Violence, co-optation, and postwar voting in Guatemala

Word count: 9,990

Abstract

Wartime civilian victimization produces a counter-reaction against the perpetrator. However, this effect hinges on the creation of collective memories of the conflict. In many countries, former fighting actors and political elites try to redirect memories of the conflict through denial, propaganda, and co-optation. Previous works have ignored these aspects. I argue that the effect of violence is conditional on the capacity of local communities to build collective memories and bypass those efforts. I test this argument using local-level from Guatemala. Results show that the effects of state violence on postwar voting depend on prewar exposure to political mobilization.

Identifying the mechanism

Road infrastructure and the diffusion of political activists

In Chupol, Chichicastenango Esparza (2018): "for communities lying off the main road, facilitating the introduction of the new liberation theology gospel was the expansion of the Interamerican Highway in 1956. Chupolenses used the highway to increase their economic, social, and political networks throughout El Quiché. ... As their geographical isolation was now reduced by easier access to el pueblo and other adjacent townships, and particularly to Guatemala City, merchants both traveled to meet and were visited by outside institutions: rural Catholic Action catechists and Spanish and North American missionaries" (Esparza, 2018, 93–94).

Beyond the role of key actors, the argument states that better connected communities should have had more intensive and continued contact with the poles of leftist mobilization. Along these lines, Bran (1985), writing in late 1980, explains that it was not only the main peasant or religious organizations that engaged in political mobilization, but also other types of local organizations that did not have explicit political goals but were also used as platforms for mobilization. For example, he talks about a local soccer team where "young revolutionaries make use of the weekly tours of regional championships to communicate with young peasants ... to exchange information, reading materials, ask for or offer help and other support activities for the organized popular movement" (Bran, 1985, 15). It makes sense to expect that all these day-to-day activities would be more intense between better connected communities. This idea is coherent with previous research that identifies a higher potential for rebellion among subnational groups that are more isolated from the state but better connected internally (Müller-Crepon, Hunziker & Cederman, 2021).

Presence of priests and activists and leftist preferences

"I define as 'literate communities' those Chupol communities that were better prepared to consciously unmask the true goals of the army's civil action and psychological campaigns

... disseminating the internal enemy propaganda designed to compel peasants to join the patrol system" (Esparza, 2018, 92).

Postwar commemoration activities

The role of propaganda

Bran (1985, 16) says that "one of the most effective channels for the Guatemalan burgeoisie to disseminate foreign and conservative ideologies among the people is the radio: falsified news, concealment of information, radio soap operas, official radio stations, ideologized messages, propaganda, etc."

Lieselotte Viaene dissertation, pag 169: example of a remembrance activity in the Sahak'ok region, Alta Verapaz, and talks about a neighboring hamlet, isolated, where military control was high and thus people did not participate in the remembrance activites during the mid-1990s because of fear.

"The neighbouring village Salacium, at that time a three-hour walk across a sloping landscape, had a very different experience of the war. This village was totally controlled by the military base of Playa Grande and formed the limit of the scorched-earth campaigns. ... The commissioners and chiefs of PAC of the village provoked terror and fear. ... This is the main reason why the people of Salacium did not participate in the construction of the cross as the participants received several treats from commissioners and chiefs of PAC of Salacium that they would destroy the cross." (Viaene, 2011, 169)

"This memorial became a physical and spiritual site of memory, which made room not only for spiritual healing and public mourning; this cross also created space for openly challenging and offering a counter-narrative against the army discourse that all the people who hid in the mountains were guerrilleros (aj rub'el pim) and therefore responsible for the atrocities." (Viaene, 2011, 170–171)

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