constitution on violent political conflict in Fergusson and Vargas (2021). We coded a detailed dataset on the incidence of violent political confrontations at the municipality and year level during the entire nineteenth century up to the “War of the Thousand Days” civil war.⁶ Moreover, we use information from the 1843 population census to build a proxy for the proportion of the newly enfranchised men in each municipality after enacting the 1853 Constitution. With temporal variation given by the period during which the 1853 Constitution was in place, this creates an ideal setting to assess whether the areas that experienced the enfranchisement of a more significant fraction of the population witnessed more or less conflict following the democratizing reform.

Figure 4. Effect of the 1853 franchise extension on the probability of violent confrontations in 10-year period windows



Source: Fergusson and Vargas (2021). The Figure plots the evolution of point estimates and their 95% confidence intervals of six separate cross-sectional regressions of the probability of a violent confrontation on a proxy of the number of enfranchised voters in the 1853 Constitution. Period windows are one decade-long and cover the period 1824-1883.

Figure 4 summarizes our findings. It divides our sample period into six decade-long time intervals: 1824 to 1833, 1834 to 1843, and so on up to 1874 to 1883. For each interval, the solid line shows the difference in the levels of violent conflict (as captured by the probability of experiencing political confrontations) between municipalities with more or less enfranchised voters in 1853.⁷ The dotted lines reflect confidence bands around each estimate. The Figure suggests that the

⁶ For its construction we rely on the comprehensive historical account of Riascos Grueso (1949), which records all the violent political confrontations that took place in each Colombian municipality.

⁷ More precisely, we estimate, for each decade, a linear regression of the probability of a violent confrontation on the census-based measure of enfranchised voters and plot the point estimates together with a 95% confidence interval.

1853 franchise extension reduced violent political conflict while the 1853 Constitution was in place, from 1854 to 1863. The magnitude of the enfranchisement-driven conflict reduction is considerable. The average municipal-level increase in the proportion of enfranchised relative to the municipal population reduced the probability of experiencing conflict by almost eight percentage points. This is twice the sample mean. Crucially, municipalities that experienced a larger increase in their voting population did not have different trends in violence before the franchise extension. This helps attribute the decrease in conflict to the Constitution, not to differences in municipalities with varying levels of newly enfranchised men.

The 1863 Rionegro Constitution replaced the 1853 Constitution and renamed the country to the United States of Colombia. The new Constitution allowed each Colombian State to define its franchise in its pledge to promote federalism. Unfortunately, this was enough to partially offset the appeasing effect of the 1853 Constitution (this is also evident in Figure 4). Indeed, empowered by the federal impetus, local elites in several states reversed the universal male suffrage and re-established literacy or wealth requirements. This reduced the differences in conflict levels that had appeared between states with varying enfranchised voters. Interestingly, the State of Magdalena went in the opposite direction and extended the franchise by lowering the voting age from 21 to 18. There, the probability of experiencing a violent political confrontation decreased even further from the gain achieved with the 1853 Constitution.⁸

The short-lived and conflict-reducing effect of the democratization reform of the mid-nineteenth century illustrates how well-intended reforms may not become absorbing equilibria if they fail to address the root cause of social problems. Civil wars and other frequent violent political confrontations in nineteenth-century Colombia were partisan. While the country was democratic, Congressional elections followed a majoritarian rule, with the winning party taking all seats without any substantive power-sharing. Unlike the case studies analyzed by Acemoglu and Robinson (primarily based in Western Europe), in cases of horizontal conflict the extension of the franchise is insufficient to avoid violent confrontations. Other features of democracy are more important, notably its capacity to secure power-sharing mechanisms.

⁸ The importance of the differences in franchise requirements among states since 1863 is further confirmed by Salazar, Torres and Torres (2021), who compare regions across neighboring states with differing degrees of voting rights to document that municipalities with a larger franchise during the federal republic exhibit a long-term increase in voter turnout and attribute this to the emergence of a democratic “culture”.

Ultimately, when the political conditions were ripe, local elites exploited the de jure power that the federal Rionegro Constitution granted to restrict the franchise and obtain higher political rents.

4. Is democratic power-sharing conflict-reducing?

Among constant revolts and insurrections, the Liberal party, responsible for the 1863 Constitution, retained power until 1885. That year there was another civil war, and as a result, the Conservative party took power. It then enacted a new constitution that re-centralized political power to the national State and engaged in policies that abolished many Liberals' reforms since 1863, especially regarding free trade and the separation of the Church from the State. It also abolished the election of state governors, favoring presidential appointments until 1986.⁹ The efforts of the new Conservative regime to undo the Liberal party's policies was called *La Regeneración* (The Regeneration), and its motto was "one nation, one goal, one god."

The extreme efforts to reverse 30 years of Liberal reforms caused widespread resistance and, ultimately, a new civil war in 1895 (Posada-Carbó, 1997). Further, after the nationalist faction of the Conservative party allegedly committed fraud in the 1898 presidential elections, and in the context of a widespread economic crisis triggered by the plummeting price of coffee (Colombia's main export), factions of the Liberal Party and the Historic Conservative Party --a group of moderate Conservatives--started yet another civil war. The "War of the Thousand Days" was the last civil war of the century and the longest and the bloodiest. It lasted three years (hence its name) and resulted in almost 40,000 casualties (Meisel-Roca and Romero Prieto, 2017).

The aftermath of the War of the Thousand Days left a devastated country, destroyed and impoverished. Inflation was rampant, and the country was heavily indebted. The crisis worsened with the separation of Panama in 1903. Nevertheless, the end of the war also marked the start of Colombia's most prolonged period of peace, which lasted for half a century. To be sure, during the first half of the twentieth century, Colombia was the most peaceful country in LAC (see Figure 3, panel B). While the region was experiencing military interventions during the Great Depression, Colombia showcased stable competitive democracy, featuring periodic and peaceful power transitions.

⁹ Later in the chapter we will return to the 1986 political reform that introduced competitive elections of both governors and mayors.

Why did Colombia become a hallmark of political order after a century of civil war and constant violent political contestation? Mazzuca and Robinson (2009) argue that the reason was a significant transformation of its political institutions that ensued a large step toward democratic consolidation in the form of credible power-sharing.

Recall that in the nineteenth century, majoritarian rule led to political monopolization from the party in office and excluded most peaceful forms of political participation by the opposition. However, in 1905, the newly elected president Rafael Reyes, a moderate conservative who had not taken part in the War of the Thousand Days and was seen as a political conciliator, introduced the so-called “incomplete vote” system. He did so by dismantling the Conservative Congress and promoting a constitutional reform that gave two-thirds of Congress seats to the party that won the parliamentary elections and one-third to the runner-up, irrespective of the actual vote shares. This reform ended once and for all the winner-takes-all system that dominated the nineteenth-century political landscape and ensured that Liberals and Conservatives had some access to de jure political power, with shares roughly proportional to their electoral force.

Mazzuca and Robinson (2009) argued that with the incomplete vote, the Conservatives purposefully traded power for political stability. They sacrificed a fraction of their seats in Congress (while retaining the majority) to dissuade further violent attempts to seize power, which had often led to full-scale civil war. Electoral coalitions slowly replaced partisan private armies. Indeed, the new system changed the incentives of the opposition to organize a rebellion and that of the incumbent to engage in repression and promoted a civilized interaction of the two parties in Congress.

By the early 1920s, the liberals realized that the incomplete vote system was no longer indicative of their (growing) electoral support and started pushing for proportional representation. In 1922 senator Luis de Greiff argued that “The main defect of the incomplete vote is that it only recognizes two parties, one of which receives 66 percent of the seats and the other 33 percent, even if that proportion does not correspond to their electoral force.” (quoted in Mazzuca and Robinson, 2009). After various failed attempts by the Liberal minority, in 1929 a quotient rule-based proportional representation system replaced the incomplete vote and further consolidated their political voice. While stability was no longer at stake, the new concession arose due to divisions within the Conservative party. Two factions could not agree on the presidential candidate’s nomination and

sought the support of the Liberal minority. In turn, over two decades after benefiting from incomplete voting and after having enlarged their constituency, the Liberals traded electoral support to one of the factions to introduce proportional representation.

In short, institutionalized power-sharing during the first half of the twentieth century strengthened democratic checks and balances and eliminated any form of violent political conflict for several decades. In terms of Acemoglu and Robinson's (2001, 2001, and 2005) argument of why democracy reduces conflict, the incomplete vote system was a much more credible commitment than the 1853 franchise extension. This illustrates how a key reason why democracy can reduce conflict is the credibility of the commitment that those who hold power make to share it and eventually relinquish it peacefully. Under majoritarian rule, which dominated Colombia's political landscape since independence, and for a century, even in the presence of elections with a broad franchise, political power was never credibly shared.

However, power-sharing, as implemented by the 1905 and 1929 reforms, was ill-fated. This is because it was personalistic, relying on the identity of the two established parties. But as Colombia became richer and new political forces emerged, by-partisan power-sharing institutions became obsolete. By the early 1920s, the Liberals had already hinted that excluding third parties was a mistake. This reinforced their demand to replace the incomplete votes system with proportional representation, which they thought would mainly benefit the excluded Socialist Party (Mazzuca and Robinson, 2009).

5. The limits of power-sharing in weakly institutionalized environments

While the new, peaceful, political equilibrium stuck for almost five decades, ultimately *de jure* power-sharing in the form of incomplete voting and proportional representation became obsolete to avoid violent political conflict.

The challenges to the stability of the power-sharing solution appeared at least since the early 1920s. Urbanization and increasing industrialization meant increasing support for the Liberal Party. By 1922, Liberals believed to have a genuine chance at winning elections if only they were fair. The presidential contest between Ospina (Conservative) and Herrera (Liberal) was very competitive but obscured by fraud accusations. As Deas (1993) puts it, "In 1922 the Conservative

divisions were exploited by an independent Liberal coalition, and the situation was saved by the use of force at the local level and a general reliance on fraud” (p. 218). Following the elections, a Liberal convention in the city of Ibagué debated what to do, and “the nation’s horizon was tragically obscured by the possibility of a Civil War” (Navarro, 1935, p. 46). The threat gradually disappeared, and Herrera’s motto at the time, “The Nation before the parties,” became famous.

The episode reflects the limits of institutionalized power-sharing agreements, even if they originally paved the way to a more democratic distribution of political power.¹⁰ When political circumstances change, the original terms of a power-sharing agreement might become unsustainable and, in the extreme, result in violent conflict. At the root of this difficulty is the fact that a power-sharing agreement over how to distribute power is not “robust” to the changing political clout of participating partners in the agreement. Therefore, an ideal democratic power-sharing scheme should revolve around the *procedure* to allocate political power rather than the precise allocation of power between existing parties. But even then, when the weakness of the institutional structure enables corrupting the power-sharing procedure, the agreement remains fragile.

The growing popularity of the Liberal party, for instance, meant an increasing feeling of dissatisfaction with the original terms that almost sent the country back to full-scale bipartisan violence in 1922. Moreover, the peaceful interim of the first half of the twentieth century was plagued by widespread electoral fraud, a Colombian tradition as antique as its democracy, and often involving violence and coercion. According to Guerra (1922):

“[E]lections in Colombia are (...) terrible confrontations of the press, agitation, intrigue, letters, bribes, weapons, incentives for vengeance, politics, cholera, menace” (p. 608. Quoted in Chavez et al., 2015).

Chavez et al. (2015) study the 1922 presidential elections and the widespread pervasiveness of one form of electoral fraud: ballot stuffing. Stuffing ballot boxes with fraudulent ballots is more likely to occur in weakly institutionalized environments such as Colombia’s, where the State has traditionally been absent from the periphery and the local branches of the judiciary and other law enforcing institutions are completely nonexistent or easily captured. It is also cheaper than buying

¹⁰ The chapter by Kronick and Rodríguez (2021) in this volume also illustrates, for the case of neighboring Venezuela, the potential and limits of power-sharing agreements to avoid political conflict.

votes or mobilizing turnout and easier than coercing voters into voting for a specific party or candidate (which requires a minimum level of economic control over voters). The latter was the case of the Chilean hacendados before introducing the secret ballot in 1958 (Baland and Robinson, 2008).

Akin to Fergusson and Vargas's (2021) estimates of the proportion of enfranchised new voters by the 1853 Constitution, Chavez et al. (2015) compute the amount of likely municipal-level ballot stuffing by comparing the number of casted votes to the census-based maximum potential franchise. They found that two-thirds of the municipalities had suspected ballot-stuffing irregularities. The number of fraudulent ballots was 35% of the total votes, on average, sufficient to turn the election's outcome in favor of the Liberal runner-up, confirming the grounds for Liberal outrage.

The country might have avoided full-scale civil war in the 1920s, but bipartisan violence eventually reemerged. When the Liberal party won the 1930 presidential elections, it (re)introduced universal male suffrage (in 1936) as well as redistributive policies, both in the rural sector (through a land reform) and in the urban one (via progressive labor market policies). This increased Liberal support, but also political tensions and polarization. Two years after the Conservative Mariano Ospina won the presidency in 1946, a new partisan civil war broke out. The civil war was called "La Violencia," killing between 100,000 and 200,000 people until the early 1960s (Chacón et al., 2011), and was the first major conflict after the end of the War of the Thousand Days at the dawn of the century.

The 1922 elections and La Violencia illustrate an important point in the quest for peace-building: institutionalized power-sharing mechanisms are a useful but inherently unstable mechanism to consolidate democracy and peace because the original terms of the agreement might become unattractive for at least one of the parties. Chacón et al. (2011) propose a complementary interpretation of violence during La Violencia consistent with these ideas. They argue that in weakly institutionalized environments, a party's electoral support --which determines its probability of winning the elections--is proportional to its support in the case of an armed conflict. This implies that political competition also makes fighting attractive. In contrast, and perhaps counterintuitively, peacefully accepting electoral results can be more stable if one party is

dominant.¹¹ Under this line of reasoning, the increased electoral support that the Liberals amassed since the 1930s, by increasing competitiveness, could have spurred violent partisan conflict despite the power-sharing scheme in place.

More generally and as discussed in section 2, while de jure power-sharing is an important institutional element to curb conflict in a democracy, it is not sufficient. Perhaps the most fundamental underlying condition for democracy to succeed is the strength of the broader institutional equilibrium. In the next section, we discuss how an ambitious reform that sought precisely to deepen Colombia's power-sharing institutions by allowing parties other than the Liberal and the Conservative to dispute local elections largely backfired. Instead of reducing the intensity of the internal conflict, it made things worse due to the violent response of traditional elites to the political dispute of newcomers.

6. Institutional capture and how democratization can backfire

In weakly institutionalized environments in which political and economic elites can capture key institutions such as the military or the judiciary, the political empowerment of traditionally excluded groups may push the menaced political elites to react violently, especially if the policy stance of the newcomers threatens the status quo. Precisely this occurred in Colombia since the end of the 1980s. To see why, let us get back to the last partisan civil war that sieged Colombia: La Violencia.

Faced with economic devastation and many casualties on each side, the Liberal and Conservative parties ended La Violencia by establishing the National Front in 1958. The National Front was a power-sharing deal. The two parties committed to alternate the presidency every four years and divide all public posts equally, including the appointed state governors and municipal mayors. Even when facing widespread violence, the solution was not to allow for broader political participation but rather to regress to a stricter personalistic power-sharing arrangement between the two main parties. While this strategy brought some short-term stability, it did so at the cost of alienating organizations outside the dominant coalition. Ultimately, the National Front set the ground for a subsequent, more protracted, and much more costly civil war.

¹¹ Consistent with their theoretical argument, Chacón et al. (2011) found that, during La Violencia, conflict occurred in the places in which the electoral support of both parties in the 1946 elections was more balanced. Instead, in areas where one of the parties had a large electoral edge no fighting took place.

Indeed, the strict power-sharing agreement explicitly excluded all other political movements. Because the two colluding parties were both factions of the country's economic elites, with blurred ideological differences, the groups that stood out as de facto the most affected by political exclusion were those ideologically aligned with the left. Alvarez (2013) finds decreased turnout and more political distrust in the long run (as late as 2011) in those municipalities where the National Front excluded a larger political and electoral mass, as measured by the vote share of non-traditional parties before the agreement. Indeed, as in the conventional wisdom where non-democratic features promote violence, this triggered the mobilization of different segments of society, both in urban and rural areas, and the subsequent formation of left-wing guerrilla movements starting in the mid-1960s. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC from the Spanish acronym) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) were the largest ones.

To finance their operation, guerrillas engaged in illegal activities such as extortion, ransom, and kidnapping. This precipitated the creation in the late 1960s of paramilitary self-defense militias funded by landowners and supported and trained, first with the reach and the law and then illegally, by the military (Dudley, 2004; Acemoglu et al., 2013). In the mid-1990s, splintered paramilitary groups colluded under the umbrella organization of the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), and as a result, the conflict escalated substantially.

By the early 1980s, increasing violence in rural areas led the administration of President Belisario Betancourt to start peace talks with several insurgent groups. As part of the negotiation, FARC demanded mechanisms for political participation. Even when the National Front had formally ended in 1974, the de facto continuation of the bi-partisan collusion was evident. As a result, the government undertook profound institutional changes to foster broader political participation. In particular, the electoral system was reformed in 1986 to allow, starting in 1988, the direct election of governors and mayors by simple plurality rule.

The 1991 Constitution further consolidated the opening of the political system by making the stakes of winning local elections higher (Steele and Schubiger, 2018). It did so by complementing political decentralization with fiscal autonomy for regional entities. Under the new system, municipalities received transfers from the central government and a large share of the revenue coming from the exploitation of their hosted natural resources. They were also granted the

collection of specific local taxes and expenditure responsibilities to cover basic services at the local level.

Relinquishing the power to appoint local executive authorities directly constituted an unprecedented step toward opening the political system in Colombia. Traditionally excluded groups representing peasants, workers, ethnic groups, students, and other segments of society could now dispute local elections. While not all the newcomers were left-wing parties, the policy proposals of the left were particularly threatening to the interests of traditional elites. Fergusson et al. (2020) show that in places where left-wing challengers won mayoral elections, local elites reacted by colluding with private paramilitary groups and exerted violence to influence the outcome of subsequent elections.

Specifically, and to statistically assess the causal effect on violence of the victory of local executive offices of previously excluded left-wing parties, the authors rely on a regression discontinuity design that compares municipalities in which a left-wing candidate narrowly won the mayoral race with municipalities in which a left-wing politician narrowly lost. They find that a narrow left-wing local victory multiplied by three the number of violent paramilitary attacks during the subsequent government term. Notably, the violent paramilitary reaction that proceeds the triumph of the left is concentrated toward the end of the government period, a result consistent with the idea that traditional elites incite violence to prevent left-wing groups from increasing their representation in local government and retaining power at the local level. In fact, the authors also document that left-wing parties in Colombia have a very large incumbency disadvantage.

Fergusson et al. (2020) report two additional relevant results. First, in sharp contrast with the dynamics of paramilitary violence, when a left-wing candidate wins the election by a small margin, there is no surge in violence perpetrated by guerrillas. Second, when a non-left-wing newcomer wins the election by a narrow margin, there is no violent reaction of any type. These results are crucial to understanding the kind of political openness that may increase political violence. The first finding illustrates how the use of violence --rather than other means such as electoral fraud--to counteract the private loss that democratization entails to political incumbents requires a comparative advantage in the access to violent means. This includes the control of private armies, the collusion with the military, and the complicity of other law enforcement institutions such as the judiciary. The second shows that traditional elites must feel sufficiently threatened in their interests by the policy platform of the newcomers.

Perhaps the most important new player in competitive politics after the political openness resulting from the 1986 reform was FARC's political branch, the Patriotic Union (UP from the Spanish acronym). As a case study of the broader patterns documented by Fergusson et al. (2020), Steele (2017) documents how after several victories in the first elections that UP contested, including nine congressional seats and 351 seats in municipal councils, paramilitary groups killed the party's candidates systematically and targeted its sympathizers collectively through massacres that killed hundreds and made tens of thousands to flee.

Between 1986 and 1988, over 500 active UP members were killed, including four congressmen, 45 council members, and Jaime Pardo, who obtained an unprecedented 4.5% of votes in the 1986 presidential elections (Steele and Schubiger, 2018). Illustrative of the broader findings of Fergusson et al. (2020), this prevented UP from competitively contesting elections any further.

This episode of Colombia's political history portrays how well-intended and ambitious democratic reforms, and in fact purposefully designed to curb conflict, can instead set the ground for conflict escalation and the consolidation of new and powerful violent groups. This occurs because, in weakly institutionalized environments, traditional elites can capture democratic institutions to advance their private interests. Ultimately, institutionalized power-sharing does not work and may even backfire if the broader institutional equilibrium is in disarray.

7. Political rents from disorder

We have argued that democratic reforms, viewed as efforts to include otherwise excluded groups, may backfire and spur violent conflict in weakly institutionalized settings. This section notes that such a situation is hard to overcome because it directly creates incentives to sustain disorder. Indeed, groups exercising or benefitting from violence derive political rents from the institutional weakness that enables them to limit the benefits of reforms or even use them for their electoral advantage. Therefore, groups are interested in sustaining institutional weakness; violence becomes a side effect, at best, or even a direct source of rents (Fergusson, 2019).

Again, Colombia's history demonstrates these possibilities, where groups may oppose ending conflict for fear of losing an electoral advantage and political power. Acemoglu, Robinson, and

Santos (2013) show this in the case of “parapoliticians.” These are politicians who agreed to conspire with illegal paramilitary militias to influence elections through violence and coercion. The authors show that where paramilitaries were present, parapoliticians thrived electorally. More importantly, senators who received more electoral support in areas with paramilitary influence were more likely to support policies benefiting the paramilitaries. Finally, paramilitary control was more persistent where they delivered votes to their preferred (and ultimately winning) presidential candidate. In short, all this evidence is consistent with (some) political groups allowing violent, illegal armed groups to persist because they provide electoral advantages.

Democratic institutions can also be instrumental for violence in more subtle ways. Fergusson, Robinson, Torvik, and Vargas (2016) suggest that some politicians might prefer violence to persist when perceived as having an advantage in the military fight against insurgents. Consistent with this idea, after the most significant victories against FARC rebels in Colombia, the right-wing government of Alvaro Uribe (whose main electoral platform revolved around the fight against the FARC) reduced its counterinsurgency efforts, especially in municipalities that Uribe cared more about electorally.

Politicians are not the only potential beneficiaries of violence and the resulting institutional disarray. Public functionaries may also benefit, as illustrated by Colombian “false positives,” a euphemism for civilians killed by the armed forces to misrepresent them as guerilla members killed in combat. Acemoglu, Fergusson, Robinson, Romero, and Vargas (2020) show that these assassinations responded to a policy that (formally and informally) rewarded army units for their anti-insurgency performance as measured by the “body count.” This was particularly the case for military units headed by colonels, who face more substantial promotion incentives than generals. False positives were also more common in areas with weak local judicial institutions for oversight. More relevant for explaining the persistence of weak institutions and conflict, the efficiency of judicial institutions further deteriorated where brigades were led by colonels, suggesting an incentive to sustain institutional weakness to protect the rents from violence.

8. Conclusion

This chapter argued that the relationship between democracy or democratization and violent political conflict is nuanced. At least two key factors shape the extent to which democratic reforms

can either curb or exacerbate conflict. The first one is the extent to which reforms generate the right incentives to stop the fighting. Crucially, this depends on the nature of the underlying social conflict. In a now-classic theory of democratization, an oligarchy that holds power democratizes to provide credible future redistributive concessions, averting a rebellion from the disenfranchised poor. This is an example of a vertical political conflict that democratization discourages via material redistribution. It can explain several cases in which reforms set the ground for long periods of peace, notably the franchise extension in nineteenth-century Western Europe. However, in other instances, the underlying conflict could be more horizontal at its core, for example, when two political parties or other social groups that are heterogeneous on a dimension other than their socioeconomic status fight for power. In such cases, democratization reforms can only sustainably reduce conflict if they include institutionalized and non-personalistic power-sharing mechanisms.

The second factor is the broader institutional equilibrium. When democratization entails power-sharing mechanisms, this implies that political and social groups that were (de jure or de facto) previously excluded from the political arena can now compete in elections and obtain positions of power. This necessarily makes some groups worse off, namely those who, before the reform, had the monopoly of power. In such cases, and precisely because it transitions to being more inclusive, democratization can exacerbate rather than attenuate political conflict. Critically, this depends on the degree to which traditional elites capture key institutions such as the judiciary or the military.

The chapter argues that these two factors explain why Colombia, perhaps surprisingly, has stood out within Latin America --and also relative to most of the world— as a puzzling case whereby a “strong” democracy (in the form of relatively free and fair elections) has persisted alongside with constant violent political conflict for the last 200 years.

In the mid-1800s, amidst frequent and recurring partisan violence, Colombia was one of the first countries in the world to introduce universal male suffrage. This reform managed to substantially reduce violent conflict for about a decade until local elites in various parts of the territory took advantage of the move toward federalism to revert the franchise restrictions. Importantly, even if it gave political voice to a large majority of citizens, this enfranchisement took place under majoritarian rule. Thus, political exclusion persisted in a winner-takes-all type of system until the end of the century. In 1905, and explicitly to avoid yet another civil war, a second ambitious reform

ended the majoritarian system and gave a third of the Congress seats to the minority party. This “incomplete vote” system later became a proper proportional representation setting with quotient rule (in 1929). Violence was thus avoided for half a century, a record for Colombia. However, when the political support of the two traditional parties grew to similar proportions, a new civil war erupted in the late 1940s, and it ended with a new power-sharing agreement that de facto excluded all non-traditional political voices from the political arena. This set the seed for yet a new civil war, which started in the 1960s. As a response, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Colombia undertook several democratizing reforms seeking political inclusion, notably the introduction of local-level elections. This triggered the entry of traditionally excluded groups, particularly left-wing parties. But, yet again, these reforms exacerbated the internal conflict instead of reducing it. It did so by threatening the interests of traditional elites. Critically, the violent reaction of these elites can be explained by their extensive and unchecked access to both institutionalized and violent power, a consequence of Colombia’s weak institutional equilibrium.

This discussion implies that, for it to be conflict-reducing, democracy needs three key ingredients: a credible commitment for future redistribution of the surplus, institutionalized and non-personalistic power-sharing mechanisms, and, perhaps most importantly, several dimensions of institutions must effectively function together for democracy to prosper. In particular, some of which Colombia has traditionally lacked, such as the monopoly over violence in the hands of the legitimate State and checks and balances capable of preventing the disproportional accumulation of political power in the hands of a few individuals.

We argue that our introspection into Colombia’s long history of democracy and conflict from a political economy perspective is relevant for the present. On the one hand, democratization reforms and political opening are still common in the developing world. On the other hand, Colombia’s recent peace agreement with FARC, the largest and oldest guerrilla of the country, constitutes both a huge opportunity and an immense challenge for the country’s consolidation of a resilient peace. Indeed, by recognizing both the roots of the conflict and part of the reasons why it persisted for over half a century, one of the critical points of the agreement is that the conditions for the political participation of former FARC leaders and combatants should be guaranteed and protected. However, the implementation of the peace agreement has been at best slow, and Colombia’s political equilibrium has not changed significantly. The traditional elites have managed to entrench in power by changing identity and coalition once and again, and by blocking the implementation of the agreement. At the time of writing this chapter, the party in office campaigned

under the slogan of tearing the agreement apart. The situation in former FARC strongholds is not very different, and local social leaders and former FARC combatants became increasingly targeted by illegal groups even since the start of peace negotiations.

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