Democracy and civil war: The case of Colombia

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Abstract

We argue that scholarship on the Colombian civil war can fertilize the research program on political violence and democracy in two ways. First, the Colombian case demonstrates that the scholarly research agenda on electoral violence should expand to incorporate a broader focus on democratic institutions. In the context of an ongoing civil war, democratic reforms in Colombia had a substantial impact on the dynamics of wartime violence. Second, the Colombian case showcases an overlooked danger of decentralization that, if implemented under the wrong conditions, can facilitate the capture of democratic institutions by political and criminal armed groups. These insights have important implications for the study of wartime democratic governance and state-building relevant both for the peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC, and for cases beyond Colombia.

Introduction

The Colombian civil war and its "multiple violences" (Sánchez, 2001) have coexisted with democratic politics for decades. This article explores how insights from the war and the scholarship surrounding it can push the research program on electoral violence in new directions. We argue that current research overlooks key ways in which democratic institutions can be undermined by civil wars while at the same time fuel new forms of political violence, and that previous work has primarily focused on electoral violence at the expense of other implications of and for democratic governance. We draw on Colombia's experience and several generations of scholarship that, we argue, elucidate the conditions under which wartime

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democratic reforms as well as decentralization are likely to foster an escalation of violence and ultimately undermine democratic participation and representation.

Variation in violence and institutional reforms over the five decades of the Colombian civil war allows us to generate insights that are relevant for other civil wars. While electoral violence and the influence of armed groups on elections have attracted much needed scholarly attention (e.g. Daxecker, 2012; Matanock and Staniland, 2018; Staniland, 2014), extant analyses tend to focus on elections as isolated events rather than linked to broader democratic governance and forms of civil war violence. Moreover, while some attention has been devoted to the consequences of violence for political parties (Birnir and Gohdes, 2018; de la Calle and Sánchez Cuenca, 2013; García-Sánchez, 2016), the relationship between elections and post-conflict institutions (e.g. Flores and Nooruddin, 2012), armed groups and post-conflict political parties (Sindre and Söderström, 2016), or to democratization as a trigger of conflict (e.g. Cederman et al., 2010), we focus on the implications of democratization and elections while conflict wears on. With a few exceptions (e.g. Berti, 2016; Staniland, 2015), these implications remain underexplored. The Colombian experience sheds light on two of them: first, it shows how policy choices aimed at ameliorating grievances and ending a conflict by deepening and enhancing democratic institutions can lead to the escalation of violence during the war; second, it illustrates the conditions under which, and how, armed groups and their allies may effectively co-opt democratic institutions for their own purposes, undermining both the representation of ordinary citizens and their opportunities for meaningful participation.

In addition to the theoretical and conceptual questions the Colombian case raises, it also points to important policy implications. Beyond the question of when to introduce elections (e.g. Brancati and Snyder, 2013), the Colombian case reveals the dangers of holding competitive elections during a civil war. Asking civilians to participate in public, political decisions in an unstable environment puts them at grave risk of suffering violent retribution by armed actors. Without protection for both citizens and politicians, both are likely to either recur to the assistance of armed actors with the capacity to protect them or to opt not to participate in democratic processes at all.

These insights are also relevant for Colombia's peace agreement with the FARC, in which political participation is a key pillar. A successful transition of the FARC from an armed group to a political party, and the consolidation of democratic governance for all sectors and regions of the country, will require additional steps if our analysis is correct. Specifically, the government must find a way to marginalize regional political elites and armed groups so they are unable to use violence to subvert democracy and peace. Former members and supporters of the FARC, as well as victims and others working for restitution and reparations, need the resolute and robust support of government agencies, including security agencies. Sadly, since the signing of the peace accord, over 150 social leaders have been targeted and killed, indicating that groups willing to use violence to resist change are still a threat to democracy in Colombia (El Espectador, 2017; El Tiempo, 2017).

The article proceeds in three sections. First, we draw on the Colombian case to consider the conditions under which democratic institutions could lead to the intensification of an ongoing war, and when they are less likely to endanger citizens and politicians. Second, we discuss the implications of the armed conflict in Colombia for democratic institutions and governance. The final section concludes.

Civil wars and democracy

As a policy matter, elections are frequently promoted by international agencies as a priority in an effort to transition from war to post-conflict (Autesserre, 2010). However, and despite the scholarly attention on electoral violence, little consideration has been given to the broader context in which elections take place, and what their repercussions are. With the case of Colombia, we focus on two: how democratic institutions can shape civil war dynamics; and how, in turn, democratic governance is influenced by the dynamics of civil war. Beyond the time immediately before and following an election, holding elections can set in motion longer-term trends in ongoing civil wars, such as an escalation of violence through repression and insurgent retaliation, the formation of new cleavages and alliances, and increased polarization (Steele, 2017). Democratic institutions beyond elections can also influence armed group behavior. The capture of democratic institutions is facilitated in particular by decentralization measures intended to improve government accountability (Eaton, 2006). Colombia's experience over several decades illuminates these processes and serves as a depressing warning: the improvement of democratic institutions can lead to the escalation of violence in civil wars and, ultimately, to the deterioration of those same institutions.

Elections and war dynamics in Colombia

Civil war in Colombia has co-existed with democratic politics since the country's independence. While the mid-twentieth-century civil war *La Violencia* sparked democratic retrenchment, such as the 1953 coup and decades of a shared power arrangement between the two traditional parties, the contemporary civil war led instead to democratization efforts.

The groundwork for institutional change began in 1982, when President Belisario Betancur's administration initiated peace negotiations with multiple insurgent groups. Betancur viewed the war in part as a reaction to exclusionary political institutions (Eaton, 2006). Moreover, the group that emerged as the primary negotiator with the government— the FARC, until then a relatively marginal group (Chernick, 1988)—demanded mechanisms for legal political participation. These demands, and the government's diagnosis, led to institutional changes in Colombia's democracy meant to foster improved participation and representation.

In 1985, the Colombian government adopted two democratization reforms. First, it approved a new political party, which would represent a leftist alternative to the two traditional parties in competitive politics. Second, it amended the constitution to allow the direct election of municipal mayors (*alcaldes*).

The new political party was the Patriotic Union (*Unión Patriótica*—UP), founded by the FARC. FARC leader Jacobo Arenas conceived of the UP as filling a gap in the "war on all fronts" strategy, which called for the FARC to pursue revolution through violent and nonviolent means, including elections. In addition to the party's origins, the approval of the UP was notable because until then, competitive party politics had been effectively restricted to the two traditional parties: the Liberals and Conservatives. In this sense, the UP signaled the possibility of representation for a wider range of political views.

The new electoral law was another departure from the existing system: citizens would elect mayors and governors directly beginning in 1988. Prior to 1988, presidents appointed governors who appointed municipal mayors in their departments. Now citizens would have the ability to participate more directly in local governance. While these changes were laudable

for the advances they represented in terms of democratic ideals, they had unforeseen and terrible consequences.

Exposing voters and candidates. Beginning in May 1985, FARC fronts organized the UP in their area through "*Juntas Patrióticas*" (JPs), small groups that engaged in political mobilization of the population (Dudley, 2006: 60).[1] The mobilization led to several victories in the first elections that the party contested in 1986. It won three senate seats, six congressional posts, 19 departmental representatives, and 351 local council members in 187 cities (Giraldo, 2001: 23). The presidential race was contested by UP leader Jaime Pardo Leal, who won 4.5% of the vote, an unprecedented margin for the left (Bushnell, 1993; Giraldo, 2001).

The participation of the UP in the electoral process led to two new forms of violence: assassinations of candidates; and the collective targeting of UP sympathizers and political cleansing (Steele, 2011, 2017). UP leaders and candidates were almost immediately targeted by narcotraffickers and paramilitaries in what became known as the Dirty War. Narcotrafficker Rodríguez Gacha—a.k.a. *El Mexicano*—and his private militia were particularly ferocious, apparently because of a dispute with the FARC over coca taxation. Between 1986 and 1988, 550 UP members were reported killed, including its director, two senators, two congressmen, and 45 local councilmen and mayors (Giraldo, 2001). Pardo Leal was assassinated in October 1987. The assassinations of UP leaders and candidates led many others to go into exile, or to hide in cities.

The second form of violence that resulted from the formation of the UP was political cleansing: the expulsion of UP sympathizers from their communities. As paramilitary groups formed in the early 1980s, particularly in the Puerto Boyacá region, they targeted known Communist Party sympathizers for exile or death. As the groups evolved, "The typical mode of action consisted of penetrating regions by force where the guerrillas had influence and committing selective massacres that terrorized the population and provoked forced displacement" (Reyes Posada, 2009: 88). After the direct election of local mayors began, this model evolved and expanded with the emergence of new, vulnerable targets: UP sympathizers. A brutal example took place in the Magdalena Medio municipality of Segovia in 1988. Despite years of selective killing around Segovia, guerrillas still retained a presence in the municipality. Then on 11 November 1988, a group of paramilitaries arrived in Segovia where "names of people were replaced by names of blocks" that displayed yellow and green banners—the colors of the UP (Dudley, 2006: 123–124). Pamphlets had been circulated, warning citizens to leave or die. In all, 43 people were killed (Dudley, 2006: 124). It was the first collective targeting of UP supporters—not just leaders or candidates. The paramilitaries employed this form of violence—political cleansing, in this case the expulsion of UP supporters from communities—and spread it to other municipalities as well (Romero, 2000; Steele, 2017).

Political cleansing had a lasting, if less recognized impact on the war than the assassinations. Selective targeting in the Dirty War undermined the UP's ability to contest elections, but it did not affect the military capability of the FARC. The Catholic organization Pastoral Social, for example, documented that in one town, paramilitaries targeted the leaders of unions, most of whom also belonged to the UP; this, however, did not prevent incursions by the FARC or the ELN (Pastoral Social, 2001). Vargas (2009: 19) notes that even though the paramilitaries successfully killed leaders in Yondó, it was not until they entered the area between December 1996 and January 1997, killed seven residents and gave a deadline for others to abandon the area, that they were able to neutralize the FARC. The expulsion of

UP supporters deprived the FARC of its civilian base, and tipped the local balance of power in favor of the incoming paramilitaries and their political allies. Although the FARC was not destroyed—it withdrew to other, more remote regions and amassed its forces into military fronts (Echandía, 2006)—it was forced to sever its long-cultivated ties to civilian groups in the targeted regions. As a mode of conquest, political cleansing was highly successful for the paramilitaries.

For its part, the Colombian state opened elections to the UP, but failed to protect its supporters and candidates. The military claimed that it could not protect the UP's supporters because they were affiliated with the FARC, even though the UP officially broke from the FARC in February 1989 (Giraldo, 2001: 19). Years later, the Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) of the Organization of American States agreed to investigate state complicity in the violence against UP members in response to a petition brought by family members of the victims.

Forging alliances. UP voters not only attracted the attention of paramilitary groups; they also incensed local politicians who had previously enjoyed power through appointment rather than electoral competition. The new elections motivated politicians to ally with paramilitaries to maintain their power, and provided an opportunity for the paramilitaries to expand and consolidate (Romero, 2003).

Local elections were important for the FARC because its pockets of isolated support would not aggregate to much clout at the national level (Shugart, 1992: 136). Indeed, the FARC was most successful at the municipal level, where it won 15 mayoral posts, and had representation in 105 more municipalities through local coalitions (Giraldo, 2001: 25). In effect, the UP enjoyed some share of political power in more than a tenth of the municipalities of the country. The party also won more than 400 local council seats (*concejales*) (Cepeda Castro, 2006).

These victories were the first for third-party mayors. As a result, politicians who had relied on the traditional system of clientelism and patronage were challenged. These local elites and their regional patrons became the "sore losers" of democratization who sought to disrupt and resist the new competition.

Local elites anticipated the electoral threat early on. In the first UP congress, in November 1985, the party denounced an effort in the Senate by "official" Liberals to prevent UP participation in the elections or to "annul its vote," and a military presence in areas of UP influence was meant to "repress the thousands of Colombians from joining the new political project" (Esguerra, 2009: 68). A UP report from Urabá notes, "The [UP's] imminent invasion of local power, in detriment to the caciques of the traditional parties that considered the mayoral office their personal turf, unleashes the ire of the *politiqueros* who believe that the time has come when Communism will snatch their perks from them" (Reiniciar, 2006: 73). Carroll (2011: 43) argues that an elite backlash "sponsored and largely carried out by politically displaced elites" and the Colombian military emerged where an armed insurgency had a presence, a social movement existed, and democratic reforms led to electoral gains for such movements.

The emergence of right-wing paramilitaries in some areas can be linked to the practices of left-wing guerrilla groups such as "revolutionary" taxes and kidnapping, which generated substantial resentment among some sectors (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2003). However, the *expansion* of the paramilitaries in the late 1980s was facilitated by alliances between "politically

displaced elites" and the *paras*. These alliances allowed politicians to stave off the UP or win back local seats following the political cleansing of UP's supporters, and allowed paramilitaries the opportunity to establish a presence in communities (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2003). In other words, the two democratic reforms—the legalization of the UP and the introduction of local elections—enabled the paramilitaries to spread by creating a national-level target rather than isolated pockets of Communist radicals, and to consolidate their presence across the country through alliances with local elites. These two strategies were more effective than assassinations of visible leaders. It is difficult to imagine the emergence of the national-level paramilitary organization AUC in 1997 without these democratic reforms.

The capture of democratic institutions

Soon after the unification of the paramilitaries into the AUC, the organization's leaders realized that they could take further advantage of the previous democratic reforms for their own ends. Following the adoption of the new constitution in 1991, Colombia embarked on a process of political, fiscal and administrative decentralization. At the time, such steps were hailed as a means to make the government more accountable, efficient, and responsive to citizens' needs (Bejarano, 2001). Rather than bringing the institutions closer to the people, however, the reforms brought the institutions closer to the armed groups. The armed groups did not miss their opportunity.

Decentralization, including elections at the local level, not only endangered civilians and altered the course of the civil war. It also provided an opportunity for armed groups to capture local and even national state institutions (Acemoglu et al., 2013; López, 2010). The armed groups—both paramilitaries and left-wing groups like the FARC—had political and material incentives to capture institutions. The paramilitaries sought recognition as a political group in order to gain eligibility under favorable amnesty laws. Materially, the Barco and Gaviria administrations each promoted fiscal decentralization that entailed the transfer of resources from Bogotá to the municipalities, as well as a greater share of royalties from natural resources. Administrative decentralization increased responsibility for expenditures at the local level, including education, health care, irrigation, public housing, water treatment and sewage (Eaton, 2006: 545). The increased funding enticed armed groups to target the municipalities so that they could redirect some of the funds to their coffers, and may have contributed to the spread of the armed groups' presence (Sánchez and del Mar Palau, 2006).

Armed groups influenced politics to gain access to resources that began flowing to municipalities as the result of decentralization. In some instances, groups coerced voters to elect favored candidates. They also warned candidates to withdraw, or they would become a target of the group (El Tiempo, 1997). Chacón (2013) finds that both insurgents and paramilitaries assassinated local politicians, especially where more transfers from the center were at stake. Another form of engagement was cooptation: armed groups offered to support a politician's campaign in exchange for future benefits. Some of these arrangements were attractive to politicians because the backing of armed groups helped them side-step the traditional party hierarchies. With changes in the minimum vote share requirement for political party recognition, armed groups and their collaborators formed new, third parties in the 1990s (Acemoglu et al., 2013). Another tactic was abstention: Bogotá daily *El Tiempo* reported in 1997 that the Manuel Cepeda Front of the FARC circulated pamphlets that called on residents across 23 municipalities to join in "constructing true popular power"*rather* than vote.

One of the main ways armed groups sought municipal influence was through *Juntas de Acción Comunal* (JACs)—Community Action Committees, which existed in small rural hamlets throughout the country. Additionally, the FARC pressured mayors and councils following decentralization "to obtain things: rents but also political and strategic objectives" (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2010: 16). Beginning around 1997, paramilitaries also engaged in local governance (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2010: 16). Alias El Alemán (Fredy Rendón Herrera), the commander of the paramilitary Elmer Cárdenas block in the Urabá region, organized mobile units of injured combatants to visit JACs, make notes of public works projects that needed attention, and eventually, promote particular candidates for local council and mayor (Verdad Abierta, 2011).

Insurgents and paramilitaries both influenced public policy outcomes through municipal councils and mayors, although in different ways (Ch et al., 2018). For example, while insurgent presence has been associated with a decrease in land formalization (implemented by municipal governments), paramilitary presence has been linked to an increase in land formalization, and more tax revenue, as a result. Presumably, such formalization helped paramilitaries and their supporters legitimize "*despojo*," the illegal acquisition of land through violence. At the same time, there appears to have been variation in the extent to which particular paramilitary blocks engaged in municipal politics (López Hernández, 2010; Robinson, 2013; Ronderos, 2014).

Starting in 2002, the paramilitaries turned to influencing the national level (López Hernández, 2010). Rather than hope that politicians would designate paramilitaries as political organizations (and therefore qualify for more lenient punishment under existing law), the AUC became proactive (Ronderos, 2014; Verdad Abierta, n.d.). In 2001, it convened a meeting where over 100 politicians signed an agreement to collaborate on an electoral strategy that included supporting Álvaro Uribe's 2002 presidential candidacy. Over one-third of Congress eventually came under scrutiny for ties to the paramilitaries in what became known as the "*Parapolítica*" scandal.[2] Acemoglu et al. (2013) find that the same politicians investigated also voted in favor of the Justice and Peace law, which extended political status to paramilitary groups, guaranteed lenient sentences for paramilitary leaders who demobilized, and protected them from extradition for drug trafficking, indicating a quid pro quo (see also Valencia, 2007: 35).

In summary, insurgent and paramilitary groups reshaped democratic institutions through coercion of voters and candidates, community engagement, electoral coordination, institutional capture, and co-optation of politicians. While the paramilitaries engaged in all of those strategies, the insurgents were primarily focused on the first two.

Although decentralization has been suggested as a way to mitigate conflict (Lijphart, 1977), and even to end it (Walter and Snyder, 1999), in the context of the Colombian civil war, it backfired by essentially funneling funds from the state to the armed groups (Eaton, 2006: 537). Additionally, it transformed the war by incentivizing armed groups to capture municipal institutions (Gutiérrez Sanín et al., 2007; Sánchez and del Mar Palau, 2006; Sánchez and Chacón, 2005).

When is democratization safe and effective?

Colombia's experience suggests the ways in which successful democratic reforms can ultimately lead to worse wartime dynamics, and eventually even undermine democratic

institutions. However, not all democratic reforms will inevitably lead to these dire outcomes. In this section, we consider the conditions under which reforms are less likely to lead to a deterioration of the war or democratic institutions, or both.

Several factors account for why the electoral reforms in Colombia led to the intensification of the war. First, electoral competition was extended to a political party that was tied to an armed group. Second, elections were held at the local level, and hence political loyalties became visible on a fine-grained scale. Third, local politicians were not previously exposed to competitive elections, but rather had been appointed to office through political connections. Fourth, the state had limited capacity or will to control counterinsurgent actors. Finally, Colombia experienced fragmentation on the counterinsurgent side with the emergence of paramilitary groups.

Importantly, it is the *interaction* of these factors that mattered in Colombia, rather than their individual impact. In isolation, the electoral participation of armed groups does not necessarily lead to an escalation of political violence. Between 1970 and 2010, Matanock (2016) finds that there were 100 instances of "militant" actors (not restricted to armed groups) that contested national legislative elections. Of those elections, only 23 were violent. Indeed, the opening of democratic institutions to armed non-state actors can be an important development towards conflict de-escalation and peace. However, Colombia shows that under certain conditions, the participation of such actors can contribute to an escalation of violence against politicians and civilians.

A political party that represents, is sympathetic to, or is in alliance with a party to the war is not a sufficient condition for the targeting of civilians. Yet support for such a party can serve as the basis of an inference of citizens' preferences and loyalties. If civilians are perceived to be loyal to a rival armed group, then they may become targets of violence. In order for this to occur, a second condition is important: the elections have to be held at the local level and be territorially based to spur increased violence. This is particularly the case in non-ethnic civil wars, where without the information revealed by the elections, it would be difficult to infer civilians' loyalties at the group level. Local-level, territorial representation allows armed groups to judge the preferences of the majority of a neighborhood or small community based on the party affiliation of their elected representative. Higher-level territorial units, such as legislative districts or states, are too large to effectively target the supporters of particular parties. Without the simultaneous extension of elections to the local level in Colombia, the enemies of the FARC and the UP would still have pursued assassinations of candidates. At the same time, targeting UP voters for political cleansing would have been much more difficult, and probably impossible on a large scale.

Local-level elections have also been held in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Cambodia, India, and Peru in the context of ongoing wars, for example. However, these elections were held under different conditions. In Afghanistan and Cambodia, they were restricted to areas controlled by the government. In Algeria, the insurgent-affiliated FIS was barred from competing. In Bangladesh, India and Peru, insurgent groups spurned electoral contestation and tried to enforce boycotts instead. Only in Colombia, where insurgents were affiliated with a political party and elections were held at the local level, did widespread political cleansing emerge.[3]

In Colombia, an additional important condition was the limited electoral competition that preceded the reforms. The prior lack of competitiveness in the political system meant that the UP constituted a threat to the existing political elite, particularly at the local and regional levels (Romero 2003). The UP's open ties to an insurgent armed group—even once dissolved—made it easy for electoral competitors to deny the legitimacy of this new

opponent. In contrast, in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin's participation in elections was eventually endorsed by the establishment as a mechanism to achieve peace. The advocates of a similar transition in Colombia were overwhelmed by the regional elites' resistance to democratization and backlash against the UP (Romero, 2000; Valencia, 2007). The fact that the FARC remained armed was used to legitimize targeting the UP.

In addition to the political decentralization that led to local-level elections, the Colombian government also adopted fiscal and administrative reforms that devolved authority and responsibility to the municipal level. As we described, these changes prompted armed groups to attempt to appropriate municipal resources (often through the manipulation of elections). Without sufficient oversight for fiscal and administrative activity at the municipal level, or guarantees for the electoral process, the armed groups were able to penetrate local institutions and use them for their own benefit. Colombia's experience in this regard suggests that decentralization has to be weighed against the ability of the central government to effectively monitor elections and fiscal activity.

Finally, the existence of paramilitary groups greatly facilitated both an escalation of violence and the exploitation of the conflict by those local elites who emerged as sore losers from the reforms. The presence of armed groups available to political parties and politicians is not uncommon (Matanock and Staniland, 2018). Indeed, it has been documented not only in wartime but also in non-war and postwar settings. Examples include Côte d'Ivoire (Banégas, 2011), Sierra Leone (Christensen and Utas, 2008), and Pakistan (Staniland, 2015). It is unclear whether and how the Colombian state will challenge any such groups, but so far the government's underwhelming reaction to the assassinations of social leaders is worrisome. As in the early days of paramilitary activity, the government seems reluctant to address this threat as a systematic one (El Tiempo, 2017).

Importantly, while the combination of these conditions made Colombia especially vulnerable to the detrimental outcomes discussed, our study has implications for all cases that share at least some of the highlighted characteristics. For example—and most critically—subnational elections can be problematic in conflicts where territorial control is contested, and where loyalties may be revealed, exposing voters and candidates to competing armed groups. While we do not have information on local *and* competitive elections around the globe, a substantial proportion of armed conflicts do take place in countries where some of the mechanisms we describe in this article might be at work. Based on Hyde and Marinov (2012), we identify 69 civil wars out of 147 between 1945 and 2004 during which at least one round of national competitive elections was held (see Table 1 in the Online Appendix, available at the *CMPS* website).[4] Between 1975 and 2004, 37 out of 103 civil wars took place in countries that held local elections at least once during the conflict, according to the database of political institutions (Keefer, 2012); we list these cases in Table A2 in the Online Appendix. Scholars and policy-makers should be attentive to the dangers that these electoral processes, and democratization in armed conflicts more generally, might entail.

Returning to Colombia, given our analysis, what are the implications of democratization as the result of the peace agreement with the FARC? One of the pillars of the peace agreement reached between the FARC and the government is political participation. The government pledged security, public financing, and access to media outlets to the political party successor to the FARC (which shares the same acronym but stands for "Common Alternative Revolutionary Party"). For the first two elections following the agreement, the FARC will receive 10 special seats in Congress. Without this guarantee, the FARC would have had no seats following the first Congressional elections it competed in: it received less

than 1% of the vote in both the Senate and House elections, far below the threshold necessary to win seats.

Broader efforts to expand representation beyond the FARC are also included in the agreement. Regions historically affected by the conflict were designated "Special Transitional Constituencies for Peace" which should be eligible to elect special representatives to Congress, in addition to their ordinary districts (as of this writing, the law has not been adopted; El Tiempo, 2013). There will also be an effort to expand voter registration and improve mechanisms for citizen participation (such as electronic voting). Finally, a commission will be formed to oversee the incorporation and recognition of opposition parties.

Several of these measures recognize the failures of the previous attempt to incorporate the FARC as a legal political party. First, the FARC insurgency no longer exists: nearly 17,000 combatants began disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. As a result, illegal armed groups cannot claim that opposition or FARC political party supporters are also insurgent sympathizers. (Roughly 7–8% of combatants are estimated to have rearmed, but they do not appear to have any political party affiliation (Álvarez et al., 2018).) Second, in contrast to the first elections contested by the UP, politicians have been engaging in competitive elections to win their local-level seats for more than two decades now. As a result, additional competition should not upend the local dynamics as much as when they initially became competitive. In order for the state to truly protect political competition, and voters and candidates, it must marginalize the regional elites who might have used violence to avoid meaningful democratization in the past.

Democratic politics also factor into the peace process in important ways. The accord was nearly derailed by a popular referendum that narrowly defeated its approval. Rather than risk another referendum defeat after renegotiation, the modified agreement was allowed to proceed to Congressional approval by a Constitutional Court decision that facilitated important changes to how laws are approved in the legislative branch. Several existing laws need to be reformed, abandoned, or passed in order to implement the accords. The newly elected Congress will have to take up these tasks in July 2018. In the meantime, presidential elections are underway, and the peace agreement is a key campaign issue. The Constitutional Court ruled in October 2017 that the peace agreement must be respected by the next three administrations, but depending on which candidate is elected, the implementation of the agreement could be facilitated, stalled or impeded (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, 2017).

Conclusion

The Colombian civil war has coexisted with democratic politics since its onset. As such, it provides valuable lessons that are relevant theoretically and in terms of policy. On the one hand, the democratic reforms that Colombia adopted in an effort to end the war improved the quality of democracy in two dimensions. First, it enhanced representation by allowing a new political party to contest elections. Second, it improved participation by offering citizens the opportunity to directly decide who their local officials would be, rather than appointing the officials from the center. Moreover, decentralization measures brought governance further under local control, in theory. On the other hand, however, as the reformed elections and institutions came closer to approximating democratic ideals, they triggered a frightening escalation of political violence, and ultimately enabled the warring parties and their allies to erode the same institutions that the reforms were intended to improve.

The tragedy of Colombian democratic politics over the last 30 years demonstrates that without protection for citizens and politicians, true democracy is unattainable. Once violence is unleashed against certain types of voters and candidates, vulnerable voters understand that participating in elections is extremely risky. A likely reaction is to stop voting, or to falsify preferences (Kuran, 1987). For certain candidates, there is little incentive to stand for office. Both responses undermine the very notions of participation and representation that democracy should promote.

The case of Colombia also shows that violent elections are one segment of contentious politics, and democratic politics, especially in civil war contexts. Beyond how violence affects elections, the elections themselves can lead to important shifts in the dynamics of civil war violence. Further, civil wars are environments that armed groups can exploit to penetrate democratic institutions. Both dimensions are crucial aspects of democratic politics beyond elections *per se*.

Colombia's experience can inform choices for conflict resolution and post-conflict transitions elsewhere. What are the conditions necessary for credible, safe, and enduring democratic politics? We argue that the wartime and post-conflict reform of democratic institutions, while promising in many contexts, has to be initiated with particular consideration to vulnerable elements of the population. Especially where elections take place locally, where political elites have previously not been part of a fully competitive political process, and where cleavages are not "visible" or territorially demarcated, holding local elections can endanger the very citizens the reforms were intended to include. Moreover, and especially under conditions of wartime decentralization, elections should be closely monitored to prevent the capture of democratic institutions by criminal and political armed actors ready to exploit electoral windows of opportunity where state presence is weak.

Although the current FARC is less likely to mount a similar-scale political challenge to regional elites as the UP did, there are indications that some actors are nevertheless intent on blocking real democratic participation. As we described, regional elites were able to form alliances with armed organizations to target their rivals' supporters. They have threatened and killed victims' rights advocates and the leaders of organizations of internally displaced people who are seeking reparations and land restitution, or who are politically active in areas abandoned by the FARC. It would be prudent to treat these attacks as systematic rather than isolated (El Tiempo, 2017). The government must ensure that such organizations and politicians are kept in check and do not threaten the political, unarmed supporters of new leftist opposition parties and their candidates. Given the ties between elites and illegal armed groups in the past, the government should not only investigate the direct perpetrators of the murders, but also politicians who stand to benefit. The central government can also provide external assistance to bolster local communities' abilities to withstand armed groups' arrival, and potentially even hold local elites accountable unless they can demonstrate that they responded proactively to any threats against politically active residents. If history is our guide, then it is far from sufficient to hope for the best.

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Notes

1. Not all JPs were organized by the FARC, however: many emerged spontaneously (Dudley 2006: 60, 51, 64). The UP was presented to the public as a mechanism for the guerrillas to enter legality, and to demobilize altogether (Dudley 2006: 28).
2. In contrast, only 4% of the congress was investigated for ties to the FARC, compared with 35% to paramilitary groups (López Hernández 2010: 33).
3. Importantly, the same mechanisms as outlined here could occur in the case of elections at higher, i.e. supra-local yet still sub-national, levels, and as such elections might have the potential to expose voters' political loyalties as well.
4. Civil wars recorded by Kalyvas and Balcells (2010).

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