

# **Machine Gun Politics: Why Politicians Cooperate with Criminal Groups**

**Book Proposal**

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## **1 Project description**

13% of Latin Americans live under criminal governance. Across the region, criminal groups provide order and influence over minute details of civic life – even electoral politics. Taken together, these residents represent a formidable voting bloc, and could single-handedly sway legislative and executive elections. How does living under criminal control affect their vote choice? Relatedly, how do politicians evaluate risks when approaching these voters and their criminal governors? Who benefits, electorally, when criminal groups govern?

There is a strong consensus that criminal groups can influence elections. However, much of the literature focuses on criminal groups' incentives to engage with politics, leaving voters' and candidates' decisions unexplored. To understand how criminal governance affects voters' and candidates' choices during electoral campaigns, this book explores candidate-criminal electoral interactions and their consequences in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Electoral cooperation is a common yet underexplored interaction between candidates and criminal groups. That candidates would strike collusive deals with organized crime could be puzzling. Partnering with criminal groups could be toxic to a candidate's reputation, criminal groups are known

perpetrators of political violence, and it is often illegal to associate with them. Existing scholarship reflects these risks, often depicting candidates as one of two extremes: (1) engaging with organized crime under duress, and having little agency (passive bribe-takers or victims), or (2) deeply embedded and politically aligned (often as criminal group members themselves). However, the reality is more nuanced.

I demonstrate that professional politicians often strike strategic deals with criminal groups, and there exists a spectrum of cooperative arrangements between “passive bribe taker” and “fellow gangster.” In fact, candidates often strike mutually beneficial bargains with organized crime, leveraging criminal groups’ local influence for *their* electoral gain. I argue that resolving this empirical puzzle requires an understanding of how candidates evaluate and minimize risk while on the campaign trail. Specifically, candidates minimize reputational, legal, and security risks by striking spot deals with criminal groups. When candidates are able to strike such deals, they solve the commitment problem and earn votes, while criminal groups earn a one-time payoff. The nature of the candidate-criminal group deal has downstream implications for voters: it determines how (if at all) criminal groups mobilize voters, and how accountable their elected officials are, both to the group and to the voters. The book has key implications for our understanding of not only the risk assessments candidates make, but also the ways criminal groups interact with voters and the broader implications of criminal governance on democratic participation and accountability.

The empirical evidence in this book integrates several original pieces of evidence, collected over twenty months of fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro. This includes over seventy interviews with candidates for local office, community leaders, criminal group members, and voters; an in-person survey administered to more than 350 residents subject to criminal governance; and a telephone survey administered to more than 300 candidates for local office. I also collected information from administrative and NGO records to create an original large-N database linking voting records with criminal governance and politician accountability. To compile these sources, I generated original

data, scraping public websites and using text processing tools to prepare the data for analysis. Each of these sources provides important insights into the role of criminal governance in electoral politics. I evaluate my theory using a multi-method strategy that includes multiple natural and survey experiments, observational analyses, and case study comparisons.

This project focuses on Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for theoretical and empirical reasons. This setting has rich within-case variation in the types of collusive agreements (from long-term partnerships to arms-length deals) and types of criminal groups (from warring drug trafficking organizations to extortion rackets). The subnational variation allows me to hold the broader institutional setting constant to isolate the effect of deal-striking on electoral outcomes and eliminate alternative explanations.

My book speaks to broad debates within comparative politics. There is not yet a theory explaining how distributive politics operate amidst criminal governance, two critical modalities of politics in the developing world that have largely been examined separately. Existing theories of criminal politics focus on what criminal groups can gain from getting involved in elections and on explaining variation in criminal violence, while leaving candidates in a black box. I depart from these studies of criminal politics by focusing on what *politicians* can gain from colluding with criminal actors. Finally, this book has implications for broader debates about public security policy. To understand why governments have been largely unsuccessful at constraining criminal groups' power and have allowed violence to escalate, I argue that we must consider candidates' electoral incentives and their relationships with powerful criminal intermediaries.

## 2 Chapter summaries

### *Section I: Machine Politics Meets Criminal Governance*

**Chapter 1. Introduction** This chapter presents the main puzzle motivating the project: despite the predictions and assumptions of existing scholarship, it is common for candidates to strike a range of electoral bargains

with organized crime. It summarizes the book's main argument, develops the theoretical contributions, addresses alternative hypotheses, and outlines the empirical evidence used to test my claims.

**Chapter 2. Crime and local politics in Rio de Janeiro** This chapter demonstrates empirical variation in candidate-criminal group deal-striking across the city of Rio de Janeiro. First, I present an overview of the complex electoral landscape in Rio de Janeiro. It summarizes the history of poverty and marginalization, and the growth of organized crime in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* (informal settlements), and builds an argument about why *favela* voters play a pivotal role in local politics. Second, using evidence from original surveys and candidate interviews, I characterize what local campaigns look like on the ground in *favelas*, provide evidence of criminal groups' involvement in local campaigns, and describe the types of campaign activities that organized criminal actors are more likely to participate in.

## *Section II: Why Politicians Strike Deals with Criminal Groups*

**Chapter 3. Why not to strike a deal with criminal groups** This section begins by taking seriously the reasons why candidates should fear or avoid interactions with organized crime. Chapter 3 enumerates three major risks that candidates face when dealing with criminal groups: reputational, legal, and security risks. I characterize the concepts underpinning these risks, then provide descriptive evidence about candidate perceptions of their severity from an original candidate survey. Further, I link the survey results with candidate demographics, partisanship, and political resources and expertise to identify which risks are more salient for different candidate profiles.

**Chapter 4. The anatomy of the deal** Despite the risks, many candidates choose to pursue deals with criminal organizations. This chapter links the variation in candidate-criminal interactions (Chapter 2) with the different risks of deal-striking (Chapter 3) to explain *why* there is variation in differ-

ent types of candidate-criminal group deals. I build a theory that examines how the institutional and criminal factors that bargains are conditioned on co-determine the terms of the trade (e.g., a spot deal or a favor). This chapter leverages in-depth candidate interviews, descriptive survey evidence, and an experiment from a candidate survey to explain why different types of deals are struck. I contrast my theory with alternative explanations of candidate-criminal group cooperation.

**Chapter 5. How spot deals minimize risk** This chapter argues that spot deals in any candidate-criminal interaction help both parties to solve the commitment problem, minimize risk, and mutually benefit from the deal. I explain how spot deals enable outsider candidates with lower levels of trust to strike deals with criminal groups and benefit electorally. I show that, contrary to conventional wisdom and popular imagination, candidates that often leverage deals with criminal groups are neither gang members nor deeply embedded members of the community, but rather are savvy negotiators that strike spot deals with organized crime. This chapter argues that candidate-criminal spot deals persist in plain sight while the state hunts the more elusive cases of long-term, embedded collusion. This chapter combines observational data with voter and candidate in-depth interviews and surveys, including two survey experiments.

**Chapter 6. How criminal groups deliver votes and win elections** This chapter explains what happens after a candidate-criminal group electoral deal is struck, explaining how criminal groups deliver votes through their capacity to serve as a political broker. I show how criminal groups rely on two primary mechanisms to deliver votes and uphold their side of the electoral bargain. I call these mechanisms 1) *gatekeeping* (limiting contestation) and 2) *corralling* (regulating participation); both reduce electoral competition at the ballot box and help a deal-striking candidate win. This chapter draws from a large-N original database, compiling electoral returns with candidate-criminal electoral interactions. I use a natural experiment

to show that criminal governance reduces the effective candidate pool and increases voter participation, all of which undermine democratic electoral competition in criminally-governed communities. A related article is invited for an R&R at the *American Journal of Political Science*. Yet, the theory in the book goes beyond what is presented in the article, and includes qualitative evidence of *gatekeeping* and *corralling* in action.

### *Section III: Implications for Governance*

**Chapter 7. What voters get in return** How responsive are candidates elected from criminally dominated areas to their constituents? This chapter examines the implications of my theory for voters, once elections are over. This section leverages an original database of local politicians' targeted public service requests to identify how responsive candidates are to the microregions and neighborhoods that elect them. The findings in this chapter provide two important theoretical and empirical addenda to my book. First, when politicians strike electoral deals with criminal groups, they do not deliver as much to their constituents as those who deploy conventional distributive politics strategies. Drawing from in-depth interviews and case study evidence, I argue that this is because they are more responsive to the criminal group's demands than to the voters' preferences. I argue that candidate-criminal group electoral bargains are welfare-reducing for constituents and can lead to a "tragic peace" between criminal groups and politicians, where both parties tacitly cooperate, but the benefits of such cooperation are not passed down to the voters.

**Chapter 8. Alternatives to cooperation** While much of this book is focused on the decision of candidates to cooperate with organized crime, this chapter provides a necessary overview of the alternatives to cooperation in an electoral context. Through a series of case studies across the Americas, I demonstrate that different combinations of a country's electoral institutions and criminal landscape yield other types of candidate-criminal interactions; namely, large-scale electoral violence or criminals running for office. I exam-

ine both cases that led to candidate-criminal group deals as well as a series of shadow cases.

**Chapter 9. Conclusion** In this concluding chapter, I return to the puzzle that motivates the book and further probe the risks inherent in striking deals with criminal groups, and how candidates overcome such risks. I consider the implications of candidate-criminal deals for democracy, both in the specific ways it affects local political dynamics and generally. This chapter explores the normative implications of cooperation and the policy implications, especially those focused on public security and good governance. I conclude the book by restating the argument and reviewing the book's key theoretical and policy contributions.