

ARTICLE

# How Do Violent Politicians Govern? The Case of Paramilitary-Tied Mayors in Colombia

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## Abstract

How do politicians with coercive linkages govern? This article relies on original data on militia-linked mayors in Colombia from 1988 to 2015 derived from 42,000 pages of Colombian Supreme Court sentencing documents. Using a regression discontinuity design, it examines the governance records of militia-tied mayors who won the elections by a narrow margin. It finds that being ruled by a militia-linked mayor significantly reduces levels of insecurity and crime, but has pernicious effects on the provision of other public goods, especially education. I theorize that these politicians' (perverse) comparative advantage on security, combined with their crowding out of social spending, engenders these outcomes. I evaluate these mechanisms with data on the nature of paramilitary–mayor alliances, police reinforcements, municipal budgets, politicians' Twitter feeds, and in-depth interviews with paramilitary commanders and politicians. The article has implications for understanding the effects of voting for politicians with coercive ties on the quality of governance and democracy.

**Keywords:** violence; elections; public goods; security; regression discontinuity

## Introduction

Around the world, politicians with violent linkages win political office. In Providence, Rhode Island, after being “indicted on charges including extortion, kidnapping and assault,” mafia-tied Mayor Vincent “Buddy” Cianci won reelection (Smerling and Stuart-Pontier 2018). In the Philippines, citizens elected the “death squad mayor” Rodrigo Duterte, responsible for paramilitary forces' spree of extrajudicial killings. In India, as of May 2011, approximately 30 per cent of the 545 elected lawmakers in the lower house had cases pending against them for criminal linkages, many involving violence (Chemin 2012). In Kenya, Mexico, Iraq, El Salvador, Afghanistan, and Northern Ireland, local politicians with known ties to violent militias have regularly won elections (Bekoe 2012; Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski 2014; Marten 2007).

In sum, candidates with violent connections and allies win political office in all parts of the globe. While some win through manifest coercion, many others win through relatively free democratic elections. From normative and rule-of-law perspectives, this seems undesirable. Some pundits even criticize electoral democracy and point to the need for systems in which the “ignorant masses” are not allowed to vote—they make bad decisions (Brennan 2016). At the same time, while it has been remarked upon that citizens vote for and elect these politicians with coercive linkages, we do not fully understand the implications of their electoral selection on security and welfare.

I argue that politicians with coercive linkages generate a reduction in crime and insecurity, but have pernicious effects on the provision of other public goods. These politicians perform well in the domain in which they have a (perverse) comparative advantage, competence, and expertise:

security. Their comparative advantage derives both from motivation—the prioritization of stability—and capacity—the wider repertoire of security enforcers upon which they can draw. In particular, they can deploy their connections with coercive actors to help keep sources of disorder under an iron fist and to restrain themselves (Gambetta 1996; Lessing 2017). This is not to suggest that they necessarily govern in such a fashion only for benevolent purposes: to provide public security. Indeed, they may do so for private gain.

At the same time, politicians with violent ties tend to underperform in development and public goods provision relative to their noncoercive counterparts. I argue that these politicians’ prioritization of security leads them to divert funding from development to licit and illicit security provision. This shift in resources from “butter” to “guns” erodes social welfare (Powell 1993; Sexton, Wellhausen, and Findley 2019). What results is a perverse cycle in which politicians with coercive linkages improve security in an oftentimes ethically perplexing fashion (Ahnen 2007) and nurture their reputation as being competent on security issues, and this comes at the long-term cost of other public goods. This suggests that citizens often trade off not only justice, human rights, and legitimate rule of law by electing politicians with coercive linkages, but potentially also development.

This argument finds company in studies on the governance implications of elections that bring into positions of political power politicians with alternative violent linkages: to former military regimes,<sup>1</sup> to rebel groups,<sup>2</sup> and to cartels and gangs.<sup>3</sup> These studies similarly find that actors with varied coercive linkages often prove adept at keeping instability and violence at bay—engendering and sustaining a form of social order—but prove detrimental to provision of other public services.

One of the challenges in studying rule by politicians with coercive linkages, however, is endogeneity bias. A variety of factors may influence both the likelihood of them winning elections and of them governing in a specific fashion. The election of politicians is nonrandomly assigned and sound instrumental variables are unlikely. Therefore, understanding the causal effects of these significant elections becomes elusive. I seek to overcome this challenge by analyzing Colombian mayoral elections between 1997 and 2015 with a regression discontinuity (RD) design to compare paramilitary candidates for mayor who barely won with those who barely lost the elections.

The Colombian context offers a fertile environment in which to explore the question of violent-linked politician governance because it offers an ability to compare the administrations of a sufficient number of coercive politicians with those of politicians without coercive ties. Colombia has remained an electoral democracy throughout its violent history and has politicians both with and without connections to actors with blood on their hands (for additional context, see the Online Appendix). This article looks, in particular, at what has become known as “*parapolítica*” (“paramilitary politics”)—an illegal process of alliance between politicians and nonstate armed actors. According to Antonio Calvo, there was “no border” between the paramilitary groups and parts of the democratically elected political elite in which one could say, “this was the oil and this was the water”; rather, they were allied and “never detached.”<sup>4</sup> *Parapolíticos* formed the militia groups,<sup>5</sup> created political pacts with them, received their support, were themselves part of the paramilitary structures,<sup>6</sup> and were implicated in their atrocities (Daly 2016; López 2010; Romero 2007).<sup>7</sup> Between 1988 and 2015, I find a total of 1,200 paramilitary-

<sup>1</sup>See Huntington (1993), Hagopian (1990), Karl (1987), O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986), and Stepan (1988).

<sup>2</sup>See Daly (2014) and Staniland (2012).

<sup>3</sup>See Albarraçin (2018), Chemin (2012), and Cruz and Durán-Martínez (2016).

<sup>4</sup>Personal interview, Bogotá, February 2017.

<sup>5</sup>Personal interview, Valledupar, February 2017.

<sup>6</sup>See Eaton (2006).

<sup>7</sup>Judicial proceedings uncovered the extent of the paramilitaries’ atrocities and the extent to which large sectors of the political elite—officially called “*terceros*” (third parties) by the transitional justice regime (JEP)—were implicated. The

politicians in national and local politics.<sup>8</sup> The sizeable number of observations in the paramilitary-politics phenomenon at the local level—784—allows a RD design to overcome inference challenges and enables analysis of a usually intractable and yet important question: the implications for governance and public goods provision of the commonplace election of violence-linked leaders. I return to the key question of generalizability in the Conclusion.

The original dataset includes information on all paramilitary-tied candidates in mayoral elections during 1988–2015.<sup>9</sup> The RD design enables me to examine the administrations in municipalities ruled by paramilitary-politicians and those ruled by politicians without violent ties, where the treatment—a paramilitary-politician barely winning or losing an election—can be considered as if randomly assigned (Eggers et al. 2015; Lee 2008). Accordingly, the design allows me to isolate the causal effects of having a paramilitary-politician in local office on governance outcomes.

In the first part of the article, I test whether being assigned a paramilitary-mayor influences security and public goods provision in the municipality during the mayor's term. Consistent with the theory, I find that these politicians improve security outcomes while degrading development ones. For example, on average, municipalities under the rule of a paramilitary-mayor that is barely elected experience not only an 85 per cent reduction in thefts, but also a reduction in social services, specifically, a 17 per cent drop in education coverage, compared to similar municipalities in which paramilitary candidates barely lose.

In the second part of the study, I conduct several analyses to probe the two mechanisms of the proposed explanation: capacity and motivation. Guided by my framework, I explore whether the effects of a narrow paramilitary-politician win on insecurity is more pronounced for those with the strongest coercive linkages with violent actors. I find that paramilitary-politicians' pacts with illegal enforcers seemingly enable them to dampen crime and insecurity irrespective of the exact nature of these pacts. Their moderating effect on crime also seems to derive from their licit alliances, which allow them to build up law enforcement capacity. Analysis of police reinforcements demonstrates that, relative to their nonparamilitary counterparts, paramilitary-politicians prove able to significantly augment their local police forces.

Additionally, I examine municipal government expenditures and find that paramilitary-politicians and nonparamilitary-politicians allocate resources in different ways, indicating that the paramilitary-politicians' prioritization of and resulting greater devotion of resources to (licit and illicit) security crowds out spending on public goods. Analysis of 195,715 paramilitary-politicians' Twitter posts illustrates that paramilitary-tied politicians tend to emphasize security over social welfare in their public discourse.

In the third part of the study, I exploit a most-similar research design of two, comparable municipalities in the northern Colombian department of El Cesar—Astrea and El Copey—in which a paramilitary-tied mayor narrowly won and narrowly lost the elections. I tease out how these politicians' coercive alliances and diversion of development funding to security forces influenced local governance outcomes on the ground. The qualitative analysis relies on fieldwork and interviews with paramilitary commanders and paramilitary- and nonparamilitary-politicians. The article concludes with the implications of the project for existing and future research.

### How Do Politicians with Coercive Linkages Govern?

Scholars of political and criminal violence highlight the trade-offs, tensions, and dilemmas inherent in the inclusion of politicians with coercive linkages in democratic politics. Existing literatures focus on politicians' linkages to militaries, rebels, and organized crime, leaving those to militias

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paramilitaries were deemed responsible for over 60 per cent of the massacres, assassinations, and disappearances in an armed conflict that left over 7 million victims (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2019).

<sup>8</sup>These alliances existed before and after the controversial peace accords between the government and paramilitaries that dismantled the paramilitary armies.

<sup>9</sup>In Latin America, mayors are critical determinants of local governance (Avellaneda 2009).

underexplored. On the one hand, scholars express concerns that, absent safeguards, the election of politicians with coercive connections emboldens violence and jeopardizes welfare (Mansfield and Snyder 2007; Paris 2004). Skeptics claim that the political inclusion of characters with violent ties further undermines the power of “liberal, programmatic political” actors (Reilly 2002). Chemin (2012) and Prakash, Rockmore, and Uppal (2019) posit that politicians with coercive linkages also rule in a fashion that is particularly detrimental to development. In India, these politicians increase levels of crime, contribute to corruption, decrease consumption by vulnerable sections of society, and undermine provision of public goods, such as roads and nighttime lights.<sup>10</sup> Arias (2006) argues that the election of politicians linked to violent traffickers engenders persistently high levels of violence in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas. Most closely related to my context, Fergusson et al. (2021) propose that, armed with private militias, the traditional elite’s loss of elections to excluded left-wing parties in Colombia increases right-wing violence. Scholars hurl similar critiques at militarized security and *mano duro* (iron-fist) policies, which undermine human rights and replace alternative crime-reduction strategies, such as human capital enhancement and community policing (Ahnen 2007; Arias and Ungar 2009; Rivera and Zarate-Tenorio 2016).

On the other hand, scholars observe that pacts between politicians and violent actors have, at times, reduced insecurity in places as diverse as Chicago (where the former commissioner of police admitted: “We do not mind if the gangs engage in illicit activities as long they keep a lid on violence”<sup>11</sup>), Italy (where regions governed by mafia-linked politicians experienced low levels of petty crime<sup>12</sup>), and El Salvador (where the government-brokered truce between the Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 gangs halved killings<sup>13</sup>). Similarly, in contexts of political violence, ceding to rebel and militia governance, under certain conditions, has had the effect of establishing and sustaining social order (Arjona 2016; Staniland 2012). Researchers have promoted provisions transforming nonstate armed actors into politicians in order to sustainably end violence (Hartzell and Hoddie 2007; Matanock 2017; Walter 1999). Indeed, citizens tend to vote prospectively in this fashion, electing militarily winning belligerent successor parties because they are deemed best able to provide security and order (Daly 2019). While associated *mano duro* policies have been unequivocally critiqued on human rights grounds, few systematic studies have assessed the effect of these policies on public security and development (Ahnen 2007).

In sum, the scholarly literature on elections of politicians with varying, violent linkages converge on the belief that these politicians have an effect on levels of insecurity and public goods provision during their administrations, but there exists disagreement about the direction of this effect. Importantly, it could be that places in which these politicians win are those that exhibit higher levels of violence, crime, and poverty, and lower levels of stability and public services, suggesting that these electoral outcomes are the result, rather than the cause, of poor governance. Moreover, the mechanisms by which these politicians with coercive linkages influence the quality of governance and democracy remains underspecified. Is it through their backgrounds and experience, their emphasis and prioritization, or their alliances and resources that they affect these outcomes (McDermott and Panagopoulos 2015; Teigen 2013)?

## Theoretical Framework

To understand puzzling votes for successor parties to coercive actors that used violence against the civilian population, Daly (2019) demonstrates that citizens elect these actors because they perceive them to be the most credible providers of future security: Restrained Leviathans. Daly (2019), however, leaves unanswered whether, in hindsight, electing actors with coercive linkages

<sup>10</sup>See also Pinotti (2015).

<sup>11</sup>Personal interview, Chicago, May 2014.

<sup>12</sup>See Gambetta (1996).

<sup>13</sup>See Cruz and Durán-Martínez (2016).

on promises of stability and order proves correct. Do these politicians, in fact, realize their campaign promises and at what cost to citizen welfare?

I propose that electing politicians with coercive linkages does have a stabilizing effect on insecurity but a pernicious one on other public services. These politicians influence governance outcomes through two mechanisms. One is capacity—the power “to overawe,” which paramilitary-tied mayors enjoy due to their connections with strongmen and the coercive apparatus; the second is motivation—paramilitary mayors prioritize security over other public goods and engage in butter to (illicit) guns transfers. I elaborate on each mechanism in turn.

Once in political office, paramilitary-mayors’ coercive allies tie their own violent hands and wreak less havoc. Given their contribution to insecurity, this self-restraint checks violence. They also, however, reduce general instability and crime. Paramilitary-politicians’ dampening, if chilling, effect on crime results from the wider array of security providers upon which they can call. In particular, they enjoy pacts with illegal nonstate security forces able to provide order over the criminal underworld (Moncada 2013; Ungar 2007). Their prioritization of security aligns their interests with the prerogatives of licit security forces, enabling their administrations to build up local law enforcement.

I argue that these positive short-term effects on security may come at a long-term significant cost. First, tough-on-crime approaches erode public safety over the long term (Ahnen 2007; Lessing 2017). These politicians may reduce levels of crime, but by sowing further terror, they likely end up undermining the rule of law over time. Moreover, paramilitary-politicians’ prioritization of security over other public goods crowds out social development expenditures. They intentionally emphasize security issues over civilian welfare ones and divert funds intended for welfare to sponsor (often illicit) security forces. In particular, as Eaton (2006) and Ch et al. (2018) illustrate, they use their control of subnational offices to appropriate fiscal transfers intended for social public goods (education, health, and infrastructure) to instead fund military operations. The systematic practice of siphoning funds intended for social welfare to finance paramilitary forces means that in paramilitary areas, as Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos (2013) reveal, “citizens obtain fewer public goods.” Such a budget reallocation, even if small, cannibalizes spending on social services and results in catastrophic welfare outcomes, as Sexton, Wellhausen, and Findley (2019) demonstrate with the case of infant mortality rates in Peru. Similar butter-to-guns trade-offs (and tragedies) have been found to manifest in other contexts (Mintz 1993). Lack of education spending, in particular—shown to be an important antidote to crime—reduces public safety over time (Rivera and Zarate-Tenorio 2016).<sup>14</sup> The election of politicians with coercive linkages therefore serves to dampen crime but has likely detrimental implications for social development.

### Data on Governance of Paramilitary-Tied Mayors

I explore these tensions between security and nonsecurity public service provision in the context of Colombia’s paramilitary-linked mayors. I constructed an original database of militia-tied mayors and their governance records. To do so, I first consulted official data I requested from the Colombian Supreme Court on politicians who were being investigated or were convicted by the judicial authorities for relationships with illegal armed groups from January 1980 to February 2016. These politicians ran both on established right-wing and center-right party lists and on paramilitary party tickets, including those of *Alas Equipo Colombia*, *Colombia Viva*, *Convergencia Ciudadana*, *Partido de Integración Nacional*, *Partido de Opción Ciudadana*, *Colombia Democrática*, and *Partido Opción Ciudadana*.<sup>15</sup> I digitalized the responses

<sup>14</sup>Investment in human capital, among other welfare policies, is a noncoercive strategy to address the social roots of crime, decrease motivations for criminal offending, and thereby enhance public safety.

<sup>15</sup>Party lists were very personalized, so, typically, one candidate was elected from each list.

to these “*derechos de petición*” (rights to petition) and reviewed 42,000 pages of sentencing documents to ensure inclusion of all politicians suspected, under investigation, or convicted of paramilitary linkages. I then examined public datasets and research reports, including the 2013 *Verdad Abierta* Parapolíticos project, 2013 Misión de Observación Electoral’s data, Congreso Visible reports, Fundación Paz y Reconciliación (PARES) publications, and multiple secondary sources to verify information for each individual paramilitary-politician case.<sup>16</sup> The article focuses on mayoral elections through the year 2015. Therefore, it is possible to review judicial records and verify that the militia mayors were not maliciously or incorrectly accused of paramilitary linkages, in which case they would likely have been exonerated by 2021. I exclude such cases from the analysis, providing greater confidence in the coding of the paramilitary mayors. The participation of several coders enhanced intercoder reliability.

After completing and verifying the names of the paramilitary-tied politicians, I gained information about their judicial status from 60 sentences of the Supreme Court, totaling nearly 6,000 pages, provided to me by the Fiscalía General de la Nación. For information about the candidates’ individual characteristics, I used the datasets listed earlier and national and regional newspapers and journals, including *El Espectador*, *El Tiempo*, *El Pílon*, *Heraldo*, *La Silla Vacía*, *Verdad Abierta*, *La Nación*, *Revista Semana*, *Diario del Norte*, *Hoy Diario del Magdalena*, *El País*, *Vanguardia*, *El Nuevo Día*, *La Patria*, *Prensa Libre Casanare*, *Diario de Casanare*, *El Heraldo de Urabá*, *El Diario del Llano*, and *El Universal*. Electoral data were derived from the Centro de Estudios sobre Desarrollo Económico and cross-checked using the original records of the Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil. For missing election data, I consulted newspapers and contacted political party offices. The individual-level dataset registers 784 paramilitary mayors. I restrict the analysis to the post-1997 data for which runner-up local election results and municipal-level governance data are available for all 1,122 Colombian municipalities.<sup>17</sup>

I seek to analyze how these paramilitary-tied mayors governed. To do so, I explore two dimensions of governance: provision of public security and provision of other public services. To measure levels of insecurity and crime, I use three main indicators: (1) the total number of thefts (of cars, motorcycles, stores, people, banks, and residences); (2) the number of robberies against people; and (3) the number of incidents of bodily harm (interpersonal violence). These data derive from the Policía Nacional.<sup>18</sup>

I pause to consider whether these data are reliable and whether paramilitary mayors may have manipulated how the data were recorded. Could these mayors have discouraged local police from recording cases or otherwise altered crime reporting such that, rather than actually solving security problems, they just cooked the books? In this case, any finding of security improvements would be a mere artifact of the data.

There are several pieces of evidence that moderate these concerns of bias. I outline them here and engage in more extensive validity tests in the Online Appendix. First, in Colombia, crime statistics are highly centralized through the Criminal, Contraventional, and Operational Statistical Information System of the National Police (SIEDCO). Patrols submit a report to the Automatic Dispatch Center (CAD), which immediately enters the information into the national SIEDCO system, based in Bogotá. Crime reporting is therefore systematized, does not pass through the local mayor’s office, and, given rigorous controls, is not likely to be easily altered (Policía Nacional de Colombia 2021). Additionally, the National Police Central Command in Bogotá sets national goals upon which local police commanders are evaluated and rewarded, rendering the incentives for manipulation the same across the treated and control samples. The same

<sup>16</sup>These included Giraldo (2008), López (2010), Romero (2007), and Valencia and Ávila Martínez (2014).

<sup>17</sup>That these elections were barely won suggests that they took place in localities not necessarily hegemonically under the control of the paramilitaries, and that judicial investigations reached the highest levels of government (including ensnaring former President Uribe) suggests that a lack of blanket impunity ultimately prevailed (personal interviews with paramilitary commanders, la Picota prison, Bogotá, September 2008).

<sup>18</sup>For definitions of the crimes, see Policía Nacional de Colombia (2021).



goals and crime-communication practices thus apply to localities governed by paramilitary-mayors as to those of their nonparamilitary counterparts.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, as I show in Table A.2 in the Online Appendix, localities where the paramilitary-mayors won and where they lost were equally impacted and controlled by the paramilitaries.

Second, I evaluate alternative sources of crime and violence statistics—those of Colombia’s National Forensics Institute, its National Center for Historical Memory, and its Victims Unit. I find that these data correlate with the National Police data equally where paramilitary mayors narrowly won and where they narrowly lost (see the Online Appendix). I also find that the results hold if I use alternative sources of crime statistics as the outcomes in my main analyses. Finally, I reviewed a random sample of the judicial sentences, searched eight years of national and local news, and engaged in in-depth interviews with experts on Colombian policing. I find little systematic evidence of paramilitary-mayors’ interfering in police crime reporting. Among experts, there emerges a consensus, well described by one: “There are always biases and issues with data, but these are evenly distributed. There is no reason to think they were more pronounced where paramilitary-mayors governed.”<sup>20</sup> I therefore follow convention among scholars of violence in Colombia, who “regard the police data as high quality” (Avellaneda 2009), and use these data in the main analyses.

I calculate the averages of the crimes during the mayors’ tenures in office. The crime variables are computed as rates per 1,000 inhabitants. Given the level of skewness in these indicators, I take the log of each of the three measures, which facilitates the interpretation of the treatment effects as percentage changes.

For municipal performance in nonsecurity public goods provision, I examine levels of development, as captured by infant mortality rates from Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE)’s Estadísticas Vitales. I also derive the rate of educational coverage calculated as the total number of enrolled students divided by the total number of school-age individuals, provided by the Colombian Ministerio de Educación. For these measures, I compute the averages during the mayors’ administrations. Although spending is a mechanism of the theory, given the slow-moving nature of development indicators, I also examine expenditures as a proxy for non-security public goods provision.<sup>21</sup>

## Research Design

This project uses a RD design. Conditions of insecurity and lack of development could facilitate the electoral success of politicians with coercive linkages, rather than these politicians causing changes in insecurity and development. Moreover, there could be unobserved factors determining both the election of these types of politicians and governance outcomes. The RD design enables the estimation of the treatment effect in a nonexperimental setting where treatment is determined by whether an observed “assignment” variable exceeds a known cutoff point, with individuals with scores just below the cutoff serving as good comparisons to those just above the cutoff. While electoral performance is determined by a multitude of factors, including those of an institutional, economic, political, and social nature, the precise vote totals are subject to a “nontrivial random component,” and candidates cannot fully control how many votes they receive on Election Day (Lee 2008, 684). As such, whether a candidate barely wins or barely loses an election may be viewed “as if” it was a random event, which permits the credible estimation of the causal effects of this electoral victory. Many have used this design to study the effect of holding office on different political outcomes (Eggers et al. 2015; Erikson and Titiunik 2015; Galasso and Nannicini 2011; Klasnja and Titiunik 2017; Lee 2008; Querubin 2016).

<sup>19</sup>Personal interview, Jerónimo Castillo (former Director of Criminal and Penitentiary Policy of the Ministry of the Interior and Justice), January 2021.

<sup>20</sup>Personal interview, Maria Victoria Llorente (Director of Fundación Ideas para la Paz), January 2021.

<sup>21</sup>The Colombian mayor is considered “the Secretary of Education in its municipality” (Avellaneda 2009, p. 297).

I use this strategy to compare the governance outcomes in places in which paramilitary-politicians narrowly won against those in places in which paramilitary-politicians narrowly lost. In these elections, the distribution of potential outcomes is a smooth function of the vote margin. On either side of the threshold, the outcomes of winners can be viewed as valid counterfactuals for the outcomes of losers. In the analysis, the unit of analysis is the municipality. I take all mayoral elections in Colombia during 1997–2015 and restrict the sample to the races in which a paramilitary-politician and a nonparamilitary-politician were the top two finishers (515 observations). I look at the paramilitary-politician’s vote share minus that of their strongest contender. The margin of victory therefore ranges from  $-1$  to  $1$ ; the paramilitary-politician won when their vote margin was positive and lost when it was negative. I examine the local average effects on security and public goods outcomes at the cutoff of a locality being “treated” with a paramilitary-mayor against the “control” case in which it received a nonparamilitary-mayor.

RD designs can be invalid if individuals can precisely manipulate the “assignment variable.” To test the validity of the design, I follow now-common practice and first analyze the density in the margin of victory for the paramilitary-tied politicians.<sup>22</sup> I look for an abnormal number of observations immediately above or below the threshold, which would suggest that the candidates, particularly the paramilitary ones, could manipulate the election results. Figure A.1 in the Online Appendix shows the graphical results of the McCrary test, which analyzes possible anomalous jumps in the distribution of the running variable. The jump at the threshold is not statistically significant (the  $p$ -value of the log difference in heights is higher than 0.1), suggesting that it is a normal jump that also exists at different values of the distribution. This indicates that candidates could not precisely influence close elections and that mayors’ administrations on either side of the cutoff may be comparable (McCrary 2008). I also use Cattaneo, Frandsen, and Titiunik’s (2015) local polynomial density estimator to estimate whether the density of the margin-of-victory variable is continuous in the neighborhood of the threshold. The  $p$ -value of 0.34 confirms that the test fails to reject the null hypothesis that the density of the running variable is continuous at the cutoff.

I engage in a second check of the validity of the design in which I verify whether there is a correlation between other pre-treatment variables and the margin-of-victory outcome. To be considered as if random, whether a paramilitary candidate barely wins or barely loses a mayoral election should be unrelated to variables that occurred and were captured before the election occurred; there should be no discontinuities in the distribution of these other factors. In Table A.1 in the Online Appendix, I estimate the RD model using one-period-lagged outcomes as the dependent variable to check whether there is a significant effect of having a paramilitary-mayor on pre-treatment outcomes. None of the RD estimates are significant, suggesting that there is not a pre-trend on the outcomes that may explain the treatment effects. In Table A.2 in the Online Appendix, I show the results of the RD models on pre-treatment outcomes and an additional set of covariates: population, log of urban population, and log of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. None of these estimates is statistically significant, indicating that there are no systematic baseline differences among municipalities that barely elected a paramilitary-mayor and those that did not. In the placebo tests, there exist no discontinuities, further validating the RD design and suggesting, in particular, that places with paramilitary- and nonparamilitary-mayors did not differ in their pre-treatment levels of insecurity and public goods provision.<sup>23</sup> All five outcome variables of interest are balanced at the baseline; prior to electing or not electing a paramilitary-mayor, the municipalities in the sample showed no systematic differences in

<sup>22</sup>While the empirical strategy focuses on the comparison among municipalities where paramilitary-politicians barely won or lost, it is worth considering how these municipalities may differ from the rest. Table A.13 in the Online Appendix reveals no significant difference between municipalities where elections were very contested and those where elections were not contested.

<sup>23</sup>It should be noted that while valid, the RD design gives fairly localized estimates, which should be kept in mind when evaluating the findings.



terms of thefts, robberies, bodily harm, education, and infant mortality. This bolsters the idea that the findings would not be a statistical aberration, but are, instead, evidence that the type of mayor elected has a direct impact on governance.

The paramilitaries were known to have engaged in a wide variety of electoral coercive practices (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos 2013), rendering the assumption of the RD design potentially violated. I analyze if there was also balance in the pre-treatment levels of paramilitary violence and control [and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) violence and control] in the municipalities in which the paramilitary-politicians barely won and lost. Table A.2 in the Online Appendix shows no significant difference in rates of attacks from these illegal armed groups or in their levels of territorial control. This suggests that there are no discernable pre-treatment differences in armed group coercion or intimidation. As a robustness check, I further exclude the municipalities flagged as exhibiting medium to high risk of electoral fraud according to the Misión Observatorio Electoral (MOE). To do so, I digitized the MOE reports of each Colombian municipality for each election and extracted an index of not only “active” risk factors—electoral violence (assassination attempts, threats, homicides, and kidnappings of candidates or current politicians; forced displacement; and illegal armed group presence)—but also “passive” ones more imperceptible to electoral observers, including atypical electoral participation, anomalies in null votes, limitations on electoral competition, unusual rates of candidate withdrawal, and voter intimidation. Excluding places with electoral risk, I find that the results described in the next section hold (see Table A.5 in the Online Appendix).<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that this article is not advancing that no electoral coercion took place, but rather that there also existed political competition and voter choice in these municipalities.<sup>25</sup>

## Analysis

To analyze the effect of a violent politician barely winning or losing a mayoral election on governance outcomes, I estimate the following RD model:

$$y_{it} = f(\text{margin})_{it} + \beta_1 (\text{parapol})_{it} + \varepsilon,$$

where:  $y_{it}$  is the outcome of interest in time  $t$  for municipality  $i$ ;  $f(\text{margin})_{it}$  is a function of the paramilitary-politician margin of victory (the forcing variable) in the municipal election; and  $(\text{parapol})_{it}$  is an indicator variable equal to 1 if the paramilitary-politician candidate won and 0 otherwise. The coefficient  $B_1$  represents the local average treatment effect (LATE) at the threshold of the margin-of-victory forcing variable, which is the difference between the local regressions' two estimated intercepts. For the RD estimation, I first use local polynomial methods with optimal bandwidths and robust standard errors (Calónico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik 2014). Typically, an optimal bandwidth obtained by minimizing the mean-squared error would lead to a relatively large window. Thus, I present the results using robust confidence intervals (Calónico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik 2014). I also estimate the RD effect using predetermined bandwidths of 10 and 5 percentage points from the threshold, and I estimate the models with the inclusion of controls, using Calónico et al.'s (2018) covariate-adjusted RD.

### The Governance Records of Colombian Paramilitary-Mayors

Table 1 shows the difference in means across the governance outcomes in the sample of municipality-years used for the RD models: those in which a paramilitary-candidate competed

<sup>24</sup>I examine changes in the margin of victory over time and verify that the observed competitiveness of the elections was not a result of the intervention of armed groups (i.e., learning to allow for some competition to avoid the attention that high victory margins might bring).

<sup>25</sup>LAPOP survey data reveal that only 2.4 per cent of the population reported having been pressured to vote for a specific candidate and 1 per cent reported being pressured to abstain.

**Table 1.** Difference in means: security and public goods outcomes

Variable	(1) Nonparamilitary	(2) Paramilitary	(3) Difference
Thefts	-0.2 (2.1)	-0.6 (1.7)	-0.8*** (0.3)
Robberies (of people)	-0.3 (2.1)	-1.3 (1.7)	-1.0*** (0.3)
Bodily harm	0.1 (1.9)	-0.8 (1.7)	-0.9*** (0.2)
Education coverage	70.9 (22.9)	70.9 (23.0)	-0.0 (2.5)
Education spending	4.3 (1.6)	3.7 (1.4)	-0.6*** (0.2)
Infant mortality rates	21.9 (7.9)	25.4 (9.4)	3.6*** (1.3)
Observations	157	358	515

Notes: Standard errors in parenthesis. Thefts, robberies, and bodily harm are measured in logs per person. \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

for office. In general, paramilitary-mayors' municipalities exhibit lower crime rates—lower total thefts, robberies, and interpersonal violence per 1,000 inhabitants. At the same time, relative to their nonparamilitary counterparts, these mayors tend to perform poorly in terms of social welfare, with, on average, higher infant mortality rates and lower educational coverage and expenditures.

Table 2 shows the RD coefficients for the security outcomes. For all three outcomes—thfts, robberies, and personal injuries—and for every bandwidth choice, there is a negative effect of a narrow paramilitary-tied politician win, suggesting that having this type of mayor in office causes a reduction in crime and improvement in security. As the dependent variable is logged, for substantive interpretation, I exponentiate the coefficients. The analysis presented in the first column reveals that, when a paramilitary-mayor barely wins an election, the municipality experiences, on average, a  $(\exp(-1.90) - 1) \times 100 = 85$  per cent reduction in thefts, compared to when this type of politician barely loses the election. This effect is statistically significant at the 0.05 level for the three models. Moreover, we see that these effects are also pronounced and significant for rates of victimization and bodily harm. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the jump at the discontinuity with a RD plot of personal injuries and thefts, where the dots are optimally chosen binned means and the line is a linear fit that includes the 95 per cent confidence interval. These effects hold when I use alternative security indicators from the police, Defense Ministry, and victims' registry (see Table A.12 in the Online Appendix).

At the same time, the analyses in Table 3 show that a paramilitary-tied politician barely winning a closely fought election tends to harm the municipality on dimensions of public goods, such as education coverage, though the results are weaker. All the point estimates are consistently negative. Models 1 and 3, in particular, show that among municipalities that elected paramilitary-mayors, educational coverage is 17 percentage points lower compared to municipalities in which such mayors narrowly lost. The coefficients on education in these specifications are significant at conventional levels. For infant mortality rates, we see that the effect points in the same direction: paramilitary-mayors tend to increase these rates, but the results are not statistically significant. These effects on education coverage and infant mortality rates are illustrated in Figures 3 and 4. These variables tend to be slow to change and are measured over the mayors' short administrations. In the following section, I analyze the effect of a narrow paramilitary-mayor win on expenditures on public goods, a variable more mutable over a mayor's term. I find a strong negative effect. The coefficients and differences in the means on public services and spending on these services may indicate, though by no means prove, that paramilitary-politicians' rule produces longer-term adverse effects on development outcomes.

Given the limited sample size, these are strong results on security and education. I show that they are robust to the inclusion of covariates, using Calónico et al.'s (2018) covariate-adjusted RD, which increases precision (see Tables A.6 and A.7 in the Online Appendix). In sum, politicians with ties to armed militias do indeed influence governance outcomes. They tend to dissuade and mitigate crime and insecurity, but this likely comes at a cost to social welfare.

**Table 2.** RD estimates: security outcomes

Outcomes	Thefts			Robberies of people			Bodily harm		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Paramilitary-mayors	-1.90* (1.10)	-1.45** (0.66)	-1.68* (0.98)	-2.62*** (0.99)	-1.86*** (0.62)	-2.25** (0.91)	-1.82** (0.86)	-1.19** (0.57)	-1.60* (0.85)
Band	Opt (0.081)	0.1	0.05	Opt (0.074)	0.1	0.05	Opt (0.085)	0.1	0.05
Observations	100	115	66	79	101	59	107	120	70

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Columns 1, 4 and 7 use the package “rdrobust” developed by Calonico et al. (2017), the computed optimal bandwidth and a triangular kernel; these columns report robust point estimates and standard errors. The other models use a local linear regression with robust standard errors. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.1$ .

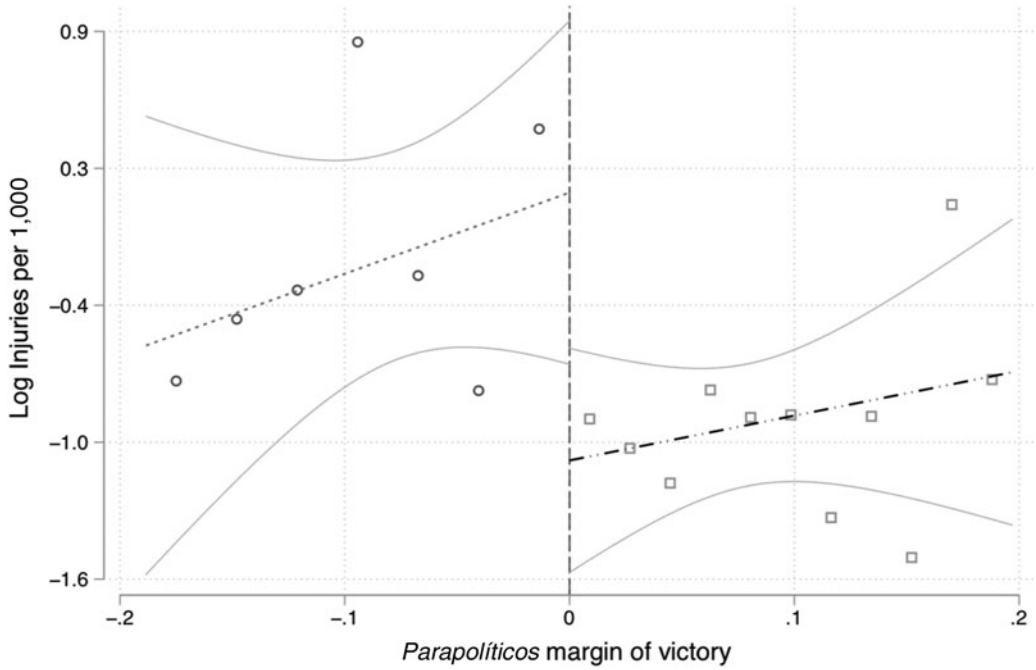


Fig. 1. RD effect of paramilitary-mayor winning on bodily harm.  
Note: The horizontal axis displays the winning margin of the paramilitary-mayors (winners and runners-up). The dashed lines are the linear fit. The solid lines are the 95 per cent confidence intervals at both sides of the threshold.

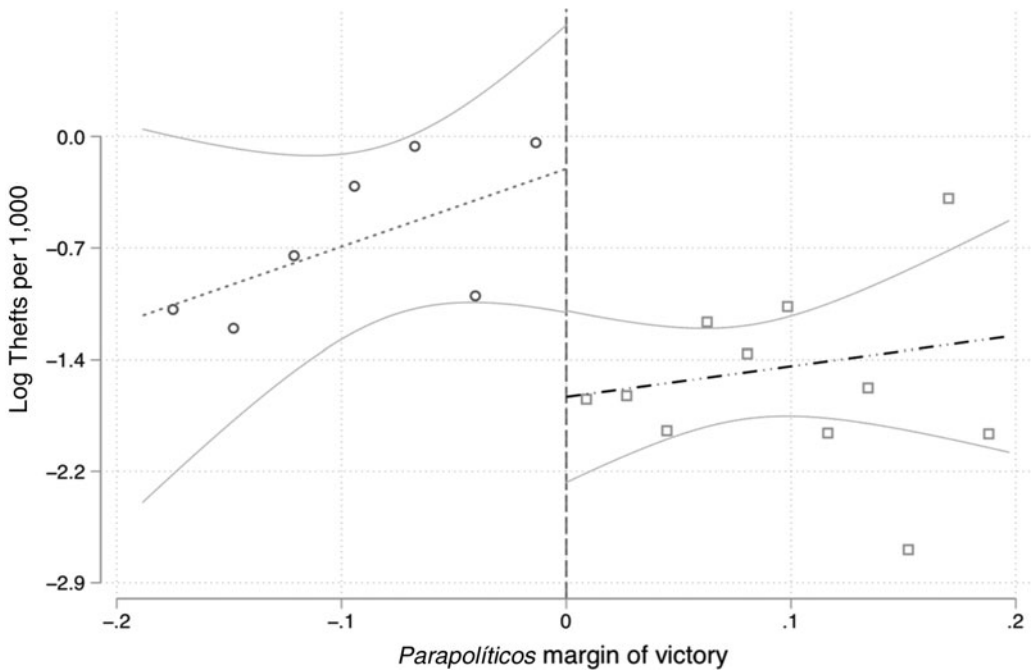
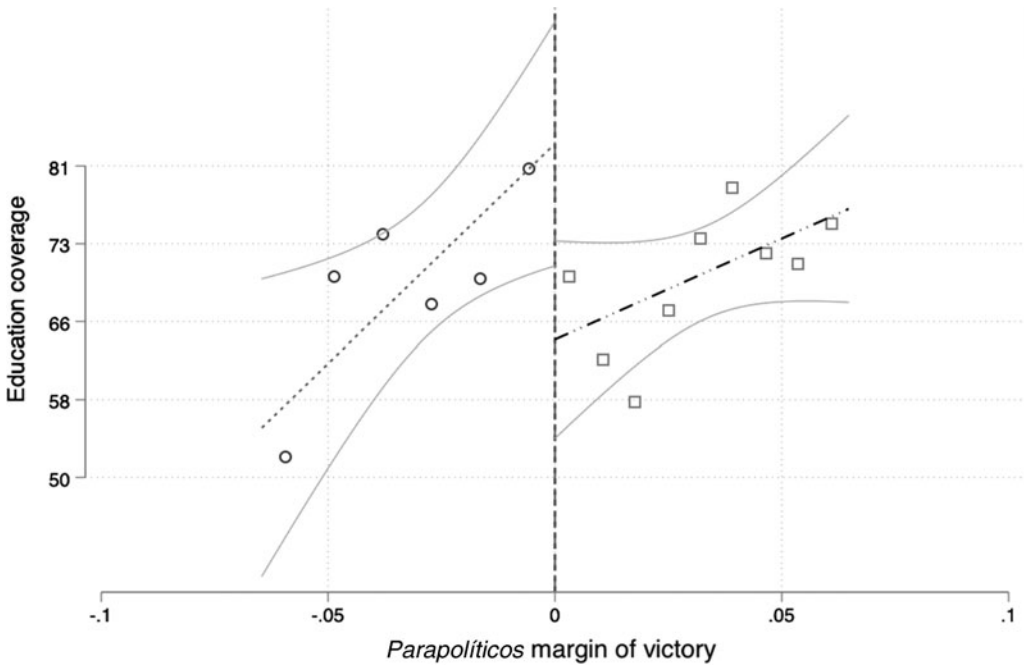


Fig. 2. RD effect of paramilitary-mayor winning on thefts.  
Note: The horizontal axis displays the winning margin of the paramilitary-mayors (winners and runners-up). The dashed lines are the linear fit. The solid lines are the 95 per cent confidence intervals at both sides of the threshold.

**Table 3.** RD estimates: public goods outcomes

Outcomes	Education			Infant mortality		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Paramilitary-mayor	-17.36** (7.38)	-7.07 (5.65)	-16.66** (6.94)	4.50 (4.48)	4.27 (3.47)	5.36 (4.81)
Band.	Opt (0.087)	0.1	0.05	Opt (0.11)	0.1	0.05
Observations	179	198	108	142	121	70

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Columns 1 and 4 use the package “rdrobust” developed by Calonico et al. (2017), the computed optimal bandwidth and a triangular kernel; these columns report robust point estimates and standard errors. The other models use a local linear regression with robust standard errors. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.1$ .



**Fig. 3.** RD effect of paramilitary-mayor win on education coverage.

Note: The horizontal axis displays the winning margin of the paramilitary-mayors (winners and runners-up). The dashed lines are the linear fit. The solid lines are the 95 per cent confidence intervals at both sides of the threshold.

### Why Paramilitary-Politicians Reduce Insecurity and Hamper Development

Why and how do these narrow wins by paramilitary-tied mayors influence crime rates and the provision of nonsecurity public goods in the observed fashion? This section uses data on politicians’ ties to the paramilitaries, police reinforcements, municipal expenditures, transparency, party affiliation, and public discourse to evaluate the framework’s proposed mechanisms of security capacity—power to self-restrain and to “overawe” threats<sup>26</sup>—and security prioritization—diversion of social spending from other public services—and to test alternative pathways. I then turn in the article’s final section to qualitative case studies to further probe the mechanisms.

#### Mechanism 1: Capacity—Licit and Illicit Security Alliances

I argue that politicians with violent linkages have a comparative advantage in the provision of security because of the coercive capacity afforded by their wider repertoire of (legal and illegal)

<sup>26</sup>See Hobbes (1996).

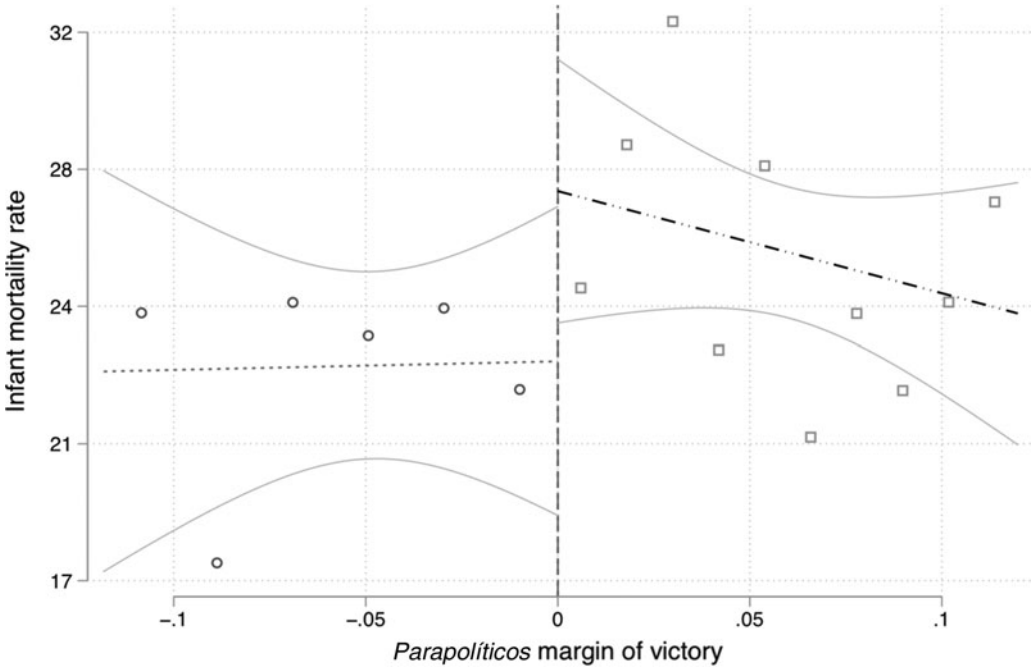


Fig. 4. RD effect of paramilitary-mayor win on infant mortality rate. Note: The horizontal axis displays the winning margin of the paramilitary-mayors (winners and runners-up). The dashed lines are the linear fit. The solid lines are the 95 per cent confidence intervals at both sides of the threshold.

security enforcers. If alliances with illicit armed actors partially underpin the paramilitary-politicians’ moderating effect on crime and insecurity, we would expect to see evidence of such pacts, and we might anticipate the effect on security to be even greater among the politicians with the densest ties to coercive actors able to check their own violence and deter that of others.

All “paramilitary-mayors” had established linkages to the paramilitaries, but there were differences in the degree and strength of these ties. Some of the mayors were part of the armed paramilitary structures or were responsible for founding the paramilitary forces, whereas others had looser alliances with the paramilitaries: the paramilitaries backed them and conspired with them, but they were neither paramilitaries themselves nor their creators. To better differentiate the strength of the linkages and to provide evidence of the systematic use of pacts in localities governed by paramilitary mayors, I returned to the judicial sentences and extracted information on the exact pacts, including Pacto de Uraba, Pacto de Chivolo, Pacto de Ralito, Pacto de Barranco de Loba, Pacto de Casanare, Pacto de Granadazo, Pacto de Marizco, Pacto de Pijivay, Pacto de Díficil, Reunión de las Canarias, and Pacto Uraba Grande Unida y en Paz. A total of 74 per cent of the paramilitary-mayors were signatories to these pacts; the remaining 26 per cent fell outside of these formal agreements to found and grow the paramilitaries, but were nonetheless charged with ties to the paramilitary forces. Table 4 presents an RD model in which the treatment variable (barely winning the election) is interacted with a dummy variable indicating the mayor’s links with the paramilitary structure. The results suggest that all paramilitary-mayors—irrespective of the density of their linkages—benefit from their alliances with these illegal enforcers, which facilitate their production of iron-fist security.

If paramilitary-politicians’ dampening effect on insecurity and crime stems from a broader repertoire of security providers, including licit law enforcement, we should observe divergence in security policies among localities in which paramilitary mayoral candidates barely won and



**Table 4.** RD estimates by strength of violent linkage

Outcomes	Thefts (1)	Robberies (2)	Injuries (3)	Education (4)	Infant (5)
Paramilitary-mayor	-1.70* (0.98)	-2.18** (0.85)	-1.71** (0.83)	-11.00 (8.63)	7.97 (6.72)
Paramilitary-mayor * Dense ties	0.91 (1.18)	0.02 (1.09)	-0.78 (1.25)	-4.10 (16.37)	17.11** (7.01)
Band	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Observations	73	64	78	112	78

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. All models use a local linear regression with robust standard errors. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.1$ .

those in which they barely lost the elections. In Colombia, mayors control local security policy and spending.<sup>27</sup> However, police deployment is decided by the centralized National Police, with mayors only able to request new police officers from Bogotá police headquarters (Eaton 2006). At the beginning of the period of analysis, as many as 200 or approximately 20 per cent of all municipalities were without police protection.<sup>28</sup> I propose that paramilitary-politicians' emphasis on stability and order—even if for different and nefarious reasons—aligned their prerogatives with those of the National Police, giving them greater access to request and be granted law enforcement deployment.<sup>29</sup> To explore this mechanism, I examine data from Cortés et al. (2012) on police reinforcements, which capture the number of years of a mayor's term in office that the municipality received reinforcements from the National Police, with a maximum of four. In a simple difference-in-means test, municipalities under paramilitary-politician rule augment their police presence. Likewise, in Table 5, I exploit an RD approach and compare the increases in police presence in municipalities with narrowly elected paramilitary- and nonparamilitary-mayors. Table 5 provides evidence that having a paramilitary-tied mayor causes an increase in police reinforcements.<sup>30</sup>

While paramilitary-politicians, on average, reduce levels of insecurity and crime, in electing these mayors, the evidence suggests that citizens opt for administrations that tend to produce adverse effects on other governance outcomes, notably, education, which is considered the optimal indicator of municipal performance (Avellaneda 2009). Why do politicians with coercive linkages, who are seemingly successful at security provision, perform relatively poorly on this other governance outcome?

### **Mechanism 2: Motivation—Crowding Out Spending on Citizen Welfare**

To test whether the negative social welfare effects stem from paramilitary-mayors' prioritizing and allocating budgets away from and misappropriating public funds intended for social services, I compare the municipal spending on education of violence-linked mayoral candidates who barely won and lost the elections. These data derive from the Panel de Buen Gobierno data of the Universidad de los Andes. Table 6 presents RD models on this expenditure outcome, measured in logs per person. The first column shows that paramilitary-mayors spend approximately  $(\exp(-0.94) - 1) \times 100 = 60.9$  per cent less on education. This diversion of funds away from social welfare (most often funneled to armed groups) could help explain the adverse implications for public goods outcomes described earlier. Figure 5 illustrates this result. In the Online Appendix, I further verify that this divergence in public goods expenditures does not derive from differential fiscal performance. There appears to be little difference between barely elected

<sup>27</sup>Personal interview, Juanita Goebertus, February 2019.

<sup>28</sup>Personal interview, Alejandro Eder (Director of the Colombian Agency for Reintegration), New York, January 2013.

<sup>29</sup>For example, of Colombia's large cities, Bogotá has the fewest police officers per capita, in part, because of Gustavo Petro's poor relationship with the National Police during his time as mayor (personal interview, December 2020).

<sup>30</sup>This dynamic could also signal the central state's desire to complement, but also substitute, informal paramilitary policing with regular police presence.

**Table 5.** RD estimates on police reinforcements

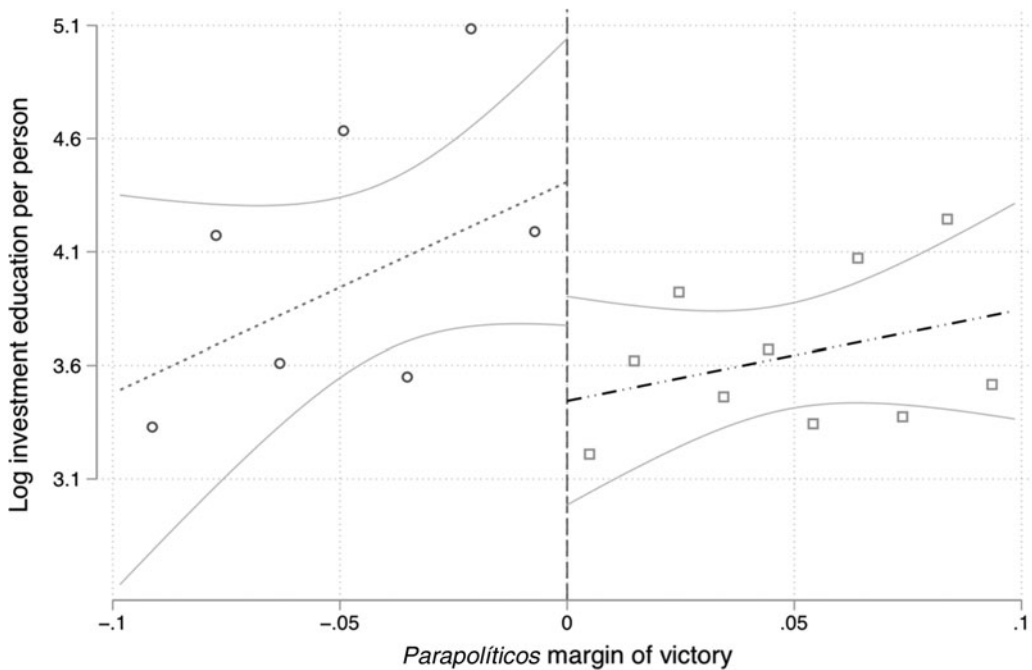
Outcomes	Police reinforcements (1)
Paramilitary-mayor	0.60* (0.32)
Band	0.05
Observations	99

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Model 1 uses a local linear regression with robust standard error. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.1$ .

**Table 6.** RD estimates on spending and corruption variables

Outcomes	Education spending			Corruption		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Paramilitary-mayor	-1.05** (0.48)	-0.96** (0.38)	-1.05* (0.54)	-8.73 (7.04)	-6.42 (5.97)	-8.61 (7.91)
Band	0.078 (Opt)	0.1	0.55	0.094 (Opt)	0.1	0.05
Observations	135	164	98	75	79	45

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Columns 1 and 4 use the package “rdrobust” developed by Calonico et al. (2017), the computed optimal bandwidth and a triangular kernel; these columns report robust point estimates and standard errors. The other models use a local linear regression with robust standard errors. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.1$ .



**Fig. 5.** RD effect of paramilitary-mayor winning on education spending.

Note: The dashed line is the linear fit on both sides of the threshold. The solid line is the 95 per cent confidence interval.

paramilitary- and nonparamilitary-mayors on the maintenance of a balanced budget (see Table A.8 in the Online Appendix).

Anecdotal evidence is consistent with the crowding-out and diversion logic (for additional examples, see Table A.16 in the Online Appendix). Paramilitary-mayor Angel Villarreal Barragán, for instance, used 47 million pesos from public works and infrastructure contracts to fund security forces, likely also providing his comrades employment. In Santander, through

bureaucratic payroll and public contracts, mayors diverted 40 per cent of their local budgets to fund private security forces (*Periódico Portada* 2013). In Santa Marta, Francisco “Chico” Zúñiga’s government redirected funds from the health promotion agency Sol Salud to finance the paramilitaries,<sup>31</sup> while in Riohacha, Mayor Wilder Ríos was detained for diverting 148 million pesos destined for healthcare to instead finance militia groups.<sup>32</sup> Judicial records reveal how Gabriel Antonio Rivera Cueto and Nilson Navajas sponsored paramilitary groups by diverting public social resources in Suan, Atlántico, and Coveñas, Sucre, respectively.<sup>33</sup> A report by the Comptroller General of the Republic found: “Of the total royalties received by the [Cesar] departmental government during the period 1998–2002, only one quarter was allocated to the basic sectors required under the current legislation.... For this reason, the advances ... in the sectors of education, health, aqueduct and sewage are not the expected ones.”<sup>34</sup>

If paramilitary-politicians’ impact on public goods outcomes stems from their emphasis on security over education, we would expect to observe, at a minimum, evidence of this prioritization in their public discourse. Their rhetoric should also likely diverge from that of nonparamilitary-politicians. I have data only on the 195,715 Twitter posts of paramilitary-politicians, and given the life span of Twitter, these include only a relatively recent period (post-2010). I nonetheless see whether their propaganda follows the anticipated pattern. Figure 6 shows the average weekly tweets devoted to public goods and demonstrates that paramilitary-politicians allocated, on average, twice as many tweets to security as to education.<sup>35</sup>

### **Alternative Mechanisms: Corrupt, Inept, or Ideological?**

The framework suggests that the paramilitary-politicians’ public goods record results from (illegal) butter-to-guns transfers rather than from these politicians’ general kleptocratic management of resources and “plunder[ing of] public finances.”<sup>36</sup> If a general corruption mechanism were operative, we should observe significant differences in levels of corruption in treated and control municipalities. I use the Procuraduría indicator, “Índice de Gobierno Abierto,” ranging from 0 to 100, which captures the levels of transparency and corruption of the local governments. Models 4–6 in Table 6 suggest that municipalities governed by paramilitary-politicians tend to suffer on transparency, but the effect is not significant by conventional standards. That the paramilitary-tied politicians spend less on social welfare further suggests that the mechanism underpinning their poor public goods record is also not mere ineptness (Avellaneda 2009; Boyne 2003).

It may be that these politicians undercut public services because of their anti-redistributive ideology. Across Latin America, the political Right has been associated with *mano dura* (iron-fist) policies and coercive responses to crime, and the Left with noncoercive crime-reduction strategies, including social welfare policies and human capital enhancement (Ahnen 2007; Holland 2013; Rivera and Zarate-Tenorio 2016). The paramilitary-politician pacts sought to “refund the country” and consolidate a conservative, right-wing platform centered on the “natural right of legitimate self-defense” and the state’s responsibility to defend its citizens (López 2010; Romero 2007). Rural elites created paramilitaries to protect elite interests (Romero 2007). Consistent with this, Ch et al. (2018) demonstrate that locations with paramilitary violence experienced, for example, greater land formalization. At the same time, in the highly competitive districts upon which this article focuses, paramilitary- and nonparamilitary-mayors oftentimes occupied similar positions on the ideological spectrum, as indicated by their comparable party

<sup>31</sup>See Ávila and Valencia Agudelo (no date).

<sup>32</sup>See *El Tiempo* (2004).

<sup>33</sup>See Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris (no date).

<sup>34</sup>See United Nations Development Program, Colombia (2010, 76).

<sup>35</sup>In ongoing research, I am analyzing all nonparamilitary-politicians’ tweets as well.

<sup>36</sup>See Procuraduría General de la Nación (2006).

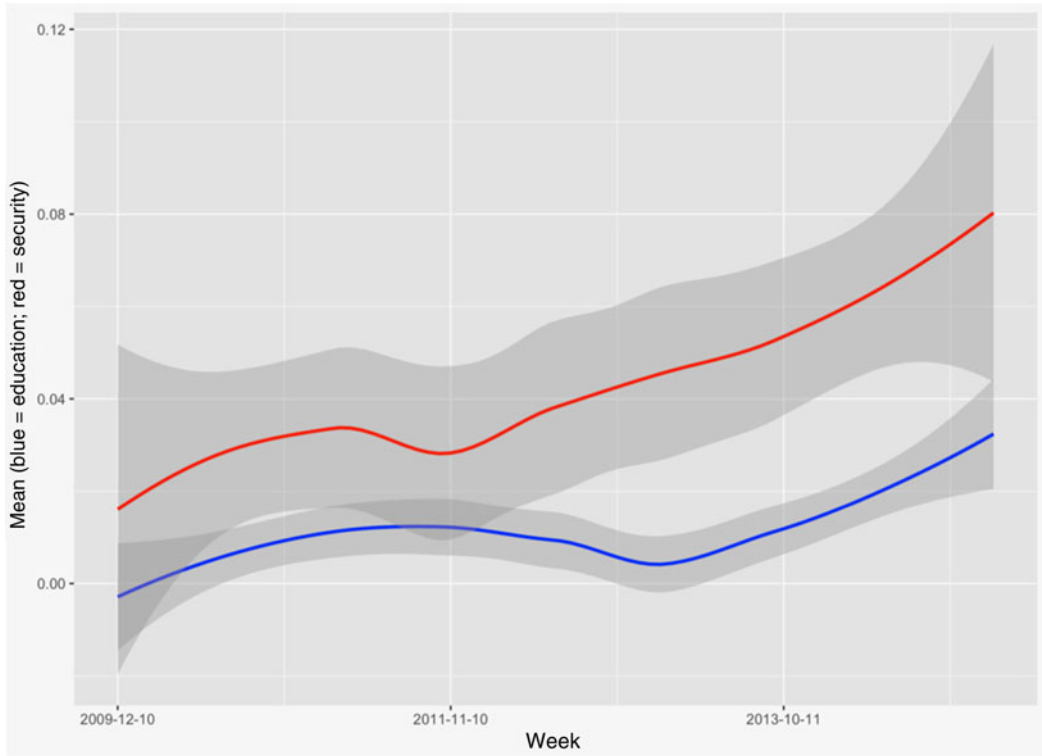


Fig. 6. Paramilitary-politicians' tweets on security and education. The gray shading denotes 95% confidence intervals for the average Tweets over time.

affiliations shown in Figure A.2 in the online Appendix.<sup>37</sup> Paramilitary-mayors' coercive linkages and priorities, rather than their partisanship, I argue, drive their impact on public goods.

### Probing the Mechanisms of Paramilitary-Politician Governance in Cesar

To further construct how mayors with and without paramilitary linkages govern, I engage in controlled, most-similar comparative case studies of two municipalities in the northern Colombian department of Cesar: Astrea and El Copey. Separated by less than 100 km, the municipalities exhibit many similarities that make them good cases for comparison. They have comparable population sizes, share a local economy based on cattle ranching and mining, and experienced a common history of politics and violence.<sup>38</sup> Especially relevant is that the two cases comprised part of the baptized "G8" localities: a paramilitary pact to seize political power by placing mayors in each municipality.<sup>39</sup> Astrea and El Copey therefore prove well matched in terms of violent, criminal efforts at manipulating elections. However, in 2007, the two municipalities diverged.

In this year, the paramilitary-candidate Edgar Orlando Barrios Ortega narrowly *won* the mayoral race in Astrea. He was convicted of crimes, including forced displacement of civilians and alliances with illegal armed groups to commit violence.<sup>40</sup> In El Copey, in the same year, the

<sup>37</sup>I derive party affiliations from Colombia's Registraduria Nacional del Estado Civil.

<sup>38</sup>In 2006, before these elections, Astrea's population was 18,168 and El Copey's was 24,408. Astrea's educational coverage was 0.76 and El Copey's was 0.72. Their homicide rates were equal at 16 per 100,000.

<sup>39</sup>Personal interview, Alvaro Araujo Castro, former congressman and senator, convicted of paramilitary politics, Valledupar, February 2017.

<sup>40</sup>República de Colombia Corte Suprema de Justicia (2015), Verdad 2015.

paramilitary-candidate Wilfrido Enrique Ruiz Rada narrowly *lost* the mayoral contest to a nonparamilitary-candidate, Pablo Emilio Ordonez Simanca, by a mere 394 votes.<sup>41</sup> Governance outcomes between these mayors' administrations mirrored those across the full sample of close elections. In Astrea, the paramilitary-mayor oversaw reductions in crime and insecurity but also eroded social welfare relative to El Copey. To illustrate the mechanisms that generated these governance outcomes, I conducted interviews with violent and nonviolent politicians and paramilitaries, and drew on local press, judicial sentences, paramilitary testimonies under the Justice and Peace Law, and victim reports for the Centro de Memoria del Conflicto project.

Why did nonparamilitary-tied Ordonez Simanca outperform paramilitary-tied Barrios Ortega on social welfare? In El Copey, no evidence exists of the diversion of public resources or crowding out of development spending under the nonparamilitary-mayor.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, in Astrea, resources were diverted away from public goods to fund illegal security forces. The two mayors' social-spending patterns diverged, with El Copey's nonsecurity public goods' expenditures surpassing Astrea's. However, more importantly, resources were diverted from social welfare to security in Astrea. For example, Astrea's hospital and healthcare funding was put at the paramilitaries' disposal for medical services for the self-defense groups.<sup>43</sup> Barrios Ortega ran the hospital before assuming the mayorship. Rather than serve the community, it instead provided medical attention and medicine to irregular soldiers.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, public contracts and mining royalties were shifted away from their intended destination of nonsecurity public goods enhancement to instead finance private security services.<sup>45</sup> Royalties for the exploitation of resources, in particular, intended to be used for basic public services, did "not ha[ve] the destination established by law" (United Nations Development Program, Colombia 2010, 52).<sup>46</sup>

Qualitative evidence further suggests that Barrios Ortega emphasized security and relied on coercive allies to keep violence under an iron fist.<sup>47</sup> Both Astrea and El Copey fell within the strengthened 10th Armored Brigade's deployment range. However, whereas the nonparamilitary-mayors' key objectives in their municipal development plans did not include the word "security," "security" appeared in the first item of the Fundamentals' section of the paramilitary-mayors' plans.<sup>48</sup> Astrea's, for example, promised to implement "a security program with the help of the police and the army in order to reduce the indices of insecurity in the municipality" and "consolidate equality, peace, and security." To do so, Barrios Ortega relied not only on the armed forces, but also on the full repertoire of security enforcers at his disposal, including the self-defense forces.

In 2000, the paramilitaries entered Astrea with barbarism, executing eleven campesinos in the public plaza of Santa Cecilia.<sup>49</sup> With paramilitary-politicians in office, "the fighting ceased."<sup>50</sup> Following the Colombian proverb, "Between firemen, we do not step on the hoses" (Guillén 2008), Mayor Barrios' pact<sup>51</sup> with paramilitary Numa Pompilio Cortez Mendoza<sup>52</sup> established:

<sup>41</sup>Ruiz Rada was accused of conspiracy to commit aggravated homicide of a protected person (*El Pilón* 2017) and causing irregularities in the delivery of school food rations (Marina 2018).

<sup>42</sup>Personal interview, Alejandrina Ayastauy, Organization of American States Peace Mission, Valledupar, February 2017.

<sup>43</sup>See *Verdad Abierta* (2015).

<sup>44</sup>See *El Pilón* (2012) and República de Colombia Corte Suprema de Justicia (2015). Personal interview, Orlando Carreño, researcher for the Centro de Memoria del Conflicto, Astrea, March 2017.

<sup>45</sup>See Jiménez Herrera (2015) and *Verdad Abierta* (2015).

<sup>46</sup>See also *El Pilón* (2011).

<sup>47</sup>Personal interview, Alfonso Núñez Gutiérrez (acting Mayor of Astrea, who made denunciations against paramilitary politics), Astrea, February 2017.

<sup>48</sup>See Pablo Emilio Ordoñez Simanca (2008) "Plan de Desarrollo Municipal: Por Tí ... Por El Copey, Sigamos Adelante 2008–2011," *El Copey*; Eduardo Orlando Barrios Ortega (2008) "Plan de Desarrollo Municipal 2008–2011: Astrea Comunitaria, Participativa y Eficiente," Astrea.

<sup>49</sup>Personal interviews, victims, Astrea, March 2017.

<sup>50</sup>See *Verdad Abierta* (2015).

<sup>51</sup>See Jiménez Herrera (2015).

<sup>52</sup>See República de Colombia Corte Suprema de Justicia (2015).

a form of social control ... exercising “justice” ... imposing specific standards of mandatory compliance for the entire population.... The imposition of rules determined the hours to be in the fields or in public spaces.... In Astrea, no one could be outside before six in the morning and after seven at night.<sup>53</sup>

There was “continuous monitoring” and “institutional control of the population” with the complicity and cooperation of the public authorities. In this way, under paramilitary-mayor Barrios, crime and violence were kept to a minimum and there existed “[coerced] peace in the region.”<sup>54</sup> In El Copey, Mayor Ordóñez Simanca not only placed less emphasis on security, but also had a narrower repertoire of actors and alliances with which to clamp down on insecurity and crime.

## Conclusion

This article analyzes all Colombian mayoral elections from 1997 to 2015 that paramilitary- politicians barely won or lost, and shows that their close wins resulted in significant governance implications: reductions in insecurity and common crime but also in human capital. I propose that the pathway by which the violence-linked characters in office influenced government outcomes was through security alliances and diversion of resources from social investment to illicit security. Analyses of the mayors’ spending patterns, security policies, paramilitary ties, corruption levels, Twitter feeds, and a comparative case study provide results consistent with this interpretation.

There are particularities to the case of paramilitary politics in Colombia. The paramilitaries were not just violent, but brutal and indiscriminate in their atrocities, and highly criminalized in their operations. The security provision of politicians with linkages to actors more restrained in their use of violence might assume different forms. The paramilitary-political phenomenon constituted an illegal system of alliances, rather than an open, legal process of reincorporation that might provide measures geared precisely at reducing the trade-offs implicit in including actors with violent linkages in democratic politics. Rebel movements, such as the FARC, have been shown to have engaged in similar takeovers of local political office and, despite espousing a left-wing ideology, similar diversion of public investment from social development to military operations and similar provision of local order. However, FARC politicians relied only on illicit linkages and lacked access to licit security providers until, in 2018, they openly entered the political arena (Eaton 2006). In other contexts, paramilitaries are instead a legal part of the official state apparatus (for example, the Italian Carabinieri) and may therefore enjoy the full coercive strength of the state apparatus but be limited in their ability to use all means necessary—including illicit ones—to control the criminal underworld. Pacts between government and militia belligerents are under-studied, often involve gray areas, and merit further scholarly attention, as do the implications of using such illicit security forces in democracies.

Despite these limitations, the study likely has empirical and theoretical generalizability beyond Colombia’s paramilitary politics. It may inform debates raging in the literatures on democracy, war, peace, crime, and governance about whether and how to politically include potential spoilers of stability, particularly those with citizens’ blood on their hands: whether to create pacts with them; whether to allow them to run for office; and whether to guarantee them political power. Critical to these debates is an understanding of what happens if the coercive politicians go on to win the elections (How will they rule?), and very often, they do win the elections (Daly 2019; Loxton and Mainwaring 2018). We have little leverage over this question of their rule because these politicians do not win randomly. By taking advantage of a rare opportunity, this article sheds light on this important debate. In support of arguments favoring the inclusion of

<sup>53</sup>El Centro de Memoria del Conflicto, “Borrador: Contexto Histórico Astrea,” Astrea.

<sup>54</sup>See *Verdad Abierta* (2015).



candidates with violent linkages in office, my findings suggest that it has stabilizing effects. However, consistent with criticisms of this policy, I demonstrate that in gaining security, citizens forgo not only justice and human rights, but also public goods and social welfare. This likely undermines longer-term citizen safety and well-being.

From a theoretical perspective, security voting, violent pacts, and crowding out development spending are also not unique to Colombia. Actors with coercive linkages are seen as credible on security around the world, and transfers of butter to (licit and illicit) guns undermine welfare in many violent contexts. In India, violent criminals are elected *because* they signal that they will be hard on crime (Vaishnav 2017). Across 57 countries during 1970–2015, belligerent successor parties won at the ballot box because they were deemed the most competent providers of societal peace (Daly 2021). At the same time, by prioritizing security over development, these politicians with coercive linkages tend to undermine their administrations. This suggests, on the one hand, that pernicious cycles may result, in which violence-tied politicians seek to show deliverables on the issue on which they have a comparative advantage and to endogenously raise the salience of security deliverables in voters' minds to enable their reelection. On the other hand, it indicates that their poor performance on other public goods should lead to a negative incumbency advantage over time. Future research should seek to follow the political accountability process and probe if and how citizens reward or sanction politicians with coercive linkages for their performance in office over the longer term.

The article also raises questions about what makes politicians deemed credible and competent on security issues and use of force. Should those with (para)military experience or ties to violent actors be good at solving the country's problems, including those related to national defense and law and order (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020)? *Mano dura* may work in the short run, but does it work in the long run. And are pacts with violent actors sustainable ways of bringing down violence? When these policies fail, do politicians with violent linkages lose their ownership over the security issue? Understanding the underpinnings of votes for politicians with coercive ties and inheritance is a topic worthy of continued, future inquiry.

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## **Supplementary Online Appendix**

How Do Violent Politicians Govern? The Case of Paramilitary-Tied Mayors in Colombia

Intended for Online Publication Only

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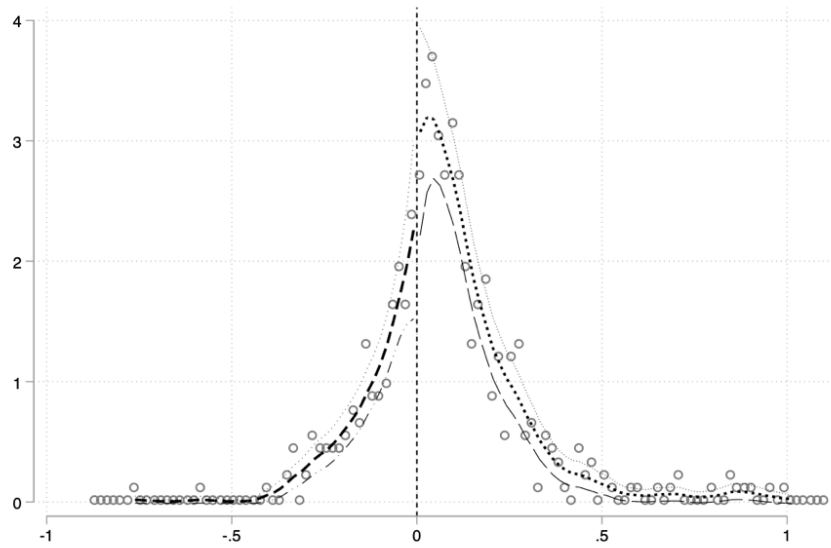


Figure A.1. McCrary Test, DC Density Plot: Paramilitary-Mayor Margin of Victory

Figure A.1 shows the graphical results of the McCrary test, which analyzes possible anomalous jumps in the distribution of the running variable: paramilitary margin of victory (bandwidth 0.1). The jump at the threshold is not statistically significant (the p-value of the log difference in heights is higher than 0.1), suggesting that it is a normal jump that also exists at different values of the distribution. This indicates that candidates could not precisely influence close elections and that mayors' administrations on either side of the cutoff may be comparable (McCrary 2008).

In Table A.1, I estimate the RD model using one-period lagged outcomes as the dependent variable to check whether there is a significant effect of having a paramilitary mayor on pre-treatment outcomes. None of the RD estimates are significant, suggesting that there is not a pre-trend on the outcomes that may explain the treatment effects. In the placebo tests, there exist no discontinuities, further validating the RD design and suggesting, in particular, that places with paramilitary and non-paramilitary mayors did not differ in their pre-treatment levels of insecurity and public goods provision.

Table A.1. Continuity Tests Lagged Outcomes

Outcomes	(1) Education	(2) Infant mortality	(3) Education spending	(4) Thefts	(5) Robberies	(6) Bodily Harm
Paramilitary- mayor	6.48 (9.75)	-0.81 (8.34)	-0.65 (0.65)	-0.85 (1.42)	-1.19 (1.27)	-1.25 (1.23)
Obs.	199	62	100	48	49	48

Standard errors in parentheses. The models use a triangular kernel and the optimal bandwidth calculated with the package “rdrobust”, which uses the algorithm developed by Calonico et al. (2017). Robust point estimates and robust standard errors are estimated with a local polynomial regression-discontinuity. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

In Table A.2, I show the results of the RD models on pre-treatment outcomes and an additional set of covariates – population, log of GDP per person, and log of urban population. None of these estimates is statistically significant, suggesting that there are no systematic baseline differences among municipalities that barely elected a paramilitary mayor and those that did not. Models 5 and 6 further show no significant difference in rates of attacks from the illegal armed groups.

Table A.2. Continuity Tests Pre-Treatment Covariates

Outcomes	(1) Population	(2) Log GDP	(3) Urban	(5) Attacks FARC	(6) Attacks AUC
Paramilitary- mayor	-0.19 (0.34)	-1.48 (1.58)	-0.52 (0.41)	1.07 (1.0)	-0.55 (1.03)
Obs.	199	36	207	29	23

Standard errors in parentheses. The models use a triangular kernel and the optimal bandwidth calculated with the package “rdrobust”, which uses the algorithm developed by Calonico et al. (2017). Robust point estimates and robust standard errors are estimated with a local polynomial regression-discontinuity. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Tables A.3 and A.4 report results of the main outcomes using placebo cutoffs of the running variable at the median values of the paramilitary-mayor vote share for untreated and treated observations, (41.12% and 61.08%, respectively). Only one specification out of ten is statistically significant at  $p < 0.1$ , which is consistent with random chance.

Table A.3. Placebo Test

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Outcomes	Thefts	Robberies	Bodily Harm	Education	Infant
Paramilitary mayor	2.54 (1.97)	2.91 (2.12)	1.07 (1.48)	17.89 (14.59)	0.13 (4.49)
Observations	23	16	32	116	41

Standard errors in parentheses. The models use a triangular kernel and the optimal bandwidth calculated with the package “rdrobust”, which uses the algorithm developed by Calonico et al. (2017). Robust point estimates and robust standard errors are estimated with a local polynomial regression-discontinuity. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

Table A.4. Placebo Test

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Outcomes	Thefts	Robberies	Bodily Harm	Education	Infant
Paramilitary mayor	-0.86 (0.58)	-1.13* (0.67)	-0.55 (0.60)	3.27 (5.74)	4.95 (3.89)
Observations	121	104	140	290	117

Standard errors in parentheses. The models use a triangular kernel and the optimal bandwidth calculated with the package “rdrobust”, which uses the algorithm developed by Calonico et al. (2017). Robust point estimates and robust standard errors are estimated with a local polynomial regression-discontinuity. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

Table A.5 conducts the main analysis, excluding places with electoral risk, according to MOE data. I find that the results hold.

Table A.5. RD Estimates, Excluding Municipalities with Electoral Risk

Outcomes	Thefts	Robberies	Bodily harm	Education	Infant mortality
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Paramilitary-mayor	-1.90*	-2.62***	-1.82**	-17.36**	4.50
	(1.10)	(0.99)	(0.86)	(7.38)	(4.48)
Obs.	100	79	107	179	142

Standard errors in parentheses. The models use a triangular kernel and the optimal bandwidth calculated with the package “rdrbust”, which uses the algorithm developed by Calonico et al. (2017). Robust point estimates and robust standard errors are estimated with a local polynomial regression-discontinuity. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

I further undertake the analyses with the inclusion of covariates, using Calonico et al. 2018’s covariate-adjusted RD (Tables A.6 and A.7). I use only population variables for these covariate-adjusted models as these variables have sufficient observations to estimate local effects.

Table A.6. RD Estimates of Security Outcomes, Covariate-Adjusted

Outcomes	Thefts			Robberies (of people)			Bodily Harm		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Paramilitary-mayor	-1.70	-1.38**	-1.56	-2.30**	-1.78***	-2.02**	-1.65*	-1.18**	-1.50*
	(1.16)	(0.69)	(1.03)	(1.01)	(0.64)	(0.97)	(0.87)	(0.57)	(0.86)
Band.	Opt.	0.1	0.05	Opt.	0.1	0.05	Opt.	0.1	0.05
Obs.	98	113	64	77	99	57	102	118	68

Standard errors in parentheses. Columns 1, 4 and 7 use the package “rdrbust” developed by Calonico et al. (2017), the computed optimal bandwidth and a triangular kernel; these columns report robust point estimates and standard errors. The other models use a local linear regression with robust standard errors. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Table A.7. RD Estimates of Public Goods Outcomes, Covariate-Adjusted

Outcomes	Education			Infant Mortality Rates		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Paramilitary-mayor	-13.77*	-6.68	-14.90*	3.39	2.91	4.47
	(7.40)	(6.06)	(7.63)	(5.07)	(3.39)	(4.67)
Band.	Opt.	0.1	0.05	Opt.	0.1	0.05
Obs.	187	177	102	126	119	68

Standard errors in parentheses. Columns 1 and 4 use the package “rdrbust” developed by Calonico et al. (2017), the computed optimal bandwidth and a triangular kernel; these columns report robust point estimates and standard errors. The other models use a local linear regression with robust standard errors. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

I use an index of fiscal performance ranging from 0 to 100 from CEDE, which measures whether the local government has a) self-financing of its operating expenses; b) back-up of debt service; c) dependency on national transfers and royalties; d) generation of its own revenues; e) savings capacity; and e) sizeable investments. There is no difference between barely elected paramilitary mayors and barely elected non-paramilitary mayors on fiscal performance (Table A.8).

Table A.8. RD Estimates on Fiscal Performance

Outcomes	Fiscal Performance		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Parapolítica	-3.33 (3.71)	-1.91 (2.76)	-3.32 (3.71)
Band	Opt.	0.1	0.05
Obs.	177	177	105

Standard errors in parentheses. Column 1 uses the package “rdrobust” developed by Calonico et al. (2017), the computed optimal bandwidth and a triangular kernel; these columns report robust point estimates and standard errors. The other models use a local linear regression with robust standard errors. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Tables A.9 and A.10 report results of the main outcomes with conventional estimates and robust standard errors including triangular kernel weights for the Calonico et al. (2017) optimal bandwidth and the 0.05 and 0.1 bandwidths. The results are substantively unchanged though estimated more noisily in some specifications.

Table A.9. RD Estimates of Security Outcomes, Covariate-Adjusted

Outcomes	Thefts			Robberies (of people)			Bodily Harm		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Paramilitary- mayor	-1.75 (1.10)	-1.60 (1.18)	-1.77 (1.45)	-2.40*** (0.99)	-2.06** (1.01)	-2.46** (1.19)	-1.63* (0.86)	-1.47 (0.93)	-1.55 (1.01)
Band.	Opt.	0.1	0.05	Opt.	0.1	0.05	Opt.	0.1	0.05
Obs.	100	115	66	79	101	59	107	120	70

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table A.10. RD Estimates of Public Goods Outcomes, Covariate-Adjusted

Outcomes	Education			Infant Mortality Rates		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Paramilitary- mayor	-14.90** (7.38)	-13.14* (7.85)	-18.10** (8.77)	4.66 (4.48)	4.51 (5.57)	2.17 (7.13)
Band.	Opt.	0.1	0.05	Opt.	0.1	0.05
Obs.	179	198	113	142	121	70

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table A.11 reports results of the main outcomes with conventional estimates and robust standard errors using the Epanechnikov kernel and the Calonico et al. (2017) optimal bandwidth. The results are substantively unchanged.

Table A.11. Epanechnikov Kernel

Outcomes	(1) Thefts	(2) Robberies	(3) Bodily Harm	(4) Education	(5) Infant
Paramilitary mayor	-1.84 (1.13)	-2.37*** (1.03)	-1.75** (0.90)	-14.57* (7.71)	4.80 (4.49)
Observations	91	73	97	169	128

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Alternative Security Indicators*

Table A.12 analyzes alternative indicators of security: car thefts, threats, and terrorism, averaged over the mayors' administrations. The results hold across most of these different outcomes.

Table A.12. RD Estimates: Other Security Outcomes

Outcomes	Car Thefts <sup>a</sup>			Threats <sup>b</sup>			Terrorism <sup>c</sup>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Paramilitary- mayors	-1.39** (0.59)	-0.89** (0.44)	-1.47** (0.57)	-13.66*** (6.28)	-13.21 (8.36)	-14.61 (9.00)	-0.34 (0.24)	-0.29* (0.16)	-0.36* (0.19)
Band	Opt (0.08)	0.1	0.05	Opt (0.073)	0.1	0.05	Opt (0.064)	0.1	0.05
Observations	100	128	74	80	104	58	71	104	58

Standard errors in parentheses. Columns 1, 4 and 7 use the package “rdrobust” developed by Calonico et al. (2017), the computed optimal bandwidth and a triangular kernel; these columns report robust point estimates and standard errors. The other models use a local linear regression with robust standard errors. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

<sup>a</sup> Source: Policia Nacional; <sup>b</sup> Source: Registro Único de Víctimas; <sup>c</sup> Source: Ministerio de Defensa



## Generalizability

The empirical strategy focuses on the comparison among municipalities where paramilitary-politicians barely won or barely lost. Here, I consider how these municipalities may differ from the rest. Table A.13 reveals no significant difference between municipalities where elections were very contested (the RD sample) with those where elections were not highly contested.

Table A.13. Comparison of Municipalities with Contested and Non-contested elections

Variable	(1) RD sample	(2) Out of RD sample	(3) Difference
Log population	10.1 (1.1)	10.0 (1.0)	-0.2 (0.1)
Log per capita GDP	1.8 (1.5)	1.9 (1.8)	0.1 (0.4)
Log urban population	9.6 (1.6)	9.4 (1.3)	-0.1 (0.2)
Log FARC attacks pp	-9.7 (1.5)	-9.8 (1.2)	-0.1 (0.4)
Log AUC attacks pp	-10.0 (1.6)	-9.6 (0.8)	0.4 (0.4)
Log FARC control	0.2 (0.4)	0.1 (0.4)	-0.0 (0.0)
Log AUC control	0.2 (0.4)	0.3 (0.5)	0.1 (0.0)

Standard errors in parentheses. \* p-value < 0.1, \*\* < 0.05, \*\*\* < 0.01.

## Validity of Colombian National Police Data

This appendix addresses questions of bias in the police data, and probes an alternative mechanism by which paramilitary mayors may influence local-level security: not by solving security problems, but by cooking the books on security data. If this were the case, the findings may reflect the manipulation of how data is recorded for thefts, victimization, and injuries rather than any causal effect of paramilitary mayors on real security outcomes. I address this issue of data reliability conceptually and then do so with both qualitative and quantitative data.

### *Police Crime Reporting Methodology*

In the 1990s, the Colombian police institution underwent extensive reforms focused on “strengthening internal discipline and internal control mechanisms over police malfeasance.” As a result, during the article’s period of examination, the National Police were highly centralized and increasingly professionalized. Reflective of this, trust in police increased from 20% in 1993 to between 50-60% in the 2000s (Esparza 2015).

I first look for evidence of bias in how security statistics are collected. I consult the Colombian National Police’s “Methodological Document of the Statistical Operation ‘Police Conduct and Services in Colombia,’” which describes the way in which the police record crime data through their criminal statistical information system (SIEDCO) designed for “systematizing the procedures.” In Colombia, police stations report the statistics directly to the national police headquarters in Bogotá where they are registered in the national-level system; the crime reporting and statistics therefore do not pass through the majors’ offices<sup>1</sup> (in 1962, local politicians lost their patrimonial control over the police) (Esparza 2015). The National Police gathers the crime data directly, through the following procedures, which are identical for places in which paramilitary-mayors narrowly won as for those where instead non-paramilitary candidates narrowly won:

When the public discloses a fact through the telephone line for emergency assistance, a surveillance patrol is assigned to verify and attend to the case. This patrol submits a report to the Automatic Dispatch Center (CAD), disclosing the nature of the criminality and operational activity. Meanwhile, the CAD consolidates a document called the Police Information Bulletin that, together with the polygrams, reports and other sources of information, are sent to the country GICRI officials ... cases are immediately inserted in the SIEDCO database....[A]fter being validated by a complaint manager, [they] become criminal news and are registered in the SIEDCO database...Criminal news received in the complaint rooms of the Office of the Attorney General of the Nation [an alternative source of crime statistics] ... are [also] migrated to the SIEDCO database of the National Police....[E]ach official signs a DECLARATION OF CONFIDENTIALITY AND COMMITMENT TO THE SECURITY OF INFORMATION - PUBLIC SERVANT; the acceptance of terms is recorded in one of the audit tables of the PSI application - Internal Service Portal, of the National Police, individualizing the report signed by each police officer....SIEDCO databases are backed up by a full Backup every eight (8) days and incremental backups are executed at intervals of three (3) hours. Likewise, the backed up

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Diego Duque, virtual personal interview, January 2021.

information is taken to disk Backup (VTL) and later to tapes (LTO5) (Policía Nacional de Colombia 2021).

According to experts on Colombia's National Police, there is a "long, long history of the police doing statistics through its criminality publication (*Revista de Criminalidad*) [which began circulation in the 1950s]. They have always been judicious."<sup>2</sup> This reporting and systematizing process casts doubt on whether the mayors were able to alter data on security-related matters and whether there is systematic manipulation of police data.

There are other structural features of the police that further render them less vulnerable to local co-optation and interference by mayors: police personnel are not necessarily "home grown"<sup>3</sup> and they rotate frequently, which can also hamper paramilitary-politicians ability to alter the statistics. It is nonetheless important to ask whether, given the institutional design, there are likely to be systematic differences in how crime-related data are communicated in localities governed by paramilitary mayors as compared with similar localities that are not governed by paramilitary mayors. Since the mid-1990s, according to experts, the National Police Central Command in Bogotá has set national security goals upon which local police commanders are evaluated and rewarded (e.g. reduce homicides by 10%). The same goals apply to localities governed by paramilitary mayors as to those of their non-paramilitary counterparts; therefore the incentive structure for manipulation would be the same across the treated and control samples.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, I consult the journalistic reporting that bravely unveiled the illegal paramilitary-politician alliances. I built a dataset of articles from ten national and regional newspapers from 2002 to 2010 that documented the paramilitaries' trajectories, including their involvement in politics. This work involved searching the few newspapers that had digital archives for this period, and also visiting Colombia's national library and regional newspaper offices to read the physical copies of the newspapers page by page, photographing the relevant articles. I then also reviewed a random sample of paramilitary and paramilitary-politician judicial sentences. These sources revealed the multi-faceted manifestations of the *parapolítica* phenomenon and the extent of malfeasance. If paramilitary-mayors were systematically interfering with police reporting and seeking to influence and control crime statistics, this would likely have come across in these journalistic and judicial sources. I find little evidence that suggests this practice. This is not to say that paramilitaries did not, in certain regions, collude with the armed forces, but manipulating crime statistics through their mayoral alliances did not seem to represent a systematic practice of these groups.

#### *Alternative Sources of Crime Data*

I move from the conceptual and qualitative to quantitative analyses of potential bias in the crime statistics. To do so, I collect alternative data on crime, violence, and insecurity. With these data, I seek to accomplish two goals: 1) to evaluate whether these different sources of crime data correlate with the police data equally in localities in which paramilitary-mayors narrowly won as where they narrowly lost. If paramilitary mayors were dampening crime by manipulating the statistics, these numbers should diverge in paramilitary-mayor municipalities and correlate in non-

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<sup>2</sup> María Victoria Llorente, virtual personal interview, January 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Juan Albarraçín, virtual personal interview, December 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Jerónimo Castillo Muñoz, virtual personal interview, January 2021.

paramilitary mayor municipalities; and 2) to use these indicators as alternative outcomes in the RD models.

I use three sources of data, which experts defend as highly unlikely to be contaminated by local politics in general and paramilitary politics in particular. The first is data from Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal (National Legal Medicine Institute), which directs and controls the Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences system in Colombia. A national institution, it provides forensic services, and produces an annual publication, *Forensis*, which for the years 2004-2019, includes data, at the municipal-level, on interpersonal violence (bodily harm). Medicina Legal does not track other indicators of criminality, such as robberies and thefts, and therefore I use these data as robustness checks, rather than for the main analyses. I use machine learning to extract the visual text as data. I then engaged in hand-coding to ensure accurate translation of the text to data. With the scraped statistics, I create a new dataset of violence.

The second data source is the Colombian National Center of Historical Memory, founded to “contribute to the comprehensive reparation and right to the truth for the victims of the Colombian armed conflict as well as society in general. The Center accomplishes this by reconstructing, through the testimony of victims, the serious human rights violations that occurred in the framework of the conflict, searching for truth, justice, reparation and the construction of a sustainable and lasting peace.”<sup>5</sup> The CNMH maintains a dataset of violence, which geo-codes events at the municipal level, and includes the date of the events. These data compile information from diverse sources including victim testimonies, but also from sources such as the Human Rights and Political Violence database of a left-leaning think-tank CINEP. This dataset also does not measure common crime. However, it overlaps with police data on two indicators: selective assassinations and physical damage to goods and private property.

The final source is the Victims’ Registry (Unit for the Victims Assistance and Reparation), created by Law 1448/2011 (Victims and Land Restitution Law). This law established measures to assist and repair the damages the conflict inflicted. To be eligible for reparations, victims must register with the unit. To date, 8.79 million victims have enrolled with the Victims’ Unit. The unit maintains a dataset based on their reported crimes, verified by the state. The number of reported incidents in these latter two sources is far lower than that maintained by the police.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, I do not anticipate that the police data will correlate highly with these two sources given that the former is focused on criminality, the latter two only on political violence. However, I would anticipate that, if the police data are credible, the data should correlate equally well in places in which paramilitary mayors narrowly won and narrowly lost. The correlative analyses evaluate whether the police data was compromised and biased where paramilitary mayors won the local administrations.

Table A.14 displays the correlations between the police data indicators (on the left) and the alternative violence data sources (on the right). These are broken down further and show the correlations in the municipalities in which paramilitary-mayors narrowly won and in those in which they narrowly lost. Across the indicators, we can see that the data correlate equally well in the two types of municipalities and, if anything, correlate better in places in which the paramilitary mayors narrowly won.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/victimsofterrorism/en/node/568>.

<sup>6</sup> The mean number of incidents of bodily harm, for example, is 48 in the police data versus 1.5 in the Victims’ Unit data.

These indicators are inferior measures than the police data as they have lower coverage, focus on political violence only, and have higher levels of missingness. They are therefore useful for evaluating bias in the police data, but less so for conducting the key analyses of interest.

Table A.14. Correlations Between Crime Data Sources in Paramilitary and Non-Paramilitary Administrations

Source		<i>Electoral Outcome</i>	CNMH	CNMH	Victims Unit	Institute of Legal Medicine
			<i>Harm to private property</i>	<i>Selective assassin.</i>	<i>Bodily Harm</i>	<i>Bodily Harm</i>
<b>National Police</b>	<i>Harm to private goods</i>	Paramil. won	0.13			
		Paramil. lost	0.06			
	<i>Political assassination</i>	Paramil. won		0.31		
		Paramil. lost		0.13		
	<i>Bodily Harm</i>	Paramil. won			-0.15	0.12
		Paramil. lost			-0.12	-0.05

#### *Additional Manipulation Checks*

Finally, I conduct several additional manipulation checks. If the paramilitary-mayors were cooking the books, the security data should show improvements immediately upon them taking office; if instead, the finding reflects a real improvement in security, there may be a lag in the improvement or it may occur more uniformly over the course of the mayors' administrations. I check for a sudden jump/fall in crime statistics when paramilitary mayors are elected. I find no such sudden decline in crime statistics in paramilitary-mayor localities versus those in which non-paramilitary mayors narrowly won. I also compare the first two years versus the latter two years of the mayors' terms. However, unfortunately, such an analysis is underpowered to reach conclusions.

Ultimately, while potentially, and even likely, subject to biases and corruption, this is likely a trend everywhere in Colombia, both where paramilitary mayors narrowly won and where they narrowly lost. Police statistics remain the most comprehensive data available across the country and across time, and the only statistics available on common crime. As such, it is conventional practice in the study of violence and crime in Colombia to use these data.

Table A.15. Data Sources

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Data Source</b>
<i>Vote Share</i>	Registraduría Nacional de Colombia; CEDE
<i>Thefts</i>	Policía Nacional, Ministerio de Defensa
<i>Robberies</i>	Policía Nacional, Ministerio de Defensa
<i>Bodily Harm</i>	Policía Nacional, Ministerio de Defensa
<i>Education Coverage</i>	Ministerio de Educación
<i>Infant Mortality Rate</i>	DANE, “Estadísticas Vitales”
<i>Education Spending</i>	CEDE, Panel de Buen Gobierno
<i>Dense Ties</i>	Judicial Sentences
<i>Police Reinforcements</i>	Cortés et al. 2012
<i>Electoral Risk</i>	Misión Observatorio Electoral
<i>Population</i>	DANE, Censos Nacionales
<i>Urban Population</i>	DANE, Censos Nacionales
<i>GDP per capita</i>	Sánchez and España, based on DANE, Censos Nacionales
<i>Guerrilla attacks</i>	CEDE, ‘Panel Violencia y Conflicto,’ Policía Nacional; Alternative source: Grupo de Memoria Histórica
<i>Paramilitary attacks</i>	CEDE, ‘Panel Violencia y Conflicto,’ Policía Nacional; Alternative source: Grupo de Memoria Histórica
<i>Guerrilla control</i>	Matanock and García 2017
<i>Paramilitary control</i>	Matanock and García 2017
<i>Fiscal Performance</i>	CEDE, Panel de Buen Gobierno, Departamento Nacional de Planeación, “Índice de Desempeño Fiscal”
<i>Transparency</i>	Procuraduría, “Índice de Gobierno Abierto”
<i>Political Party</i>	Registraduría Nacional de Colombia
<i><u>Alternative security measures</u></i>	
<i>Car Thefts</i>	Policía Nacional
<i>Threats</i>	Registro Único de Víctimas, Unidad de Víctimas
<i>Terrorism</i>	Ministerio de Defensa
<i>Bodily Harm-ML</i>	Instituto de Medicina Legal
<i>Bodily Harm-Unidad</i>	Registro Único de Víctimas, Unidad de Víctimas
<i>Selective Assassinations</i>	Grupo Memoria Histórica (CNMH)
<i>Harm to Private Property</i>	Grupo Memoria Histórica (CNMH)

## Political Ideology and Party Affiliation

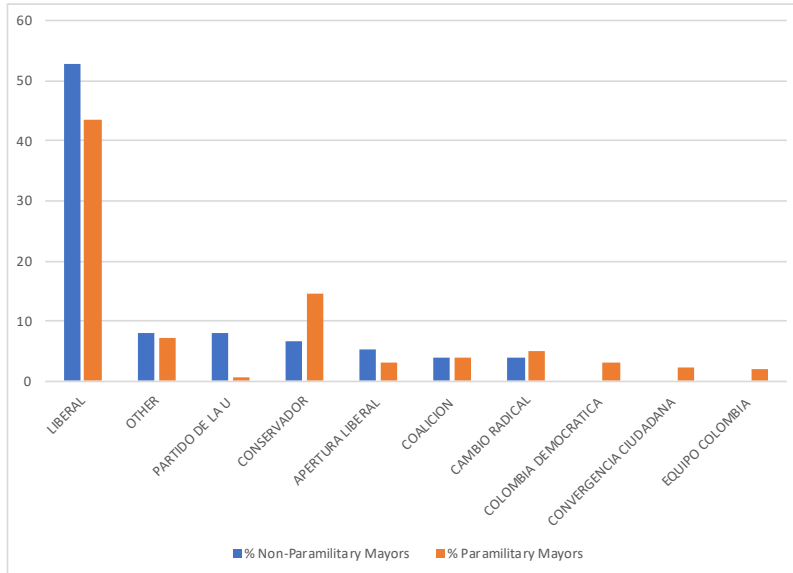


Figure A.2. Party Affiliations of Paramilitary and Non-Paramilitary Mayors  
*Source:* Registraduria National in Colombia

Figure A.2 shows the party affiliation of the paramilitary versus the non-paramilitary mayors for parties that amassed greater than one percent of the mayors in the dataset. While the paramilitary mayors spread across a greater number of parties (as well established in the literature on party fragmentation in Colombia), the figure shows that, in the highly competitive districts upon which the project focuses, paramilitary and non-paramilitary mayors oftentimes occupied similar positions on the partisan spectrum.



## Colombia's Violent History

The contemporary Colombian conflict has its roots in La Violencia, the civil war that raged from 1948-1958 between the Liberal and Conservative Parties. In the 1960s, left-wing rebel organizations including the Revolutionary Armed forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) emerged. With the introduction of the drug economy to Colombia in the late 1970s and the adoption of kidnapping and extortionary financing tactics, the rebels began to pose a serious threat to the military, landowning elite, drug barons and political class. Accordingly, these diverse sectors of society formed regional paramilitary forces (Romero 2003). Over the course of the subsequent decades, both the rebels and militias extended their power over nearly the entire country (López 2010). Between 2003- 2006, thirty-seven militia factions signed peace accords and demobilized; half then remilitarized in the subsequent years. In 2016, the FARC agreed to peace and abandoned their arms. Peace negotiations remain haltingly ongoing with the ELN. The conflict has left over seven million victims (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013). For a timeline of the country's violent history, see Daly 2016.

Given the article's focus on the paramilitaries, I pause to provide additional details on these forces and place them within the larger typology of armed actors in civil wars. In Spanish, they call themselves *autodefensas* (self-defense forces), whereas their critics and English translators call them militias or, more commonly, paramilitaries. Although their legal status has varied over time, after 1989 these organizations became illegal.<sup>7</sup> They were non-state actors. In their post-1989 manifestations, they did not fall directly under the control or direction of Colombia's armed forces and they retained autonomy and independent agency.<sup>8</sup> In that sense, their character differs from that of "para-militaries" in the traditional sense of the word. As Gutiérrez Sanín 2010 writes, "the [Colombian] paramilitaries have enjoyed a large measure of autonomy. Although they were tolerated, financed, and supported by many forces that were formally within the bounds of the law – state agencies, businesses, and also workers' organizations and neighbors, etc. – they did not become the puppets of any." Unlike death squads or terrorist groups, the paramilitaries were highly territorial in nature; their power was tied to the land on which they operated, and they mostly used the tactics of irregular guerrilla warfare rather than perpetrating sensational acts such as car bombings or suicide attacks.<sup>9</sup> They financed themselves through illicit means, most importantly through drug-trafficking. Unlike many village patrols or vigilantes, the Colombian paramilitaries were usually staffed with full-time members; especially in rural areas, they tended to patrol dressed in camouflage, to operate heavily armed with assault weaponry, and to engage in both offensive and defensive campaigns (Jentsch 2014). Although not highly ideological, the paramilitaries advocated a conservative, right-wing platform centered on the "natural right of legitimate self-defense," emphasizing the state's responsibility to defend its citizens and the right to private property. Their own historical narrative of their origins portrayed them as victims of the state's inability to provide security against rebel (guerrilla) hostility. This explanation for their existence built on the common argument that the Colombian state historically has been weak and incapable of governing its own territory or fighting the insurgency (Waldmann 2007). The paramilitaries did

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<sup>7</sup> The legal status of the paramilitary groups has varied. In 1968, self-defense forces (opposing the rebels) became legal. In 1989, this law was reversed, rendering them illegal. 1994 and 1995 saw the legalization of vigilante organizations, called *Convivir*. These decrees were overturned in 1997, rendering these forces illegal.

<sup>8</sup> Camilo Echandía, interview by author, Bogotá, July 2006.

<sup>9</sup> The paramilitaries did, however, appear on the U.S. list of terrorist groups starting in 2001.

not operate just as armies; rather they constituted multifaceted organizations with extensive social, economic, and political influence. They ranged over most of Colombia's territory, and had a strong presence both in urban and in rural areas. By the start of the twenty-first century, they maintained approximately 35,000 men and women in their ranks.

Table A.16. Examples of Diversion of Funds from Social Welfare to Illegal Security Forces

<b>Location and Date</b>	<b>Description</b>
Santa Marta, Magdalena, 2004-2007	During Francisco “Chico” Zúñiga’s government, funds were diverted from the Health Promotion Agency (EPS) Sol Salud to finance the AUC. <sup>10</sup>
Suan, Atlántico, 2003-2006	Gabriel Antonio Rivera Cueto was mentioned in the declarations of “Versión Libre” to the Unidad de Justicia y Paz by paramilitaries Jhony Acosta alias “28” and Lino Torregrosa alias “Jhonnatan” as sponsor of paramilitary groups by diverting public funds to finance them between 2003-2006. <sup>11</sup>
Coveñas, Sucre	Nilson Navajas was mentioned in the declarations of “Versión Libre” to the Unidad de Justicia y Paz by paramilitaries of the Frente Mojana (AUC) as a sponsor of paramilitary groups through the diversion of public resources. <sup>12</sup>
National, 1999-Early 2000s	Iván Roberto Duque, alias “Ernesto Báez”, in a 2005 interview said the leaders of AUC starting meeting with various regional and local politicians seeking collaboration to establish paramilitary operations in different areas of the country. They agreed to sponsor paramilitary groups through resources and transfer of public contracts in the regions. <sup>13</sup>
Atlántico, Magdalena, Bolívar	The AUC Bloque Norte was financed by farmers, merchants and public officials. The computers of Edgar Ignacio Fierro Flores’ (AUC member – Bloque Norte) show irregular contracts between mayors, governors, hospitals and other health entities and social service companies as well as an infiltration of the finances of Hospital Materno Infantil de Soledad to fund the illicit security forces. <sup>14</sup>
Córdoba, 2001	Juan Manuel López Cabrales made an agreement with Salvatore Mancuso to finance the paramilitary political project in the department with public resources. <sup>15</sup>
Guajira, 2004	According to <i>El Tiempo</i> , Wilder Ríos, Riohacha mayor was detained on Sept 2, 2004 for participating in the diversion of 148 million pesos destined for healthcare to finance paramilitary groups. <sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ávila and Valencia Agudelo .

<sup>11</sup> Corporación Nuevo Arco Íris 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Corporación Nuevo Arco Íris 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Valencia et al. 2007

<sup>14</sup> Tribunal Superior Del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá Sala de Justicia y Paz 2011

<sup>15</sup> Velasco 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Tiempo 2004.

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