VIOLENT DEMOCRATIZATION


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University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

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Notre Dame, Indiana 46556
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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Carroll, Leah Anne.
Violent democratization : social movements, elites, and politics in Colombia’s rural war zones, 1984/2008 / by Leah Anne Carroll.
p. cm. — (From the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Democratization—Colombia.  2. Violence—Colombia.
JL2881.C37  2011
986.106’35—dc22
2010033409

This book is printed on recycled paper.
CHAPTER
INTRODUCTION

THE CENTRAL QUESTIONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

The implementation of democratic reforms has usually been examined in urban areas, in parts of the world with stronger states, or in contexts where social movements of subordinate groups lack strength or autonomy. This study examines the implementation of democratic and decentralizing reforms, and the subsequent violent backlash and counterreform, in rural regions with weak states, strong social movements, and armed leftist insurgencies. My focus is on those reforms that allow the direct election and increased fiscal autonomy of county executives (alcaldes) and governors, as well as the peace process with guerrilla groups, and other reforms that are meant to weaken clientelist practices and increase the ability of civilians to rein in abuses of the state.

Theorists and political actors alike have often assumed that democratizing and decentralizing reforms would permit a peaceful resolution of formerly violent social conflicts. They reason that reforms that allow the institutional political process to represent previously excluded subordinate groups and agreements that facilitate the disarming of rebel guerrilla groups and rechanneling of their participation into electoral politics and
legal social movements would encourage these constituencies to realize their substantive and political goals through peaceful, institutional means rather than through violence. In some contexts reforms have indeed facilitated substantive and political social movement gains and a marked reduction in levels of violence. The outcomes of the peace processes in El Salvador and Guatemala would seem to fall into this category. Peaceful democratization has also occurred in contexts where the opposition social movements had largely been defeated during the authoritarian era before democratizing reforms took place: Chile and Argentina come to mind as examples of this pattern. However, in these latter cases, social movements have largely accepted material setbacks as a trade-off for political gains.

On the other hand, the experiences of several democratizing countries have shown that under certain circumstances reform can also bring higher levels of conflict. In these countries democratization, promoted by reformist national elites, allows powerful rural social movements (and in some cases the armed insurgencies linked to these social movements) to make real political and substantive gains. These gains, however, provoke violent backlash from antireformist rural elites and military sectors, and the weakness of the judicial system allows these violent acts to go unpunished. Examples of postdemocratization peasant/worker mobilization followed by violent elite backlash include the post-Marcos Philippines and rural Brazil in the late 1980s. Eventually, in some cases, the elite backlash encourages previously nonviolent movements to take up arms or demobilized guerrillas to revert to violent tactics. Examples of new guerrilla movements or resurgence of old ones in the wake of democratization include Peru in the 1980s, rural southern Mexico since the mid-1990s, and Colombia after 1984. In some of these cases, the guerrilla (re)mobilization is enough to provoke a de jure reversal of reforms, as occurred in both Colombia and Peru after 1992.

Ideally, new political solutions in cases where reform leads to escalated violence would bring social movement gains to create the foundations of a more just society, without provoking the escalation of elite and then guerrilla violence. Such intensified violent conflict not only causes tremendous human suffering in and of itself but also ultimately can contribute to a counterreform that blocks further progress toward redistributive goals through peaceful means. The design and implementation of such solutions, however, requires a deeper understanding and more complete theorization of the phenomenon of violent democratization.
Specifically, I hope to contribute to theories of democratization/decentralization, social movements and transnational activism, armed insurgencies, and political violence. Three overarching questions guided my inquiry:

1) How do democratization, decentralization, and globalization (trends over time) affect the state and elites (the view from above)? How do they affect social movements, the electoral Left, and armed insurgencies (the view from below)?

2) What are the overarching principles determining social movement gains, in revolutionary-type situations and in contexts where only incremental social movement gains are possible?

3) Within a single national case, what political/economic and geographic factors can explain contrasting regional social movement types, elite responses to social movements, and outcomes?

By addressing these questions, I hope to add a regional political economy component to analyses of democratization processes that have frequently focused exclusively on the national level; a focus on center/periphery conflicts and inequalities to a decentralization literature that has often assumed a “win-win” scenario; an element of institutional change to cross-sectional comparisons of regional political economies and the rural social conflicts they generate; and a systematic comparison of successful and failed instances of transnational solidarity to a literature that to date has drawn overwhelmingly on successful examples.

Beyond these theoretical goals, which are addressed in detail in the concluding chapter, the central empirical objectives of this study are to explain which specific mechanisms provoke escalated violence in contexts of violent democratization; under what exceptional conditions reform brings peace; and which factors and social movement strategies might maximize substantive and political social movement gains, both during the reform period and during periods of counterreform.

COLOMBIA AS A NATIONAL CASE

Colombia provides an excellent case of violent democratization in a weak state context both as it evolves over time, on the national level, and as the regional variations on the theme diverge from the overall pattern. Although
Colombia has long qualified as one of Latin America’s most stable democracies, its democracy has traditionally been described as restrictive, elite, and violent. But Colombia’s democracy made clear moves toward a less restrictive and centralized model from 1982 to 1992, as government-guerrilla peace negotiations coincided with and spurred reforms allowing local autonomy and a broader democratic participation for groups previously excluded from the electoral process. By 1987 elite backlash, fueled by the boom of the drug economy, introduced simultaneous but contradictory trends toward counterreform. In the 1990s and especially after 2002, the government reemphasized a military solution to the armed insurgency and selectively recentralized local government in areas where successful leftist electoral parties and armed insurgencies coincided.

The discussion that follows identifies the historical sources of Colombia’s paradoxical combination of violence and democracy and describes the major phases of the reform process. In analyzing the reform and its aftermath, I introduce the central national political actors that figure in the regional case histories constituting subsequent chapters.

Before the Reform Period

There is near-universal agreement that Colombia’s government constitutes a “weak state.” Social science analyses that have attempted to classify states as strong or weak have generally focused on two major characteristics: state autonomy and state capacity. Colombia, by almost all measures, ranks quite low on both. Without a full labor incorporation period, a populist phase, or a history of radical land reform, Colombia has not even experienced moments of temporary autonomy from national elites—such as that experienced by the Peruvian state in 1968, when elite interests were sacrificed in the name of development or modernization—much less permanent autonomy from elites.6 Although Colombia’s relatively diverse economy has meant that no single sectoral elite has completely captured the state and although the Colombian state has often driven a hard bargain with foreign investors, in the elements of state policy related to the protection of the political and human rights of labor, peasant movements, and leftist parties, the Colombian state can clearly be considered an elite-captured rather than autonomous state.

The Colombian state can also be considered weak in terms of almost any definition of state capacity.7 In defining strong state capacities, Migdal...
focuses especially on the state’s ability to be the predominant agent of social control, without competing vertical systems such as clans, religious leaders, families, or local strongmen. But the Colombian government not only faces powerful competing vertical systems of social control in long-settled regions in the form of regional gamonales (political bosses/strongmen) and paramilitary groups. It also faces an important armed challenge from below, especially in frontier regions. Guerrilla groups were said to have a presence in 61 percent of Colombian municipalities in 1995. Thus Migdal would classify Colombia in the 1980–2006 period as anarchic: characterized by both a weak state (not the sole vertical agent of social control) and a weak society (social control not fully imposed by elites within civil society either). He would probably argue that such state weakness contributed to Colombia’s high levels of violence while also facilitating the formation of pockets of resistance that evolved first into strong regional opposition groups and then into armed insurgencies.

Such competing vertical systems of control in Colombia, in the form of long-standing interelite competition between the Liberal and Conservative parties, reinforced three seemingly contradictory characteristics of Colombian political history: stable electoral institutions, political institutions largely co-opted by factional elite interests rather than acting in the public interest, and constant war. During the nineteenth century Colombia had a total of nine civil wars between pro–free trade, anticlerical Liberals and protectionist, church-allied Conservatives, each with its legions of vertically organized peasant clients. Due to the persisting stalemate between the two elite-led forces, the last Liberal-Conservative conflicts occurred unusually late by Latin American standards: at the end of the nineteenth century (la guerra de los mil días) and, in a somewhat different type of conflict, in the middle of the twentieth century (La Violencia).

By the end of this last conflict (1948–57), which was especially intense in the Andean peasant regions and in which nearly 200,000 were killed, each town tended to be clearly dominated by one or the other political tendency, and institutional resources became viewed as war booty. Once institutions such as the church, the judiciary, the police, and the army lost their claim to be acting in the public interest, those who might have appealed to them to mediate disputes instead took matters into their own hands. This led to rampant vigilantism, armed self-defense groups, and high levels of violent conflict. In order to end the conflict a political pact called the National Front was formed. By guaranteeing each traditional
party access to power, the pact halted the interelite competition and violence but also further excluded nonelite interests from political power.\textsuperscript{13}

Colombia’s government restricted participation by both (national) nonelite interests and interests from the peripheral regions. Although formally democratic, with presidential elections regularly observed every four years, Colombia had highly centralized institutional arrangements. These derived from a long history of governmental attempts to squelch the centrifugal forces of regionalist separatism in this weakly unified nation—separatism reinforced by the rugged Andean geography that created formidable barriers to interregional trade and communication.\textsuperscript{14} Although interregional communication and integration improved with the advent of railroads in the late nineteenth century and highways subsequently, the centralized institutions remained. These guaranteed that the two dominant parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, would virtually monopolize political power, chiefly through clientelistic means. Presidents appointed governors; governors appointed county executives based on their ability to get out the vote for Departmental (provincial) Assembly members of the same line.\textsuperscript{15} The Left was thus in effect excluded from local power and, furthermore, lacked sufficient national influence to elect a critical mass of senators or representatives.

Colombian political institutions were elite dominated as well as centralized, even before the National Front. In Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Mexico labor incorporation in the 1930s and 1940s—when the state’s response to labor conflict shifted from repression to some form of institutionalized mediation—dramatically increased labor’s political influence. In contrast, in Colombia, even after incorporation, organized labor was generally weak, used as a mere electoral tool for one or the other of the oligarchy-led traditional parties.\textsuperscript{16} As labor received few benefits from Colombia’s limited labor incorporation of the 1930s and 1940s it is not surprising that the Left gained a foothold in the Colombian labor movement by the 1980s. And with workers afforded little institutional recourse in cases of labor conflict—and with a weak state, chronic violence, and long-standing armed insurgencies as a backdrop in rural areas—it is unsurprising that leftist guerrillas at times intervened in labor disputes on behalf of rural workers in a phenomenon called “armed trade unionism.”\textsuperscript{17}

Colombian peasants, meanwhile, were left nearly unincorporated.\textsuperscript{18} Here I will not attempt a thorough explanation of Colombia’s complex and contradictory agrarian history of the twentieth century. Suffice it to say that
while state mediation mechanisms for agrarian conflicts were created and land reforms did occur, in the 1930s and again in the 1960s, these policies had as their primary objective the stimulation of capitalist production in the countryside rather than redistributive justice or peasant political incorporation. In the wake of significant moments of peasant mobilization focused on land in the 1930s and 1970s, Colombian peasants were often promised land and occasionally given it. However, even where this occurred, such as in the frontier zones, where peasants were given 11 million hectares of state lands between 1937 and 1971, insufficient credit, infrastructure, and technical support often doomed peasant beneficiaries to a precarious existence or repossession, radicalizing them. 19 This fact, together with continuing illegal eviction of peasants from land by large landholders and concentration of land via economic means, led to a bottom line of a land tenure distribution that was judged to be average in Latin America in the late 1980s and has worsened considerably since then, as documented by Richani. 20 It is not surprising that insurgencies have arisen in frontier zones where a precarious peasant economy coincides with especially weak state institutions, strong social movements, and weak elite social control. 21

Such insurgencies first emerged in Colombia in the early 1960s, not long after the National Front went into effect. Although their emergence corresponded to the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution and other external factors, it was primarily a response to the political exclusion imposed by the National Front and the continuing weakness and politicization of the Colombian state, especially in rural areas. Colombia’s is now the oldest, largest, and most active guerrilla movement in Latin America.

The first group founded, the Ejército Nacional de Liberación (ELN), in 1964, was inspired by the Cuban Revolution and the radical church. It had about four hundred fighters in the early 1980s, and its influence was mainly in Santander near the Magdalena River. 22 After the mid-1980s, with a new base in the frontier region of Arauca, a new focus on the demand of nationalizing oil, and the new tactic of blowing up the oil pipeline from Arauca to Barranquilla (and then extorting funds from contractors hired to fix it), the ELN experienced remarkable growth, becoming the second-largest guerrilla group. 23 In the 1980s and 1990s the ELN had particular influence among frontier region rural settlers, or colonos, peasant squatters in regions of traditional latifundio, the teachers’ union, various rural unions, and the powerful oil workers’ union. The ELN did not have a political party or electoral front until the late 1980s.
The largest guerrilla group (about two thousand fighters in the early 1980s), founded in 1966, was the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). It was linked ideologically to the Colombian Communist Party (Soviet line), which had been founded in the 1930s and had long-standing connections with the radical peasant movements of the Andes. However, the FARC had its earliest origin among the rural Liberal guerrillas of La Violencia in areas where the Communist Party had had peasant strongholds. These were in essence self-defense forces to protect smallholder peasants from the Conservative-controlled police and army. Later, as these persecuted Liberal peasants fled long-settled regions in the Andes to establish new settlements in the eastern plains of Colombia, they were accompanied by the armed radical peasant self-defense groups that would eventually become the FARC, in what Molano has called “armed colonization.”

This history explains the near-nonexistence of the Conservative Party throughout Colombian Amazonia and Orinoquia (where the Middle and Lower Caguán and Arauca, respectively, are located), with political conflict limited to Left versus Liberals. It also explains why the Communist Party and the FARC tend to be especially influential in newly settled peasant regions, or zonas de colonización.

The Maoist Ejercito Popular de Liberación (EPL), associated with the Colombian Communist Party Marxist-Leninist (PCC-ML), with about four hundred fighters in the early 1980s, was founded in the late 1960s when Mao broke with the Soviet Union. This ideological orientation was especially influential in the departments of Antioquia, Córdoba, and Cesar, within the banana workers’ movement of Urabá, the teachers’ union, and the movement of peasant squatters attempting to break up latifundio in these regions. Its presence in the rest of the country was relatively limited.

In contrast, the Movimiento 19 de abril (M-19), founded in 1972, had its strongest constituency among urban students. Although it had a military presence in the countryside, it generally did not have a solid organizational base. Its populist ideological origins and penchant for media-friendly actions (stealing Bolívar’s sword, for example, or high-profile kidnappings) were also quite different from the other guerrilla groups. In the early 1980s the M-19 had about one thousand fighters.

Thus, on the eve of the reform period, the Colombian Left consisted of four major ideological tendencies, each with armed wings as well as some type of social movement base. Of these four tendencies, only the
PCC had engaged in occasional electoral contests, and even then they had often been forced by electoral rules to disguise themselves as Liberals.29

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 summarize the evolution of these guerrilla groups/political tendencies during the reform and counterreform periods. Figure 1.1 identifies the location of the regional strongholds for each guerrilla group in the late 1980s.

The Reform Period: 1982 to Late 1992

Two separate categories of major political reforms occurred between 1984 and 1992, each with a major impact on the Left: reforms allowing broader democratic participation for groups previously excluded from the electoral process, including decentralizing reforms, and government-guerrilla peace negotiations. A process of economic opening began after 1990 as well, and throughout the 1980s the cocaine economy was growing quickly. The latter two trends tended to have contradictory effects, depending on the regional context and the moment in time: sometimes they strengthened the Left, sometimes the Left’s elite adversaries. The decade may be further subdivided into four main periods: a first euphoric moment of reform (1982–86); a period of mixed signals, when further democratizing reforms coincided with a retrenchment of the guerrilla-army war and increased political violence (1986–90); and a period of bifurcation of both the Left and elites (1990–92).

Colombia’s democratic reform period began in late 1982, when the newly inaugurated Betancur administration (August 1982–August 1986) initiated peace negotiations with guerrilla groups, putting democratizing reforms on the table and also demonstrating a new willingness to concede material gains to peasants and workers in war zones.30 This first round of the peace process succeeded in achieving truces of two to three years in duration with three of the four guerrilla groups (all but the ELN) but no permanent demobilizations. The agreement with the M-19 lasted from late 1982 through mid-1985; that of the EPL, from March 1984 through June 1985; and that of the FARC, from March 1984 through mid-1987.31 In addition, about eight hundred FARC guerrillas accepted amnesty to become political activists in the new Patriotic Union party that they had founded.32 While only the FARC openly endorsed a new electoral option in conjunction with its peace process and the ELN did not participate in
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guerrilla Group or Party/Electoral Front</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>Main Region(s) of Influence</th>
<th>Main Social Sectors</th>
<th>Approx. Size Early 1980s</th>
<th>Response to Reform, 1984–88</th>
<th>Response to Reform/Dirty War, 1988–92</th>
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<tr>
<td>Guerrilla group FARC</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Meta, Caquetá, Arauca, and bordering Andean regions; Urabá</td>
<td>Peasant settlers</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>Truce/amnesty, 1984–87; 1985 formation of Patriotic Union, stronger links to social movements</td>
<td>Intensified combat</td>
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<td>(Party/electoral front PCC, founded 1930s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guerrilla group ELN</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Santanderes, Arauca, Cesar</td>
<td>Rural squatters, peasant settlers, oil workers, teachers’ union</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>1984 forms A Luchar to promote links to social movements</td>
<td>Greatly intensified combat</td>
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<tr>
<td>(No party/national electoral front; clandestine)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Guerrilla group EPL</td>
<td>late</td>
<td>Antioquia, esp. Urabá; Córdoba</td>
<td>Rural squatters; Urabá banana union; school-teachers</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>Cease-fire 3/84–6/85; forms mass org./electoral front Frente Popular</td>
<td>Most of group mobilizes for 1991 Constitutional Assembly, becomes legal party Esperanza, Paz y Libertad</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Party PC-ML, founded late 1960s)</td>
<td>1960s</td>
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Table 1.2. Main Guerrilla Groups and Associated Parties in Colombia, Counterreform Period

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<tr>
<td>Guerrilla group FARC (Party/electoral front: PCC, UP)</td>
<td>Military expansion, turn against institutional norms and electoral participation</td>
<td>Despaje in Upper Caguán; negotiations unfruitful</td>
<td>17,500</td>
<td>FARC flouts human rights norms; takes territory lost by ELN</td>
<td>Weakened by Uribe: 9,000 fighters in 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guerrilla group ELN (semiclandestine electoral front: Saravena Liberals in Arauca)</td>
<td>Military expansion, turn against institutional norms and electoral participation</td>
<td>Paramilitary-organized protests prevent despaje for ELN</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>Flouts institutional norms, weakens</td>
<td>Negotiations 2005–7; 2,200–3,000 fighters</td>
</tr>
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<td>Esperanza, Paz y Libertad (demobilized guerrilla group/ political party)</td>
<td>Becomes openly Right-aligned; electoral growth in Urabá but loses national electoral representation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Becomes more oppositional, loses favored status with elites</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPL dissidence</td>
<td>Ceases to exist in 1994 (defeated)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Alianza Democrática (AD) M-19 (demobilized guerrilla group/ political party)</td>
<td>By 1998 drops to 0.3% of national vote</td>
<td>Polo Democrático founded with AD M-19, labor, ANAPO</td>
<td></td>
<td>UP remnants and other movements also join Polo; wins 22% of national vote in 2006</td>
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a After the leader of the EPL dissidence was imprisoned in 1994, virtually no combat actions were recorded for the group in my regions. United Nations, Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, “Civil and Political Rights, Including the Questions of Torture and Detention,” 78.
Figure 1.1. Regions Affected by Guerrilla Actions, Late 1980s

Source: Reyes Posada and Bejarano, "Conflicto agrario y luchas armadas en la Colombia contemporánea," foldout between pp. 24 and 25. Redrawn with permission from the publisher by Aaron Lui.
this round of negotiations, all four guerrilla groups made moves toward declandestinization during this period. This strengthened their links to social movements and contributed to a burst of mobilizations in areas of guerrilla influence.33

Despite the progress made in this first round of government-guerrilla negotiations, it was ultimately doomed to failure. As the process continued and guerrilla groups not only refrained from turning in their arms but sometimes violated the truce as well, President Belisario Betancur increasingly found his peace policies bitterly and publicly opposed by many elite groups and much of the military. At the same time, the dirty war of illegal assassinations against amnestied guerrillas and other leftist activists began to escalate in 1987. Impunity for these crimes undermined guerrillas' support for the peace process.34 The Andean cocaine economy contributed to this trend by creating, virtually overnight, a new class of wealthy narco-landowners who purchased land in areas bordering frontier zones, where guerrillas had influence.35 Death squad violence was generally their tactic of choice to “clean” the zone of leftist influence so that they could (re)claim the zone politically.36

In other ways, though, the expanding cocaine economy benefited guerrillas, peasant social movements, and the electoral Left. In particular, the expansion of coca cultivation in some frontier zones of the Amazon and Orinoco watershed—near zones where the Communist Party and the FARC were already quite strong due to the presence of precarious frontier zone settlers from the 1960s—brought a new flood of peasant settlers to more remote areas of these regions. These settlers were followed by the FARC, which became the de facto state in these unsettled regions, deriving both new supporters and new sources of revenue from this role.37 This fact, in combination with the political closing that for some demonstrated the futility of nonviolent social change, fueled the rapid expansion of the armed insurgencies,38 which grew from a total of about 4,000 in the early 1980s to a total of about 12,000 by 1990.39

In this context, President Virgilio Barco (August 1986–August 1990) took a harder line with the guerrillas, using the stick as much as the carrot. When negotiating, he insisted on guerrilla demobilization as an end goal, offering material incentives for individual fighters who complied but cutting off material concessions to war zone social movements.40 However, at the same time, he continued to promote and implement a key decentralizing
reform demanded by the FARC in the peace process (as well as supported by some elite groups), the direct election of county executives. The terms of office of county executives would get progressively longer: elections for this office have been held in 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2003, and 2007. With this reform’s implementation in 1988, Colombia was transformed from one of Latin America’s most centralized countries to one of its most decentralized.

Decentralization created real opportunities for increased political representation of previously excluded Left-influenced constituencies such as peasant settlers, rural labor unions, and small town urban squatters in the case study regions. In 1986 President Barco facilitated the appointment of the first leftist county executives, and in 1988, 18 of Colombia’s 1,025-odd counties elected leftist county executives—all in rural areas with a FARC presence. These new elected officials were able to advocate for their constituencies in unprecedented ways, especially in counties blessed with abundant fiscal resources.

However, as the Left gained politically from the democratic reforms, the backlash from national military leaders and regional (rural) elites intensified, especially where there were strong social movements and/or guerrilla presence and where newly wealthy drug traffickers were acquiring territories. The number of political assassinations rose precipitously. Most of these were social movement activists killed by elite-led death squads (many of them narco-landowner led), usually with military complicity, although in guerrilla-dominated combat zones repression against peasants was often carried out directly by army personnel or police.

In either case, nearly all the crimes went unpunished, notwithstanding the period from 1989 to 1993 when the government, having been provoked by the assassination of a leading Liberal presidential candidate and other prominent public figures by groups associated with the Medellín drug cartel, pursued some of the cartel’s members. For example, an October 1992 report by the Defensoría del Pueblo (National Ombudsman Office) stated that of 717 murders of Patriotic Union activists that took place between the party’s founding in 1985 and September 1992 (306 carried out by paramilitary and 129 by state forces), only 10 cases had reached the sentencing stage, with only 4 convictions. In response to the rampant impunity, guerrillas began to carry out ajusticiamientos, or assassinations of elites allegedly financing paramilitary activity, although the “solution” only intensified violence against the noncombatant Left.
In the first half of President César Gaviria’s administration (August 1990–August 1994), the era of mixed signals yielded to the era of division. Bold reform initiatives bifurcated the guerrilla movement, which then reinforced a bifurcated state policy toward the two halves. Gaviria continued the peace initiatives begun by Barco, offering material incentives and political representation in the Constitutional Assembly to guerrilla groups that would demobilize but, again, no material concessions to war zone social movements. In December 1990 elections of representatives to the Constitutional Assembly (held February–July 1991), the fully demobilized guerrilla group M-19, in alliance with three other demobilized guerrilla groups (most of the EPL and two much smaller guerrilla groups, the indigenous Quintín Lame and the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores, or PRT), won nearly one-third of the seats.49 A host of additional democratic and anticlientelist initiatives were passed, among them the direct election of governors (after 1991 elected on the same schedule as county executives), the election of senators by national proportional representation rather than two per department (province), due process protections for citizens in war zones, and a new ballot meant to impede vote buying by rural political bosses.50

Although the four smallest guerrilla groups, the “good guerrillas,” had demobilized for the Constitutional Assembly and had become legal parties, the two largest guerrilla groups and part of a smaller one—the FARC, the ELN, and the EPL dissidence—had not demobilized. State policy toward these “bad guerrillas” now became much more belligerent. On December 9, 1990, precisely the day when the coalition led by the M-19 was winning nearly a third of the national vote for the Constitutional Assembly, the army bombed the FARC’s national headquarters, Casa Verde, where several rounds of peace talks had once been held with the insurgency. As the possibilities for a negotiated peace with the bad guerrillas became more remote, the number of combatants in these organizations stayed constant at about twelve thousand through 1992. Furthermore, the intensity of guerrilla-army combat rose considerably during the same period.51

By 1992 many urban intellectuals once sympathetic to armed struggle became harshly critical of the still-active insurgencies.52 Furthermore, following Colombian National Front customs, based on the M-19’s success in the May 1990 presidential elections despite the assassination of its original candidate, President Gaviria offered the new political party the administration of the Ministry of Health. By accepting, the M-19 cemented its “good
guerrilla” status and reduced the risk of assassination for its remaining leaders but lost its autonomy and credibility as an oppositional voice. Gaviria seized on this moment to turn the tide definitively toward counter-reform.

The Counterreform Period: Late 1992 to 2008

In late 1992, confronted by army representatives who condemned the new civil liberties protections and democratic reforms for allowing guerrillas access to state resources, and openly admiring the apparent success of President Alberto Fujimori’s anti–Sendero Luminoso crackdown in Peru, President Gaviria moved toward counterreform. All peace negotiations with guerrillas were broken off, and “Comprehensive War” was declared on guerrillas. Defense expenditures more than doubled from 1990 levels, which were twice 1980 levels. The armed insurgencies responded in kind with escalated attacks, and of course civilian casualties increased as well.

Soon Gaviria had also suspended broad areas of the new Constitution by declaring several consecutive ninety-day “States of Internal Commotion,” with some provisions later signed into permanent law. Among other exceptional powers, the declarations permitted the president to issue decrees without legislative approval and remove governors and mayors who were deemed to be aiding guerrillas. The new measures also restricted the media, mandated special audits of territorial entities to prevent diversion of funds to guerrillas or drug traffickers, and provided incentives for informers against guerrillas. Also instituted, largely at the insistence of the United States as part of its War on Drugs, was a new system of “faceless justice.” Although intended to protect judicial personnel against drug trafficker retaliation, in fact, the “faceless” judges—and witnesses—were frequently used against leftist elected officials and social movement activists, who were then denied due process for their own defense against accusations of being guerrilla auxiliaries.

Finally, Gaviria also favored export producers by quickly removing protective tariffs on domestic production, devaluing the currency, and moving toward an export-led economic development model. Despite the protests of producers for the domestic market, the economic opening was largely left in place by Gaviria’s successors, causing a major crisis in regions dependent on domestic crops. Rural areas were disproportionately affected; in fifteen years the gap between urban and rural incomes doubled.
By 1994 many Colombians favored a changed direction. President Ernesto Samper (1994–98) was elected on a platform to restart guerrilla negotiations and to slow the pace of economic opening. However, his administration is now remembered primarily for its paralysis, resulting from his refusal to resign in the face of overwhelming accusations—from within Colombia and from the U.S. government—of links to the Cali drug cartel. The Colombian economy, which had experienced steady growth through 1995, contracted dramatically. The mid-1990s also witnessed an explosion of paramilitary violence, with well-documented collusion from military forces that received U.S. military training and support. Paramilitary forces first organized regionally, with Córdoba (near Urabá) and the Magdalena Medio as focal points, then nationally, as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). Samper’s creation of the Convivir security cooperatives were seen by illegal paramilitary groups as a symbolic green light. They doubled their number of fighters, from about 2,000 to more than 4,000, during Samper’s administration. Paramilitary assassinations of political activists increased from about 1,000 to about 1,800.

Coca crops also expanded significantly during this period, from about 50,000 to 100,000 hectares. The number of guerrilla fighters rose from 12,000 to 15,000, and they seemed to be taking the upper hand. In one of quite a few dramatic and unprecedented attacks between 1996 and 1998, for example, 1,000 guerillas in the Caguán killed 62 soldiers and took 43 hostages. Concern within U.S. government circles that the FARC could topple Colombia’s government spurred discussion of an increase in military aid, which had already tripled from $28.5 million in 1995 to nearly $100 million in 1997. Meanwhile, the electoral Left had nearly disappeared by 1994, and it lost further ground in 1998. In the rural war zones, as guerrillas focused on demonstrating their military might, they no longer supported the electoral process. To the contrary, they often actively sabotaged county executive elections to try to create an ungovernable situation. Any war zone activists who, despite the new guerrilla approach, had persisted in pursuing electoral or social movement activism had been virtually exterminated by paramilitary violence or had re clandestinized. The moderate urban Left, meanwhile, had succumbed to co-optation, internal divisions, and demoralization. Only new indigenous political parties appeared to thrive, riding a tide of popularity with nonindigenous urban voters.
In 1998 Andrés Pastrana took office, staking his presidency on the peace process. In 1998 he demilitarized five contiguous counties straddling the border of Caquetá and Meta, near Cartagena del Chairá, to facilitate negotiations with the FARC. In 2000 he attempted to set up a similar demilitarized zone in the southern tip of Bolívar Department to negotiate peace with the ELN. But, as during the Betancur presidency, tensions mounted on both sides. The FARC accused the Pastrana government of failing to halt the rising paramilitary tide, among other truce violations. Indeed, between 1998 and 2000 the numbers of paramilitary fighters doubled again, from 4,000 to 8,000, and assassinations by paramilitary forces increased from 1,800 to 2,800 per year. The government, meanwhile, accused the FARC of crimes against prominent politicians, as well as of expanding its manpower from an estimated 16,000 in 1998 to a high point of almost 18,000 in 2000. Kidnappings were said to increase from about 3,000 per year to almost 3,800 per year in the same time frame; and, fueling both sides of the conflict, national coca cultivation rose from 102,000 hectares in 1998 to its high point of 163,289 hectares in 2000.

Unsurprisingly, the AUC was adamantly opposed to the proposed demilitarized zone for the ELN and mobilized hundreds of peasant protesters to oppose it, forcing Pastrana to capitulate and withdraw it. Furthermore, military expenditures as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) rose quickly, from 2.16 percent in 1996 to 3.5 percent in 1999. Adding more weight to the forces pulling Pastrana toward the right, President Bill Clinton proposed, and the U.S. Congress passed (albeit with some human rights preconditions), a $1.3 million package of mostly military aid to Colombia in June 2000, with the plan to spend $4.4 billion in five years. This made Colombia the third most important U.S. military aid recipient in the world. By early 2002 Pastrana had abandoned peace initiatives; he adopted a hard-line approach to counterinsurgency and bombed the FARC demilitarized zone.

This trend carried over into the presidential elections of May 2002. Alvaro Uribe, an enthusiastic proponent of Samper’s Convivir security cooperatives as governor of Antioquia, easily swept into the presidency on a platform promising to defeat the guerrillas militarily. As part of his strategy to accomplish this goal, one of his first acts on taking office was to decree the restriction of constitutional citizen protections and political rights—not just the usual Colombian de facto arrangement but de jure—in order to carry out unimpeded counterinsurgency in Colombia’s war.
zones. Thus Uribe declared a ninety-day State of Internal Commotion in September 2002 and renewed it twice (the maximum permitted by law). Among other late 2002 Uribe decrees granting extraordinary powers to the military was that establishing Zones of Rehabilitation and Consolidation (ZRCs) in Arauca and another oil-producing region on the Atlantic coast. Within these zones the population’s civil rights were restricted, foreign journalists were forbidden from visiting without permission from the Ministry of the Interior, and the central government was allowed to overrule and remove from office directly elected county and departmental officials.80

By 2003, however, a reaction to the excesses of 2002 on the part of regional social movements, the Supreme Court, the Procuraduría (attorney general), international human rights organizations, and even the human rights certification process required for the issuance of U.S. military aid reined in the most extreme abuses against ordinary civilians and violations of constitutional and political rights in the ZRCs.81 Furthermore, from early 2004 through late 2005, although “destroying the FARC” remained a top priority—the other two priorities were to negotiate the demobilization of paramilitary groups and the ELN—Uribe refocused on the southern Amazon watershed coca-growing regions, in a massive new U.S.-supported military operation, Plan Patriota.82 Unlike the wave of leftist presidents taking office in other nations in Latin America, Uribe alone was “forcefully pro-Bush.”83 Bush demonstrated his appreciation by visiting Colombia, continuing the massive military aid infusions of almost $1 billion per year,84 and increasing the number of U.S. advisers in Colombia from 400 to 800.85 But Plan Patriota was costly in terms of citizen abuses and soldiers’ lives and left coca acreage unchanged by 2006; coca cultivation simply moved to other regions.86 After being reelected in May 2006, Uribe’s counterinsurgency strategy reemphasized combat in Arauca, creating material incentives for guerrilla desertion, and using intelligence and infiltration to capture top leadership.87

Without a doubt, by late 2008 Uribe accomplished much that he set out to do. A paramilitary cease-fire was declared in 2002, negotiations began in July 2003, and Uribe declared that the last AUC contingent had demobilized in July 2006, about 30,000 fighters total.88 Even Uribe’s implacable critic, Human Rights Watch, notes in its in-depth 2008 report on the paramilitary demobilization effort that on Uribe’s watch, through the post-2004 “Justice and Peace” process of taking confessions from demobilized paramilitary leaders and prosecuting those complicit with
paramilitary forces, “Colombia’s institutions of justice have made historic gains against paramilitary power.”89 Furthermore, between 2002 and late 2008 kidnappings declined by 75 percent, homicides declined by 40 percent, and urban areas became much safer.90 Most notably, although by late 2008 Uribe had defeated neither the FARC nor the ELN and negotiations with the ELN from late 2005 through 2007 ultimately failed, both organizations were weakened considerably. The Council on Foreign Relations estimated in March 2008 that the FARC’s numbers, calculated at nearly 18,000 in 2000, had declined to 9,000, and the ELN’s numbers, once estimated at 4,500, had declined to 2,200 to 3,000.91 Since that date the FARC has been further weakened by the loss of several top leaders and the infiltration of its communication networks, facilitating the spectacular bloodless rescue of the high-profile hostage Ingrid Betancourt in mid-2008.92 These accomplishments help to explain why Uribe’s approval ratings frequently hovered around 80 percent.93

However, Uribe also experienced serious setbacks in his second term. Most important, Colombia’s human rights situation is viewed as dire by much of the international community. Impunity for crimes perpetrated by military or paramilitary forces remains almost absolute.94 The UNHCR states that Colombia has three million internal refugees,95 a number that is already the second highest in the world but is quickly climbing due to new right-wing groups (termed “emerging groups” by the Uribe administration) that have filled the vacuum in rural areas left by the demobilized paramilitary forces and in late 2008 had as many as ten thousand fighters.96 To the extent that the “Justice and Peace” process has yielded important revelations about military, elite, and politician complicity with paramilitary forces, it has been due to international pressure and to the Supreme Court’s amendments of the process made despite Uribe’s objections.97 Furthermore, in a related scandal unfolding since the fall of 2006, sixty of Uribe’s political allies, including his vice president and his minister of defense, have been accused of “parapolítica.”98

With a Democrat-dominated U.S. Congress since late 2006 and the election of a Democratic U.S. president in 2008, these human rights issues have cost Uribe dearly: a free trade agreement between Colombia and the United States negotiated by Bush and Uribe in 2006 remained unratified in mid-2009, with then President-elect Barack Obama citing Colombia’s abysmal record of impunity for murdered labor leaders (of
the nearly 500 union slayings during Uribe’s presidency, only 14 perpetrators had been brought to justice as of late 2008) as his reason for opposing it. Furthermore, the late 2008 “false positives” scandal, in which military forces were shown to have executed many innocent civilians who were then presented as guerrillas killed in battle, had as of late 2008 caused the removal of 27 officers, including army Commanding General Mario Montoya; the investigation of 2,742 other officers; and the decertification for U.S. military aid to three army units (the second such decertification during the Uribe years). Meanwhile, given the U.S. economic crisis and the fact that coca acreage actually rose 15 percent from 2000 to 2008, despite the U.S. expenditure of nearly $6 billion on Plan Colombia, U.S. military aid to Colombia peaked in 2004 and was set to decline further in late 2009. Uribe’s efforts to reverse that trend by offering the United States the use of seven bases in Colombia greatly worsened already tense relations with his Left-led Latin American neighbors in mid-2009. Yet within Colombia, in late 2009 Uribe’s popularity ratings continued to be as high as 78 percent.

Even in Uribe’s first administration, as his successes delighted his supporters, his excesses solidified—and strengthened—the opposition: regional, national, and international. The visibility and questionable constitutionality of de jure restrictions of citizens’ rights intensified outrage among Colombian anti-Uribistas and international public opinion, focusing action on especially offensive (and ultimately overturned) policies such as the Rehabilitation and Consolidation Zones. There have been some important victories. As one example, having sued the Colombian government in the Interamerican Human Rights Court in 1993 for genocide against the Patriotic Union—almost 1,300 murders or disappearances were documented of the 2,500 total said to have occurred—the Colombian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Corporación Reiniciar and Comisión Colombiana de Juristas have won reparations for many surviving family members, as well as the reopening of 294 cases that had been abandoned.

In this context the Left has gained breadth, unity, strength—and international allies, proving to be a crucial resource for rural human rights activists. Starting with the bifurcation of the Left in 1990, the electoral Left in Colombia has become increasingly critical of the FARC and the ELN guerrilla groups as these have more frequently and flagrantly violated international humanitarian law. This fact, together with the extreme
nature of Uribe’s policies, has helped cement the Left’s commitment to the democratic process. The Polo Democrático, founded in 2002, originally combined the Alianza Democrática (AD) M-19, the Left-populist Alianza Nacional Popular (ANAPO), most of the labor movement, and many independent human rights figures and intellectuals. It received 6 percent of the presidential vote in 2002 and won the Bogotá mayoral elections in both 2003 and 2007, its administration relatively well received. In 2006, joined by the remnants of the Patriotic Union, indigenous groups, and others, the Polo Democrático Alternativo won 10 percent of the vote in the March 2006 legislative elections and 22 percent of the vote in the May 2006 presidential elections. Furthermore, the Polo’s senators, especially the former M-19 guerrilla Gustavo Petro, have been major protagonists in the unveiling of the parapolítica scandal. Despite these positive trends for the electoral Left, a cautious prognosis is in order. Uribe met Petro’s parapolítica accusations with “Farcpolítica” accusations against some top Polo leaders based on findings from a FARC commander’s laptop. More generally, the Polo Democrático Alternativo covers a broad political spectrum. Its unity is fragile at best, and considerable political skill, commitment, and luck will be required to maintain it.

SITUATING THE CASE STUDY REGIONS IN THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

The case study regions must be situated geographically as well as historically, since they were chosen not because they are typical rural counties in Colombia but, to the contrary, because they represent an ideal type in the Weberian sense: an extreme example of social movement strength and leftist electoral influence accompanied by armed insurgency. The following figures illustrate just how exceptional these regions are. Of 1,041 Colombian counties that existed in 1988, the midpoint of the reform period, about 1,000 had a clear rural majority. Of these 1,000, only 105 elected one or more leftist county council members in 1988; the Left won 20 percent or more of the county council vote in only 36 counties. Leftist candidates actually won the county executive’s office in only 16 counties. Two other counties that had not elected leftist candidates in 1988 did so in the 1990 local elections. One of them, San Alberto, Cesar, elected a county executive from the newly demobilized M-19. Thus the total number
of counties where candidates from leftist parties won either 20 percent or more of the county council vote in 1988 or the county executive’s office in 1990 was 38.

Choosing cases that were anomalies rather than typical rural counties allowed me to focus precisely on the phenomenon that is the subject of this study: the implementation of democratic reforms in rural regions with weak states, strong social movements, and armed insurgencies. The case study regions include counties where the Left won postreform local elections most overwhelmingly, due to the unusual strength of the social movements that form its base, and therefore where institutional political change could be expected to provoke the most dramatic changes and reactions. The reforms unleashed the social movements’ substantial latent electoral potential, quickly displacing local elite factions that had long held sway. And due to the weakness of state institutions in these regions as well as collusion on the part of central elites, elite backlash occurred with almost total impunity.

What geographic, historical, and social factors help explain why the history of these counties diverged from the rest? First and foremost, all the counties had strong and well-organized social movements. All had peasant movements; a few had labor movements and/or urban squatters’ movements as well. While all of them also had guerrilla presence, the social movements were the strongest predictor of leftist electoral success. After all, in 1988, 275 to 285 counties were reported to have had at least one guerrilla-army confrontation, but only 38 counties had more than 20 percent leftist electoral strength in 1988 or a leftist mayor in 1990. What, then, is the root of this social movement strength that provides the basis for the electoral Left? Figure 1.2 illustrates the discussion that follows.

For three of the thirty-eight counties, the origins of social movement strength can be found in the peasant land struggles of the 1930s in the coffee-growing region of Sumapaz—as documented by LeGrand, Marulanda, and Bergquist, among others—or the aftermath of the legislation that these struggles won. With massive mobilization that was essential to forcing national land reform legislation, coffee-growing peasants managed to consolidate a peasant economy under the leadership of the Communist Party (among other leftist political forces). Since then the Communist Party has outlived other leftist political parties and has maintained its historic following as it continues to defend smallholder interests (promoting infrastructure, organizing producer and inputs cooperatives, etc.).

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Figure 1.2. Map of Colombia, with Case Study Counties and Leftist Counties, 1988–1990

region is located where the departments of Meta, Cundinamarca, and Huila meet and the towns of Pasca and Cabrera are located. On the southern tip of Huila is Palestina, a coffee-growing area founded in 1936 and made a county in 1948, likely due to new colonization spurred by the 1936 land reform bill.118

In the 1950s, when La Violencia broke out, it was most likely to be resisted in a collective way in these highly organized regions. First, Liberal guerrillas formed as self-defense groups. When these did not succeed in keeping the Conservative forces at bay, in the regions with highly organized peasantries the Liberal guerrillas became the forerunners of the FARC. They led peasants from the Sumapaz region over the Cordillera Oriental toward the east, to settle in the Piedmont regions of Meta and Caquetá, while similar refugees in Huila fled to Caquetá.119 Four of the counties with over 20 percent leftist electoral strength followed this pattern: Mestas and Lejanías in Meta and La Montañita and El Paujil in Caquetá.

As can be seen in figures 1.2 and 1.3, the largest and newest colonization zone in Colombia extends along the entire eastern flank of the Cordillera Oriental, from the Venezuelan border to the Ecuadorian border. The other major areas of post-1950 settlement are the Magdalena Medio (along both banks of the mid-Magdalena River); the area centered on Norte de Santander Department, including the areas around Bucaramanga and Cúcuta; the Urabá region on the border with Panamá and around the Patía River valley in Cauca/Nariño.120 After the initial wave of Liberal and Communist refugees from La Violencia subsided, a new wave of colonization was spurred in these areas by deliberate state intent as the Instituto Colombiano de Reforma Agraria (INCORA) tried to respond to the growing demands of the peasant movement in the 1960s and 1970s.121

While land recipients were initially pacified by the frontier zone land titles, the almost total lack of transportation infrastructure, credit, and technical support made their holdings precarious, radicalizing their struggles against the state and creating sympathy for the Left.122 Furthermore, they needed to be highly organized and collectively oriented just to survive on the frontier. Collective work brigades known as mingas were the norm. When guerrilla groups, especially the FARC, later moved into these regions, they helped rural settlers organize further and were able to gain a foothold as an alternative state due to the sparse social, judicial, and police services; the trees that concealed guerrillas’ presence; and the lack of elite presence, at least initially. Conflict intensified if and when
Figure 1.3. Phases of Colonization in Colombia, Nineteenth Century to 1990s

Source: Marulanda, *Colonización y conflicto*, map, p. 28. Redrawn with permission from the author and IEPRI by Emily Busch.
lucrative economic activities began to draw elites into the zones who then began to force out the homesteaders, often by violent means. As LeGrand writes, “This enclosure process led to social conflict over public lands between peasant settlers and . . . speculators. . . . This is the major form of rural conflict in Colombia historically, and it is the major form today.”

Of the thirty-eight counties with strong leftist tendencies in 1988–90, sixteen, including the case study county Arauquita, had peasant settlers’ movements launched by 1960s colonization processes as the main impetus of the electoral Left.

A final wave of colonization occurred as a direct result of the coca boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The areas affected were located in the same watersheds of Orinoquía and Amazonía (and the Valley of the Patía) as the wave of the 1960s but farther out toward unsettled or sparsely settled areas, often those officially designated as wildlife preserves or indigenous reservations. Eight of the thirty-eight counties with strong leftist tendencies in 1988–90 fall into this category. In most of these the FARC had effective military control at the time and acted as the state: taxing production, resolving property line disputes, organizing peasant protests and work brigades, and acting as a police force. Peasant movements in these regions, like those in the INCORA regions, made demands for infrastructure, credit, and technical assistance. However, the illegality of both their holdings and their livelihood made their status even more precarious, vulnerable to fumigation/eradication and forced eviction as well as insolvency. Thus they also demanded land titles and an end to coca eradication, and they drew benefits from guerrilla presence more clearly than the INCORA-zone settlers. Despite this stronger link to the FARC, this coca-colonization route was the least dependable of all the routes to leftist electoral strength. While most of the counties with strong electoral presence in 1988 retained this strength in 1990 and 1992, in those with coca leftist electoral influence was severely diminished by 1990, reflecting the relative instability of peasant organization and the larger influence of the FARC and its political whims in these regions. The case study county Cartagena del Chañar (Middle and Lower Caguán, Caquetá) exemplifies this pattern.

For eight more of these thirty-eight counties, leftist electoral success derived primarily from the strength and leftist affiliation of organized rural worker organizations. However, the location of these counties in or very
near settler zones contributed to their radicalization by facilitating contact with armed insurgencies as well as alliances with radical peasant organizations, increasing their potential autonomy from elite political forces. Colombian workers in general are not highly unionized, as Collier and Collier have documented. To the contrary, in 1980 less than four thousand unions existed in the entire country. Thus the strength and political autonomy of these labor movements are indeed exceptional. Four of these counties (Turbo, Carepa, Chigorodó, and the case study county Apartadó in Urabá) have banana plantations; two (Segovia and Remedios, near the Middle Magdalena colonization zone) have gold mines; one (San Alberto, near both the Norte de Santander and Middle Magdalena colonization zones) has a palm oil plantation; and one (Sabana de Torres, Santander, in the Middle Magdalena region) has both oil and palm oil workers. Oil palms and bananas are continuous-harvest crops; as Paige notes, the resulting stability of employment facilitates unionization.

Different nonleftist regions may be contrasted directly with each of the categories named above. Most of the coffee-growing regions of Colombia have been settled since the nineteenth century.Colonization of these areas was led and initiated by commercial elites rather than by peasants themselves. As a result, if peasant smallholders are organized at all (and the ones on the Central Cordillera are much less likely to be organized than those of Sumapaz) they are not radical. To the contrary; as Zamosc documents, for most of the period studied peasants of the Andes aimed to consolidate an already relatively stable peasant economy through the improvement of existing services and credits. When the National Peasant Association (ANUC) split in the early 1970s, the Andean peasants were quite clearly on the moderate side of the divide, leaving the more radicalized peasant factions—the precarious peasants of the colonization zones and the landless peasants of the Atlantic coast—to bear the brunt of state repression. Furthermore, at least until the coffee crisis of the late 1980s, the Federación Nacional de Cafeteros performed an important parastate role by funding schools, infrastructure, and social services, as well as stabilizing prices paid to smallholder coffee farmers.

Other regions characterized by the scant presence of the Left have been settled since before the nineteenth century and thus have very well established elites and clientelist systems and little political space for the development of leftist social movements. The lack of leftist electoral pres-
ence is noteworthy on the Atlantic coast: Atlántico, Sucre, Guajira, and Magdalena are all characterized by latifundio and semifeudal relations. The exceptions—inland areas of Córdoba, Bolívar, and Cesar discussed above—are all colonization zones. While landless peasants in these coastal departments and in Córdoba mobilized to force land redistribution in the 1970s and again emerged in the 1980s, they were overwhelmed and defeated both times by the strength of elite organization and repression. The exceptions to the rule—San Alberto (Cesar), nearby Aguachica (Cesar), which had an M-19 county executive in 1994, and two counties in Magdalena, all of which developed a strong electoral Left presence after 1988—have strong worker movements, based on palm oil and bananas, respectively. And although the department of Boyacá, located high on the Cordillera Oriental, is typified by smallholding and cold-weather subsistence crops like potatoes and beans, it also had powerful clientelist organizations. With 122 counties, Boyacá had not one leftist county councilor in 1988. Before 1988 one county in Boyacá had a leftist presence: Puerto Boyacá, located in the Middle Magdalena colonization zone. However, the Left was decimated there by the first narco-landowner–sponsored death squads of the 1980s.

Thus the counties that I chose to study differ from the norm in rural Colombia in clear ways: all had much more powerful social movements than are normally found, due to autonomous worker organization of an organizable commodity such as gold mining or continuous-harvest agricultural crops or to the location in or proximity to colonization zones, or both. They also had a weaker state, with fewer state or parastate mediation mechanisms, than most of rural Colombia.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Research Design

Within the anomalous class of counties with strong electoral presence of the Left, I selected cases—Apartadó, Arauca/Arauquita, and Cartagena del Chairá—and incorporated time periods—1982–92 and 1993–2008—that typified the following variations expected to affect the outcome: regional political economy (export plantation, peasant settler–produced