Criminal Electioneering: Theory with Evidence from Guatemala*

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Abstract

Criminal electioneering—deliberate efforts by criminal organizations to influence elections—is both widespread and consequential. Yet our understanding of two important questions remains limited. Why do criminal groups electioneer at some times and in some places but not others? And when they do enter the electoral arena, what explains the tactics criminal groups employ? In this paper, which draws on my broader dissertation project, I focus on the first of these two questions. I explain variation in the incidence of criminal electioneering based on two key variables: the degree of criminal competition and politicians' access to party resources. When criminal groups compete with each other for control over territory or markets, they are more likely to enter the electoral arena because elections offers them a crucial opportunity to gain an upper hand over rivals: electing friendly politicians. In other cases, criminal electioneering occurs instead because candidates themselves seek out electoral pacts with criminal groups. I argue that this is most likely to happen during elections in which rival candidates have access to comparable levels of party resources: in these settings, enlisting a criminal electioneer can give candidates a decisive electoral boost. I provide evidence in favor of these predictions using data from an original voter survey conducted after Guatemala's 2023 election. My findings highlight the importance of paying greater attention to how political parties structure the behavior of criminal groups in the political arena—and how, in so doing, they mediate the consequences of organized crime for democracy.

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1 Introduction

In Mexico, drug cartels routinely threaten, harass, and assassinate candidates for elected office (Trejo and Ley 2020). In neighboring Central America, street gangs and drug-trafficking groups have been known to (de)mobilize voters (Córdova 2019), finance candidates (US Department of Justice 2022), and strike electoral pacts with political parties (Martínez et al. 2020). And in Brazil, local criminal groups buy votes (Albarracín 2018) and regulate campaigns' access to their turf (Trudeau 2022).

These are examples of what I label *criminal electioneering*: deliberate efforts by criminal organizations to influence elections. In addition to the cases of Brazil, Central America, and Mexico, criminal electioneering has been documented in settings as varied as Colombia (Acemoglu et al. 2013), Italy (Alesina et al. 2019), Indonesia (Daxecker and Prins 2016), Jamaica (Arias 2017), Japan (Adelstein 2010), Nigeria (Albin-Lackey 2007), and the United States (Peterson 1983). Criminal electioneering can have decisive electoral consequences—perhaps especially when contests hinge on thin margins,[1] or, most dramatically of all, when criminal groups physically eliminate major candidates.[2] But beyond any given election outcome, criminal electioneering represents a threat to the very foundations of representative democracy: in the words of one scholar, when criminal organizations enter the electoral arena "elections are no longer mechanisms of accountability or leadership selection" because "results reflect more a capacity to inflict harm than the preferences of the electorate" (Alabarracín 2018, 559).[3]

In other words, criminal electioneering is both widespread and consequential. Yet our understanding of criminal electioneering remains limited. Consider two basic questions.

[1] Ahead of El Salvador's 2014 presidential election, for example, both major parties—the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)—sought to secure the electoral support of the country's street gangs (Labrador 2016; Martínez D'Aubisson and Martínez 2016). By one gang leader's estimate, the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs had the ability to mobilize "approximately 400,000 people" from across "all the municipalities of El Salvador" (Vice News 2015). The FMLN won the runoff by just shy of 6,400 votes (Wilkinson 2014).

[2] Consider, for example, Colombia's 1990 presidential election, ahead of which criminal groups assassinated at least three serious presidential candidates or pre-candidates, including the Liberal Party's Luis Carlos Galán (Duzán 1991). Or, more recently, consider Ecuador, where one major presidential contender, anti-crime candidate Fernando Villavicencio, was gunned down by the Los Lobos gang just eleven days before the country's 2023 election (Mosquera and Pellegrini 2023).

[3] See also Trudeau (2022). Criminal electioneering is also worth understanding for at least three additional reasons. First, criminal electioneering can not only strengthen criminal organizations, but do so at the expense of the state, as when criminal groups use their resources to tip the electoral scale in favor of corrupt, captured, or otherwise "friendly" politicians. Second, though empirical evidence on this point is limited, it seems likely that criminal electioneering, much like criminal violence, can *undermine* public support for democratic institutions (similar to, e.g., Carreras 2013) and *increase* support for repressive security policies (e.g., Bateson 2012). Finally, criminal electioneering can itself be a significant source of violence (e.g., Alesina et al. 2019; Ley 2018; Ponce et al. 2022).

First, when and why do criminal groups choose to enter the electoral arena? Because they operate in illicit markets, criminal groups tend to have a keen interest in capturing, coopting, influencing, or, at the very least, avoiding the state.[4] And because elections help determine who has access to the state, they can provide criminal groups with an important opportunity to advance these objectives. Yet criminal groups do not *always* enter the electoral arena. In El Salvador, for example, street gangs emerged as significant criminal organizations as early as the 2000s (Cruz 2010; Yashar 2018). But it was only about a decade and three electoral cycles later that they launched major criminal electioneering efforts (Martínez 2018; see also f.n. 1 above). Moreover, criminal groups have the option of forgoing criminal electioneering in favor of *post*-electoral influence tactics, such as lobbying or corrupting actors who have already been elected (Lessing 2017). Why, then, do criminal groups opt to electioneer in some times and places but not others?

Second, when criminal groups *do* enter the electoral arena, what explains their choice of electioneering tactics? As the examples above suggest, most criminal groups have at their disposal a wide range of tools through which to influence elections—from buying votes and intimidating voters to assassinating candidates and controlling turf access; from bankrolling campaigns and bribing candidates to spreading (mis)information and even running for office themselves. Why do prevalent forms of criminal electioneering seem to vary across cases? For example, why is criminal electioneering in Central America relatively *non*-violent, especially compared to the notoriously violent tactics favored by criminal groups in Mexico?

My dissertation project, *Criminal Electioneering: How and Why Criminal Groups Influence Elections*, answers these questions. In this document, I focus on the first of the two puzzles I describe above: What explains variation in the incidence of criminal electioneering? Much of the existing conceptual and theoretical work on the involvement of criminal groups in elections has focused on individual case studies of specific—and often highly context-dependent—forms of criminal electioneering. I therefore begin by providing a generalizable conceptual framework for thinking about criminal electioneering *comparatively* (Section 2).

Building on this framework, I explain variation in the incidence of criminal electioneering by focusing on two key variables: the degree of criminal competition and politicians' access to party resources (Section 3). I argue that, when criminal groups compete for control over turf or markets, they are more likely to enter the electoral arena because

[4] Though sometimes framed and qualified in different ways, this is a core assumption of almost all major works on the politics of criminal organizations in political science and related fields. For notable examples, see Durán-Martínez (2017); Gambetta (1996); Lessing (2017); Trejo and Ley (2020); and Yashar (2018). See Barnes (2017) for an insightful typology of crime-state relations.

elections offer an opportunity to gain an upper hand over rivals by electing friendly politicians. In other cases, criminal electioneering occurs instead because parties or individual candidates seek out electoral pacts with criminal groups. I argue that this is more likely to happen when candidates are more evenly matched in their access to licit vote-winning resources: when candidates are locked in close resource-races with their opponents, enlisting the help of criminal electioneers can offer a critical electoral advantage. Therefore—and perhaps counterintuitively—I expect criminal electioneering to be *more* common when party resources are *evenly distributed* across rival candidates.

Next, I present one test of these predictions: a voter survey conducted after Guatemala's 2023 election (Section 4). The survey reveals that Guatemalan street gangs play a larger role in elections than most popular and scholarly accounts would suggest: almost 14 percent of all respondents, for example, said they knew of gang efforts to sway the 2023 election. Using random effects models, I leverage subnational variation in both criminal competition and access to party resources to test my hypotheses about the drivers of criminal electioneering. Consistent with my predictions, I provide descriptive evidence showing that voters are more likely to report criminal electioneering (1) when two or more criminal groups are active in their community and (2) when they live in municipalities where party spending is more evenly distributed across candidates.

In the conclusion (Section 5), I briefly describe how my dissertation expands on the Guatemalan case study and extends my analysis to the cases of El Salvador and Mexico. I also discuss some of the key theoretical and policy implications of my findings. In particular, I highlight the importance of paying greater attention to the role of parties, party systems, and party resources in structuring the behavior of criminal groups. Though party variables are largely absent from the comparative politics literature on organized crime, my findings suggest that party resources shape the actions of criminal groups in the electoral arena and, by extension, the consequences of these groups for democracy.

2 Conceptualizing Criminal Electioneering

2.1 Defining and Situating the Concept

I define criminal electioneering as deliberate efforts by criminal organizations to influence elections. The two halves of the label—"criminal" and "electioneering"—help clarify the concept.

First, criminal electioneering is "criminal" in the sense that it encompasses activities carried out by criminal organizations: that is, by armed, hierarchically-organized non-

state actors whose primary objective is to extract profits from illicit markets.[5] Following Reuter (2008) and Kalyvas (2015), this definition of criminal groups emphasizes "the presence of a coherent and hierarchical organization operating with a certain degree of stability and continuity" (Kalyvas 2015, 1518-1519). It also follows Gambetta (1996), Kalyvas (2015), Lessing (2015, 2017), Varese (2013), and many others in viewing criminal organizations first and foremost as profit-seeking actors: unlike many other armed non-state actors, criminal organizations do not exist to promote political change or advance any particular political agenda. Finally, this definition views criminal organizations as *non*-state actors: even though these groups may collaborate quite closely with the state, they must remain analytically and operationally distinct from the state to count as criminal organizations as I define them.

Thus, criminal electioneering encompasses activities carried out by groups such as drug cartels and other trafficking organizations (e.g., Lessing 2017; Trejo and Ley 2020), mafias (e.g., Gambetta 1996; Varese 2013), street gangs (e.g., Cruz 2010; Yashar 2018), and prison gangs (e.g., Skarbek 2011, 2014). But it excludes electioneering activities carried out by three other types of illicit actors. First, it excludes activities carried out by "individuals engaging in criminal behavior in a sporadic and isolated way" or by "small groups that lack hierarchy and organizational complexity and coherence" (Kalyvas 2015). Second, criminal electioneering excludes activities carried out by armed groups that are primarily motivated by political objectives, including guerrillas (e.g., Arjona 2016), terrorists (e.g., Sánchez-Cuenca and De la Calle 2009), paramilitaries (e.g., Mazzei 2009), and armed separatist groups (e.g., Butt 2017).[6] Finally, it excludes activities carried out by groups that originate within—or become completely indistinguishable from—the state, even if the main objective of these groups is to profit from illicit markets.[7]

This relatively narrow view of criminal organizations has important implications for theory-building around criminal electioneering. Because criminal groups are fundamentally profit-maximizing organizations, I assume that choices about whether and how they engage in politics—including in electoral politics—ultimately respond not to ideological

[5] I use the terms "criminal organization" and "criminal group" interchangeably.

[6] Politically motivated armed groups like insurgents and paramilitaries can—and often do—engage in illicit markets. But I assume that, by and large, these groups engage in criminal activities in order to generate material resources that will help them advance political objectives. In other words, politically motivated groups engage in criminal activities to further political goals, while criminal groups engage in political activities to further criminal goals.

[7] The relationship between criminal groups and the state varies (e.g., Barnes 2017), and "the borders between the state and organized crime can be fuzzy" (Trejo and Ley 2020, 36). In extreme cases, when illicit actors and the state become "intimately intertwined" (Barnes 2017, 976), it can admittedly be difficult in practice to ascertain whether an illicit group meets my "non-stateness" criterion for criminal organizations.

or partisan preferences but to strategic calculations about how to boost material gains. And because they operate with a certain degree of stability and continuity, I assume that criminal organizations have relatively long time horizons—in some cases longer than those of politicians and other actors for whom any given election may be existentially important. As I describe in more detail below, these assumptions inform my hypotheses about where, when, and why criminal electioneering takes place.

Second, criminal electioneering is "electioneering" in the sense that it only includes actions whose proximate objective is to influence elections. As I discuss below, this might mean shaping the pool of candidates (i.e., who runs, on what platform, and with what resources) or shaping the distribution of votes (i.e., who votes, who votes for whom, and how those votes are counted).[8] Influencing elections is a *proximate* objective of criminal electioneering because, as I have already suggested, criminal groups engage in electoral politics to secure resources, concessions, rents, influence, or other outcomes that will help them maximize profits.

One advantage of this conceptualization is that it differentiates criminal electioneering from three related but distinct concepts. First, criminal electioneering is distinct from "ordinary" criminal activities that may influence elections *indirectly* but are *not* carried out for that purpose. For example, to conduct business, instill internal discipline, and fight rivals, criminal groups often engage in high levels of violence and exercise governance over territories, populations, and markets. These routine criminal activities can have indirect effects on voter participation (Trelles and Carreras 2012), incumbent approval (Romero et al. 2016), policy preferences (Visconti 2020), party platforms (Holland 2013), and even public support for democratic institutions (Carreras 2013). In this sense, much of what criminal groups do could be said to influence elections. But these actions do not qualify as criminal electioneering unless they are deliberately carried out for that explicit purpose.

Second, criminal electioneering is distinct from *post*-electoral tactics of criminal influence, such as bribing or threatening elected officials or agents of the state (e.g., Dal Bó et al. 2006; Lessing 2015, 2017). The key difference between the two is that whereas post-electoral tactics are meant to influence actors who already have access to the state, criminal electioneering aims to shape the process through which actors come to have access to the state in the first place. To be sure, both electoral and post-electoral criminal strategies can be part of a broader pattern of "criminal politics" (Barnes 2017). But ac-

[8] Trudeau (2022) also distinguishes between criminal electoral tactics that seek to "shape the pool of candidates" (e.g., what Trudeau labels gatekeeping) and those that "shape voter choice" (e.g., what Trudeau labels corralling). Both Trudeau's framework and mine also mirror Albarracín's (2018) discussion of the demand and supply sides of "criminalized electoral politics."

knowledging that these constitute analytically distinct channels through which criminal groups can seek to influence the state helps increase our leverage on theoretically important questions. Below, for example, I argue that variation in the occurrence of criminal electioneering can be understood at least in part as a result of criminal groups' calculations about whether electoral or post-electoral influence strategies will be more effective.

Finally, criminal electioneering is distinct from electioneering activities that, though unlawful, are not carried out by criminal organizations. A legitimate organization (e.g., a political party) that engages in an electioneering activity that is itself prohibited by law (e.g., buying votes or using violence against its rivals) is, despite breaking the law for electoral gain, *not* engaging in criminal electioneering as I define it. By the same token, a criminal organization that engages in an electioneering activity that is itself permitted by law (e.g., releasing a public statement in support of a candidate) *is* engaging in criminal electioneering by virtue of being a criminal group. In other words, the "criminal" in "criminal electioneering" refers to the actor that conducts it, not to the legal status of the electioneering activity itself.

This definition is compatible—but distinct from—previous efforts to conceptualize the broad nexus between criminal organizations and electoral politics. Existing studies tend to suffer from one of two conceptual limitations. Some studies focus on specific—and sometimes context-dependent—criminal electioneering *tactics*, such as violence against candidates (e.g., Alesina et al. 2019; Ley 2018; Sberna 2014) or clientelistic strategies that interact symbiotically with preexisting criminal-state relationships (e.g., Albarracín 2018). These approaches are valuable for understanding the causes and consequences of specific subtypes of criminal electioneering, but they offer more limited leverage over questions about criminal electioneering writ large and may not travel easily to the full spectrum of cases and contexts. Another set of studies tacks in the opposite direction, folding the electoral strategies of criminal groups into discussions of neighboring or more general concepts like criminal governance (e.g., Arias 2017; Lessing 2021).

In contrast, to borrow Gerring's (2011, 117) terms, my definition of criminal electioneering aims to combine a high degree of differentiation (in that it allows me to distinguish between criminal electioneering and several neighboring concepts) with a relatively broad domain (in that it is designed to travel easily, incorporate previously undertheorized subtypes, and cover an ample empirical terrain).

2.2 A Typology of Criminal Electioneering Strategies

As I define it, criminal electioneering encompasses a wide array of tactics. Mexican cartels that assassinate and intimidate local candidates (e.g., Ley 2018), Salvadoran street gangs that form electoral pacts with a presidential candidate (e.g., Martínez et al. 2020), Brazilian militias that regulate campaign turf access (e.g., Trudeau 2022), Honduran traffickers who finance campaigns (e.g., US Department of Justice 2022), and Colombian drug lords who run for office are all examples of criminal electioneering.

These examples all share the key "defining properties" of criminal electioneering: they are instances of criminal organizations taking deliberate actions to influence elections. But they also vary along a number of theoretically relevant dimensions. For the purposes of this paper, I organize these various tactics around two "variable properties" of criminal electioneering: (1) the extent to which electioneering tactics seeks to influence elections by shaping the pool of candidates versus shaping the distribution of votes (as in Trudeau 2022 and Albarracín 2018; see also f.n. 8 above); and (2) the extent to which they rely on the overt use of physical violence versus material incentives and other inducements.

To illustrate the first dimension, consider a basic stylized model of the electoral cycle. First, potential candidates decide whether to enter a race. Candidates who enter a race choose a set of positions to campaign on. Candidates carry out campaigns, subject to the resources and other constraints available to them. During the course of a campaign, candidates may choose (or be forced) to adjust their positions and campaign tactics, or to leave the race altogether. Eventually, votes are cast and counted. Winners govern until the next election takes place, or until they leave office through some other mechanism.

Though straightforward and highly stylized, this simple model illustrates a basic insight: the electoral cycle provides criminal groups with three (analytically, if not temporally) distinct opportunities to exert their influence. At the stage in which candidates are choosing whether to run, what platforms (programmatic or otherwise) to run on, how and where to campaign, and whether to stay in the race, criminal groups have an opportunity to shape the pool of candidates. This might involve, for example, harassing, intimidating, eliminating, bankrolling, or even fielding candidates, as well as using territorial control to regulate where, when, and how they can campaign. At the stage in which votes are cast and counted, criminal organizations have an opportunity to shape the distribution of votes, whether by influencing how voters behave (e.g., forcing turnout, demobilizing voters, or shaping vote choice through clientelism or intimidation) or by influencing how votes are counted (e.g., ballot tampering, intimidating or capturing electoral authorities). Finally, in between elections, criminal organizations have an opportunity to influence the behavior of elected officials, for example through bribes or intimidation (e.g., Dal Bó et

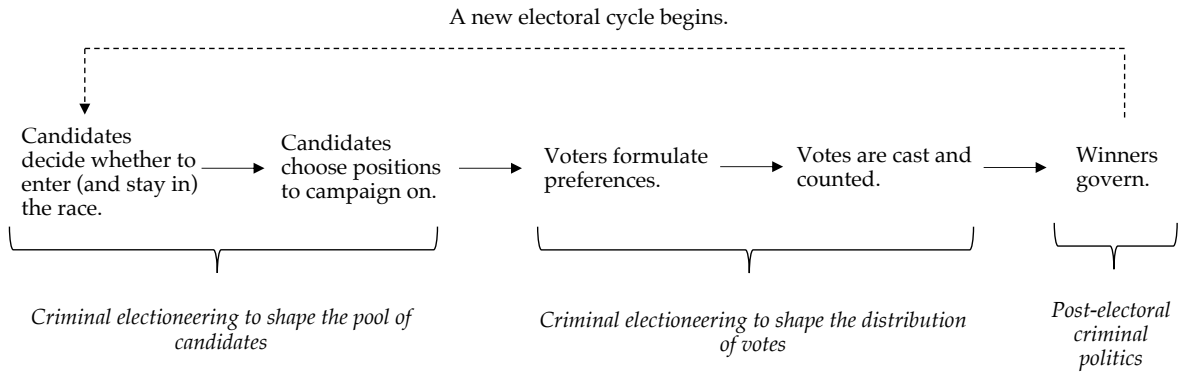


Figure 1: A basic model of the electoral cycle, illustrating two different subtypes of criminal electioneering strategies based on one key dimension of variation: criminal electioneering to shape the pool of candidates and criminal electioneering to shape the distribution of votes. Criminal groups also have the option of engaging in post-electoral criminal politics.

al. 2006; Lessing 2015). The first two strategies—influencing the pool of candidates and the distribution of votes—are instances of criminal electioneering; the third constitutes post-electoral criminal influence tactics.[9] This simple framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

The second dimension of variation I emphasize is the degree to which criminal electioneering relies on the overt use of physical violence. On one extreme of this dimension are the types of criminal electioneering tactics that can dominate headlines—and that therefore tend to weigh most heavily on popular and academic accounts of criminal electioneering. This is Colombia in 1989 or Ecuador in 2023, when criminal groups assassinated high-profile presidential candidates on the campaign trail. Or elections in Mexico, where criminal groups routinely murder dozens of (mostly local) candidates—and threaten violence against many more. Violent criminal electioneering tactics can also be directed at voters: I show below, for example, that a significant share of voters in Guatemala reported receiving violent threats from criminal groups ahead of the country's 2023 election. What these episodes have in common is that criminal electioneers influence elections by exercising—or explicitly threatening to exercise—their ability to cause physical harm. On the opposite end of this dimension are criminal electioneering tactics in which overt physical violence plays a much more limited role—and, sometimes, almost no role at all. These are Honduran traffickers financing friendly candidates, Salvadoran *maras* releasing public statements in support of certain parties, or Brazilian militias moonlighting as clientelistic brokers. In these cases, a criminal organization's latent coer-

[9] On the timing of criminal electoral tactics, as well as discussions of electoral vs post-electoral tactics, see also Daniele and Dipoppa (2017) and Ponce et al. (2022).

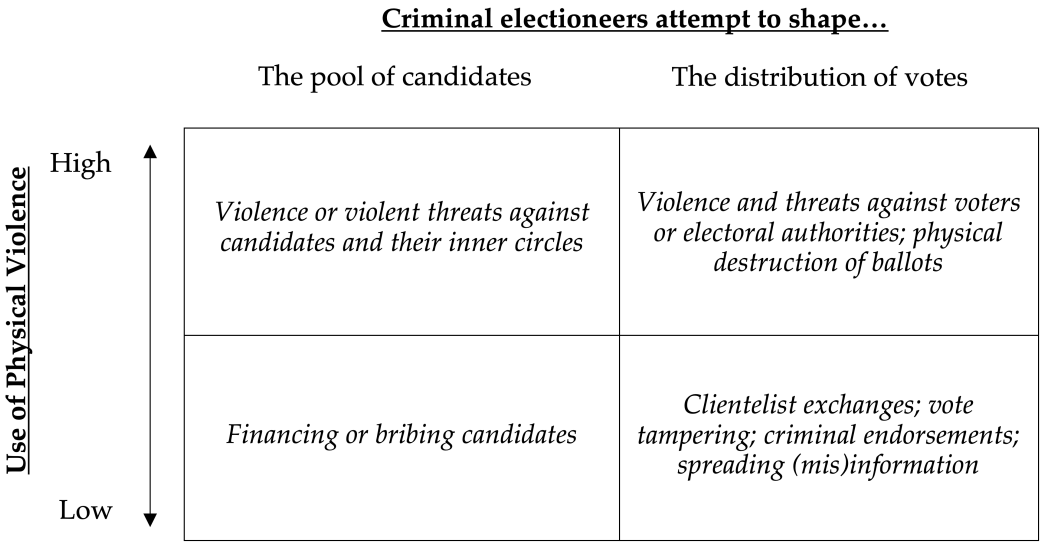


Figure 2: A typology of criminal electioneering tactics.

cive capacity may still matter insofar as it affects how voters and politicians respond to their electoral tactics: a voter may take a group's political endorsements more seriously, for example, when that group has a proven ability to use physical violence to accomplish its objectives. Or a candidate may be more likely to accept criminal bribes if she fears that refusing to do so could put her in physical danger (e.g., Dal Bó et al. 2006). But the central point is that these tactics are not overtly violent in the same way that, say, assassinating a leading presidential candidate in the middle of a campaign rally is overtly violent.

Putting these two dimensions of variation together results in a two-dimensional conceptual space along which criminal electioneering tactics can be arranged, as shown in Figure 2. Criminal electioneers can aim to shape the pool of candidates using physical violence (the northwest quadrant of Figure 2), for example by using violence or threats of violence against candidates and their inner circles (e.g., family members, advisors, staff). Or they can choose to do so with a limited use of physical violence, for example by financing campaigns or bribing candidates (the southwest quadrant of Figure 2). Alternatively, criminal electioneers can instead choose to focus on shaping the distribution of votes. They can do so using physical violence (the northeast quadrant of Figure 2), for example by threatening or hurting voters (i.e., to change whether and how they vote), by threatening electoral authorities (i.e., to change how votes are counted and reported), or by physically destroying ballots. Or they can alternatively shape the distribution of votes with a limited use of violence (the southeast quadrant of Figure 2), for instance by engaging in clientelistic exchanges with voters, modifying ballots, endorsing candidates, or spreading (mis)information that could affect voter behavior. Finally, criminal groups

could opt out of electoral politics altogether—that is, position themselves outside of Figure 2—choosing, for example, to engage only in post-electoral politics or to evade the state altogether.

3 When Does Criminal Electioneering Occur?

This conceptual framework helps set the stage for addressing two questions. First, when does criminal electioneering take place? Put differently, when do criminal groups stay out of electoral politics, and opt instead to engage in post-electoral politics or evade the state altogether? And second, when criminal electioneering does take place, what explains the type of electioneering tactics criminals choose? In other words, what explains variation along the subtypes of criminal electioneering in Figure 1? In my dissertation project, I answer both of these questions. In the interest of space, here I focus only on the first.

When does criminal electioneering occur? This section develops my hypotheses. Like other works examining the electoral strategies of criminal groups, my focus is on the strategic interactions between criminal organizations and the state (see, e.g., Albarracín 2018; Alesina et al. 2019; Daniele and Dipoppa 2017; Ley 2018; Sberna 2014; Trejo and Ley 2020). But I depart from most of these existing studies in at least two important ways. First, I am explicit about framing criminal electioneering as just one of a set of options criminal groups have for dealing with the state, along with evasion and post-electoral forms of influence.[10] This allows me, for example, to explain criminal electioneering at least in part in terms of the tradeoffs involved among these alternative strategies. Second, rather than assuming that criminal actors are the default instigators of criminal electioneering, I propose that office-seekers—e.g., candidates, parties—can also be key drivers of criminal electioneering.[11] This allows me to distinguish between two analytically distinct paths to criminal electioneering: one in which criminal groups enter the electoral arena of their own accord, and another in which office-seekers seek out criminal groups as "criminal electioneers for hire."

3.1 Criminal Groups and the Importance of Competition

Criminal groups, as discussed above, are organizations whose primary purpose is to extract profits from illicit markets. Latin America's most notable criminal groups, for example, extract rents from trafficking goods (e.g., drug cartels) and from extortion (e.g.,

[10] Daniele and Dipoppa (2017) and Ponce at al. (2022) are also explicit about this distinction.

[11] See also Albarracín (2018) and Trudeau (2022).

street gangs). Whatever else criminal groups may do—such as providing its members with intangible goods (e.g., a sense of belonging) or offering communities under their control public goods (e.g., security)—I assume that these groups are, first and foremost, interested in maximizing profits. What sets criminal groups apart from ordinary firms is (a) that they extract profits primarily from illicit activities and (b) their ability and willingness to use violence in the conduct of these activities.

Maximizing profits from illicit activities requires any criminal group to engage in strategic interactions with two key actors (or sets of actors): the state and rival criminal groups. Consider, first, the state. Because criminal groups trade in illicit activities, the rule of law can pose a serious threat to both criminal organizations and their individual members. For criminal groups, securing the complicity of the state—or at least its non-interference—is therefore a central imperative. Most studies of how criminal groups pursue this goal implicitly assume a post-electoral setting. The set of actors within the state is taken as given (or, at the very least, exogenous to the activities of criminal groups) and the focus is on what strategies are pursued by those actors and by criminals—and on how those strategies result in different equilibria between the state and criminal organizations, ranging from evasion or intense confrontation to "symbiosis" (Lessing 2021) or "integration" (Barnes 2017).[12] Yet elections are critical for at least two reasons. First, elections help determine who has formal access to the state. They therefore present criminal groups with an opportunity to *shape the state* in their favor, for example by helping elect candidates who will be less likely to interfere with illicit activities. Second, and relatedly, elections matter a great deal to politicians and other state actors. To the extent that they can frame themselves as potential electoral allies (or spoilers), elections can therefore present criminal groups with important profit-making opportunities in their own right.

However, from the perspective of criminal groups, engaging in electoral politics presents potential risks, especially compared to evading the state or engaging in more conventional forms of post-electoral influence. Electoral processes tend to be subject to significant scrutiny; interfering with elections can therefore bring unwanted public and law enforcement attention upon criminal groups. In addition, even minimally free and fair elections can introduce a high degree of uncertainty. Election outcomes may be difficult to predict and no one actor—even a relatively powerful criminal group—may be able to bring about any given result. The inherently uncertain nature of elections thus presents criminal groups with two additional (and related) risks: alienating future state actors by electioneering in favor of their unsuccessful rivals and investing significant re-

[12] Though for examples of important (partial) exceptions see Alesina et al. (2019); Albarracín (2018); Dal Bó et al. (2006); Trejo and Ley (2020); and Trudeau (2022).

sources with limited (or even negative) returns. Moreover, even if criminal electioneers "back the right horse," politicians may have strong incentives to renege on their commitments after election day.

When, then, will criminal groups engage in electoral politics? Put differently, when will the risks involved in criminal electioneering be outweighed by its potential benefits? I argue that this is most likely to occur under two conditions.

The first is directly linked to the other key set of actors that any criminal group must engage with: rival criminal groups. Criminal competition, I argue, sharply raises the potential risks involved in *not* engaging in electoral politics while amplifying the potential benefits of electioneering. To illustrate this logic, consider elections under two stylized scenarios. First, consider a scenario in which a criminal group (Criminal Group A) faces no competition from rivals; the group, in other words, enjoys an unchallenged monopoly over its illicit market. In this scenario, Criminal Group A would prefer the election of an acquiescent (or allied) politician. But, regardless of the election result, the criminal group can reasonably expect to have an opportunity to engage in post-electoral forms of influence with the eventual winner.

Consider, in contrast, a scenario in which Criminal Group A faces competition from a rival organization (Criminal Group B). As before, Criminal Group A would prefer the election of an acquiescent (or allied) politician. But in this second scenario, the election presents Criminal Group A with both a new danger and a new opportunity compared to the previous setting. On one hand, the vote could result in the election of a candidate who will acquiesce toward or ally with Criminal Group B at Criminal Group A's expense (for example if Group B captures, pacts with, or otherwise gains the sympathies of the winning candidate). This could place Criminal Group A at a serious strategic disadvantage relative to Criminal Group B and potentially close off many of Criminal Group A's opportunities for post-electoral forms of influence. For Criminal Group A, this outcome can represent an existential threat. On the other hand, the election provides Criminal Group A an opportunity to achieve the opposite outcome: the election of a candidate who will acquiesce toward or ally with it at the expense of Criminal Group B. This outcome could place Criminal Group A at a major advantage relative to its rival.

For this reason, introducing criminal competition significantly changes Criminal Group A's calculations. Without criminal competition, Criminal Group A may well decide that forgoing criminal competition in favor of evasion or post-electoral forms of influence is the safest and most efficient strategy. But once competition is introduced, engaging in criminal electioneering becomes more appealing (because it presents an opportunity to deal a serious blow to Criminal Group B) and *not* engaging in criminal electioneering be-

comes riskier (because Criminal Group B could emerge from the election in a dominant position at Criminal Group A's expense). Under criminal competition, Criminal Group A is therefore more likely to engage in criminal electioneering—and the same logic applies from the perspective of Criminal Group B. Indeed, all other things being equal, I expect criminal groups to be more likely to engage in criminal electioneering when they face competition from rival criminal organizations.

3.2 Electoral Actors and the Importance of Party Resources

The second condition under which criminal electioneering is likely to take place involves not competition among criminal groups but rather competition among candidates. Much as I have done up to this point, we tend to assume (though sometimes only implicitly) that criminal groups are the primary instigators or "first movers" in models of state capture: thus, for example, we tend to speak of criminal groups "capturing," "bribing," or "co-opting" politicians, not the other way around.[13] But politicians—and candidates in particular—themselves can initiate, lead, or at least embrace collusive exchanges with criminal groups. That is: in particular contexts, candidates—not criminal groups—may provide the impetus for criminal electioneering, for example by seeking out electoral pacts with criminal organizations.[14]

After all, criminal organizations can serve as formidable electoral allies. From the perspective of a candidate, criminal groups can, for example, regulate campaigns' access to turf, provide funding, facilitate clientelistic exchanges, mobilize or coerce voters, and, in the extreme, eliminate rival candidates. Enlisting the support of a criminal group can therefore provide a candidate with a decisive electoral advantage over her rivals. In exchange for their support, a candidate can offer criminal electioneers rents or future (de facto or de jure) policy concessions. And, from the perspective of criminal groups, these incentives can motivate them to enter the electoral arena even if they would not otherwise have done so. They become, essentially, criminal electioneers for hire.

To be sure, forming electoral pacts with criminal groups presents politicians with significant moral costs and serious legal, reputational, and political risks. Politicians must weigh the potential risks and benefits of engaging in these collusive agreements. When will its benefits outweigh the costs?

I expect party resources to play a crucial role. To win elections, candidates need resources such as funding and "boots on the ground" (e.g., volunteers, campaign workers,

[13] For important exceptions, see Albarracín (2018); Trejo and Ley (2020); and Trudeau (2022).

[14] E.g., Trudeau (2022).

party members). Parties play a crucial role in providing candidates with these resources.[15] When access to party resources is evenly distributed among candidates—for example when parties provide them with a comparable amount of funding or volunteers—enlisting the support of a criminal electioneer can be decisive, providing the colluding candidate with a critical resource advantage over her rivals. In contrast, when access to party resources is highly concentrated in the hands of one candidate, enlisting criminal electioneers becomes less appealing. For under-resourced candidates, resource gaps may not be surmountable even with the support of a criminal group. The resource-rich candidate, meanwhile, has less to gain from accepting the risks involved in enlisting criminal groups as electoral allies: after all, she already enjoys a significant resource advantage over her rivals. All other things being equal, then, I expect criminal electioneering to be more common where party resources are evenly concentrated among candidates and less common where these resources are highly skewed.

To illustrate this logic, consider a mayoral race between two candidates: Candidate A (a member of Party α) and Candidate B (a member of Party β). Candidates A and B believe that controlling more campaign resources than their opponent will greatly increase their chance of being elected.[16] Each candidate receives some amount of resources from her party, and must then decide whether to enlist additional resources by colluding with a criminal group. Consider, first, a scenario in which parties α and β provide their candidates with a comparable pool of resources. In this setting, a criminal group could help either candidate win the "resource race" against her rival. In other words, the electoral payoff of enlisting the criminal group could be large, providing strong incentives for both candidates to seek out a criminal electioneering pact despite the potential risks entailed.

In contrast, consider a situation in which the resources that Party α provides to Candidate A greatly outnumber those that Party β provides to Candidate B. In this scenario, there are few incentives for Candidate A to enlist the help of the criminal group. As before, doing so is risky—but now the expected payoff of pacting with the criminal group is diminished because Candidate A already enjoys a significant resource advantage over her rival. Meanwhile, Candidate B *does* have a strong interest in closing the resource gap with Candidate A. But as the gap between the two grows, it becomes increasingly un-

[15] Here I focus on the role of parties in providing candidates access to vote-getting resources. In practice, candidates can also rely on backing from other sources. In my dissertation, I consider this potential confounder in detail.

[16] This is especially like to be the case (1) in local races with no dedicated polling and relatively rudimentary political operations and (2) in contexts dominated by clientelistic policies. During my interviews in Guatemala, for example, mayoral candidates almost universally described access to campaign resources as the best indicator of their chances of being elected.

likely that Candidate B can catch up *even* with the help of a criminal electioneer. Perhaps counterintuitively, in this world of skewed party resources, Candidate A and Candidate B are therefore more likely to be dissuaded from enlisting the criminal group for the same reason: their expected payoff from doing so is much smaller than in a world in which the two candidates are more evenly matched.

To summarize my expectations:

H_1: I expect criminal electioneering to be more common when there is competition between rival criminal groups.

H_2: I expect criminal electioneering to be more common when candidates from different parties have access to a similar amount of party resources. When candidates have access to a similar amount of party resources, I say that party resources are "(more) evenly distributed across candidates." When candidates have access to dissimilar amounts of party resources, I say that party resources are "(more) highly concentrated."

4 Survey Evidence from Guatemala

I tested these hypotheses in the context of Guatemala's 2023 general election, which took place on June 25 (with a presidential runoff on August 20). Guatemala is a useful setting in which to test my hypotheses because it offers significant subnational variation on my two key predictors of criminal electioneering: criminal competition and access to party resources. Subnational variation in criminal competition stems both from the presence of rival gangs (like MS-13 and Barrio 18) and the relatively decentralized nature of these gangs. The result is a varied patchwork of local cliques that compete with cliques from rival gangs—and even with cliques from their own gang—in some neighborhoods and municipalities but not in others.

Subnational variation in party resources, meanwhile, is driven in part by Guatemala's extremely fragmented party system. Because of this fragmentation, most parties tend to draw on a limited pool of resources—and must then make strategic choices about where to invest those resources. As a result, some municipalities see candidates competing with relatively level access to party resources, while in other municipalities a small number of candidates (or, often, a single candidate) enjoy a large resource advantage over rivals.

This combination of factors suggests that we should see significant variation in the incidence of criminal electioneering as well, particularly connected to local (mayoral) races. Guatemala also has the advantage of being a case that is almost entirely overlooked by

the political science literature on criminal groups, providing an opportunity to test alternative explanations and generate new empirical and theoretical insights.[17]

I conducted my research in Guatemala in three stages. Between January 2023 (when the electoral process officially began) and late August 2023, I conducted interviews with candidates, attended dozens of campaign events, ran a candidate survey, and collected a wealth of administrative data, including constructing a new dataset of municipal-level party spending (described below). In October and November 2023, I fielded a survey of voters in 12 municipalities.[18] In May and June 2024, I conducted additional qualitative research in Chinautla, one of the 12 municipalities included in the survey. In my dissertation, the case study on Guatemala draws on all these and other sources. Here, I present only evidence from the voter survey. I begin by providing important background on the Guatemalan context (subsection 4.1) and the 2023 election (4.2). Next, I explain how I designed the survey and measured key variables (4.3). The rest of the section summarizes my results.

4.1 The Guatemalan Context

Like neighboring Honduras and, until recently, El Salvador, Guatemala is host to significant organized crime, including drug-trafficking organizations (located primarily in sparsely populated rural areas and around key transportation points like borders, coasts, and major highways) and street gangs (located primarily in densely populated, urban areas).[19]

For the purposes of this paper, I am primarily interested in the electoral activities of street gangs.[20] Guatemala's street gangs or *maras* are "structured, extractive, and violent organizations" of primarily urban youths that "have come to dominate certain geographies (particularly urban ones)" (Yashar 2018, 187). Dedicated primarily to extortion and small-scale drug-dealing, the *maras* are organized as local cliques ("clicas") belonging to loosely structured umbrella organizations ("barrios") like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and

[17] For an important that work in political science that does look at the Guatemalan case in depth, see Yashar (2018).

[18] I originally intended to field the survey in late June 2023, immediately after the first round of voting. An unexpected political crisis, which I describe in a bit more detail below), delayed the survey until late October.

[19] Guatemala is also plagued by high-level corruption networks, which often interact and overlap with drug-trafficking groups (see, e.g., Schwartz 2023).

[20] This and the next paragraph draw on Levenson (2013); Ranum (2011); Yashar (2018); technical reports by the Guatemalan Interior Ministry, the Guatemalan national police, International Crisis Group, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC); and interviews I conducted in the field.

Barrio 18. The leaders of the umbrella organizations nominally constitute national directorates ("ranflas" or "ruedas"), though it is unclear how active and effective the national *ranflas* are in practice. A 2020 technical report from Guatemala's Interior Ministry (*Ministerio de Gobernación)*, for example, notes that leadership in the MS-13 and Barrio 18 is "diffuse…functional, variable, unstable and shared among various members of the gangs" (12). Indeed, my interviews suggest that *clicas* belonging to the same *barrio* do not always coordinate (even when they share bordering turf) and often go as far as to compete with each other. The *maras* use significant violence to compete with each other for turf, as well as to extract extortions, resist the state, enforce internal discipline, and control populations. According to a technical prepared by the National Civilian Police (PNC), there were at least 72 known cliques of the Barrio 18 and MS-13 operating in Guatemala in 2020. Yashar (2018, 92) placed the number of gang members in the late-2000s at 14,000, or approximately 111 per 100,000 population. Despite their size and significant strength, little, if anything, has been written about the *maras* as electoral actors in Guatemala; in fact, many local experts I spoke to expressed surprise at the suggestion that these groups could be engaging in criminal electioneering (though, tellingly, many local political candidates I spoke to treated the gangs' electoral role as a matter of course).

Historically, the Guatemalan state—generally weak and hamstrung by corruption and a history of violence—has been ineffective at combating these groups, and attempts at punitive policies have often backfired. Nominally, primarily responsibility for combating crime falls upon the central government, and in particular upon the Ministry of the Interior, which manages the National Civilian Police (*Policia Nacional Civil de Guatemala*, PNC) and the prison system (*Dirección General del Sistema Penitenciario*, DGSP). But local authorities play at least three important roles. First, 80 of Guatemala's 340 municipalities have municipal police forces (MINGOB 2023). Though officially categorized as municipal *transit* police, the jurisdiction of these municipal law enforcement bodies is ambiguous (Chumil 2021; CIEN 2022) and, according to interviews, they in practice almost always engage in at least some degree of street-level policing, as well intelligence-sharing and other forms of coordination with the PNC. Moreover, though the PNC is officially under the command of central authorities, in practice their routine operations are often coordinated with mayors and other local authorities. Finally, beyond law enforcement, mayors and local councils often control both private and public goods that can provide a boost to criminal groups. In the municipality of Chinautla, for example, one long-time resident and local political operative told me that one clique of the Barrio 18 supported the incumbent mayor's reelection campaign in part because she ensured that the clique's turf always had running water. This, in turn, helped the clique gain support among the turf's

residents and stave off neighboring cliques.

In terms of *accessing* the state, every four years Guatemala holds general elections for 160 national legislators,[21] 340 municipal councils (each led by a mayor),[22] 20 representatives to the Central American parliament, and president and vice-president.[23] In general, elections have been minimally free and fair since Guatemala's democratization (particularly at the national level), though the 2019 and 2023 elections saw the systematic exclusion of reformist presidential candidates. Guatemala's party system, meanwhile, has been characterized by its inchoateness and instability: Guatemalan parties are generally personalistic, short-lived, and non-programmatic.[24] The notable exception to party weakness in Guatemala is the National Unity of Hope (*Unión Nacional de la Esperanza*, UNE), which has remained electorally competitive since 2003 (Sánchez-Sibony and Lemus 2021).

4.2 The 2023 General Election

Against this backdrop, the 2023 general election took place on June 25. Thirty parties were registered to compete. At the presidential level, twenty-two candidates appeared on the ballot. Four presidential candidates were excluded from participating on questionable legal grounds, however. These and other irregularities were widely seen as "antidemocratic maneuvers" by the government of President Alejandro Giammattei and his allies to prevent an antiestablishment candidate from reaching the presidency (Schwartz and Isaacs 2023). The three frontrunners throughout the campaign were former first lady and three-time candidate Sandra Torres of UNE; the Valor party's Zury Ríos, daughter of former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt; and Edmond Mulet, a former diplomat and veteran politician, of the Cabal party. None of these candidates, however, was able to poll above 26 percent throughout the campaign.[25] Crime and security played a limited role in the campaign, though Torres and Ríos both said that they would emulate the hardline

[21] Of these 160 legislators, 128 are elected from 23 multi-member districts. Each of the 23 districts corresponds to one *departamento* (state), except for the state of Guatemala, which is split into a "central district" (Guatemala City) and second district for the rest of the state. The remaining 32 legislators are elected from a single national district. Both the 23 local districts and the national district use closed lists and proportional representation via the D'Hondt method.

[22] Each mayor is elected in a first-past-the-post system. The remaining seats in municipal councils are allocated via the D'Hondt method.

[23] Elections for president and vice-president operate on a run-off system, in which the two most-voted candidates advance to a second round of voting if no candidate secures more than half the votes.

[24] On Guatemala's party system, see González-Ocantos et al. (2020); Lemus (2012); Lemus (2013); Sánchez (2008); and Sánchez-Sibony and Lemus (2021).

[25] In late April and early May, antiestablishment populist Carlos Pineda emerged as a surprise leader in the polls. He was disqualified from the race on a technicality shortly thereafter.

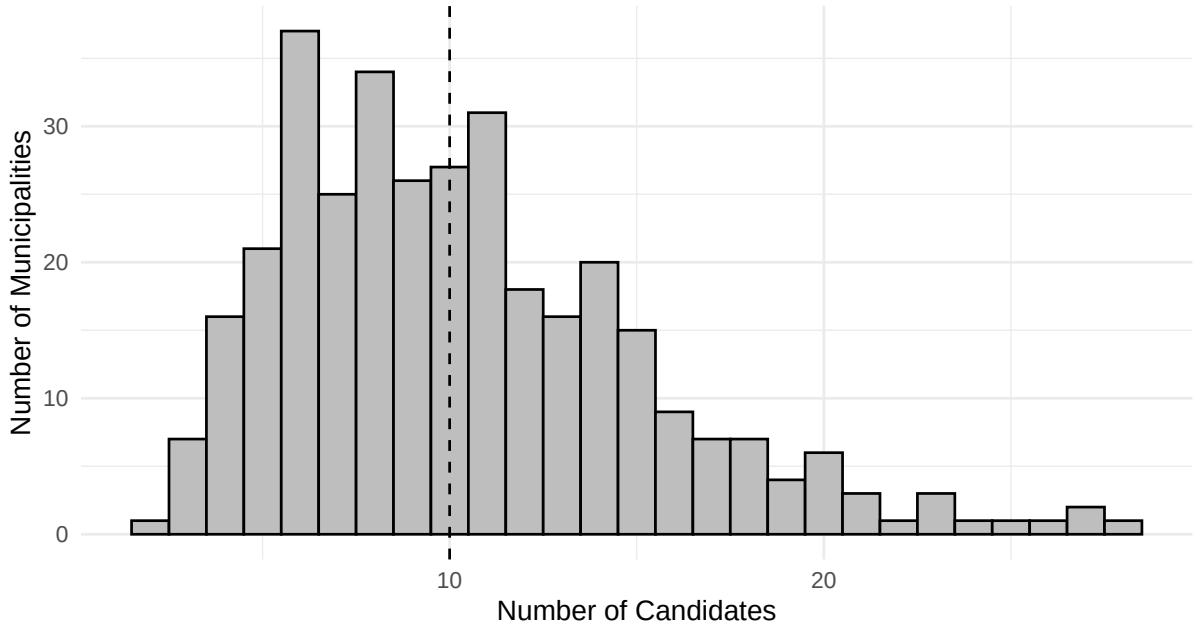


Figure 3: Number of mayoral candidates in Guatemala's 340 municipalities (2023). The dashed line marks the median number of candidates (10). Based on data from the TSE.

security policies of Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara 2024).[26]

At the municipal level, the number of candidates varied significantly, as illustrated in Figure 3. The median number of mayoral candidates was 10, the modal number 6 (in 37, or almost 11 percent, of all municipalities). One municipality (San Sebastián Coatán in Huehuetenango) had only two candidates. At the other extreme of the distribution, Villa Nueva in Guatemala Department had 28 mayoral candidates. One notable development in the mayoral campaign involved Vamos, the party of President Giammattei. In the 2019 election, the newly founded Vamos elected only 29 mayors. In the lead up to the 2023 contest, however, Giammattei and his allies persuaded no fewer than 144 mayors—that is, 60 percent of the country's mayors—to switch parties and seek reelection under the Vamos banner. Dozens of Vamos's new recruits came from the UNE, which had elected a large plurality of mayors in 2019 (106, or about 31.8 percent). To carry out this strategy, media reports suggest that Giammattei and his party engaged in "the selective assignment of public works, increases to old-age subsidies, and possible influence peddling," among other "probably illegal" tactics (Kestler et al. 2023).

The June 25 election brought about an unexpected outcome. As predicted, Torres re-

[26] Mulet too advocated for hard-on-crime measures—including building a new maximum security megaprison for gang members—but distanced himself from Bukele's policies.

ceived a plurality of the votes (21.1 percent) and advanced to the run-off. But Semilla, a small center-left reformist party vastly outperformed the polls. The party secured 23 legislative seats (behind only Vamos's 39 and the UNE's 28). More importantly, its presidential candidate, Bernardo Arévalo—who had been polling in 8th place—won 15.51 percent of the vote and a ticket to the runoff.

This unexpected outcome triggered a political crisis. Immediately after the June 25 election, a group of political and economic elites who Schwartz and Isaac (2023) have described as Guatemala's "criminal oligarchy" called for a recount. The recount failed, as did a host of other legal efforts to disqualify Arévalo from participating in the run-off. Arévalo won the August 20 run-off in a landslide. Efforts to prevent him from taking office continued, but were ultimately beaten back by a combination of mass popular mobilization, intense international pressure, and cracks within the criminal oligarchy. The new legislators and mayors took office on January 14, 2024. After last-ditch efforts to prevent the transfer of power, Arévalo followed suit in the early hours of January 15.

With two exceptions, there were, to my knowledge, no public reports of gang involvement in the election. The first major exception took place shortly before the presidential run-off. In late July, a precautionary ruling from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights outlined evidence suggesting that the *Fundación Contra el Terrorismo*—a far-right activist organization—was conspiring with incarcerated gang leaders to carry out an assassination attempt against Arévalo. The attack never materialized, perhaps because Arévalo and his team adopted heightened security measures (particularly after another anti-corruption presidential candidate, Ecuador's Fernando Villavicencio, was slain on the campaign trail). Regardless, this episode illustrates one of the key assumptions I describe above: that criminal electioneering efforts can be triggered by licit political actors. The second reported instance of gangs interfering with the election happened in the municipality of Chinautla, which neighbors Guatemala city. Shortly after polls closed on June 25, rumors spread that the incumbent mayor was rigging the vote count to secure her reelection. Protests ensued and eventually turned violent, with a group of masked men attacking a temporary office of the electoral authority and burning dozens of ballots. Though not reported as such at the time, subsequents interviews I conducted in Chinautla—as well as responses from survey participants—suggest that these actions were carried out by gang members.[27]

These two episodes are not insignificant. But the theoretical framework I have out-

[27] Interestingly, almost every local politician I spoke to assured me that the gangs were acting *in coordination with*—not in opposition to—the incumbent mayor. The logic is that, fearing a recount that would undermine her efforts to secure reelection, the mayor recruited gang members to burn ballots that heavily favored her closest opponents.

lined above would expect them to constitute only a small portion of the gangs' electoral activities: after all, gangs and gang cliques routinely compete with each other, particularly in urban areas. Because gang competition occurs primarily at the hyper-local level, and because the gangs are relatively decentralized (see above), if criminal criminal is driven at least in part by criminal competition, I would expect there to be significant criminal electioneering activity around municipal races in municipalities with gangs. Similarly, while, at the national level, licit campaign resources are highly concentrated among a small number of actors—particularly among three of the the 30 parties: UNE, Ríos's Valor, and Giammattei's Vamos—the same, as I illustrate below, is not true at the municipal level. In at least some municipalities then, I would expect local candidates locked in tight resource-races with rivals to enlist criminal electioneers (much like the mayor of Chinautla allegedly did).

To test whether this was, indeed, the case—and if so, whether the local prevalence of criminal electioneering varies as expected with criminal competition and the distribution of campaign resources—I fielded a survey in 12 municipalities shortly after the August 20 runoff. I now turn to a description of that survey.

4.3 Survey Design and Measurement Strategies

Studying criminal electioneering presents major empirical challenges. One such challenge is relating to reporting bias. While some forms of criminal electioneering are highly visible (e.g., assassinating candidates or burning ballots), others, such as vote-buying and voter coercion and intimidation, tend to happen more covertly. This implies that readily available sources, including media and NGO reports, are likely to systematically underreport many forms of criminal electioneering. A second (and related) challenge involves sensitivity bias (e.g., Blair et al. 2014; Glynn 2013; Visconti 2020). Powerful actors—both licit (e.g., complicit politicians) and illicit (e.g., criminal groups)—can have powerful incentives to keep criminal electioneering covert. This means, among other things, that potential informants may be unwilling to report their experience with or knowledge of criminal electioneering even when they *are* asked. I address these challenges by (1) using a survey to collect information directly from voters, who experience many forms of criminal electioneering first-hand and (2) ameliorating sensitivity bias by giving survey respondents opportunities to report criminal electioneering indirectly. This subsection describes key elements of the survey design and strategies for measuring key variables.

Identifying Target Municipalities

Because a basic scope condition of my argument is that criminal groups—in this case, *maras*—must be present, a first-order challenge involves identifying municipalities where criminal groups are active.

Ideally, I would rely on preexisting, up-to-date data on the geographic distribution of criminal organizations to identify the municipalities where gangs have a meaningful presence. My population of interest would then consist of all voters in these municipalities. Unfortunately, such data is largely unavailable for Guatemala. Instead, I rely on a combination of what data *is* available and theoretically driven modeling to classify municipalities based on how likely they are to house street gangs.

A technical report from Guatemala's Ministry of the Interior, obtained as part of a tranche of related congressional documents, lists the location of all known cliques of Barrio 18 and MS-13 in 2020. Figure 4 displays one page from this document. After geocoding these cliques, I collected a variety of theoretically-relevant municipality-level covariates, including extortion rates, homicide rates, urbanization rates, population estimates, surface areas, and the presence of major roads and borders.[28] I then ran a series of logistic regression models, each taking 2020 gang presence as the outcome and some combination of the covariates as the predictors. After running a series of specification, diagnostic, and fit tests, I settled on the two best-performing models.[29] Finally, I used these models—trained on the (known) geographic distribution of 2020 gang presence using 2020 covariates—to generate probability estimates for the (unknown) distribution of 2023 gang presence based on covariate values from 2023 (or from 2022, when 2023 data was unavailable).[30] Figure 5 shows the distribution of gang cliques in 2020 (top panel) and the probability of gang presence in 2023 in each municipality using each of the two models (middle and bottom panel). The figure suggests that there is significant overlap

[28] Extortion and homicide rates were calculated using data from the PNC and the National Statistics Institute (INE); urbanization rates were calculated using the latest census (2018); population estimates were generated by INE; surface areas were calculated using administrative boundary maps from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); and major roads and borders using the latest available data from OpenStreetMaps.

[29] These tests included Akaike information criteria, AUC and ROC scores, and separation plots (Greenhill and Sacks 2011).

[30] According to these models, the two best predictors of gang presence in 2020 were the prior year's homicide rate (consistent with gangs being criminal groups that use violence to extract rents, enforce discipline, settle scores, and fight the state) and population (consistent with large populations—with their opportunities for rent extraction and recruitment—attracting gangs). As expected, the presence of major roads or borders—strategic assets for DTOs but not for street gangs—did not appear to predict the presence of gangs. Interestingly, neither urbanization rates nor extortion rates appear to predict gang presence. The result around extortion rates may reflect that as many as 90 percent of all reported extortions are allegedly carried out by gang imitators, and not by gangs themselves.

between the 2020 data and the 2023 estimates, as well as between the two sets of estimates generated by the models—model choice, in other words, is likely to matter only at the margins. The final step in the process is selecting a probability cut-off point for categorization into municipalities that are and are not likely to have gang presence in 2023. A commonly used cut-off point is $p > 0.5$ (i.e., the probability of the outcome occurring is greater than 0.5). I use a slightly higher cut-off point of $p > 0.55$ (on either model) to err on the side of avoiding false positives.

This resulted in a list of 31 municipalities with likely gang presence. From this list, 14 municipalities had to be excluded, either because they were too dangerous for enumerators to work in or because, in the context of Guatemala's post-electoral popular mobilization, they could not be reliably accessed. I then randomly selected 12 of the remaining municipalities. In each municipality, enumerators randomly sampled 100 voting-age residents, for a total of 1,201 respondents. The municipalities included in the survey are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Municipalities Included in the Survey

Municipality	Department
Chimaltenango	Chimaltenango
Chinautla	Guatemala
Colomba	Quetzaltenango
Escuintla	Escuintla
Guatemala	Guatemala
Mazatenango	Suchitepéquez
Mixco	Guatemala
Nueva Concepción	Escuintla
San Andrés Villa Seca	Retalhuleu
San José	Escuintla
San José Pinula	Guatemala
San Pedro Ayampuc	Guatemala

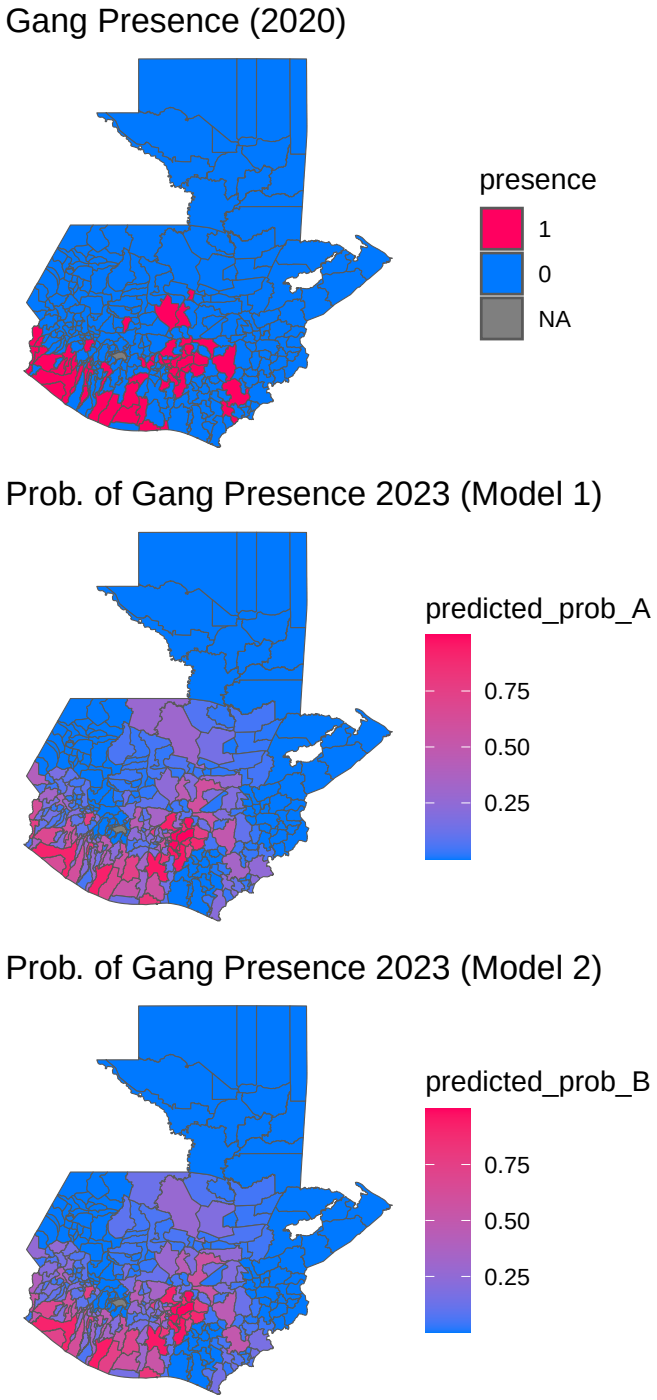
Measuring Criminal Competition and Party Resource Concentration

The two key independent variables in my argument are competition between criminal groups and the degree to which party resources are (un)evenly concentrated among candidates. As a measure of criminal competition, I asked survey respondents how many criminal groups were active in their community. I coded responses of two or more criminal groups as indicating that the respondent lived in an area of potential criminal compe-

Figure 4: A page from the Interior Ministry / PNC document listing gang cliques in 2020

5. Distribución Territorial de pandillas en Guatemala			
a. Cilcas Pandilla Barrio 18			
N°	**Nombre de Clica**	**Siglas**	**Lugar de Operatividad**
1	Águilas Negras	---	Quetzaltenango: Casco urbano
			Retalhuleu: Champerico
2	Carnales	LCS	Zona 5 Ciudad
			Baja Verapaz: Rabinal
3	Columbia Gangsters	CG	Chinautla: Tierra Nueva
4	Columbian Liro Saico	CLS	Quetzaltenango: Casco Urbano
			Suchitepéquez: Mazatenango
5	Corner Gansters	CRGS	Zona 18 Ciudad: Colonias San Rafael y Paraíso II, Las Champas, Colonia el Cerrito
			zona 16 Ciudad: Colonias Lourdes y Santa Rosita
			Escuintla: Palín
6	Crazy Latín	CL	Zona 7 Mixco: Colonia La Brigada, Belén, Jardines de San Juan
			Villa Canales: Colonia El Carmen
			Suchitepéquez: Mazatenango casco urbano, Chicacao.
7	Crazy Rich	CR	Zona 6 Ciudad: Colonia San Julián, Santa Marta, Santa Luisa, Gobernación, Santa Isabel I, II y III, El Molino, Caibil Balam, Santa Faz, Jocotales.
			Chinautla: El Sausalito.
			Chuarrancho
			San Pedro Ayampuc: El Durazno, La Esperanza, San Jose Nacahuil.
			El Progreso: Sanarate
8	Cypres Gangsters	CGS	Zona 6 Ciudad: Colonia Bienestar Social, Cipresales, La Reinita, 19 de Mayo, Proyectos 4-4, treinta de Junio, El Quintanal.
			Villa Canales: Colonia El Carmen

Figure 5: Gang Presence: Known 2020 Distribution and Expected 2023 Probabilities



tition.

Resource concentration proved more challenging to measure. First, I relied on financial reports that all parties must periodically submit to the electoral authority (*Tribunal Supremo Electoral*, TSE). In these reports, parties must itemize all expenditures. Based on the information contained in each line item, as well as the structure of the forms through which this information is submitted, it is possible to categorize all items into three levels of party spending: national, departmental, and municipal. I manually categorized these line items for every party and municipality, which enabled me to construct two measures of municipality-level party spending: the total amount of party spending that took place in each municipality, and a municipality-level Herfindahl-Hirschman index (HHI) of party spending, defined as:

$$HHI_m = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \left(\frac{s_{i[m]}}{t_m} \right)^2,$$

where HHI_m is the Herfindahl index for municipality m; n is the number of parties; $s_i[m]$ is the amount of money spent by party i in municipality m; and t_m is the total amount spent by all parties in municipality m. The result is an index that ranges from $(0, 1]$, with larger values representing a greater concentration of party spending: that is, the larger this indicator, the less evenly spread party resources are across candidates in a given municipality. This means that, in terms of my hypotheses, I expect the relationship between this concentration measure and criminal electioneering to be *negative*.

I construct a second measure of party resources based on party membership rolls, also reported by all parties on a periodical basis to the TSE. Party membership is a useful indicator of resource access for two reasons. First, parties with more members in a municipality may have access to more "boots on the ground" that can help local candidates win votes. Second, membership numbers serve as an indirect indicator of a party's organizational capacity in any given municipality: registering members, after all, is a non-trivial process that requires a minimum level of local presence. As with party spending, I categorize party membership by municipality and generate a Herfindahl index for membership.

While providing useful information about the concentration of these two sets of resources, these indicators have their limitations. Two are worth highlighting. First, they do not capture other categories of licit resources, such as candidates' private wealth or public resources that are used for campaigning. Second, the spending measures in particular are sensitive to underreporting. Parties have clear incentives to underreport spending, particularly when the rule of law is relatively weak. Guatemala in particular is no stranger

to campaign finance scandals.

Measuring Criminal Electioneering

I collected respondents' knowledge of criminal electioneering activities in their communities through three different measures:

1. **Direct measure**: I asked respondents directly (a) whether a criminal group had offered them money, goods, or other benefits to affect how they voted in the 2023 election and (b) whether a criminal group had used threats or acts of violence to affect how they voted in the 2023 election. However, these direct measures offer limited leverage, because I expect respondents to severely underreport these activities when asked directly due to social desirability bias. I include them in the questionnaire primarily to inform and supplement statistical analyses of other measures.

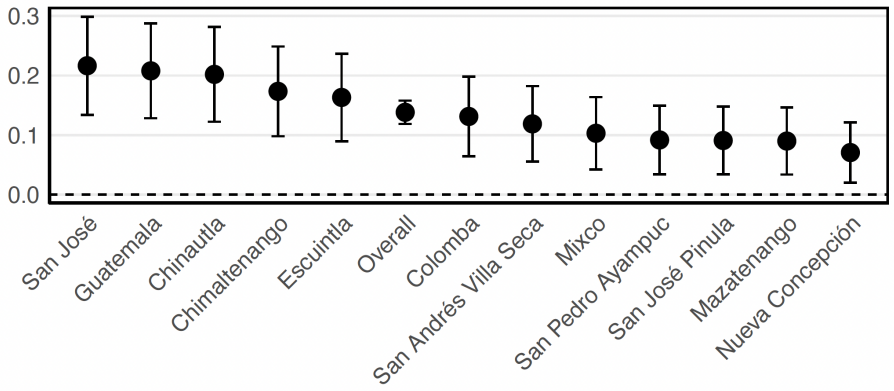
2. **Indirect measure**: I elicited the same information as in the direct method, but using a list experiment (Blair and Imai 2012; Imai 2011). List experiments have the advantage of allowing respondents to report knowledge of or participation in a sensitive activity (such as accepting gifts or receiving threats from criminal groups) without revealing this information to enumerators. In this way, they help reduce underreporting from sensitivity bias. However, list experiments are highly sensitive to design effects and respondent error, and the estimators they generate tend to be imprecise.

3. **Semidirect measure**: As a middle ground between the direct and indirect (list-experiment) measures, I asked respondents if they were aware of criminal groups interfering in the election in some way. When respondents answered affirmatively, this question was followed up with an open-ended question asking what electoral strategies criminal groups had used. The key difference between this measure and the direct measure is that respondents are not asked if they, personally, were targeted by criminal electioneers. In this way, the semidirect measure may go some way toward ameliorating sensitivity bias (though perhaps not as far as the list experiment). And unlike the indirect measure, this semidirect measure is less sensitive to design effects and respondent error, while providing greater statistical power. This measure also has the advantage of allowing respondents to report a broader range of criminal electioneering activities through the open-ended follow-up question.

Here I focus my analysis on the semidirect measure.[31]

[31] My dissertation includes a full analysis and discussion of all three measures.

Figure 6: Share of Respondents reporting Criminal Electioneering by Municipality



4.4 Results: General Trends

How common was criminal electioneering in this sample? Among those surveyed, 13.8 percent reported being aware of some instance of interference by criminal groups in the election. Prevalence appeared to vary at the municipality level, as shown in Figure 6: in San José, Escuintla, more than 20 percent of respondents said criminal groups had interfered in elections, while in Nueva Concepción, Escuintla, that number was under 10 percent.

This overall prevalence figure—13.8 percent—is difficult to benchmark, as this is, to my knowledge, the first attempt to quantify the extent of Guatemalan gangs' involvement in elections. But two data points may provide some useful context. In a survey carried out after the 2011 election, González-Ocantos et al. (2020) aimed to estimate the *general* (i.e., not specific to criminal groups) prevalence of vote-buying and voter intimidation. In a question that was worded similarly to mine, about 35 percent of those surveyed said they knew of some vote-buying in their community, while about 15 percent said they were aware of some voter intimidation. Another way of thinking about this prevalence figure is in terms of vote shares. In the 2023 election, only two candidates—Torres and Arévalo—won more than 15 percent of the vote. A candidate who mustered 13.8 percent of the vote would have come in a close third place.

What kinds of criminal electioneering activities did these respondents report? Answers to the open-ended questions are summarized in Table 2. These counts tally-up the number of times different types of activities were mentioned by respondents. Unspecified threats were the most commonly mentioned activity (mentioned by 69 respondents), followed by offering money (66), and food (32). But, overall, respondents reported a wide range of activities. Table 3 groups these into five broad categories. Violent tactics—targeted voter intimidation/violence and vote tampering in Table 3—were mentioned

98 times by respondents. Non-violent tactics—vote-buying, ballot/vote tampering, and campaign financing—were mentioned 165 times.

Table 2: Summary of Reported Criminal Electioneering Activities

Activity	Mentions
Threats (Unspecified)	69
Offered Money	66
Offered Food	32
Burned Ballots	31
Disturbances/Vandalism	11
Offered Construction Materials	7
Sponsored Campaigns	6
Vote Tampering	6
Offered Jobs	5
Sabotage (Unspecified)	5
Threw Bombs	4
Attacks on Voting Places	3
Hid Ballots	3
Produced Power Outages	3
Stole Ballots	3
Death Threats	1
Forced Turnout	1
Offered Clothes	1
Offered Fuel	1
Offered Medical Consultation Vouchers	1
Offered Shopping/Discount Vouchers	1
Pre-Marked Ballots	1
Threatened to Withdraw Pensions	1
Threw Cans and Bottles	1

Table 3: Summary of Reported Criminal Electioneering Activities (Grouped)

Tactic	Mentions
Vote-Buying	115
Targeted Voter Intimidation / Violence	71
Ballot/Vote Tampering	44
Election Day Violence	27
Campaign Financing	6

Among respondents, reported criminal electioneering also varied with a range of individual and municipal-level characteristics. These are displayed in Figure 7. Three pat-

terns illustrated by these figure are worth noting. First, criminal competition is correlated with more reported criminal electioneering. This is consistent with H_1 above. Second, reporting criminal electioneering appears to be positively correlated with whether respondents live in urban areas. This is consistent with criminal gangs operating primarily—and operating most effectively—in those regions. Finally, education levels are positively correlated with reporting criminal electioneering. I interpret this as suggesting that respondents with more education tend to have more information about political events and are therefore more likely to have come across evidence of criminal electioneering—*not* as evidence that they are more likely to be targeted by criminal electioneers. I control for education in my regression models below.

Overall, these broad trends suggest three things: that criminal electioneering by Guatemalan gangs is more common that generally assumed, that gangs used a wide range of criminal electioneering tactics in the 2023 election, and that the incidence of criminal electioneering varies across places and voter profiles. In the next subsection, I test these relationships more rigorously.

4.5 Results: Predictors of Criminal Electioneering

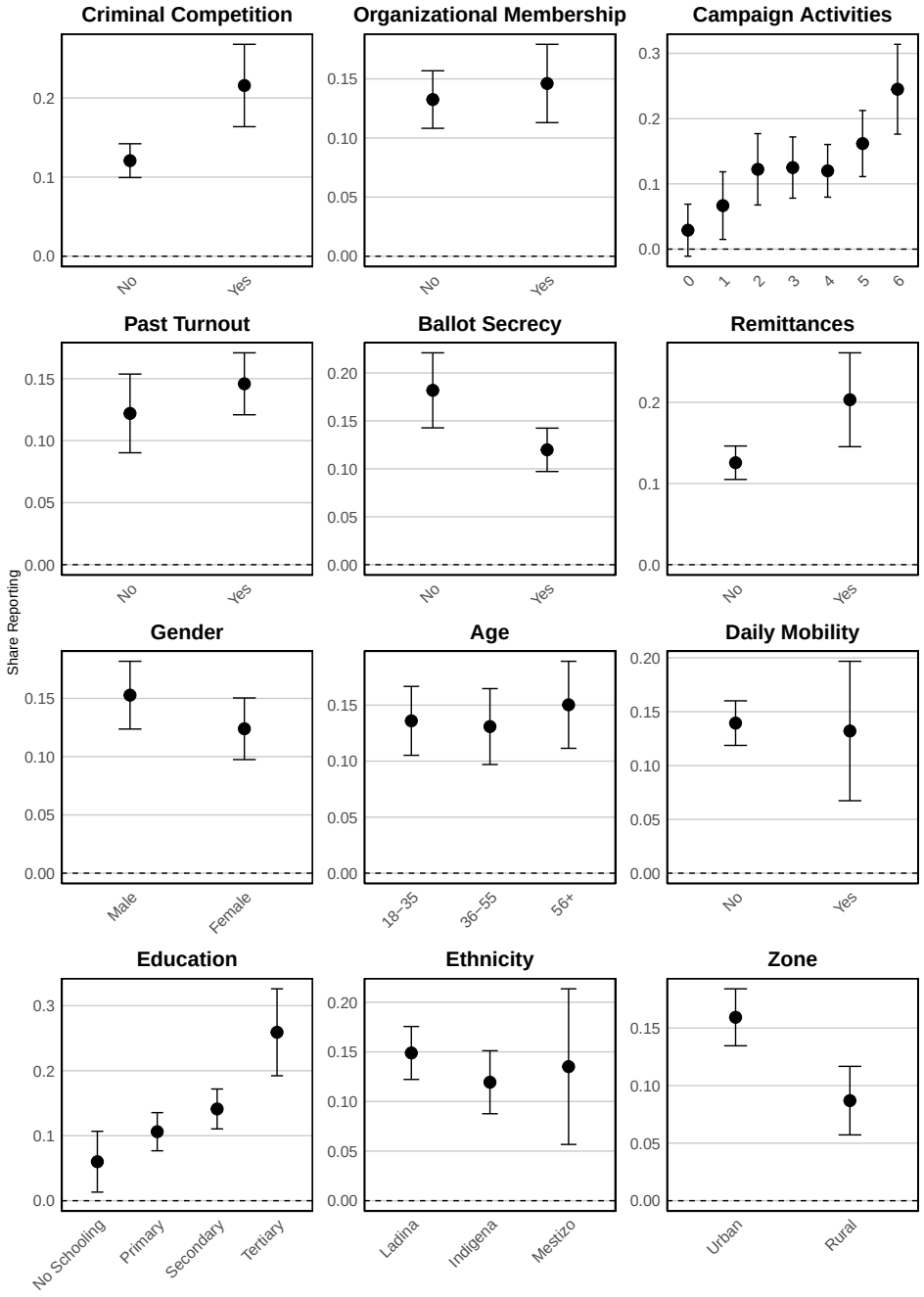
To test the relationship between criminal competition and the distribution of party resources, on one hand, and the reported incidence of criminal electioneering, on the other, I use logistic multilevel models (Gelman and Hill 2007). Multilevel models are a natural choice given the nested nature of the data (i.e., individual respondents that are grouped into municipalities).

I run varying-slope models of the following form:

$$\text{logit}(P(Y_{ij} = 1)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Competition_{ij} + \beta_2 HHI_j + \beta_3 \mathbf{Z_{ij}} + \beta_4 \mathbf{W_j} + u_j + \epsilon_{ij},$$

where $u_j \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_u^2)$ represents the random intercept for municipality j. In the equation above, $P(Y_{ij} = 1)$ represents the probability that individual i in municipality j reports criminal electioneering; $Competition_{ij}$ is whether individual i in municipality j reported criminal competition in her community; HHI_j is the Herfindahl index for party spending or party membership in municipality j; $\mathbf{Z_{ij}}$ is a vector of individual-level controls; $\mathbf{W_j}$ is a vector of municipality-level controls; and ϵ_{ij} is an error term. The coefficients of interest are β_1 and β_2, which will test hypotheses about the effect of criminal competition (H_1) and the distribution of party resources (H_2), respectively. Though these are not show in the formula below for readability, I also include multilevel interactions between $Competition_{ij}$ and HHI_j. Recall that, because of how the HHIs are constructed, if crim-

Figure 7: Prevalence of Criminal Electioneering by Type and Municipality



Note: This figure shows the share of respondents who said they knew about at least one instance of criminal electioneering, broken down by different covariates of interest. Vertical lines display 95% confidence intervals.

inal electioneering is more common where candidates have more even access to party resources, then I would expect the coefficient β_2 to be *negative*.

Individual-level controls include three traits that were identified by González-Ocantos et al. (2020) as being significant predictors of vote-buying and voter intimidation in Guatemala: whether respondents have voted in the past, whether respondents believe in ballot secrecy, and whether respondents express high levels of inter-personal reciprocity. I also include a fourth trait that is associated with vote-buying in a similar context (El Salvador): whether respondents receive remittances (González-Ocantos et al. 2018). I also include controls for respondents' level of education (see discussion above), and whether a respondent has to travel outside of her municipality for work or school.[32] I estimate all of these traits using respondent responses.

I also include three municipality-level controls: municipal state capacity, the margin by which the previous (2019) mayoral race was decided, and the population-adjusted homicide rate in 2022 (the latest full year for which data was available). I created an unweighted additive index of state capacity based on three subindices created by Guatemala's *Secretaría General de Planificación y Programación* (SEGEPLAN) measuring administrative capacity, financial management, and public goods provision. Data on 2019 election margins are from the TSE. And homicide numbers were compiled, calculated, and generously shared by the Centro de Investigaciones Económicas Nacionales (CIEN), a Guatemalan think tank, based on data from a variety of government sources; I generate homicide *rates* using these data and intercensal population estimates from Guatemala's National Statistics Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, INE). All continuous variables are mean-standardized across all models.

Tables 4 and 5 show the results of the models with party spending and party membership, respectively. The coefficient of criminal competition on reported criminal electioneering is positive across all models and statistically significant at the standard levels. In other words, these models suggest that, controlling for individual and municipal covariates, respondents who live in areas with criminal competition are more likely to report seeing criminal involvement in the election. This finding supports the two of my first hypotheses, H_1: criminal competition is associated with more reports of criminal electioneering.[33]

As shown in Table 4, the party spending HHI appears to be negatively correlated with criminal electioneering. In other words, the results suggest that when party spending

[32] Respondents who routinely travel outside their municipality are more likely to report criminal electioneering activities *not* taking place in their municipality of residence.

[33] The results described in this and the next paragraph are robust to a series of alternative specifications.

is *more* evenly distributed among candidates, respondents are also *more* likely to report seeing criminal group involvement in the election. This result is statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level in the model without controls and the model with individual and municipal controls, though only at the $p < .1$ level in the model with individual controls only. The same applies for the models with party membership (Table 5). Put together, these results provide some support for H_2: a more even distribution of party resources across candidates is associated with more reported criminal electioneering.

5 Conclusion

To explain variation in the incidence of criminal electioneering, I developed a theoretical framework centered on two key variables: criminal competition and politicians' access to party resources. I argued that criminal groups are more likely to enter the political arena when they are in competition for control over territory and markets: under these circumstances, elections provide criminal groups a crucial opportunity to gain an upper hand over their rivals by electing friendly politicians. I also expected criminal electioneering to be more common in races where rival candidates are more evenly matched in their access to party resources. For candidates who are locked in close resource-races with their opponents, enlisting the help of criminal electioneers can provide a decisive electoral advantage, which makes them more likely to seek out electoral pacts with criminal groups.

Evidence from a survey conducted after Guatemala's 2023 general election provides support for these hypotheses. Respondents reported that criminal electioneering by gangs was common: in some municipalities, as many as one in five respondents said that gangs attempted to influence the election. Moreover, leveraging subnational variation in both criminal competition and the distribution of party resources, I provide descriptive evidence that criminal electioneering was more common in constituencies where criminal groups were in competition, as well as in those where candidates were more evenly matched in their access to party resources.

Elsewhere in my dissertation, I extend my analysis of the Guatemalan election, drawing on a candidate survey and interviews with politicians, party leaders, and local notables. I also expand my analysis to other cases. I leverage archival material, legal documents, new data on criminal competition, and interviews with politicians and party strategists to show that criminal competition and access to party resources also help explain over-time variation in criminal electioneering at the national level in El Salvador. And I expand and refine empirical strategies developed by Trejo and Ley (2020) to show that my hypotheses travel to the Mexican case.

Table 4: Effect of Competition and Spending Concentration of Criminal Electioneering

	Dependent variable:		
	Reported Criminal Electioneering		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Criminal Competition	0.782***	0.745***	0.726***
	(0.198)	(0.205)	(0.202)
Party Spending Concentration (HHI)	−0.352**	−0.292*	−0.318**
	(0.161)	(0.164)	(0.142)
Past Turnout		0.153	0.176
		(0.195)	(0.196)
Daily Mobility		−0.073	−0.003
		(0.319)	(0.319)
Receives Remittances		0.574***	0.605***
		(0.221)	(0.220)
Interpersonal Reciprocity		0.026	0.031
		(0.089)	(0.089)
Believes Vote is not Secret		0.348*	0.313*
		(0.187)	(0.188)
Education Level		0.284***	0.260***
		(0.086)	(0.087)
Municipal State Capacity			0.135
			(0.100)
Margin in 2019			−0.157
			(0.099)
Homicide Rate (2022)			0.159
			(0.118)
Criminal Competition × HHI	0.287	0.235	0.194
	(0.200)	(0.205)	(0.199)
Constant	−2.077***	−2.758***	−2.742***
	(0.139)	(0.297)	(0.287)
Observations	1,135	1,096	1,096
Log Likelihood	−449.650	−422.032	−419.137
Akaike Inf. Crit.	909.301	866.064	866.273
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	934.472	921.058	936.265
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5: Effect of Competition and Membership Concentration of Criminal Electioneering

	Dependent variable:		
	Reported Criminal Electioneering		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Criminal Competition	0.732***	0.692***	0.651***
	(0.197)	(0.203)	(0.201)
Concentration of Party Members (HHI)	−0.279**	−0.258*	−0.433***
	(0.141)	(0.136)	(0.166)
Past Turnout		0.124	0.140
		(0.195)	(0.196)
Daily Mobility		−0.117	−0.077
		(0.319)	(0.317)
Receives Remittances		0.604***	0.645***
		(0.220)	(0.221)
Interpersonal Reciprocity		0.029	0.026
		(0.089)	(0.089)
Believes Vote is not Secret		0.373**	0.314*
		(0.187)	(0.189)
Education Level		0.298***	0.302***
		(0.086)	(0.086)
Municipal State Capacity			0.234***
			(0.091)
Margin in 2019			0.232
			(0.148)
Homicide Rate (2022)			−0.124
			(0.115)
Criminal Competition × HHI	−0.042	−0.117	−0.144
	(0.211)	(0.216)	(0.210)
Constant	−2.037***	−2.731***	−2.726***
	(0.127)	(0.291)	(0.286)
Observations	1,135	1,096	1,096
Log Likelihood	−449.466	−420.597	−417.077
Akaike Inf. Crit.	908.932	863.195	862.153
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	934.104	918.188	932.145
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

My findings offer four possible lessons for the broader study of organized crime, criminal electioneering, and democracy. First, my analysis highlights the importance of parties, party systems, and party resources in structuring the behavior of criminal groups and in shaping how these illicit organizations interact with political actors. The role of parties has been largely neglected by a growing political science literature on organized crime. In contrast, I show how party resources shape the actions of criminal groups and their relationship with politicians in one crucial arena—electoral politics—and how, in doing, party resources mediate the consequences of organized crime for democracy. While Guatemala represents a particularly striking example of party system fragmentation, in other parts of this broader project I demonstrate that this insight travels to contexts with stronger parties, like El Salvador (before 2019) and Mexico.

Moreover, my core result regarding the role of party resources—that rival politicians are more likely to seek out criminal electioneering arrangements when they are evenly matched in their access to these resources—complicates the conventional wisdom on the relationship between strong parties and healthy democracies. A long tradition in political science has observed that strong parties are essential for the quality and survival of democracy.[34] But to the extent that strong parties provide politicians with more resources for winning office, they might inadvertently create incentives for candidates to seek out criminal electioneering pacts in order to gain an advantage over similarly well-resourced rivals. In this way, when criminal groups are present, strong parties might help *undermine* the quality of democratic institutions.

My analysis also adds to a growing body of evidence that underlines the role of competition for territory and illicit markets in shaping the behavior of criminal groups. I contribute to this literature by providing evidence of how criminal competition can spill over into the electoral arena. In other portions of this larger project, I show that competition makes criminal groups not only more likely to engage in electoral politics but also to do so using violent tactics. This highlights an important dilemma for policymakers. Common tools for fighting criminal violence—and in particular those that emphasize repression—tend to drive up competition between rival criminal groups (see, e.g., Lessing 2017). My results suggest that, in so doing, repressive policies might trigger or exacerbate criminal electoral violence. Politicians might pursue policies that *reduce* competition between criminal groups—such as *laissez-faire* policies (Lessing 2017) or non-aggression pacts (Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016)—but these policies tend to be deeply unpopular and do little to address the problem of organized crime in the long term.

Finally, my analysis suggests that criminal electioneering might be more common—

[34] For classic formulations, see Aldrich (1995) and Schattschneider (1942).

and take up more diverse forms—than is commonly assumed. Popular and scholarly accounts almost universally ignore the electoral role of gangs in Guatemala. Yet my survey results show that gangs engage in widespread criminal electioneering and do so in a variety of ways, from issuing threats and buying votes to rigging ballots and attacking voting places. Insofar as the extent of criminal electioneering elsewhere in Latin America and beyond is similarly underappreciated, this finding suggests that our understanding of electoral politics wherever democracy and organized crime coexist will remain incomplete until we pay greater attention to the strategies of criminal groups use to influence elections.

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