Political Power in the Peripheries: The Paramilitares from Magdalena Medio (Colombia), 1978-2003

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This dissertation explores the political discourse and military behavior of the “paramilitares” right-wing militia as well as of the local political alliances that sponsored and initially controlled these militias in the Magdalena Medio region, a rural periphery in Colombia, during the last decades of the 20th century. Previous literature explains these right-wing militias simultaneously as reaction of rural elites to the incapacity of the Central State to monopolize political violence and as the consequence of the rural elites fear of an agrarian reform. Yet, from a tradition Weberian perspective, it is impossible to present the state as both capable and incapable.

To solve this contradiction, the dissertation employs a mixed method approach based in the “Sources of Social Power” theory, with an emphasis on the operationalization of quantitative variables measuring the capacity of the central state to penetrate society and territory. A mixed methods approach combines a panel regression at a municipal-year granularity modeling the effects of conflict intensity, public services provision, and sociopolitical mobilization on paramilitar activity against civilians with a discourse analysis on the contemporary political discourse on the paramilitares and by the paramilitar political allies. The results point to how the paramilitar violence against civilians has a
positive relation to certain dimensions of State presence (Armed Forces activity, schooling) and to sociopolitical mobilization, but a negative relation to guerrilla activity.

An original method to capture a time-series of the evolution of the transport network from cartographic sources into a GIS database is presented.
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List of Abbreviations and Colombian-Specific Concepts

**AUC.** *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self Defense Forces of Colombia). The umbrella organization created in 1997 to coordinate different paramilitary groups. It worked as a federation, with a nominal national command. They agreed with the government to enter a demobilization transitional justice process that was carried out between 2003 and 2006.

**Central Colombia.** Defined in this work as the seven departments with shores on the Middle Magdalena Basin: Antioquia, Bolívar, Boyacá, Caldas, Cesar, Cundinamarca, and Santander.

**Colono.** A colonizer peasant; a category of peasants that recently settled in the agrarian frontier in search of unclaimed lands from which to work and profit.

**CSJ.** *Consejo Superior de la Judicatura* (Judiciary Supreme Administrative Council). The institution charged by the Constitution of 1991 to administer the human and material resources of the judiciary power.

**DANE.** *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas* (National Department of Statistics). The central state’s statistics authority.

**Department.** Constitutionally defined as the second level administrative division. Departments consist of multiple *municipios*. Led by a governor (executive) and a department assembly (collegiate body).

**DNP.** *Departamento Nacional de Planeación* (National Planning Department). The central state’s planning agency.

**ELN, Ejército de Liberación Nacional** (National Liberation Army). The second most important Marxist guerrilla in Magdalena Medio during the period of study. It follows a “Guevarist” political ideology.

**FARC.** *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army). The largest Marxist guerrilla organization during the period of study. It followed the “Moscow Line” during the Cold War.
**Fuerza Pública** (Public Force). The collective constitutional definition of the regular Colombian Military (Army, Navy, Air Force) and the Colombian National Police. Borrowing the tradition from military history works, the term will be employed in its original Spanish language. Doing so will be helpful when addressing the differences among the military activities of different armed actors (guerrillas, paramilitares, and regular armed forces).

**GMH.** *Grupo de Memoria Histórica* (Historical Memory Group). The historic and academic institution created by the Peace Process with the AUC designed to study the historical conditions of armed conflict.

**IGAC.** *Instituto Geográfico “Agustín Codazzi”* (“Agustín Codazzi” Geographic Institute). The national geographic and cartographic authority.

**INCORA.** *Instituto Nacional de la Reforma Agraria* (National Institute for Agrarian Reform). The central state’s office charged with land and agrarian reform policies.

**Magdalena Medio** (Middle Magdalena). A frontier agrarian region in Central Colombia defined in this project as 62 municipalities with shores on the Middle Magdalena Basin and the Brazo de Loba juncture connecting the Magdalena and Cauca Rivers.

**MAS.** “*Muerte a Secuestradores*” (“Death to Kidnappers”). A short-lived vigilante organization funded by notable drug kingpins to counteract guerrillas that were extorting the drug business, their leaders, and their families. It eventually became an umbrella term to refer to loosely connected, criminal right-wing organizations, including paramilitares.

**Municipio.** A municipality. Constitutionally defined as the basic administrative division, led by a mayor (executive), and a municipal council (collegiate body).

**Paramilitares.** The right-wing Colombian militias created in the late 20th century by an alliance of local elites, members of the regular armed forces, and drug traffickers, whose alleged goal was to combat the guerrillas. In the Colombian context, the words *autodefensas, paramilitar, and paramilitares* are nowadays commonly associated with those organizations.

**PNUD.** *Programa de Naciones Unidos para el Desarrollo* (United Nations Development Program).
**Procuraduría General de la Nación.** An idiosyncratic Colombian institution inherited from the 19th century Constitutions that serves as an independent control institution supervising civil service. Prior to the 1991 Constitution, it served as the ad-hoc national Ombudsmandry.

**UV. Unidad de Víctimas (Victims Unit).** The statistics office of the national executive charged with receiving, finding, and sorting victimization records for the Colombian conflict from 1985 onwards.
Map I-1 Republic of Colombia, South America
Source: Design by the Author, with data from (IGAC 2011)
Map I-2 Evolution of Central Colombia's Road Network 1982:2002

Note: Roads outside Central Colombia might not be shown. Source: Design by the author with data from (IGAC 1982; IGAC 2002)
Map I-3 Detail of Magdalena Medio with select roads for 2002
Source: Design by the author with data from (IGAC 2011; IGAC 2002)
Map I-4 Evolution of Travel Time to Department Capitals
Source: The author. With data from OD Matrix (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2.1)
Introduction

This dissertation follows the history of the right wing private militias known as the paramilitares from Magdalena Medio region in Colombia. It also covers the history of the alliance of legal and illegal actors (local landed elites, career politicians, members of the regular Armed Forces, and drug traffickers) that created, funded, and guided these militias from 1978 to 2003. In the context of the Colombian armed conflict between Marxist guerrillas and a democratic -albeit very restrictive- Government, the paramilitares emerged as a third armed actor, allied with the state’s regular Armed Forces against the insurgents, but answering to the interests of their private sponsors.

The paramilitares behaved savagely and were responsible for countless crimes. Nonetheless, a political justification for their action and their existence was regularly advanced by the members of the paramilitary alliance. In this political justification, the paramilitares were the natural and legitimate reaction from rural entrepreneurs living in peripheral regions where the central state was absent or very weak and could not protect the people nor their properties from the predation of Marxist Guerrillas. According to the previous interpretation, these militias were “self-defense” mechanisms rather than paramilitary units in the sense the militia literature often assigns to armed civilians coordinated by a political party (Mann 2004) or the regular military of an incumbent government (Ahram 2011; Eck 2015; Staniland 2015). The principal goal of this dissertation is to dissect the behavior and narratives from the paramilitares as a militia and
the paramilitary alliance as a collective of actors with private interests against the corollaries of this political justification.

To achieve this goal the document will follow three intertwined evolutions. First, the development of the paramilitaries and their behavior as reflective of the interests of the members of the paramilitary alliance. Second, the development of state capacities across time with emphasis in quantitative comparisons at the municipal level. Third, electoral and contentious political events from both civil and armed actors. Following Charles Tilly’s advice (2003), the contentious events include examples of social mobilizations as well as events of coordinated violence. In this last category, the intensities of violence in combat and against civilians from the Armed Forces, the guerrillas, and the paramilitaries will be operationalized quantitatively while their social impact will be analyzed qualitatively. The goal is twofold: First, to study how subnational variations of the central state’s infrastructural power, democratic competitiveness, and security challenges determine paramilitary militias’ activity over space and time. Second, to understand how different social actors with conflicting interests frame and justify (or denounce) the paramilitaries’ behavior.

The question on the origins and goals of Magdalena Medio’s paramilitaries has elicited two popular academic answers, often presented simultaneously, that are nonetheless contradictory regarding state capacities in the eyes of local elites. One is a “Weberian” interpretation stating that the historical weakness of the Colombian state left peripheries outside the umbrella of a hegemonic legitimate coercion. In this view, the paramilitaries were an expression of how local elites tried to solve the security problems created by that void. The second, a “reactionary” narrative, states that elites in peripheral regions created
the paramilitary in reaction to their fears of redistributive and political democratization policies under consideration by presidents and legislators, and under discussion in peace talks with leftist guerrillas. Thus, while the first explanations describe the state as not a credible deterrent against the guerrilla, the second one considers that the state is indeed strong enough to pose a credible redistributive threat.

A simple solution to this contradiction is to conceptualize the state’s capacities as multidimensional and unevenly distributed in geographic terms. Different dimensions of state power can have both distinct levels of strength and uneven geographical reach. This project’s main thesis is that configurations of these variables would yield a mosaic of subnational political opportunity structures, where some places, i.e. Magdalena Medio, become especially prone to develop militias.

To address the contradictory claims about the causes of the paramilitary phenomenon, this project will contrast the incidence of paramilitary activity at the local level against different dimensions of the concept of state power, guerrilla activity, electoral competition, and popular mobilization. A critical discourse analysis of the narratives from paramilitary leaders, state bureaucrats, social movement members, and printed media outlets will compare the actor’s behavior with their political discourses.

**How to Understand State Power?**

The Weberian theory of power is perhaps the most common conception of state power in western political science. It offers two avenues to understand the modern state’s power and reach. The first one derives from the state’s ideal monopoly over the legitimate means of coercion within society and territory (Weber 1946, 78). This condition is considered the source of political power, and furthermore, it is often understood as a power based on the
threat of coercion (Tilly 1985, 172). The second one is government through bureaucracy (Weber 1978, 980–83). The state’s capacities to govern are a function of its bureaucratic capacity and efficiency, whose principal characteristic is commonly described as the capacity to levy taxes to fund the state’s apparatus (Tilly 1985, 182). Nonetheless, this project argues that in the Colombian case, Weber’s concept of the monopoly over the means of legitimate coercion conflates two dimensions of power that could be usefully treated as separate: military or coercive power on the one hand, and political power - understood as the access to the state’s institutions- on the other hand.

A traditional brand of Colombian literature has stressed that guerrillas, drug cartels, and paramilitary are all symptoms of the central state’s inability to claim the social monopoly over legitimate coercion (F. Gutiérrez 2014b; Richani 2013; Varón Sánchez 2013; Leal Buitrago 2006; Pizarro 1998). These works draw heavily from Weberian interpretations of the modern state (Weber 1946), and have often evoked Oquist’s (1976) model of the “collapse of the state” as a historical parallel on the causes of La Violencia.¹ Their common causal claim is that the state’s weakness, expressed essentially as its incapacity to monopolize legitimate violence, enabled the existence of armed actors offering alternative political orders in the nation’s peripheries. The most “pessimistic” among these scholars were concerned with the possibility of a “failed state” scenario in Colombia at the turn of the century (Pizarro and Gaitán 2006). From an anthropological perspective, Civico posits that the peripheries are negotiated symbolically and politically between local elites and the central state (Civico 2015). More recent literature disputes the extent of the state’s collapse,

¹ La Violencia (The Violence) was a period of intense social violence in Colombia between the 1940’s and the 1960’s.
and furthermore, considers that the activities of actors like the paramilitary, drug traffickers, and guerrillas have in fact forced the central state to strengthen its capacities and extend its geographical reach (Duncan 2014; 2015b; López 2016).

This project will work with an alternative conceptualization of state power, drawn from Micahel Mann’s comparative sociological history of power, also known as the “sources of social power” (SSP) theory (1986; 1993; 2012; 2013). SSP’s theory is particularly suited to account for the Colombian case. Mann defines the state as an arena contested between civil society groups, and as “as a differentiated set of institution and personnel embodying centrality [and where] political power relations radiate outwards from a center to cover a territorially-demarcated area” (Mann 1984, 188). In contrast with Weberian traditions, Mann’s theory relaxes the expectation over the monopoly of coercion and differentiating between military and political power sources. In SSP, domestic politics in nation-states are determined by the capacity of the state as a centralized regulator of social life and by the capacity of social actors to influence (or even to control) the state. The theory describes two types of political power: Despotic and infrastructural. The first one is the “range of actions that state elites is empowered to make without consultation with civil society groups”(Mann 2008, 355). The second one is the “state’s actual capacity to penetrate society”, and to implement its policies across the territory (Ibid, Mann 1984, 202). Military power is defined simply as the social organization of lethal violence, carried out through disciplined collectives (i.e. the guerrillas, the paramilitares, or the regular Armed Forces). In this theoretical framework, political power can exist without military hegemony, and military presence by itself does not automatically translates into forms of political power.
Taking the state’s capacities seriously has important implications when considering the role played by the paramilitares as a coercive tool to subdue political rivals during a democratization process. As Soifer (2013) has shown, the bearing of elite’s assessment of the risk posed to their material interests by a democratization prospect (i.e. Boix and Stokes 2003) is determined in turn by their appraisal of the infrastructural capacities of the state. Following Mann (2012) and Soifer (2013) we should consider that if elites in the peripheries believe that the central state has the capacity to penetrate society at the local level, then these elites will fear a democratization process and its eventual redistributive policies. Recent work from González (2014) presents a second alternative. In those scenarios were the leaders from the central state are not powerful enough to execute their policy preferences due to the resistance coming from local functionaries controlled by local elites, these local elites will fear the loss of control over the local state. A possible alignment from leaders at the local and central levels of the state would make local traditional elites’ position and interest vulnerable (F. González 2014, sec. 3104). This is, essentially, an expression of the thesis from the economic origins of democracy theory played at the subnational level. (Boix 2003; Soifer 2013) I argue that Magdalena Medio local traditional elites who feared a process of democratic opening led by leaders at the central level of the state recurred to the paramilitares to safeguard their historical preeminence as leaders of the local state and to repress alternative political movements whose votes they could not control by regular clientelism. In that sense, the paramilitares were designed as mechanism of armed clientelism designed to isolate subnational illiberal regimes through mechanism of boundary control and armed clientelism (Gibson 2005; Duncan 2015b).
Magdalena Medio and the Magdalena Medio Paramilitares as the Case Study

The historical, administrative, and geographic conditions of the Magdalena Medio as a region make it a relevant region of study to explore the relationship between the paramilitares and the war on the one hand, and between the paramilitary alliance and the central state on the other hand. From the mid 20th century onwards, Magdalena Medio has been an open agrarian frontier on the peripheries of the state and the national market reach (F. González 2014; F. González 2009). In this sense, it shares similar characteristics to other regions like the Amazonian or Orinoquía regions to the south and south east of the Andean ranges, or the Pacific corridors between the Pacific Ocean and the Western Andean Range. These are regions with very little state presence, low densities of population, but higher densities of non-state armed actors. In these peripheries the most lucrative productive activities are often illegal, and chiefly among them are the cultivation of drug crops and the processing of illegal narcotics, the two levels of the drug-trafficking illicit trade (Duncan 2015b; Duncan 2015a; Gouëset 1999).

At the same time, despite its peripheral status, Magdalena Medio has a central geographic position, along the waters of Colombia’s historically most important route of communication between the Andean capitals and the Atlantic Ocean. The Magdalena River. Magdalena Medio is a region that lies between Bogotá, Medellín, Bucaramanga, Manizalez, Barranquilla, and Cartagena, seven of the ten most important Colombian conurbations (see Map I-1). Surrounded by more dynamic poles, no other peripheral region of Colombia has more potential to be penetrated by infrastructural investments as the Magdalena Medio. As this dissertation will show, this was in fact what happened to the south and eastern regions of Magdalena Medio. There the central state invested with different intensities in transport,
education, and judicial infrastructure. The investment was especially notorious regarding transport infrastructure. National projects that were designed to connect the Andean capitals with the Atlantic ports crisscrossed Magdalena Medio. These works had the effect to increase connectivity and thus reduce the peripheral condition- of some but not of all the region’s municipalities. These variations in infrastructural capacity will allow us to operationalize inferential models accounting for the role of the state capacity to penetrate a region as a determinant of intensities of violence during a civil-war like armed conflict.

Magdalena Medio paramilitares as a private militia fit into this scenario because their actions reflect the interests of the members of local elites and members of the Armed Forces regarding the social, economic, and political changes brought about by changes in measures of infrastructural power -the capacity of the state to penetrate society over territory, and the capacity of members of society to connect with the state-. Magdalena Medio paramilitares are paradigmatic in two senses. First, Magdalena Medio is the region that served as cradle to the Colombian paramilitary phenomenon. No other region endured their presence for a longer period: 1978 to 2006. Second, the structural model from Magdalena Medio paramilitares, including the political alliance of local elites, drug traffickers, and members of the Armed Forces, became the archetypal that other paramilitares from different regions copied.

**Chapter Structure**

Following this introduction, Chapter 1 will offer the historical and political context required to understand the complex case of Colombia at the end of the 20th century. Its first section will approach the Colombian Armed Conflict and the role that the paramilitares and the paramilitary alliance played in it. The second section will briefly explain the sui-
generis nature of the Colombian Armed Forces, whose relative independence from civilian authorities and ideological anti-communist alignment are key elements to understand their contradictory involvement in the paramilitary alliance. The third section describes the evolution of the Colombian state’s capacities in the agrarian frontiers and explores the agrarian roots at the heart of Colombia’s more pronounced sociopolitical contradictions. A concluding section will explain how these three processes converged in Magdalena Medio at the end of the 20th Century.

Chapter 2 is a discourse analysis of four case studies that occurred during the 1980s. These cases were selected for two reasons. First, because they cover the initial stages of the paramilitary phenomenon in Magdalena Medio. These initial stages are not covered by the quantitative chapter due to a lack of operationalizable data. Second, to profit from primary sources that record the first-hand narratives, projects, and discourses from members of paramilitary alliances, state officials, and victims of the paramilitares’ violence. The first case approaches early narratives on the weakness and capacities of the state in the context of peace negotiations with the guerrillas. The second case dissects the discourse from paramilitary leaders, state authorities, and journalists regarding the justification for paramilitary violence against civilians. The third case studies the agency of a peasant social movement in response to a paramilitary offensive and a brief electoral opportunity during the early years of the democratic opening. The fourth and final case deconstructs the narratives from two political campaigns from candidates sponsored by the paramilitary alliance.

Chapter 3 presents a quantitative characterization of the paramilitares violent activity across Magdalena Medio from 1988 to 2003. It employs a set of variables measuring at
yearly-municipal granularity dimensions from the intensity of the armed conflict, the evolution of state capacities, and socio-political mobilization of peasant movements and left-wing political parties. In its first section it offers a short analysis of the descriptive statistics from each set of variables, and a brief contextualization interpreting the most salient characteristics of the distributions. In its second section it presents the inferential models, composed of three pairs of fixed-effects and first difference panel modelling the intensities of paramilitary violence, with an emphasis on civilian victimization. The conclusions develop an analysis of how the paramilitary behavior fared against its political justification.
Chapter 1. Political and Historical Context of the Colombian Armed Conflict and the Capacities of the Colombian State

This chapter provides a historical and political context of the evolution of the Colombian armed conflict and the capacities of the Colombian state to project its power into the nation’s wide peripheries. It begins by describing the still ongoing armed conflict and specifying the role the paramilitares played on it. It also offers a definition of two key concepts that will be employed in the dissertation: the paramilitares as a right-wing militia, and the alliance of social actors that created them. It then moves to explore the history of the land conflicts and the characteristics of Magdalena Medio as an open agrarian frontier, a region of recent peasant colonization where unclaimed lands are still available for the colonos to claim them.

The roots of the armed conflict can be traced to Colombia’s unsolved agrarian problem. This dissertation’s thesis is that the roots of Magdalena Medio paramilitares can be traced to that region’s condition of being simultaneously an open agrarian frontier (and thus a political periphery) and geographically located right between various axes of economic development connecting the Andean and Caribbean dynamic urban centers (and thus a region of geographic centrality).

The concluding section deals with the history of security policies and political contestation amid the armed conflict and the democratic openings. This section is meant to help explain two murky relations. First, the role the Armed Forces as a state institution held from the
1950s to the 1980s as the de-facto decision makers regarding not just external security matters but also domestic political contestation. The fact that starting in the 1980s presidential initiatives challenged those military prerogatives is essential to understand the reactionary and private militia nature of the paramilitares. Second, to explain the ideological tenets of the National Security Doctrine, that explain how and why members of the Armed Forces were inclined to support the paramilitares as useful allies instead of challengers for the state’s monopoly over legitimate coercion.

1.1 Colombia’s Armed Conflict and the Nature of the Paramilitares

Colombia has faced a political armed conflict pitting Marxist guerrillas against state security forces since the 1960s. By the late 1970s a third type of actor, right wing paramilitary militias known as “Paramilitares” or “self-defense forces”, had joined the fight (see Figure 1-1).

![Figure 1-1 Basic Three-Sided Model of the Colombian Conflict](source: The Author)

This three-sided conflict was further complicated with the boom of the illegal drug trafficking industry since the 1980s. First, the rise of powerful drug cartels led to an all-out war between the state and criminal organizations like the Cartel de Medellin, Cartel de Cali, and Cartel del Norte del Valle, among others. Second, because the resources from drug
trafficking trickled down towards all the armed actors, blurring the distinction between political armies and organized crime.

For clarity purposes, this dissertation will refer to the abovementioned right-wing militias as “Paramilitares” in plural, and “Paramilitar” in singular. There were multiple paramilitary organizations, yet they shared broad similarities.

1.1.1 The Paramilitary Alliance

The paramilitares were private militias created by what this dissertation refers as the paramilitary alliance. This alliance consisted of local landed and political elites, members of the state security apparatus, and drug traffickers. The members of the alliance would fund, support, and -at least initially- provide political guidance to the militias. Colombia saw two waves of creations of paramilitary groups during our period of study. The first one during the early 1980s, the second one during the mid-1990s. Both waves followed the “pioneering” model of two early models from Magdalena Medio: the militias led by Ramón Isaza in Puerto Berrío (Antioquia) circa 1978 and those led by the Pérez family in Puerto Boyacá (Boyacá) circa 1982 (M. Romero 2003; F. Gutiérrez 2014b; F. Gutiérrez and Vargas 2016, 15; E. M. Restrepo, Cohen, and Velasquez 2012). There were multiple paramilitary alliances across Colombia, and thus multiple paramilitary militias. In 1997 Carlos Castaño and Salvatore Mancuso, the leaders of one of the most powerful paramilitary alliance - the “Self-Defense Forces from Cordoba and Urabá”- created a loose national federation called the “United Self Defense Forces of Colombia” (AUC) (M. Romero 2002, 285).

The local elites conforming the alliance were usually large land owners and/or career politicians, local electoral “caciques” as they are known in the clientelist Colombian
political system. The *Fuerza Pública* (Colombia’s regular armed forces) were present either institutionally or through the individual action of some of their members, depending on the circumstances. Up to 1989 and from 1994 to 1997, rural self-defense organizations were legal. Military doctrine encouraged deployed units to foster them through alliances with the local notables (Leal Buitrago 2006, 68).

Drug traffickers gradually became a dominant force in the alliance from the mid 1980’s onwards (Camacho Guizado 2009). These drug lords were looking to reinvest their illegal profits into rural real estate, and over time coopted or replaced the original local landed elites in the alliance’s dynamics (Thoumi 1995; Duncan 2014; Duzán 2015).

![Figure 1-2 The Paramilitary Alliance and its Drug Trafficking Contradictions](Image)

*Figure 1-2 The Paramilitary Alliance and its Drug Trafficking Contradictions*  
*Source: The Author*

The presence of drug traffickers presented constant contradiction to the alliance, due to the illegal nature of the business (see Figure 1-2). The state security policies divided in broad terms the role of the Military the Police towards different enemies. The Military would concentrate on fighting the Marxist insurgents, and the National Police would concentrate
on antinarcotic operations. Yet, in moments of crisis, the state employed both institutions simultaneously to face either of the two threats. The confounding of Military and Police roles has characterized the Colombian conflict since the 1970s (Velásquez 2006). Two mechanisms were frequently employed to solve this drug-trafficking related contradiction. The first was plain corruption through the bimetallic law. The enormous economic resources of the Drug Traffickers were often employed to buttress through bribes the occasional crisis.\(^2\)

Another source of contention within the paramilitary alliance was the complex composition of the state, with civilian and military authorities (see Figure 1-3). The *Fuerza Pública*, and specially the Military Forces, were much more prone to support the militias as a mean to add a military and political ally in the fight against the guerrillas. Civil leaders and oversight institutions were not necessarily so favorable to the strategy because the paramilitares rapidly became entangled in drug trafficking, blood crimes, abuses against civilians, and many public relations scandals. Furthermore, all the Presidential Administrations covered during our period of study held peace talks and/or peace processes with guerrilla organizations. Officers from the *Fuerza Pública* often interpreted those political negotiations through the lenses of the National Security Doctrine and found them suspicious. In political and legal issues related to the paramilitares, the civil and military leadership were not seeing eye to eye.

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\(^2\) For instance, leaders from the Medellín Cartel had in their payroll the Air Force aerial controllers of the radars from Palanquero Air Base, the largest military compound in the Magdalena Medio. These Air Force controllers provided early warning to the drug traffickers and the paramilitares of Army and Police airborne operation in the region. (Salazar 2012, 184)
Acdegam was a civil façade and mutual-help association complimenting the military power of the private army. It was also the launchpad for political movements that helped paramilitary endorsed candidates to challenge the rigid structures of the liberal and conservative parties. Liberal and conservative leaders at the national level were not necessarily receptive to up and coming candidates emerging from Magdalena Medio region. The national bipartisan leadership was used to handle their authority through clientelistic relations, selectively granting access to public resources as a mean to discipline the subnational partisan hierarchies. As long as local candidates remained dependent on the trickling down of such public resources to advance their careers and consolidate local clienteles, the national party leaders had a firm grip (Leal Buitrago and Dávila 2010, 40).

Yet, the irruption of drug trafficking and the constitutions of private armies in regions like Magdalena Medio reshuffled the power balance and the access to clientelistic resources. Local candidates friendly to the paramilitary alliance could tap into the vast economic resources of the drug traffickers to fund their campaigns and establish a kernel clientele.
They could also employ the military capacities of the paramilitares to repress local political rivals. Acdegam and their candidates offered just that (see Image 1-1).

![Image 1-1 Acdegam advertisement in a local newspaper from La Dorada, Caldas, in 1987. The left column lists social services, including health, education, marketing and even road building. The right column lists their moral goals, including a culture of respect and obedience to the authorities. Source: Detail from (El Remanso 1987, 6)](image)

Bipartisan leaders at the national level faced a dilemma: Accept “tainted” candidates emerging from the paramilitary alliance and profit from their votes but loose a great degree of clientelar and disciplinary power over those candidates or reject them and lose their votes. For as long as Magdalena Medio was composed of multiple municipalities with low to medium low population densities, the appeal of candidates from the paramilitary alliance was more important at the local level than the national level. For instance, prior to the 1991
constitution, only two candidates for the House of Representatives supported by Magdalena Medio’s paramilitares won a seat: Pablo E. Guarín (1986-1988) for Boyacá with the help of Acdegam in Puerto Boyacá, and César Pérez García (1986-1990) for Antioquia with the support of the Puerto Berrío paramilitares.

As a right-wing militia, the paramilitares were instrumental to the alliance’s interests. They were meant to deter guerrilla aggressions, which suited the elites and the Armed Forces. But they also were involved in “social cleansing” against “people that cause trouble” to paraphrase the interviews from Manrique (Manrique and Tanner 2016; see also Santamaría 1983b), which meant political opponents to the dominating electoral elites, members of left-wing parties, leaders of peasant movements, and those colonos would where not willing initially to sell their lands to rural entrepreneurs (El Tiempo 1989; F. Gutiérrez and Barón 2006; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013a, chap. 2). Barón presents multiple examples of how Magdalena Medio paramilitar militias repressed civic and political participation from those who, while not necessarily representing the left of center of the ideological spectrum, were nonetheless questioning candidates and elected officials endorsed by the paramilitary warlords (Barón 2011, 92–95).

To different extents, the paramilitary leaders expressed anti-communist, anti-guerrilla and anti-leftist discourses. Some of their leaders where more prone than others to imprint an ideological character to the troops, and to build a social movement in parallel to the militia. The best example of this model were the Puerto Boyacá paramilitares, controlled by the warlords Gonzalo and Henry Perez -father and son, respectively-, but politically represented by career politicians Pablo Emilio Guarín (1982-1988), and later, by Ivan Roberto Duque Gaviria (1988-1992). The group invested in British and Israeli mercenaries...
to train their militias, and to cover the costs established an alliance with the drug lords from the Medellín Cartel (Duzán 1994; Duzán 2015). Gonzálo Perez and Pablo Guarín expected the training to include political indoctrination, in part to offset the negative influence brought about by the alliance with the drug traffickers (Viafara 1989, 85–86; Peña and Ochoa 2008). Decades later, the famous caporegime of the Medellín Cartel’s army of hitmen (“sicarios”), Jhon Velásquez Vasquez, would dismiss the paramilitares’ political status as deceiving. According to his words, they had always been a collective of drug lords’ henchmen, whose ideological depth was shallow, reduced to “hitmen with an hymn and a flag” (Velásquez Vasquez 2014).

1.1.2 The Magdalena Medio Paramilitares as a Military Instrument for Local Political Power

The original Magdalena Medio paramilitary militias were instrumental in conducting politicide. They were employed in a region wide systematic violence against political parties and candidates that were local threats to the members of the paramilitary alliances. Furthermore, hitmen trained by Magdalena Medio paramilitares were also employed at the national level in hundreds of selective and random killings of opposition candidates, judges, and left-wing militants. Paramilitar organizations are considered responsible for the assassination, attempt at assassination, and kidnapping of at least 1’600 members of left of center parties, including Colombian communist party, MOIR, Unión Patriótica, and A Luchar (Viafara 1989; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010c; Gomez-Suarez 2011; R. Romero 2012). The Unión Patriotica and A Luchar parties were in fact created as part of the peace talks between the national Executive and the Farc and ELN guerrillas.
In late 1982 the recently inaugurated President Betancur offered political dialogue to the guerrilla organizations. By 1983 peace talks were under way, and the administration was working toward establishing a cease-fire and a formal peace dialogue to solve the conflict through a peace accord. One of the interim agreements between the state and certain guerrillas was the creation of a legitimate and civil political party linked to each guerrilla group to offer their members and sympathizers an electoral option to pursue their struggle without arms. An amnesty for political crimes complimented the offer. (Betancur 1986, 61). As a result, the Unión Patriótica party was born, linked to the Farc, and drawing support from the Colombian Communist Party. The ELN sponsored A Luchar, a smaller organization that nonetheless drew support from “Guevarist” political organizations.

This democratic aperture policy was contrary to the interests of the members of the paramilitary alliance. Local established politicians from the bipartisan tradition could face greater electoral competition. Pablo Guarín expressed in an interview, circa 1987, a binary Manichean position, where Colombia was facing a struggle between the “established democratic government” and the “insurgency”, with Magdalena Medio:

“[…] a region inhabited by communist and anti-communist. The communists are all those supporting left wing options, whoever you want to call them. Even those acting within the law. They support openly or surreptitiously the insurgents. So, right now, there are only two groups: Democrats against enemies of the Fatherland, I do not recognize more sides.”(Guarín 1987, Min. 0:30-1:10).

Political scientists including Duncan (2015a), Steele (2011), and Carrol (2011, chap. 2) have explained the rise of the paramilitares as a reactionary strategy from regional elites and multinational corporations against the political pluralization brought about by the electoral consolidation of the Unión Patriótica and A Luchar during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This interpretation does not necessarily apply to Magdalena Medio.
Rather, I argue that in this, the “cradle region” of the paramilitary phenomenon, the alliance that sponsored those militias created them to repress earlier leftist political expressions. While the *Unión Patriótica* and *A Luchar* were undoubtedly targeted by the paramilitares, leftwing political expressions had already gained an important electoral space in Magdalena Medio years before the *Unión Patriótica* and *A Luchar* were created.

Map 1-1 depicts the number of times that in left wing parties reached at least 15% of the total tally during 8 Municipal Council elections held between 1970 and 1984. The size of the Municipal Councils is determined by the number of municipal inhabitants according to the Census. Yet, the smallest Council is composed of at least seven members. Thus, any unified electoral list that gathered at least 14.5% of the municipal vote would win at least a seat. Thus, while this metric does not necessarily reflect a region wide left-wing dominance over municipal politics, it illustrates how within the southern Magdalena Medio the left of center parties had been able to gather enough political support to represent a viable electoral alternative to bipartisanship.

In ten municipios the Left obtained at least 15% of the municipal vote in more 6 or more elections. These were clustered around a first cluster in the middle of the map, dominated by the city of Barrancabermeja (Santander, 8 times), in an arch including from east to west Remedios (Antioquia, 7 times), San Pablo (Bolívar, 7 times), Puerto Wilches (8 times) and Sabana de Torres (Santander, 7 times). A second cluster exists around Puerto Nare (Antioquia, 8 times) extending towards the southeast basin of the Magdalena River along the towns of Puerto Boyacá (Boyacá, 6 times), Cimitarra (Santander, 6 times), and Yacopí

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3 While the allocation methods for parties and or candidates changed across different elections, a list gathering at least 15% of the votes would ensure at least one seat he municipal council in all our electoral observations. During the period of study, the smallest municipal councils included 7 seats.
and (Cundinamarca, 7 times). Puerto Berrío and Maceo (Antioquia, 5 times) sit between both clusters.

The first paramilitar militias were created between 1978 and 1982 by local elites from Puerto Berrío and Puerto Boyacá. These paramilitares conducted a violent repression of left wing candidates within the southern cluster. During the late 1990’s, the paramilitares would launch military and dirty war offensives against the northern cluster (see Chapter 4 Section 3.1.1.2)

![Map 1-1 Left Wing Electoral Competitiveness, 1970:1984](source: Calculations by the author with data from Pachón & Sánchez (2010a))

Large land owners represented Magdalena Medio’s principal rural elites. The majority were members or supporters of either the Liberal or Conservative parties. Traditional political leaders in these municipios represented the interests of the large landowners. It was very common that the local notable was at the same time a hacendado – owner of a
large Hacienda- and held an elected or appointed office of the local state, like mayor, notary public, or member of the Municipal Council. This congruence of interests had granted to the traditional parties continued control of all but 6 of the region’s municipal councils from 1970 to 1984 (Pinzon 1989, chap. 1).

Local politicians formed the base of the nationwide clientelistic political system. Traditional politicians from the landed elites were very active in their condemnation of peace dialogues between the Executive and the guerrillas, agrarian reform initiatives, a political reform that opened electoral competition to left-wing movements, and amnesties favoring left-leaning political criminals. Rural entrepreneurs from Magdalena Medio and other regions published open letters and manifests in the national press, “warning” public opinion on the risks that peace-talks with the guerrillas presented to the political and economic models (350 Agricultores y Ganaderos Colombianos 1984, 4b; Comité de Agricultores de la Ciénaga Grande de Lorica 1984). They framed their message in an ideological anti-communist rhetoric, typical of the Cold War, were traditional bipartisanship was equated with democracy, and all but the tamest forms of social mobilization and left-wing sympathies equated with the communist threat emanating from Moscow or La Habana. The local traditional elites found in the Armed Forces a central state institution with relative autonomy that shared, through prevailing military doctrine, a very compatible ideological appreciation of the “communist threat” (Pizarro 2017, 67).

Members of the Fuerza Pública were deeply suspicious of the peace talk between the Executive and the guerrillas. During the Cold War, Colombia’s Military had adopted the main ideological elements of Brazil’s National Security Doctrine (DSN) (Leal Buitrago
2003). which in fact posited a bipolar concept of the Cold war struggle in Latin American countries identical to the one described by Pablo Guarín in the previous quote.

The DSN posited a bipolar concept of the Cold war struggle in Latin American countries identical to the one described by Pablo Guarín in the previous quote. In their view, the Cold War was a struggle between a “free world” -characterized by electoral democracies- that was facing a threat from totalitarian communists. The role of the government and the state in a “free” society was to authoritatively guide and protect its people against foreign as well as internal enemies. In this restricted view, Colombia’s traditional systems of two cross-class political parties consistently, the centennial liberal and conservative parties, offered enough political options for the country to qualify as a democracy of the “free world”. Alternative political options, especially those considered too sympathetic to the communist powers -the USSR, Cuba, China- were deemed as fifth columnist, members of an internal enemy which was to suppressed, regardless of legal guarantees, and in the name of National Security. (Borrero 1990; Leal Buitrago 2006). As a result, with the apparent blessing of the regular Military’s national and regional general officers, local Army battalions supported through action or omission, the conduction of a “dirty war” against left wing political organizations. (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010c; Silva Bello and Poveda Pineda 2013; Ronderos 2014). The collection of regional and local actions was known to the national military and political circles as the “Baile Rojo” -the “Red Dance”- (J. F. Isaza and Campos 2009; Gomez-Suarez 2011).

The paramilitary militias were born as instruments, subordinate structures answering to the alliances of political actors that had created them. But the militias’ commanders would eventually gain agency, transforming the coercive means put at their disposal into means
to attain their independence. According to Duncan, sooner or later, a warlord type of figure would manage to consolidate military control over the paramilitary organization, and employ its coercive means to wrest control over the economic and political means originally held by local elites and drug traffickers (Duncan 2007; Duncan 2015b).

1.2 The Armed Conflict and the State’s Security Policies

Despite its acute security and armed conflict conditions, Colombia lacked robust and comprehensive defense and security state policies from the dawn of the bipartisan National Front (1958-1974) to 1990. During that period, domestic reasons -the logics of the National Front’s pact- as well as global influence-the logics of the Cold War in Latin America- played a key role on how the state and its security forces reacted through increasingly militarized lenses not just to armed insurgencies and organized crime, but also to civilian expressions of political dissent, including social movements and protests. To understand the institutional and political effects that this securitized approach had in Magdalena Medio during the 1980’s is key to understand the evolution of the paramilitares as the right-wing militia created by the members of the paramilitary alliance.


From the onset of the National Front, civilian leadership deferred to the Military as an institution on matters of military, defense, and security policies. The move was initially functional as a source of political trust for two parallel transition: (1) from La Violencia’s partisan armed conflict, whose master narrative pitted the Liberal vs the Conservative parties, into a bipartisan pact that ensured bipartisan electoral and bureaucratic parities, and (2) from military administrations (1953-1957;1957-1958) to the civilian rule of an electoral democracy. Then president elect Alberto Lleras defined on May 9, 1958 the framework of
civil-military relations that defined not just the *Frente Nacional* period but civil military relations for the following three decades (Leal Buitrago 2006, chap. 2). First, the civilian leadership would not meddle in the internal affairs of the Military, and the Military would not arbitrate partisanship disputes. Second, the Armed Forces would ensure a special judicial charter, the *Fuero Militar*, separate from the civilian justice system (Lleras Camargo 1958). A third element, not mentioned explicitly in the discourse, was the inclusion of the police service into the sphere of the Military.

The cardinal rule of administrative independence was meant to isolate the Military institutions from bipartisan cleavages and tensions (Lleras Camargo 1958, paras. 23–30). It was meant to assure the leaderships of traditional parties that whichever of them was in power would not mobilize military and/or police forces to repress the other party. While it granted the Military a level of independence from the civilian leadership, it also served to subordinate the Armed Forces to the new regime. From 1958 to 1990 an acting general officer occupied the Ministry of Defense. All these ministers came from the Army’s ranks, making that cabinet position the *de facto* upper echelon of the Military and Police uniformed hierarchies (Leal Buitrago 2006, 57). An important corollary of this rule was a separation of functions were the Military, with their autonomy and through the Ministry, were charged by the civilian leadership with matters related to public policy of defense, security, and increasingly, public order.

Yet, the initial arrangements were reflective of the political conditions of the late 1950’s, which were to rapidly change in the coming decades. The *Frente Nacional* regime interpreted that the “legitimate” partisanship was restricted to Liberal-Conservative bipartisanship, excluding other partisan manifestations. Furthermore, political contention
was to be modulated through the parties (i.e. Labor Unions aligned with a Party) or through either state institutions (i.e. Juntas de Acción Comunal, sub municipal collegiate forums of coordination of public policy and political discussion), or multilateral institutions were the state was present and had an important leverage (i.e. tripartite Government-employers-workers initiatives, like the National Salary Council and National Work Council. See Velasco 2007, 65–66). Some modulating institutions were sponsored by the state but would eventually gain independence and set courses that clashed with the Government’s or bipartisan interests. The ANUC is perhaps the most relevant example for our case study, due to its role on a peasant collective effort to tackle the agrarian question, and its legacy of mobilization with Magdalena Medio’s colonos (Celis 2013; J. M. Pérez 2010).

Social mobilization and political contention outside the traditional bipartisanship grew as the country modernized, and as segments of the public found that the new regime, which based its reproduction in the establishment of clientelar networks, did not properly answer to their demands and expectations (García Villegas 2009, 33–34; Leal Buitrago and Dávila 2010, chap. 1). As a result, alternative political expressions and social mobilizations were regularly seen as suspect by the Regime, especially when they expressed revisionist, redistributive, or left leaning claims. Social protests and mobilizations were interpreted as security challenges affecting public order rather than as legitimate political expressions, and thus, falling within the responsibility deferred by the civilian leadership to the Military (Leal Buitrago 2006, chap. 2; Perdomo 2012). In the absence of clear guidelines from the Civilian leadership, military and police institutions approached those challenges from their own perspectives and interests. The pattern was present at the national, departmental, and municipal levels of the state.
During the Cold War, most of Latin American Armed Forces’ doctrines were strongly influenced by the National Security approaches of the US and South American militaries, imbued of a strong anti-communism. The US version stressed that, within the framework of a bipolar competition between the Soviet Union and the United states, Latin American national interests were aligned with those of the later to ensure hemispheric security. Latin American militaries accepted in broad terms that principle and accepted a corollary: In a division of labor, the US would take care of the external threats (the soviets and their Cuban or Nicaraguan “proxies”) while Latin American militaries would face “inwards”, guarding against the “internal enemies”, real or alleged domestic communists. South American developments of the National Security approach led to what is known as the “National Security Doctrine”, first devised by the Brazilian Armed Forces Think Tanks (Leal Buitrago 2006, chap. 1; Vega Cantor 2015).

Albeit the levels of application of the Doctrine varied across the region’s countries, certain common elements can be identified. The first one is a justification for the occupation of the state by the Military, even if Colombia was spared from that fate. A second one was the identification of left wing and revisionist expressions as inherently tied to armed communist insurrections, and thus as source of instability endangering national security, understood narrowly as the security of the state.

The Colombian Military and Police did take this interpretation to heart, guided by the by the provisions of the Military Justice Code, the Legislative Decree 250 of June 11th, 1958 from the Military Junta. The Military Justice Code allowed for the prosecution of civilians in verbal military courts during times of peace for political crimes, and during times of war or emergency, with the authorization of the Executive branch, of any infractions to the civil
or criminal code that the Government saw fit (Article 589). This code was enacted less than a month before the inauguration of the first administration from the *Frente Nacional*. This and other “emergency” decrees related to public order enacted during the dictatorship, including those criminalizing the membership on communist organizations (Decree 434 of March 1st, 1956), were incorporated “in bulk” into the normal and nominally democratic jurisprudence by Law 2, 1958 and ratified by Law 141, 1961 (Perdomo 2012, 93). While over time the legislative and judicial process would smooth some of the most draconian measures, the persistent recourse by successive Executives of the “State of Exception” would reinforce a militarized approach to political dissent and social protest, in tune with the ideological interpretations of the National Security Doctrine.

Furthermore, the institutional activities of the Police and the Military were confounded. The subnational police forces, which had played a key role as partisan enforcers during *La Violencia*, had been nationalized in 1953 by the military administration of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, and to all institutional effects, rebooted into a new institution, the *Policía Nacional* (National Police). This police institution was modelled as an amalgamation of a military gendarmerie and a civilian police force, answering to the Minister of Defense as a corps, and nominally taking mayors and governors as their local and regional chiefs (Velásquez 2006; Deluchey 2005). Yet, in practice, the National Police struggled to shred the military tutelage and doctrines, often erring toward military concepts of national defense rather than civilian concepts of public safety during the second half of the 20th Century (Velásquez 2006).

The disjoint between the Military and the other parts of the civil administration hindered the capacity of the central state to offer comprehensive developmental and inclusive
answers to the emerging social, political, and economic challenges (Leal Buitrago 2006; Arnson and Kirk 1993; Duncan 2015a; López 2016; Albertus and Kaplan 2012). There is no doubt that during the second half of the 20th century a multitude of rebel guerrillas, ideologies, and scopes dotted the Colombian map. There is also little doubt that many civil left-wing movements were linked, ideologically and operatively, to certain guerrillas. The doctrinarian reading of such links by the Armed Forces led to and the indiscriminate application of repressive answers to political contention expressions. Nonetheless, the results were often detrimental to the interests of security. The repression enforced by a state that was very weak in its peripheries resulted in an incentive for many to join rebel insurgencies which, operating in agrarian frontiers, were outside the reach the State’s carrots and sticks. A number of anecdotal and biographical narratives stress how repression led to radicalization and/or cornering of members of civil dissident groups, providing incentives for them to join guerrillas acting in peripheral areas, especially during the 1960’s and 1970’s (Villamizar 2002; See, among others, Arenas 2009; Molano 2016). Multimethod analysis of the relationship between the spatial and institutional reach of the state and Armed groups as a determinant for recruitment into armed organizations can be found in Arjona & Kalyvas (2011), and Arjona (2016, chap. 8). Repressive action by the Armed Forces would be compounded by a “criminalization” of protest and dissent expressions to erode the legitimacy of a state that, nominally, presented itself as a firm civil democracy (Leal Buitrago 2006; Perdomo 2012; Botero, Hoskin, and Pachón 2010).
1.2.2 Public Order, Peace Processes, Drug Trafficking and Democratic Opening

During the 1980s, all the administrations tried to establish channels of communication with guerrilla organizations, looking for opportunities to find negotiated solutions to their rebellions. Paradoxically, the first President to establish a “Peace Commission” to dialogue with the rebels in 1981 was Julio C. Turbay (1978-1982), whose administration had treated with heavy hand political dissent and under whom the Military had reached the largest autonomy in handling public order. Nonetheless, it was under his successors, Belisario Betancur (1982-1986), Virgilio Barco (1986-1990), and Cesar Gaviria (1990-1994) that some -albeit not all- of the peace initiatives would come to fruition, leading to the demobilization of several guerrilla groups between 1990 and 1992.

According to Francisco Leal Buitrago, the peace initiatives that began under president Betancur were the most serious civil and political alternative to the militarized approach that had prevailed in the state’s handling of security and public order affairs since 1958 (Leal Buitrago 2006, 83). The higher echelons of the Military did not feel at ease with this shift in policy, and to different degrees at distinct levels, resisted it. In words of Leal,

*The military autonomy had seen its climax during President Turbay’s administration, and the contrast with the new administration’s vision of government was very strong. The Peace Policy was a clear intent to limit the martial autonomy on matters of public order.* (Leal Buitrago 2006, 83 Original in Spanish)

Two novel measures taken by the Betancur’s administration as a support to the peace dialogues with the guerrillas were particularly controversial to the military: amnesties to political and public order crimes in the one hand, and the opening to electoral participation to members of the negotiating guerrillas into new political parties in the other. These
implicitly questioned military authority over public order on two accounts. First, because the amnesty would apply mostly to civilian sentenced by martial courts, under the provisions of the 1958 Military Justice Code’s article 589 and norms promulgated by the Executive during “States of Exception”. Second, because it would allow the open participation of left wing sympathizers into political parties, and because it would create personal links between the dialoguing but not yet disarmed guerrillas and legitimate political parties. The public debate over the legitimacy of these procedures had juridical, and military-administrative, and political dimensions. The juridical debate was centered over the guarantees that such military courts offered to the defendants, and by the justification of “exceptional” measures in a country where the executive decreed the “State of Exception” for more than 3 quarters of the 1970 and 1980’s decades. The military-administrative problem was the fact that many of the convicts were members of the guerrilla which had been sentenced only of political crimes, and in the absence of criminal or civil charges, the Military feared that they would return to the ranks of the rebel organizations. The political debate was centered on the legitimacy of rebellion and/or dissenting political ideologies within a formally liberal-democracy. Naturally, these initiatives were not just controversial with the military, but also with many sectors of the country that feared the left-wing guerrillas and/or the left-wing revisionist movements, ideologies, and parties (Téllez and Sánchez 2003, 152; Leal Buitrago 2006, 96; Comité de Agricultores de la Ciénaga Grande de Lorica 1984; 350 Agricultores y Ganaderos Colombianos 1984).

Institutional subordination of the Armed Forces to the civilian leadership was a complex matter, as it had attitude and center-periphery nuances. As the peace dialogues led to peace
negotiations, the civilian leadership successfully imposed its authority over the military at the national level. For instance, presidents from Betancur to Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) have forced or obtained the resignation from discontent general and admiral officers at the Ministry and Force command levels when needed (Téllez and Sánchez 2003, chaps. 8–12). Nonetheless the feeling of suspicion toward the guerrillas, the peace policies, and the intervention of the civilian leadership in matters the Military had grown accustomed to treat as of their exclusive competence permeated the Forces. The weight of their relative autonomy and the National Security Doctrine had an entrenched cultural impact which was compounded by the political reticence and material challenges of civil institutions to supervise the action of Armed Forces units distributed along the country’s geography during a period of war. Commanders and units deployed in isolated posts or towns could, with relative impunity, disregard national policies or orders. Furthermore, their vulnerability to corruption—a characteristic shared by all public institutions in Colombia—only increased with their isolation (Shah 2006).

There is a good level of academic and journalistic consensus that the Army (or at least members of the Army) did in fact, resist the peace policies of President Betancur through the actions of through small units that broke presidential sanctioned truces and cease fire orders. (Leal Buitrago 2006, 84; Santos Calderón 1985; Duzán 2015). In sum, the compliance and full commitment of the deployed Armed Forces personnel to the peace and security policies of the Central Executive was not necessarily guaranteed. In fact, local and regional elites were often able to court and persuade commanders of medium and small military units to act in ways not necessarily condoned or aligned with the President’s master narratives or master policies. Perhaps the most tragic and controversial example is
precisely the role that the Armed Forces played in the evolution of “self-defense” and paramilitary forces.

In so far as the National Security Doctrine interpreted both the armed actions of the guerrilla and the contentious politics of the revisionist actors as part of a unified strategy by “left wing militants” (i.e., a dogmatic pursuit of Lenin’s maxim of “a combination of all forms of struggle”), the Military and the political right found a political justification for their support to the illegal activities of the paramilitary (Leal Buitrago 2006; Gomez-Suarez 2011). To a certain extent, guerrillas like the Farc and/or members of unarmed left-wing movements did in fact understand their revolutionary and political activities in this light (Pizarro 1991; Phelan 2017). Yet, many revisionist or left-wing grass roots organizations, political movements and civil leaders made earnest efforts to carry their effort within civility, rejecting armed struggles. Regardless, the heavy hand of state repression and paramilitary violence stroke those opposing the feudal-like rural status quo with little regard for their allegiance to civil methods. Among many, three representative examples were the ANUC (J. M. Pérez 2010), peasant and miner movement in Magdalena Medio (Celis 2013; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a) and political movements like the communist Moir, who was targeted not just by the Armed Forces and the paramilitary, but also by the Farc guerrillas (Tribuna Roja 1986; Tribuna Roja 1983b).

As Francisco Gutierrez shows, one important characteristic of different paramilitary organizations in Colombia from the 1980’s to the 2000’s is how despite their differences in geography, time period, and social composition, they all concentrated their violence against peasant and colonos, and their presence is correlated with an increase in peasant displacement and land concentration (F. Gutiérrez 2014a).
It is very telling that those institutions in charge of framing the security policies of the state did not consider the fight against peasant displacement as policy priority, nor as a mayor threat to national interests. The human and economic costs of this crime became on the heaviest legacies of Colombia’s Armed Conflict (Ibáñez 2008). The paramilitares were by no means the only responsible. In fact the guerrillas have been the largest displacers since 1985 (Rettberg 2015, 123). But the paramilitares became masterfully efficient in employing displacement for military, economic and political means (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2015).

1.3 The Intertwined Histories of the Land Conflicts, Agrarian Frontier Colonization, Peasant and Social Movements, and Magdalena Medio

The case study of Magdalena Medio⁴ is strongly determined by the historical and structural forces of the Colombian land struggles (Palacios 2011; Legrand 2016; F. González 2009; Fals Borda 1975) Unlike other Latin American countries, the Colombia state never carried out a comprehensive agrarian reform. (de Janvry 1983; Palacios and Safford 2002). During the 20th century, the public redistributive and/or inclusive policies towards peasants and colonos meant to redress a strong inequality have not enjoyed sustained political support. Invariably, their goals depended on the vagaries of each presidential administration foci, and their fate was attached to the logic of political clientelism (Leal Buitrago and Dávila 2010). not to mention outright cronyism (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010b).

The literature on the relationship between development, politics, social movements, and land issues in Colombia is extensive (Palacios and Safford 2002; Palacios 2011; Legrand

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⁴ Nonetheless, the social history of the Magdalena River’s basin predates the colonial era. On this regard see, among others, (Reichel-Dolmatoff and Dussán 1944; Cecilia Hernández 1992; Cifientes 1993)
and Molano 1994; Legrand 2016; Holmes, Amin, and Curtin 2008; Bagley 1989; Reyes 2016; Celis 2013; F. González, Bolívar, and Vásquez 2003; Oquist 1976; Fals Borda 1975). While assessing its nuances is beyond the scope of this project, four of its recurrent themes are essential to define the history of Magdalena Medio: The historically open agrarian frontier and its sustained colonization by landless peasants –the colonos; the perennial conflicts between colonos and large land owners, where social movements, political parties, and the state intervene; the structural weakness of Colombia’s central state; the contradictions between national laws and institutions, and the biases and interests of local state agents.

1.3.1 The Land and the State

In the absence of comprehensive agrarian policies, scores of landless Colombian peasants have historically sought the agrarian frontier, progressively colonizing it in waves of various degrees of coordination. This trend that characterized the 19th and 20th centuries still holds true today (Legrand 2016; Villaveces and Sánchez 2015). With few exceptions, these agrarian frontiers are synonym with peripheries. Historically, colonos migrated away from the Andean valleys and Caribbean enclaves with higher demographic and state presence densities towards agrarian frontiers, seeking to claim “empty lands” –baldios—that, in principle, are the property of the state.

Legislation over land rights to a colonized baldio has changed throughout time, but generally, if the colono/a is able to demonstrate his/her presence, work, and “improvements” to a plot of land that was previously a baldio, he/she could apply for an ownership title.

The colonos’ quest to earn ownership of the land, and the political and administrative conflicts in drafting the laws and enforcing them in the terrain constitute two of the most
determinant dichotomies in Colombia’s socio-political history (Legrand 2016; Palacios 2011; Uribe Muñoz 2016; Pécaut 2015). The comparative historical weakness of the Colombian state is well documented (Soifer 2015). Yet, during the 19 and early 20th centuries, the limited State capabilities were nonetheless concentrated in urban centers and a few well integrated rural regions within the Andean range. These “privileged” rural areas were those more densely settled during colonial times, and by the end of the 20th century these regions were comparatively better served by transport infrastructure connecting them to urban and export markets. They also enjoyed a less unequal land distribution (Palacios and Safford 2002, 320). By contrast, the agrarian frontiers were areas were the state’s projection was very low.

The historical weakness of the Colombian state to penetrate society and territory has one of its nadirs in its perennially ignorance on land property. Due in part to a confusing and overlapping normativity made of a patchwork of laws and decrees, and in part to a lack of updated cadastral records, state authorities are unable to answer authoritatively to the following questions: Who owns what plots of lands? What are the boundaries of a property? What constitutes a legal proof of ownership? Where are the administrative records for ownership and tradition stored? Which of the multiple and often contradictory laws have precedence over the others (Fajardo 2002; F. Gutiérrez 2016)?

These problems were inherited from Colonial administration, but saw limited improvement during the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries (Legrand 2016; Palacios 2011). By the turn off the 21st century some of these questions have been solved to larger degrees than others. By 1980 property titles registered in notaries were the most common ownership document, and land surveys had reduced to some degree the incertitude about most –but
not all, and not everywhere- of properties. Yet, the public registry of real state falls within the realm of the local state, in municipal Notarías. Political resistance from local and regional elites have successfully restrained the capacity and the initiatives of the central state to establish systematic access to that information and create robust centralized or at least compatible databases and statistical records of real state ownership and land value.

During the period of study, the central state lacked a centralized database of ownership titles of private lands or real state. The systematic collection of cadastral records started in the second half of the 20th century, and in 1983, Law 14 provided the basis of the current model. The responsibilities of the cadastral process are divided between different institutions across the national, regional, and local levels of the state (Ramos 2003; Pinzón Bermúdez and Fonti Garolera 2007).

Municipal executives are tasked with keeping up to date information on properties and land value. In practice, mayors tend to enforce this provision as a discretionary prerogative contingent to their immediate interests and electoral calculations. According to the IGAC’s director, by 2011 as much as 43% of the cadastral records were outdated, and the quinquennial ideal update rate was difficult to meet because during electoral years, few municipal mayors cross the interests of those who might end up with higher real state taxes (El Tiempo 2011).

Aggregate statistics are the responsibility of 5 different agencies. The three largest cities and capitals, Bogotá (Cundinamarca/DC), Medellín (Antioquia), and Cali (Valle del Cauca) have their own cadastral records for their cities and select neighboring towns. The Antioquia governorship has its own departmental institutions responsible for the municipios not covered by Medellín’s records. For the rest of the country, the IGAC is
responsible, yet it does not have tools to enforce municipal compliance, and thus relies on the political goodwill of local administrations. Furthermore, the capture methods and resulting databases are not fully compatible among these five agencies (Pinzón Bermúdez and Fonti Garolera 2007). Magdalena Medio’s records are divided between the IGAC and the Antioquia’s governorship office.

Despite its shortcomings, the consolidation levels of cadastral information have fared much better than the levels of information on land ownership. While both dimensions are related, during the last quarter of the 20th century Colombia lacked a robust method to infer rates of land concentration from ownership information.

These limitations had roots in political choices and public policy design, rather than in unsurmountable technical challenges. There is a stark contrast between the very detailed statistical information that the central state was able to collect at municipal and monthly granularities (which include vital, economic, criminal, and administrative indexes, to name a few), and its incapacity to measure land’s ownership and value. A look at a random sample of the DANE’s monthly bulletins (“Boletín Estadístico”) between 1980 and 2003 will yield a range set of time-series of agricultural product’s market prices. The logs are detailed to the degree of including –among others- several varieties of beans and types of cattle in dozens of regional markets, three of them within Magdalena Medio (La Dorada (Caldas), Puerto Berrío (Antioquia), and Barrancabermeja (Santander). Yearly aggregates at the municipal and regional levels for cases of cattle rustling, killings, kidnappings and a wide range of other crimes were available during the period of study on Criminalidad, the judicial police yearbook. Yet, the Colombian central state did not collect in an equivalent systematic way the land ownership and land value information that was stored in local
Notarías, or across 5 regional or national agencies. It was possible to compare the price of beans grown on either side of the Magdalena, or the incidences of cattle rustling between municipios, but there were no systematic sources indexing the value of the land nor the dimensions of the farms and/or haciendas were those beans grew and those calves pastured. The fundamental document of real state ownership is the “property title”, and the history of property transaction is called the “certificate of property and tradition”. Copies of both records are stored in local Notarías. Under provisions of the complex land legislation, property over a plot of land can be claimed even if a “property title” does not exist, has not yet been created, or is challenged in court. For instance, a colono of recently colonized baldío might legitimately claim property over it, even in the absence of the document. Yet, the institutional and commercial framework favors the property title as the document of choice, central to financial and commercial transactions, and also central to the peasant’s collective action (Palacios 2011; Legrand 2016; Celis 2013; J. M. Pérez 2010). Thus, municipal Notarías held in their public archives the key primary source holding the data on land ownership needed to establish a national index.

Table 1-1 Statistical Compendiums on Land Use and Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Year of Publication</th>
<th>Groups of Common Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Agrarian Samples</td>
<td>1954, 1955, 1956</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Agrarian Census</td>
<td>1960, 1970</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEGA Study</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nacional Poll of Rural Households</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellbeing and Efficiency Polls</td>
<td>1997, 1999</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlas of Rural Property</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The author, with data from (IGAC 2012, chap. 1)
Information on land use comes essentially from agrarian census. Land use is independent of land property, and it is common to find peasants or rural entrepreneurs working lands that they would not formally own or lease. Table 1-1 describes the different attempts, and their diverging methodologies, sponsored or co-sponsored by the central state during the 20th Century.

The first attempts at land census were carried in the 1950’s, but had limited scope, and were appropriately called “samples”. Two comprehensive agricultural censuses were published in 1960 and 1970. A study co-commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture was able to compare data from those two sources and samples captured in 1983 by the CEGA Think Tank (Llorente, Salazar, and Gallo 1985). Yet, methodologies and definitions changed again in the “Agricultural Polls” of 1989 and the 1990’s. In 2012, a collaborative effort between the IGAC, the Antioquia Governorship, and the Universidad de los Andes published the first comprehensive study of land ownership and use of the 21st century, with time series from 2000 to 2010 (IGAC 2012). Their authors highlighted the incompatibility of the information captured among the previously mentioned instruments, and questioned whether it was a consequence of lack of capacity or lack of political will:

“[even where and when security conditions did not hinder data collection] the clear lack of Government initiative regarding such data, which was made patent in the decision not to undertake agrarian censuses, begs the question of whether the choice of not carrying them out could have been a political choice”. (Berry 2002 as quoted in IGAC, 2012, p. 46. Original in Spanish.)

The access to systematically and consistently captured information on land ownership and land use would, in theory, have helped inform the formulation of several public policies, including real state taxation through cadastral updates, which in Colombia are prerogatives of the local governments. They could have also informed a myriad of development policies
of the regional and national administrations (López 2016, chap. 4), or at least to be dutifully collected as statistical input along a wide range of other local transactions that found their way into the logs of the DANE, DNP, or the Ministries. But for political rather than technical issues, at the start of the 21st century, the central state had not constructed such key indicators.

An important concussion of IGAC’s extensive meta-analysis of the research from 1950 to 1999 is that, despite their fragmented methods and reach, most point to a steep pattern of land concentration in the agrarian frontiers colonized during the second half of the 20th century (IGAC 2012, 58–62).

1.3.2 Investment in Communication Infrastructure and the Political Relationship Between National and Local Elites

In their analysis of public works on transport in the last quarter of the 20th Century, González (2014), Otero (2009), and McDougall (2009) present models with three rationales explaining the central state’s selection of projects. The first reason answers to a desire to connect regional capitals between them, and certain agrarian regions in low lands to the Andean capitals. The construction of major inter capitol highways reflects this trend. A second reason is bases on patron-client exchange where local and regional electoral barons get a say, often the determinant one, into the allocation of resources from the Central budget to fund select projects and road trajectories. The electoral barons’ level of influence was most certainly equivalent to the size and location of their electorate, but even municipal barons were rewarded with allocations for sub municipal roads (“caminos veredales”). Finally, road penetration was also instrumental to the security and counterinsurgency policies of the central state. This logic led to the expansion and improvements of secondary
and tertiary roads in peripheral regions. All three rationales fit into the central themes from literature on Colombian economic development (Palacios and Safford 2002), clientelar political system (Leal Buitrago and Dávila 2010), and intersections between the armed conflict and electoral politics (Leal Buitrago 2006; Duncan 2015b).

Figure 1-4 Comparison of Road Paving 1982-2002

According to Fainbom and Rodríguez (2000, 6–8), between 1978 and 1995, combined public and private investments in road infrastructure averaged 1% of the GDP with modest annual variations. Certain regions saw much more investment in transport infrastructure than others. This was not only the result of the patron-client nature of the political system, which favored certain networks of electoral barons over others, but also a reflection of the primacy of connecting the largest domestic markets (the Andean and Caribbean Capitals) to sea ports and certain areas of expanding agricultural production (Alvéar 2007; Fainboim and Rodríguez 2000). As a result, certain peripheral and semi peripheral regions saw above
average improvements in the density and quality of the transport infrastructure that irrigated them. Magdalena Medio, located in a valley across several of the most important capitals of the Andean highlands (Bogotá, Medellín, Bucaramanga, Manizalez, Ibagué) and whose basin and river offer a geographical path from the Andean core into the Caribbean ports, was among them. As Figure 1-4 illustrates, if the total length of paved roads according to IGAC (1982) is taken as a baseline, Magdalena Medio saw a more pronounced relative increase in road improvement than the municipalities of central Colombia between 1982 and 2002. It compares Magdalena Medio region with all other municipios from Departments with shores on the Middle Magdalena basin –“Central Colombia”-, which are in fact 7 of the 10 most economically dynamic Colombian departments (Camacho 2015). While the central region doubled the total length of paved roads, Magdalena Medio’s score grew fivefold, thanks to steep increases between 1982 and 1986 -related to the construction of the Bogotá – Medellín highway-, and again between 1992 and 1996/1998 -related to the construction of the “Troncal del Magdalena Medio”, communicating the eastern and southern Andean regions with Santa Marta and the Caribbean Highway in the Atlantic basin.
Figure 1-5 depicts quartile distribution of road travel times from municipios of Central Colombia to their respective department capitals. Reductions in travel time reflect improvements in quality of existing roads surface (i.e. from dirt to paved, from secondary road to highway) and the expansion of the network, especially in secondary and tertiary roads that connected municipalities with the main highways. While the tendency is both samples is towards reduction in travel time, the improvements for Magdalena Medio region are comparatively more pronounced in the median, and upper quartile measures. By 1996, the median, upper quartiles, and outlier values from both samples are of similar values, indicating that Magdalena Medio was transitioning from a clear periphery to a much more integrated area, at least in the transport network dimension.

1.4 A Tragic Convergence

The Magdalena Medio suffered record levels of political violence during the 1980’s, even for Colombian standards. According to Fernán González (2014, pt. 452), it was no coincidence that during the last two decades of the 20th century, three distinct political process converged in the region: (1) a structural and unequal transit from a condition of
agrarian frontier periphery into a more connected state, or semi-periphery; (2) the strategical decision of several guerrilla groups to move from their strongholds in peripheral of recent areas of recent colonization towards areas into more connected (or less disconnected?) areas, most of them semi-peripheries, one of which was Magdalena Medio;\(^5\) (3) the pluralization of local and regional political actors driven by the mobilization of peasant movements and the appearance of revisionist political parties fostered by the national democratic opening. While the second and third elements have been widely studied and documented by quantitative and qualitative works (C. Medina 1990; Reyes 1991; C. Medina and Téllez 1994; Bergquist, Peñaranda, and Sánchez 2001; M. Romero 2003; F. Gutiérrez and Baron 2005; M. Romero 2007; A. H. M. L. Gutiérrez 2008; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010a; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010c; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013a; Duzán 2015; Reyes 2016), the first item has enjoyed only a mostly qualitative and treatment by academics. Nonetheless, even within their differences, all the works cited in this paragraph agree on one thing: a combination of items 1 to 3 were the reason that explains the rise of the paramilitary groups in Magdalena Medio, a process that led to the record levels of political violence endured by the region (see Figure 3-1).

In fact, the notion of a “peripheral” Magdalena Medio is often treated as a discrete condition of the “core-periphery” binary, with little regard to the nuances that lay in between those two poles (Dávila 2010; Celis 2013; van Isschot 2015; Gill 2016). I argue

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\(^5\) The Farc played a key role in the Magdalena Medio during the 1980s. While the ELN retreated from most the region to concentrate on its efforts on the eastern side of the Cordillera Oriental, the Farc advanced systematically into the Magdalena basin (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010c, 195).
that we could move forward in our understanding of the relationship between politics and violence by untangling this binomial assumption, and by trying to establish a more gradual measure of the transit between peripheral and core conditions over time.

The main hypothesis is that the key condition that attracted the three processes at the same time was the “maturing” of the region from an open agrarian frontier of recent colonization into an increasingly better incorporated region. This process was characterized by dramatic increases of transportation infrastructure, a steady economic development where large haciendas were incorporating smaller plots of colono’s lands, and blossoming local networks of economic and political natures that were linking the region to larger regional and national structures, like central markets, trade organizations, and political parties (F. González 2014; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a; Leal Buitrago and Dávila 2010).

This project rests upon the assumption that the regional transition from a more peripheral condition into a more connected -or less peripheral- condition is key to understand not just the “objective” causal mechanisms but also de “constructed” political discourses on the region’s political violence. To be certain, Magdalena Medio was one open agrarian frontier for most of the 20th century, and it was certainly very isolated from Colombia’s more dynamic poles in the Caribbean coast and the Andean highlands by the late 1970’s (Henao Holguín 2015; van Isschot 2015; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a). But during the last two decades of the 20th century, Magdalena Medio was favored with great investments in public works, transport and public services infrastructure, in what Otero and Gonzalez identify as a clear cut state building effort (Otero 2009; F. González 2014). As Figure 1-4 illustrates, in just the area of road infrastructure, measured as the average length of paved highways at the municipal, Magdalena Medio went from a liminal in the early 1980’s to
an above average connectivity by the early 1990’s. The periphery was subject to a persistent effort to penetrate it geographically by the central state, which in turn reduced the costs for the social penetration and favored the linking of the local society with the departmental and national centralized entities. In the terms of the social sources of power theory, this is clearly an indicator of a growth in the political power of the state (Mann 1984; Soifer 2008; F. González 2014).

This “maturing” was by no means a homogeneous process along the region, as the southern tip of Magdalena Medio was in general much more integrated locally and regionally than the north, and also reflected the unequal weight of certain municipalities, like Barrancabermeja or La Dorada which were the second largest cities of their respective Departments (Santander and Caldas), to more peripheral towns (i.e. Puerto Boyacá, Boyacá, or San Pablo, Bolívar) which were demographically important at a regional level but electorally marginal, and economically isolated from their departmental markets -not to mention their capitals-.

The watershed transport changes caused by the culmination in 1983 of the east -west Bogotá - Medellín highway determined which municipios were rapidly integrated, and which municipios had to wait longer (see Map 1-1) The inauguration a decade later (1994-1997) of the Troncal del Paramilitares– the south-north highway linking Honda (Tolima) to Santa Marta (Magdalena) - had a similar effect, quickly improving the connectivity of those towns that happened to be on the same shore (east or west) of the Magdalena river that the highway happened to occupy in different stretches. If the most difficult engineering challenges of the Andean roads were the mountain passes, the keys to “tame” geography and foster further connectivity were the bridges linking the east and west shores along the
Rio Grande de La Magdalena (Marulanda 2014; J. J. Hoyos 1979a; J. J. Hoyos 1979b).

The inauguration of these works had an “objective” dimension because the bridge was the necessary final link completing the chain. They also had a strong symbolic value, stressed by public celebration and ribbon cutting ceremonies.

What can be considered as the initial plans for the east-west highway corridors linking Medellín to Bogotá were drawn during the military regime of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957) (Intermedio 1956, 7). They were designed to improve upon the Manizales – Honda – Bogotá road (finished in 1952), and the railroad bridges in Puerto Berrío (N. Restrepo 2009). From that moment onwards, the Colombian presidents attended all the inauguration of bridges across the Magdalena River and its main regional tributaries. They systematically created a political mise-en-scène about it, whose discourses the press readily echoed, stressing how the state would finally “arrive” the region (El Tiempo 1959; El Tiempo 1961a; El Tiempo 1961b; El Tiempo 1982a; El Tiempo 1982b; El Tiempo 1997).

The press continually stressed the inauguration of a bridge as the true mark of progress in road connectivity, even when certain stretches of the “highways” were still waiting “to receive their first layer of pavement” (J. J. Hoyos 1982). In terms of transport infrastructure, it is clear that between 1978 to 1998 Magdalena Medio was a favored periphery, benefitting from a comparatively large amount of road construction projects financed by the National Executives (Otero 2009; F. González 2014, sec. 6712). According to Gonzalez, while President Turbay (1978-1982) let local and regional electoral barons take most of the credit for the road investment for themselves, the following administrations of Betancur (1982-1986), Barco (1986-1990), Gaviria (1990-1994) and Samper (1994-1998) had a more contentious relation with local elites. While these last Presidents did not refrain from
patron-client methods of resource allocation, they did much more to claim for themselves, at least in public discourses, the political credit of such investments. (F. González 2014, chaps. 7–8)

The qualitative and quantitative changes brought about by the new infrastructure were not lost to local and regional elites, whether illegal or legal. The importance of the drug trafficker’s investment in lands in Magdalena Medio has been widely covered in the literature: In a region already under the strain of the contradiction between colonos and large landowners over the cleared land’s property rights, the drug traffickers inserted themselves as an emergent propertied class endowed with abundant capital and easy access to private coercion (Salazar 2012; C. Moreno and Zamora 2012; Barón 2011; Reyes 2016).

It also had a great economic incentive in investing/laundering their illegal money in an area that would qualitatively transform itself from peripheral to strategically connected once the east-west and south-north highways would be inaugurated. Gustavo Salazar’s history of Pablo Escobar, the infamous leader of the “Cartel de Medellín”, recalls how the drug lord found in Puerto Triunfo, Antioquia, the municipio were the bridge over the Magdalena river would stand, the lands he was seeking to invest in:

“[Escobar] had seen properties in different regions of the Department without finding what he was looking for, until one broker took him to Puerto Triunfo. “These are beautiful, recently cleared lands, just nearby the highway that soon will cross the region, leaving them at just a three-hour drive from Medellín, and a five or so hour drive from Bogotá”, said the broker to sell him the idea […]

[…] [Escobar and his close associates] bought lands at three and four times their commercial value, and Pablo built right there his Hacienda “Napoles”, the one that would become the center of his kingdom. (Salazar 2012, 56–57)

Opinion articles from local newspapers stressed the qualitative difference that the infrastructure investment had generated. In 1987, an editorial from El Remanso in La
Dorada, Caldas, signaled that it was in the best interest of the southern towns to brand the region not as Magdalena Medio – a name associated with poverty, violence, and decay-, but as the “Magdalena Central”, as a way to profit from the wave of good publicity and motor traffic that the Bogotá-Medellín highway had brought. The editorial read:

“The monumental transformation started the very evening of the Bogotá-Medellín road was opened to transit. Its route differentiated the southern part, served by the road, from the norther areas, that despite important investments in secondary roads, electricity, health and education, is still offering a precarious quality of life to its inhabitants. The Magdalena Central [from] Honda, Tolima, to Puerto Triunfo, Antioquia – the highways influence zone-, has shown in a very short span an unprecedented robustness expressed chiefly in growing investments in the cattle, produce, industrial, commercial, and mining sectors [...] The petition to baptize our region as Magdalena Central is just a way to recognize the different governments that managed to lead these palpable changes and the desire to forget a bad name that invokes a bad era.” (Cadavid 1987)

The fiscal health of the region’s municipal budgets reflected the overall north-south divide. When the rolling averages of the central state’s transfers to municipal budget -known in Colombia as the Situado Fiscal or Transferencias-, it is clear that as a whole, the average public budget in Magdalena Medio depended heavily on those transfers. tells us the story of how the region’s dependence (red line) is constantly above the national average for peripheral municipios (black line). Yet, the southern Magdalena Medio towns enjoy, from 1984 onwards, a consistently lower dependence from central resources (yellow line). This is especially true during two distinct periods, 1984-1989 and 1995 to 1999.
In sum, Magdalena Medio, and specially its southern tip, was progressively connecting to the national networks. It was moving from a periphery into an intermediate position, of improved but not yet optimal integration. This condition activated the first political process and perhaps the most structural among the three: the consolidation of local clientelistic networks with the goal and capacity to mediate between the local bases and the national and regional state through the traditional Liberal and Conservative political parties, or as Leal and Davila (2010, 41) posit, through a political system which was essentially based on patron client relations. Furthermore, the clientelist system was acting in a region characterized by the contradictory relations between colonos and hacendados. This was a moment were wealthier rural elites were excessing pressure over peasants from previous waves of colonization, expecting to grow their haciendas by concentrating the lands that had been cleared and worked by the colonos. Both the hacendados and the colonos recurred to a mixture of legal, dubious, and clearly illegal to advance their interests or defend their position. Nonetheless, as several studies illustrate (C. Medina 1990; Comisión Andina de...
Juristas 1993; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a; Celis 2013), this was yet another iteration of the asymmetric power relation between peasant *colonos* and large landowners that has historically characterized Colombia’s political systems in the peripheries, as well as the economic dynamics in the agrarian frontiers (Bagley 1989; Legrand and Molano 1994; Palacios 2011; Legrand 2016).
Security has been the most prevalent political justification for the Colombian paramilitares. They referred to themselves as self-defense forces in reference to the defense of rural entrepreneurs against the predation of Marxist guerrillas (Guarín 1986; R. Isaza 2005; Castaño as quoted in Aranguren and Castaño 2005, 63; Duque Gaviria 2006). However, the paramilitares’ behavior was frequently offensive rather than defensive. Their armed activity targeted non-combatants, unarmed civilians, and legitimate political opponents. In fact, the terrorizing of peasant and colono communities in the agrarian frontier was not just a means to “deny” a social base to the guerrillas—it was also an instrument of forced displacement that was economically capitalized on by prominent landowners who were able to accumulate even more land. This concentration of lands was in fact a counter-agrarian reform. (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010b; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013a; F. Gutiérrez 2014b; Reyes 2016).

These acts of violence had a social cost in deaths, terror, and forceful internal displacement that geographically transcended the peripheries where the conflict was fought in Colombia. Eventually, the national public and mainstream media covered the consequences and the residual costs of the paramilitares’ violent activities. While the paramilitares were initially cast as the legitimate answer for the victims in terms of guerrilla oppression and the state’s
absence, they were now regarded as responsible for the victimization of scores of massacred or forcefully displaced peasants.

The following case studies will explore how the political justifications for the paramilitares and their violent activities were cast in different scenarios. The objective is to deconstruct the way in which the relationship between the state’s presence and absence was employed to justify the activities of a private, right-wing militia that resulted in criminal acts.

2.1 The Contradictory Narrative on the Absence of the State

The leaders of the paramilitary alliance as well as the militias’ commanders emphasized that their organization was a natural answer for the local, abandoned community of resourceful entrepreneurs who faced the reality of earning a living in regions nearly devoid of the state’s presence, subject to the predation of Marxist guerrillas, yet simultaneously overtaxed by a greedy state that they claimed was on the verge of claudicating to the alleged imposition of a Marxist-inspired land reform. This discourse was transversal to the different periods studied in this dissertation. It was central to the grievances that local leaders from the Puerto Boyacá paramilitares presented to the public and to the central state in the early 1980s (Santamaría 1983a). It was also present in those same leaders’ ambition to reach the national electoral stage in the late 1980s (El Provinciano 1990),. Moreover, it remained unchanged when the national leadership of the AUC was interviewed for national TV audiences in 2000 (Arizmendi 2000).

The discourse is, nonetheless, contradictory. As explained in the introduction, this narrative qualifies the state as having a weak presence, thus enabling guerrilla activity, and at the same time as capable, in terms of its taxing capacities. In fact, as shown in Chapter 3—specifically, through the decomposition of fiscal variables—paramilitary activity was
negatively correlated with municipalities that were capable of and willing to tax land properties.

Image 2-1 Details of open letters from rural entrepreneurs warning against peace talks with the guerrillas.
Source: El Tiempo, August 17, 1984.

In March 1984, the government of Belisario Betancourt and certain guerrillas (FARC, ELN, and M-19) reached an accord to initiate peace dialogues and an eventual ceasefire. As part of the deal, the government promised a judicial amnesty to political criminals. Additionally, the guerrillas stressed the importance of including agrarian and political reforms as part of the peace-talk compromises. *Magdalena Medio*’s landed elites viewed this move as
nothing less than a claudication from the president to the will of the guerrillas, and as the first step toward communism. ACDEGAM, the civil façade of the Puerto Boyacá paramilitares, joined other cattle rancher organizations in a public relations campaign denouncing the deals reached between Betancur and the guerrillas (see Image 2-1).

A series of open letters and “manifests” signed by rural organizations of peasants, cattle ranchers, and rural entrepreneurs appeared in regional publications (La Patria, Manizales, August 19, 1984, Vanguardia Liberal, Bucaramanga, August 20, 1984), and national newspapers (El Tiempo, Bogotá, August 17, 1984). In these documents, discussions about a possible agrarian reform are presented as the first step toward communism. One of manifests asked, “The Agrarian Reform: A step demanded by the Marxist guerrillas towards peace? Or towards the establishment of a communist regime?”. In the paragraph that followed these questions, an answer was provided:

We the undersigned would like to express our concern regarding the agreement reached between the [g]overnment and some of the guerrillas to reactivate the [a]grarian [r]eform. In that respect we affirm [...] By demanding the reactivation of this process the Marxist guerrillas acknowledge their goal of implanting communism in Colombia, whose initial and partial accomplishment is the Agrarian Reform. [...] In principle, the full exercise of national sovereignty should compel the [g]overnment to obliterate the guerrillas, but as this is evidently not the case, one should think that a powerful enemy force is thwarting the Government. [...] In such light, it is only natural that we grow suspicious of the Executive Power, which must be under the influence of sympathies towards the guerrillas, refusing to attack the rebels and leaving the [n]ation to the mercy of their implacable violence. (350 Agricultores y Ganaderos Colombianos 1984, 4b)

An “open letter” to the president reinforced the alleged subordination of the political will of the National Executive to the guerrillas’ demands: “The [g]overnment seems to believe that ‘dialogue’ is the equivalent of having the whole country acquiesce to the [p]resident’s policies, whom is systematically saying yes to the guerrillas [...]” (Comité de Agricultores
The document also decried central authorities’ historical victimization of rural entrepreneurs:

We wish to state a truth that has always been suppressed: all the country is aware of the rural entrepreneurship class’ is the most victimized by the guerrillas’ murders, kidnappings and extortions. Yet, even under such dire conditions, they kept working towards greater efficiency, which is proof of the resourcefulness and commitment of the agrarian Colombian. Why should [the central state] attack them with an Agrarian Reform and impunity against land occupations, even after leaving them defenseless against the guerrillas commanded from Moscow? (Comité de Agricultores de la Ciénaga Grande de Lorica 1984, 11a)

These documents clearly presented the central state as weak in the face of the guerrillas, but, at the same time, were greatly concerned with the prospect of an agrarian reform. Naturally, a weak state would be unable to conduct massive redistribution policies. This rhetorical game would only make sense to those who were convinced that the central state was working with the guerrillas and their “Moscow” masters. However, local elites, as well as the political world, clearly knew better. The president was negotiating, but by no measure was he surrendering. In fact, to this day, Colombia stands out in Latin-American history as the only large country that did implement a large scale agrarian reform with the full support of the state (Palacios 2011; Legrand 2016).

ACDEGAM and other right-wing landowner associations feared the central state’s renewed effort in an agrarian reform and increased political competition at the local level. In fact, by 1984, the paramilitares were already involved in a massive agrarian reform or, rather, a counter-agrarian reform. The private militias were targeting peasant and colono communities and taking violent actions toward them, forcing them to flee and/or sell their properties well below market prices. Substantial landowners were the economic
beneficiaries of such illegitimate transactions. A case in point, covered extensively by *El Tiempo* an *Semana* in 1983, exposes the political contradiction.

### 2.2 The Crisis of 1983

In 1983, Magdalena Medio endured paramilitares’ increased against civilians. A series of peasant massacres (see Figure 2-1) were particularly intense, albeit selective killings also contributed to the total number of individuals who were murdered.

![Figure 2-1 Victims of paramilitary massacres in Magdalena Medio, 1982-1984. Source: The author, with data from GMH (2013b).](image)

*El Tiempo* reported that in Puerto Berrío, 150 persons were killed between January and August, including all but one of the municipal council members in opposition to the town’s mayor; another 20 peasants had been found dead in Cimitarra (Santamaría 1983b). A report presented to the House of Representatives stated that a total of 347 peasants had been between January and August (R. Medina 1983, 7b). Barrancabermeja’s authorities registered more than 1,500 forcefully displaced peasants that sought refuge in the city (*Semana* 1983).

The paramilitares’ series of violent acts reached the national press and represented the first “salvo” of the battle for the right-wing militias’ legitimacy in the eyes of the national public. The coverage of the events, as well as the narratives from the actors involved, reveal how
both the leaders of the paramilitares and their sponsors justified the violence against peasants in terms of the absence of the state and the presence of communist guerrillas. At the same time, this narrative was contradictory, as neither the paramilitares nor their leaders favored a general strengthening of the central state’s presence in Magdalena Medio. Instead, they were acting selectively to decrease the presence of certain state institutions related to the judiciary, agrarian reform, and education, and sought to increase the presence of the armed forces.

The paramilitares had been present in the region since the late 1970s, but it was not until 1983 that they unleashed such a strong and coordinated violent attack against peasants. Decades later, during transitional justice hearings, the surviving leaders from the original paramilitar groups suggested that the 1983 offensive was their first coordinated action, designed to expand their territorial control from Puerto Berrío and Puerto Boyacá toward the northeast basin of Magdalena (Durán 2013).

By May 1983, social movements and humanitarian organizations were warning people, such as the national authorities: the violence against civilians in the Magdalena Basin was reaching a level that had not been seen since *La Violencia*, the period of civil war from the 1940s and 1950s (Letter from 1983, reprinted in Habitantes del Carare 1998, 616; García Marquez 1983, 4A). The National Human Rights Commission, an ad-hoc body created by President Betancur and chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alfredo Carrisoza, led an inquiry into the region, confirmed the dire situation of human rights abuses, and recommended for a high-level commission with representatives from the national executive branch to visit Magdalena Medio. Pablo E. Guarín, ACDEGAM’s political leader, and a member of Boyacá’s Department Assembly, quickly rejected the report from
the National Human Rights Commission. In an open letter reprinted in El Tiempo, Guarín rejected the Commission’s report and accused it of pro-guerrilla biases:

> Is this committee, that calls itself a defender of human rights, uninterested in defending the lives of Colombians unsympathetic to the insurgents? In Magdalena Medio the so-called FARC kill working men, mostly members of the liberal party, on a daily basis, yet you are miserably silent about those facts. (Guarín 1983, 11B)

Following the recommendations of the Human Rights Commission, the executive sent a high-level delegation to Magdalena Medio during the second week of August. The members included the Interior Minister, a presidential peace counselor, and the National Director of Criminal Justice. Town hall meetings in Barrancabermeja and Puerto Berrío were scheduled and included the presence of local and regional authorities as well as representatives of civil society organizations.

El Tiempo dispatched its editor in chief, Germán Santamaría, to cover the town halls and report from the region. When he arrived in Barrancabermeja, he encountered hundreds of displaced peasants who had fled violence in rural areas (Santamaría 1983a, 1A). Those interviewed confirmed the facts denounced by social movements and the findings of the Human Rights Commission. During the town halls, the journalist sought answers from local authorities, but they were offered divergent responses. A municipal ombudsman from Aguachica (Cesar) offered the following succinct explanation to Santamaría: “Large landowners are expelling poor peasants from the fields seeking to obtain their lands.” Yet, Pablo Guarín presented this retort to the ombudsman:

> What is really happened is that for 20 years all of us in Magdalena Medio were collaborating to the FARC, whether because of fear or because of opportunism. [The FARC] ordered whom to vote for, all while cattle rancher were either kidnapped or had to pay extortions to the guerrillas [...] People eventually had enough, and all this actions by the guerrillas radicalized the [political] Right, prompting it to organize itself. Cattle
ranchers opted not to pay extortions but rather to pool their resources to build means of armed self-defense. As the cattle ranchers armed themselves, then a war of all against all begun. (Pablo E. Guarín, quoted in Santamaria 1983a, 8A)

The juxtaposition of the answers is revealing. Guarín’s narrative presented a historical and political justification of why and how the cattle ranchers and the political right had risen in arms against the guerrillas. Yet, Guarin’s answer never explicitly described the events related to the recent massacres of peasants. Rather, his argument implied that the peasants had died because the region was at war, and blamed the guerrillas for starting the violence, thus removing guilt from the cattle ranchers who “pooled resources” for their “self-defense”.

Santamaria discovered a more radical narrative once he travelled to the site of a massacre in the Santo Domingo shire of San Vicente de Chucuri, Santander. Weeks prior, the shire had been an active peasant community, though Santamaria found it almost deserted. A group of paramilitares had stormed Santo Domingo, killing all the men, many in front of their families. Santo Domingo’s surviving women and children were now living in fear, and spent nights hidden in the woods or fled as internally displaced persons. Yet, among the assaulting paramilitares, the survivors had recognized residents from the neighboring shire of San Juan Bosco. The journalist travelled to San Juan Bosco to speak with the shire’s police inspector. To his surprise, this sub-municipal authority was in fact a person the Procuraduría had accused as being a part of the MAS, a paramilitary group with connections to the drug cartels. When asked about the role of local residents in the massacre

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6 In Colombia, and despite its name, a police inspector is not a member of the National Police and thus is not a member of the armed forces. Rather, he/she is a sub-municipal administrator who answers to local civilian authorities.
of Santo Domingo, the interviewees replied that they were only defending themselves from communists, arguing that San Juan Bosco qualified as a “town of liberal party members surrounded by communist towns, whose inhabitants can’t venture outside [San Juan] without [the] fear of being assassinated” (Santamaría 1983b, 8A). Here again, questions about particular violent acts against peasants were answered with justifications based on the historical and geographical presence of guerrillas and alleged communists. The causal links were implicit and political, equating self-defense with the right to cleanse a region, i.e. a “living space,” of undesired political or social categories.

The central state had a modest agrarian redistribution program managed by the National Institution for the Agrarian reform (INCORA). INCORA did not recur to expropriations of private lands, but instead bought properties at market prices from legal owners to distribute small plots to registered landless peasants. INCORA worked at a very slow pace and was characterized as having clientelistic practices. However, despite its problems, it managed to regularize land property titles for its beneficiaries (Machado 2001). A presidential decree from July 1983 had, nonetheless, generated resistance from the rural landed elites. Decree 2109 of 1983 ordered the INCORA to increase its activity “to benefit with plot grants both the political crime amnesty recipients and rural dwellers of regions subject to insurgent activity” (Article 1). The decree did not allocate more economic resources, nor did it specify which regions would be considered “subject to insurgent activity”. Yet, a local newspaper from Barrancabermeja reported that cattle rancher’s committees had rejected the implementation of the decree in Magdalena Medio and warned that it would only lead to an increase in social tensions and violence (Reintegración 1983, 2).
In early September 1983, journalists from Semana interviewed the INCORA’s Magdalena Medio field office director to inquire about the possible relations between land struggles and the spike in violence in the region. The director’s perspective was clear: “The social problem is caused in at least an 80% of the cases by land tenure conflicts” (Ernesto Orozco, as quoted in *Semana* 1983). Chronicles of paramilitares’ atrocious acts of violence that targeted peasant beneficiaries of INCORA’s lands were printed in the same issue of *Semana* and in *El Tiempo* (Ibid, J. J. Hoyos 1983, 12A).

The paramilitares also targeted regional schools, threatening high school teachers from the eastern shore of Magdalena, from Cimitarra in the south to Barrancabermeja in the north. At least 100 teachers from Magdalena Medio fled to the capital city of Bucaramanga, and dozens fled to the city of Barrancabermeja. In discussions with the regional authorities, the educators articulated their refusal to return to their original postings and threatened to quit altogether if they were not relocated to other areas (Gonzalez and Cala 1983). FECODE, the nation’s largest teachers’ union, responded to these events by organizing a national strike that the Army and the police in Barrancabermeja violently repressed (Valencia and Celis 2012, 46).

The contradiction between the local elites’ alleged demands for the state’s presence was exposed even further during the second town hall meeting, held in Puerto Berrío. Local elites were keen to demand a greater presence of the state in the form of a transport infrastructure and the presence of the armed forces. On the other hand, a decision was made to transfer Puerto Berrío’s criminal justice unit (“juzgado de instrucción criminal”) to the city of Bello, (Antioquia) for “security reasons” (Santamaría 1983b, sec. 3A). This was surprising, since the criminal investigators would still need to travel to Puerto Berrío to
conduct their research on the violent acts - distance in 1983 that was at least twelve hours by car. This was a considerable distance that would unquestionably reduce the efficiency of judicial investigations, and would, in fact, force the judicial investigators to travel more rather than less across Magdalena Medio. In contrast, the number of troops from the regular armed forces increased. The following September, Semana reported that the per capita density of armed forces troops in southern Magdalena Medio had reach 60 citizens per infantryman, compared to 240 citizens per infantryman in the rest of regions affected by the armed conflict (Semana 1983).

Congresspersons from Magdalena Medio reacted to the crisis of violence in their home region by calling for a political control debate in the House of Representatives on September 6th. They requested the presence of the Interior, Justice, and Defense Ministers. At the national level, the debate reflected the same ideological frames and political tensions seen at the local level during August’s town hall meetings. Parliamentarians from the communist party demanded for the government and the Ministry of Defense to curtail the armed forces’ involvement in the paramilitary militias. Liberal and conservative representatives demanded security for all peasants, especially for those of their respective parties. The Defense Minister, Army General Fernando Landazábal, rejected the notion that the armed forces could be found politically responsible for the role of the paramilitares, which he called “anti-insurgent insurgencies,” in spreading violence in the region. Instead, he blamed the communist party as the original culprit of the increase in political violence:

*The communist party must understand that in Colombia, violence cannot be the path to power, because the Colombian people reject violence, and as obedient Catholic as the people is by waking up with a rosary and goes to*

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7 According to the origin-destination matrix. See Chapter 3, section 3.2.1.
bed with a ‘Hail Mary’, the people also rebels against oppression, vexations, and is now in the process answering with a rebellion against the insurgents. (Landazábal, as quoted in R. Medina 1983, 7B)

Gilberto Vieira, a communist senator, reminded general Landazábal that Congress was inquiring about the precise causal process of peasant murders, yet the minister was answering with an ideological response:

You cannot excuse the crimes alleging a revolt against subversives. [...] The dead were not guerrillas, but peaceful people killed by hitmen from paramilitary groups. [...] Many peasants were murdered to crush political opposition and to steal their lands, which will rise in value through forthcoming public works of infrastructure. (Vieira, as quoted in El Tiempo 1983, 2B)

The Interior Minister, Alfonso Gómez, did, in fact, present a list of current or upcoming public works that had secured funding from the Ministry of Finance: 42 schools, 30 aqueducts, 44 bridle roads, and 21 electric energy districts. In the words of the minister, the goal of such investments was to rehabilitate regions suffering due to political violence (R. Medina 1983, 7B). The Justice Minister, Rodrigo Lara, recognized the difficulties the judiciary was facing and described the paramilitares as vigilante groups of private justice rather than as self-defense organizations. The challenge for the institutions was compounded because his ministry estimated that authorities were only aware of one out of every ten crimes due to “the people’s distrust and skepticism towards the [s]tate institutions” (Lara, as quoted in R. Medina 19837B). All ministers vowed to support the president’s peace negotiations with the guerrillas and to do whatever they could to stop the crisis of violence in Magdalena Medio. Unfortunately, the violence was not curtailed.

The previous snapshots from the 1983 crisis of paramilitary violence in Magdalena Medio highlight not just the effect of the activity from the paramilitares but also the larger picture of political and ideological tensions occurring in Magdalena Medio. The members of the paramilitary alliance were negotiating a certain type of state presence with the central state.
Two of the members of this alliance were local political actors—prominent landowners and local political elites—in involved in a two dimensional political game. On the one hand, they were keen to demand greater infrastructural penetration from the central state in terms of transport and physical infrastructure. On the other hand, they wanted to limit local sociopolitical rivals’ access to state services such as education and the INCORA’s redistributive land policies. Certainly, the paramilitares were also an instrument of such local elites to deny political rivals, through repression, the opportunity to reach public office.

Michael Mann described the state’s infrastructural power as a “two-way ladder” that allows the central state to penetrate society and for social groups to reach public office (Mann 2008, 356). The crisis of 1983 revealed how the paramilitary were instrumental for the local elite’s strategy to control, through military power, the access of certain social actors to one of the paths of such ladder. Setting up the conditions for a subnational illiberal regime, organizations like ACDEGAM and other paramilitary structures enforced a “blockade,” which repressed and punished peasant communities and political rivals to deny them access to certain public services.

Magdalena Medio’s paramilitares and their allies were thus justifying the creation of the right-wing militias based on the peripheral condition of the region. The state was absent and did not provide security; therefore, the “people” had armed themselves and were not afraid to defend themselves against a communist threat. At the same time, those same paramilitares and allies were enforcing the exclusion of peasants and political rivals. In other words, the paramilitary alliance was furthering the peripheral conditions of their contradictors. This exemplified what Civico, from a constructivist perspective, regarded as
the legitimization of a particular dichotomy between “center” and “periphery” in state-building (Civico 2015, 64–65). The context can be read as one where local elites and national authorities negotiate which regional elements and actors will be considered peripheral and unimportant and which will be considered valuable and “incorporable” to the state-building process. In that regard, the coverage of the crisis of 1983 is useful to highlight the narratives and contexts in which such negotiations between local and national elites were carried out. However, the available primary sources were not well suited to reflect another essential element of the social dynamics: the agency from the grassroots movements to access and improve infrastructural means of political power. The next case study will offer a more thorough exploration of such dynamics, which will be intertwined with the way the discourse on the victims of paramilitary violence evolved in the national press after the crisis of 1983.

2.3 Victims or Hazards? Internally Displaced Peasants and Demands for Sanitarian Infrastructure in Antioquia’s Magdalena Basin

Forceful displacement is one of the most dramatic consequences of armed conflicts. It is an outcome that non-combatant civilians overwhelmingly endure. It constitutes a traumatic rupture of communal ties and places a tremendous economic burden on the displaced persons and the communities that receive them. It can also strain national welfare and healthcare (Ibáñez 2008; Steele 2009; Brodzinsky and Schoening 2012; Arias, Ibáñez, and Querubin 2014). According to the RUV, forceful displacement was the most prevalent form of civilian victimization between 1985 and 2003. This type of war crime affected Magdalena Medio in particular. Figure 2-2 compares the yearly average rate of per capita
internal displaced persons (IDP) and conflict-related homicides. Notably, the forceful displacement rates are several orders of magnitude higher than the homicide numbers.

Figure 2-2 Forceful Displacement and Homicides per Capita, 1985 to 2003. Source: Author’s calculation with data from UV (2017)

The scourge of forced displacement greatly affected the Colombian society, and placed considerable strains on the provision of health services and other social services (Ibáñez 2008; Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas 2013). Displaced persons seeking refuge in the large urban centers were a constant reminder that some regions of the country were immersed in a war-like situation, regardless of the ideological or semantic debates about the legitimacy of the political struggle (guerrillas or terrorists; self-defense forces or paramilitary death squads; civil war or armed conflict). The number of peasants turned into internal refugees, who had lost everything fleeing for their lives, was very hard to ignore (Montoya and Rojas 2003; G. Moreno et al. 2009; CODHES 2013). Nonetheless, since the early 1980s, a political contestation characterized the construction of a definition concerning who the IDP were and what they meant. Motivated by their political agendas, powerful social actors have challenged either the existence of forced displacement altogether or challenged the status of displaced persons as victims of violence.
While a debate on such issues might seem unnecessary considering the dramatic figures of violence and displacement, it has its roots in the larger political contention about the nature of armed conflict.

As illustrated in the two previous case studies, the members of the paramilitary alliance were interested in denying legitimacy to their victims. The forceful displacement of peasants and *colonos* from the agrarian frontier was one of the instruments of the counter-agrarian reform sought by the members of the paramilitary alliance (Reyes 1991; C. Moreno and Zamora 2012; F. Gutiérrez 2014b; Reyes 2016). If these displaced victims gained political or social notoriety from the central state authorities or national public opinion, the members of the paramilitary alliance risked losing their own legitimacy and facing political or judicial accountability for their deeds. It could also have legitimized their military enemies, the guerrillas, and their political contradictors, including grassroots movements, human rights activists, and opposition political parties.

One way in which the paramilitares, their allies, and their sympathizers have attacked the legitimacy of IDP has been by presenting them as social hazards, and, particularly in 1984, as health hazards and economic burdens to those communities receiving them. Furthermore, these discourses have often attempted to deemphasize the IDP’s challenges (Proyecto Colombia Nunca Más 2001, chap. 8, 2.2). They cast the *desplazados* as common economic migrants that choose through free will and a utilitarian calculus to migrate, expecting greater returns for their investments. While economic migration is not uncommon in Colombia, the Internally Displaced peasants were not choosing to leave out of free will, but rather, under severe security constraints product of the violence from the armed conflict. Furthermore, many were individually or collectively targeted by the paramilitares, drug
traffickers, and other armed groups (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2015). From another perspective, other discourses criticized those public policies that targeted and benefitted from healthcare access to IDPs. Their main thesis was that such positive discrimination measures constituted a perverse incentive for the peasants to migrate from the rural areas to the urban areas and for the common poor population to falsely present themselves as victims of political violence to reap the benefits. The more cynical critics even described the IDPs as unaesthetic additions to the cities rather than as victims of violence, labeling them as lazy vagrants and even as “members of the guerrillas” (Castrillón 2009, 445).

One example was the massive displacement of peasants in 1984 from the rural areas of Antioquia’s northeastern region, along the Magdalena River. This region includes two municipios from Magdalena Medio proper, Yondó and Remedios, and extends into Segovia (Antioquia), a municipio that is nonetheless socially and economically linked to Remedios and San Pablo (Bolívar) in the Magdalena Basin (see Map I-3).

In the 1980s, Northeastern Antioquia was characterized by multiple fronts of recent agrarian colonization and by both industrial and artisanal gold-mining enclaves. Multiple grassroots social movements had formed in the region, which, despite its economic potential, enjoyed a scarce institutional presence from the state (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010c, chap. 2; C. Moreno and Zamora 2012). The region’s topography and strategic position south of the San Lucas range had, nonetheless, made it a suitable rearguard for Marxist guerrillas operating in Magdalena Medio. These guerrillas had tried to penetrate social mobilization with different rates of success. Some social movements were favorable to the guerrilla’s discourse and sympathetic to their causes; others were not
The political left had strong popular support. As Map 1-1 illustrates, left-of-center parties had encountered moderate rates of electoral success in municipal council elections since the 1970s. However, from 1982 to 1988, left-wing parties became the larger political force at the local level in Remedios, Segovia, Yondó, and nearby San Pablo. The leaders of the paramilitary alliance interpreted this turn to the left as an unequivocal sign of allegiance to the guerrillas (Quiñones 1990, 56).

By late 1983, representatives of the paramilitares from Puerto Berrío, congressman Cesar Perez García -a regional politician from the liberal party-, and Carlos Castaño, -the future leader of the AUC- planned a paramilitary offensive to consolidate their power in Northeastern Antioquia (Aranguren and Castaño 2005, 112; Sala de Casación Penal 2013). The offensive’s primary targets were social movements, peasant organizations, and militants of left-wing organizations. Eventually, judicial processes would produce evidence of the deep involvement of armed forces personnel in the paramilitary offensive. Army personnel harassed left-wing candidates, and several units committed abuses against the civilian population. The National Police units would negotiate with commanders of the paramilitares regarding the time and place of the militias’ incursions into peasant communities as to offer a plausible explanation to national authorities regarding the police’s lack of response (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010c, 79; Sala de Casación Penal 2013, 8).

The first massacres of members of a peasant union took place in Remedios during July and August 1983, in the communities of Cañaveral and Manila (Tribuna Roja 1983a, 1A, 3A). They were followed by selective killings that terrorized the region. Fearing another
massacre, in January 1984, hundreds of peasants sought refuge in Remedios’ town center (Ronderos 2014, 136). There, the local authorities received them with scorn. The mayor, when speaking to journalists, referred to the refugees as “invaders” (José Becerra as quoted in J. J. Hoyos 1984a, 8A). The wave of displacements caused by paramilitary massacres was compounded by intense combats between the guerrillas and the armed forces. Military authorities blamed the displacement on the guerrillas (J. J. Hoyos 1984a, 1A).

The national press presented the event with titles echoing the voice of the authorities, framing the cause of the displacement with more references to the guerrillas than to the paramilitary. *El Tiempo’s* coverage is telling (see Figure 2-3). For instance, a title article read as “Sanitary problems due to peasant migrations,” which undermined the refugee condition of the victims by calling them migrants and framed the peasants as being responsible for health hazards.

The authority’s fears concerning health issues were not unfounded. Downtown Remedios was small and already underserviced. However, the displaced peasants quickly activated their social mobilization repertoire to offer a proactive response.

Across the region, peasant organizations were characterized by their activism. Prior to the massacres and displacements, their social movements had already propagandized protests
of the state’s inaction toward rural violence and the lack of judiciary procedures to punish the perpetrators. Furthermore, the regional movements had a history of contentions against the mining companies present in the region. The organizations knew how to mobilize to demand investments in transport infrastructure, education, and sanitary services. One recurrent tactic involved scheduling a protest and exerting pressure on municipal and departmental authorities during the discussions with the municipal councils and the departmental assembly of the regional development plans (Proyecto Colombia Nunca Más 2001, sec. 2.1).

Once health hazards gained political traction at the regional and local levels, the peasant movements added demands for basic health services and improvements to the sanitary infrastructure (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010c, 136). The movement leaders made the point that prior to their displacement to the town center, most of them were practically isolated from the scarce healthcare providers. Yet, now that they were concentrated in the town center, they at least could access the town’s small health station. To further contradict their depiction as the culprit of health hazards, the displaced peasants organized a series of sanitary brigades to minimize such risks (El Tiempo 1984, 2A). The peasant movements from Segovia and Remedios were able to interact with the members of the Rehabilitation Plan, the Betancur administration’s municipal development program that had a mandate and the material resources to intervene in areas affected by the conflict, including Magdalena Medio. The communal leaders secured investment for a hospital and some kilometers of road infrastructure (Presidencia de la República 1986, 198). The mobilization led to the meeting of certain demands. According to Antioquia’s statistical yearbook, in 1983, Remedios only reported having a sanitary station with a nurse and a visiting dentist.
By 1988, however, it had a new municipal hospital, the “San Vicente de Paúl,” which included eight beds, eight nurses, and three permanent doctors (DAP 1984, chap. 4; DAP 1989, chap. 4).

By the end of the decade, the numerous mobilizations had reached enough momentum to challenge the political hegemony of the traditional parties. In 1988, in Colombia’s first popular election for municipal mayors, left-wing candidates won in Remedios, Segovia, Yondó, and San Pablo. The political left received the majority of votes in the city council elections (Proyecto Colombia Nunca Más 2001, sec. 2.0). Moreover, healthcare provisions were a standout feature in the winning candidate’s government plans, reflecting the popular demand and the political weight that the peasant mobilization had conferred them.

Sadly, Elkin Martínez, the mayor-elect of Segovia, was assassinated by the paramilitary before taking office. Social movements reacted to the crime by calling for a three-week long, large-scale strike. The national government was forced to step in, sit down, and sign new accords with the protesters. Once again, the peasant organizations demanded investment in infrastructural capacities and for the government to provide safety and security guarantees to the civilian population. The list of the protest leaders’ eight demands is straightforward and places health issues among the priorities:

1. To provide the local hospital with chirurgical equipment and a physical expansion for new beds.
2. To assign more doctors and nurses.
3. Expansion of the capacity and coverage of both the sewage system and the aqueduct.
4. Expansion of school coverage, and construction of new schools.
5. Assignment of more teachers.
6. Construction of housing projects.
7. A commitment not to carry out retributions against the protesters and their leadership.
8. A commitment to fulfill previous breached accords. (Proyecto Colombia Nunca Más 2001, sec. 2.3)
Government officials subscribed the pact, and the protesters demobilized. However, the violence continued, and 1988 became the bloodiest year in the already bloody history of the region. Only in 1997, at the height of another surge in forced displacements, would the region see as much violence (see Figure 2-2). The peasant movement’s leadership was targeted with selective assassination, and new massacres were carried out, thus forcing new displacements. Army involvement in the violence was unveiled when the judiciary confirmed that letters with death threats to the peasant leaders and elected officials had been typed in the regional battalion’s offices (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010c, 136).

Figure 2-4 depicts the extent of the violence against left-wing social and political leaders in northeastern Antioquia, as compiled by the GMH.

Figure 2-4 Social movement’s leaders murdered in northeastern Antioquia
Source: Author’s calculations from GMH (2010c, 34).

Political violence eventually succeeded in undermining the peasant movement, and the political left was all but eradicated from the region. For those peasants who did not flee, demands for healthcare or infrastructure became a secondary issue, superseded by the urgent threat of violence and human right abuses. Nonetheless, the regional peasant initiative of the “Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra” (“Peasant worker
Unión from the Cimitarra Valley”) successfully expanded its influence towards Remedios, Segovia, and Yondó during the mid-1990s. It never ceased to demand greater social investment from the department and national authorities yet clarified that their priorities were to establish their own neutrality and reach pacts of non-aggression with the guerrillas, paramilitares, and the Fuerza Pública (Silva-Prada 2012a).

By 1990, the paramilitares and their allies had better political control over the region. However, the contrast between the development experimented by the region in terms of public services, and especially in terms of sanitary services, during the 1980s was a problem for their political legitimacy (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010c, chap. 3). The peasant movements’ strategies had worked, at least for a while. Their repertoire of political contestations, which challenged national and departmental authorities to demand their basic rights and public investments, had proven successful electorally and in terms of infrastructure. The new roads, the hospital, and expanded sanitary facilities were enduring brick and mortar reminders of a brief albeit bloody period of political alternatives.

As an ideological book,8 Democratic Capitalism, a National Alternative is sympathetic to the “cause” of the paramilitary alliance that attempted to tackle such political legitimacy issues (Quiñónes 1990). Its author focused on a causal, albeit politically twisted, relation between the intervention of the central state in Segovia and Remedios between 1982 and 1988 and the electoral success of the left. The catch, according to the author, was the submission of President Betancur to the will of the Marxist guerrillas. In what could be construed as a secret alliance between the conservative Betancur and the Marxist rebels,

8 It could be also described as a work of propaganda.
and as part of strategic pacts celebrated during the peace dialogues, the president would have channeled generous public resources to be invested through clientelist practices in northeastern Antioquia and in other areas where left-wing parties had dented the decades-old hegemony of the liberal party. The author stated the following:

*President Betancur, through the strategic use of the Rehabilitation Plan and its peace investments for communities, offered great benefits to the insurgents, who capitalized them with higher than average electoral results in 20 municipalities intervened by the Rehabilitation Plan [...] In Segovia [the leftist] received 535 votes in 1980; by 1986 they had risen to 2,368 [...] Was president Betancur aware of the communist's preference to [proselytize] in liberal municipalities? Did he release the communists from jail just to weaken electorally the Liberal party? (Quiñones 1990, 56–57)*

The case study of Remedios and Segovia is useful to highlight the contrasts between the narratives about “state absence” and the types of local-national relations of which the paramilitary alliance approved. The capacity of grassroots social movements and electoral rivals to induce investments from the central state into sanitary infrastructure was interpreted as a threat. The capacity of the political rivals to upend the electoral balance and turn old “secure seats” for liberal party candidates into a contested election was presented as a conspiracy between the nation’s president and the local rebels. The more important problem for the paramilitares and their allies was not so much the challenging peripheral condition of northeastern Antioquia but rather the possibility that political rivals sitting in the mayor’s office or the town council would handle the minimal state presence and any future investments made to increase it. In summary, the paramilitary alliance behaved as if it feared competition for the municipal side of the relations between local and national state authorities.

The peasant movement approached this relationship between the local and the national state authorities through political contestation, including strikes, protests, and collective
actions that put political pressure on state authorities. Quiñones, the ideologue sympathetic
to the paramilitares, regarded such relations as inherently clientelistic: Local party elites
deal with the national state to obtain resources that will help secure the continuity of the
local party in power. The revolution that Quiñones recommended avoiding is one where
the access to the local seat of those dealings with the central state is reshuffled or
redistributed, and the traditional hegemonic party faces the risk of losing its control over
the upward way in the two-way ladder of infrastructural political power.

2.4 The Proposal for a Magdalena Medio Department

After the assassination of Pablo E. Guarín, Iván Roberto Duque Gaviria inherited the public
leadership of ACDEGAM as well as the clientele accrued by the Puerto Boyacá
paramilitary alliance. In 1990, he was the president of the city council and a candidate for
the House of Representatives. He had a clear interest in capitalizing his electoral hegemony
over Puerto Boyacá to jump into the national political arena and openly talked about this
aim to the press (Semana 1989). Duque’s challenge stemmed from what he had not
inherited.

After the death of Guarín, the personal links from the local “cacique” to his supervisor at
the national level of the liberal party were severed. Former senator and minister Jaime
Castro had been Guarín’s referent during the 1980s. However, the growing links of the
Puerto Boyacá with the drug trafficker from the Medellín Cartel, especially with notorious
capo Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha, proved unacceptable to Castro. The Boyacá Liberal Party

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9 Henry Perez was the military leader and main drug trafficker, but Perez preferred to maintain a low public
profile for the press and the national public opinion. At the local level, he was widely known as the “boss”
(Barón 2011).
refrained from endorsing Duque as well as any other immediate successor of Guarín in Puerto Boyacá (Verdad Abierta 2002).

Duque registered a new political party, MORENA, and recruited candidates in Puerto Boyacá, Yacopí, Puerto Nare, and Puerto Triunfo. Recurring to Pablo Guarín’s rhetoric, MORENA presented itself as a right-wing organization that supported the right to self-defense, and understood democracy as the electoral contest between non-Marxist parties, and it thought of itself as having a right-wing Catholic-nationalist-regionalist platform (Cardona 2009, secs. 3704-3744). It also lamented the absence of the state’s presence in Magdalena Medio, blamed this absence as the cause of the region’s security problems, and offered a solution: the establishment of a Magdalena Medio department, created from the municipios bordering the Middle Magdalena Basin.

Hernán Quiñonez, MORENA’s ideologist, referred to the idea as the “Magdalena Medio Agrarian District” (Quiñones 1990, chap. V). According to his proposal, the district would differ from a regular department in that instead of a regional assembly of elected officials, a corporativist board would oversee the government. The board would have a fixed seat for representatives of public and private institutions. The national executive would have five seats: a general secretary representing the president and four members representing the Ministries of Defense, Education, Agriculture, and Interior. Select trade unions would each have a seat: the industrialists (ANDI), the cattle ranchers (FEDEGAN), the rural entrepreneurs (SAC), and the peasantry (ANUC). The two traditional parties, the liberal party and the conservative party, would each have one seat as well. Naturally, left-wing parties were expected to be ineligible (Quiñones 1990, 181). How such a corporativist and Falangist-inspired institutional design would pass a constitutionality test was anyone’s
guess. Yet, at least as a political or ideological statement, MORENA made the type of political project they were entertaining very clear.

The project had ambitious infrastructural hopes. The district would regionalize education, transport infrastructure, irrigation districts, and energy transmission lines, among many others. To fund the required projects, 3% of the national and departmental budgets would be ceded to the district. All national and department taxes collected in the district’s municipalities would be ceded to the local administrations. In addition, all increases in future land property tax revenues would be ceded to the district. To stimulate local agrarian growth, the project called for a decade-long moratorium on VAT and import taxes on machinery, vehicles, and construction materials for investment projects in the district (Quiñónes 1990, 182).

Iván R. Duque was a staunch supporter of the idea of a Magdalena Medio department, but in his day-to-day political activities, he combined such a grandiose proposal with more modest projects. For instance, he considered it alongside the proposals to transfer the national oil refinery complex from the city of Barrancabermeja to Puerto Boyacá (see Image 2-2).

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10 In 1994, Duque was one of the regional leaders who promoted the creation of a new department under the auspices of the 1991 Constitution. This time, it only included municipalities in the immediate vicinity of Puerto Boyacá and Puerto Berrío (El Tiempo 1994). The proposal never materialized.
As a campaign issue, the refinery was not necessarily a message meant exclusively for the local public. Duque and Morena had a firm, and illiberal, grip on the town’s electorate. It was also a message to the national authorities, who were the ones that held the executive power to consider such a large public works project. Duque framed his message in terms that could appeal to the central state authorities. The message pointed to the threats the city of Barrancabermeja posed to the central state’s control over the refinery. Barrancabermeja was city rife with strong left-wing opposition parties, and the guerrillas, unions, and social movements were highly active. In contrast, Puerto Boyacá had been cleansed of troublemaker elements by the paramilitary alliance and enjoyed “a good geographic position, local security, and absence of guerrilla activity” (Duque Gaviria 1990, 6).

11 The concept of “orden público” is employed in Colombia to refer to the activity of armed actors.
MORENA’s political project for Magdalena Medio reflects the position of the Puerto Boyacá paramilitary alliance in 1990. Local politicians had a firm grip on local elections and the local state. The large cattle ranchers and other prominent landowners were not threatened by immediate redistributive threats. The guerrillas had been chased away; the supporters for land reform were politically weakened.

Drug traffickers, on the other hand, were in a more precarious position. If the central state identified them as members of the Medellín Cartel or as contributors to the so-called “narcoterrorism,” they could be treated as military objectives. On the other hand, connivances with the security authorities and political elites were still possible, for a price. These connivent pacts were nonetheless dependent on the drug trafficker’s ability to keep a low profile.

Seen from this context, MORENA’s proposals for a Magdalena Medio department and a refinery in Puerto Boyacá reveal the paramilitary alliance’s preferences for certain deployments’ infrastructural capacities over others. The economic blueprint of Magdalena Medio Agrarian District offered clear political economy incentives. It sought 3% of the national budget for a region that only accounted for less than 2% of the national population. It took resources from departmental budgets but was not accountable before the regional assemblies. It would have allowed local mayors to keep the tax they regularly collected on the nation’s and the department’s behalf. It also reduced incentives to increase land property taxes. Moreover, it proposed tax breaks for investors. When the economic and political prospects are taken together, it becomes clear that the district proposal was the institutionalization of a subnational corporativist regime that would institutionally lock the
1990 balance of regional power—the same balance that was favorable to the local members of the paramilitary alliance.

The proposal for the oil refinery was one that sought to trade the “security” and “political stability” capital that the paramilitares from Puerto Boyacá had accrued through the repression of the economic resources of the energy complex with the central state. It is likely that Iván Duque was hoping to exert major influence over the clientelistic resources derived from such a large public work. He would deny access to his left-wing political rivals of all the public jobs and contracts generated by a refinery and would instead keep them for himself. Perhaps an oil refinery would grant him enough resources so that he had economic independence from the drug traffickers. In an interview printed in 2001, Duque expressed to Carlos Castaño, the AUC commander, that he was indeed looking for a means of economic independence from the drug traffickers (Aranguren and Castaño 2005, 106–10).

2.5 Chapter Conclusions

This chapter employed discourse analysis to contrast the political narrative that justified the creation of the paramilitary militias with the behavior of the paramilitary alliance’s members during the period between 1983 and 1990. This narrative is based on the legitimate right to self-defense when the state is weak or absent in terms of protecting its constituents from the predation of Marxist guerrillas. At the same time, in the case of the paramilitary alliance, it was a narrative linked to the threat of an agrarian reform and the alleged possibility of a communist takeover of the local and national governments. The questions applied to the case studies were as follows: To what extent did the behavior of the paramilitary alliance’s members conform to the political justification of a weak state?
How did they react when certain state capacities increased? What particular improvements in the state’s capacities did the local elites request from the national authorities? Which ones did they resist?

The selected cases reflected different dimensions of a complex multi-actor relation. To the farthest extent possible, I tried to operationalize the analysis to highlight the struggle for what Mann identified as the two forms of political power derived from the modern state: despotic power and infrastructural political power.

In all the case studies, members of the paramilitary alliance presented themselves as devote believers in the authority of the central state. At the same time, in each of the cases, they revealed preferences for the deployment of certain forms of state capacity. For instance, they showed an interest in the deployment of military power but rejected redistributive services and attacked education and judiciary deployments.

Rather than acting as supporters of a strong, capable state, the paramilitary alliance was in favor of controlling access to the state. They went to great lengths to secure their electoral dominion over their political rivals, employing the paramilitares to conduct a politicide. What the members of the alliance called ‘support’ for democracy was nothing more than the desire to ensure their social preeminence in Magdalena Medio. They hoped to obtain the largest concessions possible from national authorities to establish a subnational illiberal regime. In that sense, the paramilitary alliance’s political leaders behaved as armed clientelists, while the landed elites profited from the master narrative of a political conflict to accumulate even more lands in what constituted a veritable counter-agrarian reform.

In summary, the paramilitary alliance did not behave as if they believed that the state was chronically weak. Instead, they behaved as if they feared that a modestly capable state at
either the local level or the central level could thwart their own material and political interests. They seem to have feared a more democratic regime at the helm of the state, at least as much as the predation of the guerrillas in the absence of the central state.

This chapter applies a quantitative approach to characterize the intensity of the violence caused by paramilitares at the municipal level in Magdalena Medio region between 1988 and 2003. Two main political questions drive the inquiry. First, how did the geographic and infrastructural peripheral conditions of Magdalena Medio’s municipalities affect the intensity of paramilitary violence compared to neighboring regions of Central Colombia? Second, how well does the paramilitares’ activity over space and time reflect the narrative of a vigilante organization that defended rural entrepreneurs from the predation of Marxist guerrillas?

To answer these political questions, the chapter proposes a set of six inferential models designed to explain paramilitary violence, with an emphasis on civilian victimization. Two types of dependent variables are assessed: one measuring the paramilitary victimization of civilians (models 1 to 4) and a second measuring the intensity of paramilitary activity (models 5 and 6). The independent variables belong to three broad categories: the intensity of the Colombian armed conflict, the state’s infrastructural capacities, and socio-political mobilization.

12 In this project, Central Colombia refers to the departments of Antioquia, Boyacá, Bolívar, Caldas, Cesar, Cundinamarca, and Santander. These are the departments with shores on the Middle Magdalena Basin. See Introduction.
All models rely on linear panel regressions at the municipal-year level. There are three pairs of models, with each one operationalizing a fixed effect and a first difference regression. These models are designed to allow the researchers to make inferences regarding when, where, and in which sociopolitical context the intensity of paramilitary violence was distributed. These results will be contrasted with the expectations derived from theories on the intensity of conflict, the capacities of the state to penetrate territory and society, democratization theories, and historical contexts.

The political questions regarding Magdalena Medio’s peripheral condition and the political justification for the paramilitary phenomenon were described in the introduction and first chapter. In general, the former examines the evolving relation between the advances that the Colombian state had in penetrating the infrastructure of Central Colombia. This inquiry is informed by the concepts of political power and the infrastructural power of the state from the sources of social power theory (Mann 1984; Mann 2008). As a historical agrarian-frontier, Magdalena Medio was a peripheral region with historically very low densities of state presence (Vicepresidencia de la República 2001; Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra 2000; Legrand 2016, 104, 129). The second question is related to the political justification advanced by the allies and supporters of the paramilitary organizations for their vigilantism. According to this narrative, the paramilitares existed to aid vulnerable but resolute rural entrepreneurs and common peasants who lived in peripheral areas largely abandoned by the state and encountered ruthless depredation from Marxist guerrillas (Jiménez 2012; Duque Gaviria 2006; R. Isaza 2005; Castaño 2000; ACDEGAM 1989; 350 Agricultores y Ganaderos Colombianos 1984). Activists and social scientists have vigorously contested this narrative. Most of these contesters will recognize
the context where the Colombian state had not monopolized a legitimate means of coercion across the territory and will also recognize that the presence of guerrillas meant a burden and a threat to the security of rural dwellers. These authors argued that the paramilitares were also a tool of an alliance of local elites, drug traffickers, and members of the regular armed forces. In this respect, the paramilitares were instrumental in advancing the alliance’s economic and political interests through coercive means, which materialized in the criminal and sustained repression against legitimate sociopolitical contradictors of the rural status quo (C. Medina 1990; Melo 1990; C. Medina and Téllez 1994; Duzán 1994; M. Romero 2003; F. González 2014; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013a).

As explained in Chapter 1, historians have identified four distinct periods of Magdalena Medio paramilitary phenomenon. The first period, the rise of the original paramilitares from Puerto Berrío (Antioquia) and Puerto Boyacá (Boyacá) occurred from 1978 to 1989. The second period, or the “partial fall” of the original paramilitares, was from 1990 to 1993. A brief period of contraction transpired from 1993 to 1996. Thereafter, a final resurgence, led by the creation of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia as a national federation of paramilitary organizations, occurred from 1997 to 2003. In that year, the AUC accepted a political negotiation with the national executive that led to the demobilization of the militias under the auspices of a transitional justice process. This chapter’s inferential model was only able to cover the last three periods, from 1988 to 2003, primarily due to the scarcity of data for the municipal and year granularity for the earlier 1980s. For a qualitative analysis of the early years, please refer to the previous chapter.

This chapter begins with a presentation of the proposed models’ variables, which are grouped in three broad categories (conflict intensity, infrastructural power of the state, and
socio-political mobilization). Thereafter, the following aspects of each variable will be discussed: its primary source, its transformation into municipal year observations, and its descriptive statistics and the analysis of their distribution. A brief political/historical contextualization of the quantitative results concludes the presentation.

Two of the infrastructural power variables, the travel time indicator and the juridical capacity index, are my own creation. The time travel indicator seeks to measure the peripheral condition of each municipality as a function of the effort required to employ the available transport infrastructure to connect that *municipio* to three regional capital cities.

The juridical capacity aims to provide a metric of the spatial distribution access to judicial services. Because of their novelty, the description of both variables is more detailed and includes a political justification and methodological descriptions.

The chapter continues with a presentation of the panel regression models’ results, which includes a contrast of the results from the main models (1-2) and the secondary models (3-6). The findings are also contrasted and contextualized with relevant literature. The limits and advantages of the exercise, as well as a recapitulation of the main findings, are addressed in the conclusion.

### 3.1 Intensity of Armed Conflict Variables

The first set of variables presented is related to the intensity of the armed conflict. The data come from two different primary sources. The first source is a database of armed actions or events with details regarding the armed actors that were involved and the toll of casualties. This database was originally compiled by the think tank CERAC (J. Restrepo, Spagat, and Vargas 2003); I updated its contents with recently released information from the GMH (2013c). The second source is the official victims census from the Colombian
The Colombian armed conflict was intense in Magdalena Medio during the period of study. Table 3-4 shows how the rates of conflict related homicides reached up to 114 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 2001. The variables that this project employs to measure the violent activity from paramilitares, the regular armed forces (Fuerza Pública), and the guerrillas show considerable variations across time (see Table 3-1, Table 3-2, and Table 3-3).

### Table 3-1 Civilian Casualties by Actor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean by paramilitares</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean by Fuerza Pública</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean by Guerrillas</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1.490</td>
<td>4.895</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.286</td>
<td>1.173</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.898</td>
<td>2.560</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0.549</td>
<td>1.736</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.314</td>
<td>1.257</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.627</td>
<td>2.358</td>
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<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2.242</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.490</td>
<td>1.302</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.706</td>
<td>1.836</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>51</td>
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<td>3.447</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.510</td>
<td>1.461</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.725</td>
<td>1.328</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>51</td>
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<td>3.024</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.490</td>
<td>1.943</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.039</td>
<td>3.066</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0.951</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>0.856</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>2.771</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.098</td>
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<td>3.190</td>
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<tr>
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<td>46</td>
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<td>1.931</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.314</td>
<td>4.231</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.588</td>
<td>9.054</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.882</td>
<td>2.151</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.255</td>
<td>2.938</td>
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Table 3-4 Armed Conflict-Related Homicides

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3.1.1 Civilian Casualties and Acts of War by Armed Actors

The primary source measuring the intensity of violence by different armed actors is a combination of data from the BDCAC database ("Base de Datos del Conflicto Armado Colombiano") and data I extracted from proceedings of the transitional justice process. The think tank CERAC built BDCAC, with observations detailing armed events, armed actors involved, and casualty tolls, at a municipal and daily granularity from 1998 to 2005 (J. Restrepo, Spagat, and Vargas 2003; CERAC 2014). Yet, the copy of BDCAC available for this project was compiled before the publication of several accounts coming from the transitional justice process with the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia and individual demobilized members of the guerrillas. For instance, the Procuraduría General requested
the Grupo de Memoria Histórica (GMH) release the “databases” on civilian victimization and acts of war employed for the redaction of ¡Basta Ya! (2013a) to the general public (Rincón 2013).

To profit from the new data on armed violence coming from the transitional justice process, I developed an automated data-mining process to compare triads of municipal-date-actors events between the BDCAC’s and the GMH’s datasets on massacres and selective civilian assassination. This list was vetted against authoritative sources such as judicial sentences (Sala de Justicia y Paz 2011; Sala de Justicia y Paz 2013; Sala de Justicia y Paz 2014a; Sala de Justicia y Paz 2014b) and inquiries from multilateral bodies such as the Inter-American Comission on Human Rights (2016). The BDCAC originally included 3,503 armed events with a toll of 1,920 civilian casualties. The data-mining exercise complemented this data with 41 armed events involving 188 civilian casualties.

To operationalize the intensity of the armed conflict, observations were aggregated into year-municipality measures, thus preserving the distinction between different actors. Different branches of the Fuerza Pública (the military, national police, secret and judiciary polices), guerrilla groups (ELN, FARC, EPL, etc.) and paramilitares were aggregated into their master categories (See Figure 3-1). While this approach dissolves the nuances between distinct organizations and their different units, it facilitates the statistical analysis.
The resulting variables are (1) the number of civilian casualties and (2) the number of combat casualties resulting from the actions involving each armed actor at a yearly municipal level. A third variable is the number of armed actions (regardless of number of casualties caused) carried out by each actor.

*Figure 3-1 Municipal distribution of civilian victims by armed actors*

Source: The author, with data from CERAC (2014) and GMH (2013b)

Within Magdalena Medio, paramilitary violence against civilians follows a pattern of two active periods extending from 1988 to 1992 and then from 1996 to 2003. A brief contraction period from 1993 to 1995 offered some respite to the region (see Map 3-1 and Figure 3-1). During the 1988-1993 and 1996-2003 periods, the paramilitares ranked as the most frequent victimizers of civilians among the armed actors. The guerrillas committed the second most acts against civilians, while the traditional armed forces were third on this list. It was not until 2003, when the paramilitares initiated their demobilization, that their median fell below that of the guerrillas.
Map 3-1 Evolution of civilian victimizations by Paramilitares, 1988-2003
Source: The author, with data from CERAC (2014) and GMH (2013b).
3.1.1.1 The 1988 to 1992 period

We can identify certain historical patterns in Map 3-1. Between 1988 and 1992, there were above average concentrations of civilian victimization in municipios from the central and southern areas of Magdalena Medio, below the 7th parallel north. Two hotspots can be identified in and around the municipios of Puerto Boyacá (Boyacá) to the south and the Cimitarra–Puerto Parra–Barrancabermeja (Santander) axis to the north. The concentration of violence around Puerto Boyacá is consistent with the consolidation of the town as the “Paramilitary capital of Colombia” during the 1980s, under the control of the Perez family paramilitares (C. Medina and Téllez 1994; Peña and Ochoa 2008).

The concentration of violence in the Cimitarra–Puerto Parra–Barrancabermeja axis reflects the paramilitary offensive against peasant communities, especially those of recent colonization that had settled around the Carare River, which crosses from Cimitarra to Puerto Parra where it merges into the Magdalena River. Those peasant communities had established strong social movements and communal ties and were represented by several dynamic organizations such as the Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos del Carare (“Peasant Workers Union of El Carare”) and the Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra (“Peasant Union of the Cimitarra River”). These organizations had enhanced the capacity of colonos to properly claim their land based on property rights and to resist the pressure from prominent landowners to buy the recently cleared lands. In addition, they were able to demand the provision of basic services from the state (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a; Silva-Prada 2012b; Silva-Prada 2012a). The struggle to control those territories occurred on unequal terms, with the paramilitares wielding violence and the peasant communities partaking in civil disobedience and protests and clamoring for the
attention of either the central state or national public opinion (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a, 12, 133).

Curiously, Magdalena Medio Turnpike—a major transport infrastructure project—was built between 1991 and 1996 precisely across the axis of the municipios of Puerto Boyacá, Cimitarra, and Puerto Parra–Barrancabermeja. While it is not possible for this project’s model to prove a relationship, it is nonetheless possible that the offensive of the paramilitares against peasant organizations in this region was driven by a desire to accumulate land plots that would dramatically increase in value once the turnpike was inaugurated. Drug traffickers eager to launder money would find such opportunity for an “investment” very attractive, as within days of the inauguration of the infrastructure the value of the plots would increase geometrically.

3.1.1.2 The 1996 to 2003 period

The 1996 to 2003 period is characterized by three main trends of paramilitary victimization of civilians: hotspots in the southwestern region, with an epicenter in San Carlos (Antioquia), a cluster of intense activities in the southern tip of the Bolivar department, which also extends into Yondó and Remedios (Antioquia), and sustained violence in and around the city of Barrancabermeja.

The San Carlos hotspot is the result of the paramilitary offensive from 1998 to 2005 to dislodge the FARC and ELN guerrillas from that municipio. These guerrillas had established a strong presence during the 1980s and early 1990s—a period during which, according to the GMH, the insurgents established a territorial “hegemony” and coopted the peasant movement and political life (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011c, 63–64). The guerrillas’ pressure on public life was so strong that in the 1997 elections, only 231 votes
were cast out of 12,500 registered voters (Ibid, 66). Due to the secure rearguard the insurgents had established within San Carlos, their units were able to launch attacks against the Bogotá-Medellín highway to the south of the town as well as a sustained offensive against the electric powerline transport towers that communicate hydroelectric dams from eastern Antioquia to the Magdalena Valley.

By 1998, the national commanders of the AUC had ordered a massive offensive against the guerrillas’ positions in San Carlos, without any restrictions concerning civilians (Civico 2015, 122–25). The paramilitares viewed the public as responsible for the guerrilla activity and held local social movement leaders responsible for alleged support to the guerillas (Olaya 2017). At some point, they warned that “for each energy tower blown by the guerrillas, ten peasants will be executed in eastern Antioquia” (Noche y Niebla 1999, as quoted in Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011c, 67). The paramilitar strategy was to focus on controlling the civilian population rather than on facing the guerrillas in combat in the open field. When a community could not be properly policed, it was nonetheless terrorized, forcing the peasants into internal displacement in order to avoid the guerrillas (Becerra 2009; Osorio 2013). As a result, San Carlos endured one of the highest municipal proportions of internally, forcibly displaced persons registered in the Colombian armed conflict, with 30 out of the 76 municipal shires (“veredas”) still deserted by 2010 (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011c, 29). The Fuerza Pública was evidently supportive of this criminal paramilitar strategy, failing to assist civilians during the paramilitary’s massacres and attacks, even when early warnings had been given (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011c, 78).
To further complicate matters, from 2000 to 2003, two paramilitary warlords partook in a bloody dispute over territory and drug trafficking (Civico 2015, chap. 2). It was a civil war within a civil war, pitting the *Bloque Metro* led by the warlord “Doble 0” against the *Bloque Cacique Nutibara* led by the warlord “Don Berna.” Their paramilitary structures repeated the same repertoire of coercion toward the civilian community that was previously employed in the offensive against guerrillas, mainly as a means to seize territorial control (*El Tiempo* 2004). The civilian victimization toll rose accordingly.

A cluster of civilian victimization hotspots was evident around the southern tip of the Bolívar department, in the northwestern area of Magdalena Medio, between 1997 and 2001. The affected *municipios* include those with shores in the Magdalena River, from Yondó and Remedios (Antioquia) in the south, to those with shores on the Brazo de Loba Basin up to Altos del Rosario and San Martín de Loba (Bolívar) in the north. In institutional terms, it is a peripheral region in which state presence is scarce (García Villegas 2008, 83–85; Viloria 2009). As Map I-3 illustrates, this northwestern area of Magdalena Medio includes the more geographically isolated *municipios* from the sample, devoid of paved highways and characterized by the imposing topography of both the San Lucas mountain range and the marshes north of the Brazo de Loba, where the Magdalena River and Cauca begin to merge.

The region around the San Lucas range is, on the other hand, rich in mineral resources, including gold mines administered by large transnational corporations, and it experienced an increase in coca leaf production during the 1990s. The ELN guerrillas had a sizable presence in the region since the 1980s and had penetrated local politics and some social movements through the use of coercion (Coronado 2016, chap. 2). The rise of the drug-
trafficking business meant a sizable source of rents from an otherwise sparsely populated region (Molina 2012, chap. 3). With the meager state presence confined to the municipal downtowns, the ELN established parallel institutions to regulate rural life and the drug business, often on illiberal terms (Castillo et al. 2008, 83–84).

In 1997, the guerillas repelled an initial paramilitary offensive with the use of force. In 1998, a second, larger offensive involving multiple paramilitary structures was coordinated by the AUC leadership (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2014, 26–30). The AUC’s stated goal was to neutralize the ELN in the San Lucas Range and establish a safe corridor between Córdoba in the west, close to the border of Panamá, and César, to the east, along the Venezuelan frontier (Semana 1998).

While it is doubtful that the AUC wanted to oust the ELN from the San Lucas range and the southern tip of the Bolívar department, the second part of the goal is dubious. There were no infrastructural means to traverse the San Lucas range east to west. In fact, such means do not exist even today. There are no paved intermunicipal highways. The region’s most efficient means of transport is through the rivers—the Magdalena, the Brazo de Loba, the Cauca—and the marshes and their navigable tributaries (see section 3.2.1 below). It is much more likely that the paramilitares were looking to control the drug-trafficking business and its rents.

By the late 1990s, a number of paramilitar structures were transiting from serving the drug traffickers to coopting the drug-trafficking business themselves (Duncan 2007). As described in the previous chapter, the relation of drug trafficking as a business and the paramilitares as private militias is determined by economic and political geography. Drug traffickers are keen to produce in areas far removed from the reach of the state’s
counternarcotic authorities. They want to protect their coca crops and cocaine laboratories from the antinarcotic police and aerial spraying campaigns. Thus, the production stages of the drug-trafficking business benefited from the peripheral conditions that the San Lucas range offers. The fact that the ELN was there to provide further deterrence against police counternarcotic activities was a plus. On the other hand, drug traffickers are traditional capitalists who would rather invest their earnings in areas where their property rights will be protected. In this investment stage, areas controlled by the state authorities are more attractive to the Mafiosi than areas under the influence of Marxist guerrillas. It is very likely that those paramilitares doubling as drug-trafficking organizations were looking to control the San Lucas Range under a single structure. They would then control the territories key to both the production stages and the investment stages of their business.

Between 1998 and 2003, Barrancabermeja was the third evident hotspot, as shown in Map 3-1. Barrancabermeja is the only industrial enclave in Magdalena Medio; it is a city of oil industry workers who had built a strong and decades-old left-wing political movement unlike any other amid middle level cities in Colombia (C. Medina 1990). The city had a complex political life, wherein certain members of labor unions and political movements had political links with guerrilla groups, while others advanced their causes independently and within the law. The paramilitares laid a “sieged” to the city and its political activity. Their hitmen did not make distinctions between different types of left-wing or opposition activism, and rather, acted with extreme prejudice against all forms of what they considered social protests or left-leaning political alignment (Valencia and Celis 2012; van Isschot 2015; Gill 2016). While peasants and peasant social movements were targets of the paramilitares’ violence, a detailed analysis of the violence in the city suggests that the
industrial labor union and urban social movements were in fact the main targets of the paramilitares and state repressions (CINEP and CREDHOS 2004; A. Vargas 2009).

### 3.1.2 Census of Armed Conflict-Related Homicides

The “Registro Único de Victimas” ("Victims Registry"-RUV) was used to determine the number of yearly-municipal armed conflict-related homicides. The RUV is the state’s official record of victims of grave and/or systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. In other words, it is a metric that excludes violent deaths resulting from law enforcement activity (i.e., counter-narcotic operations) or by organized crime unrelated to armed conflict (i.e., drug cartels).

The RUV data are considered accurate and comprehensive (Sikkink et al. 2015; Pham et al. 2016). It functions as a census of victims. Each candidate’s inclusion is vetted by a systematic process, and there are incentives for victims to come forward and present their case, as well as deterrents for those trying to cheat (UV 2016). While the RUV is permanently undergoing updates, its data for the period of study, 1985-2003, has seen only minor modifications since 2015 (El Tiempo 2015). The RUV dataset employed in this project was web scraped during December 2017. The homicide count was normalized into a per 100,000 inhabitants metric, with official census projections for the demographic data (DANE 2011). The resulting distributions for Colombia in general and in Magdalena Medio are shown in Figure 3-2.
As Figure 3-2 shows, the armed conflict affected Magdalena Medio region to a greater extent than the rest of the country. Between 1985 and 2000, three quarters of the region’s municipios endured more conflict-related homicides than the national median. Figure 3-2 illustrates that at both the municipal level (upper panels) and the aggregate level (lower panel), a pattern of overall intensification characterizes all but the last two years of the period of study. Furthermore, Magdalena Medio endured a significantly higher rate of per-capita homicides, with the relative spread surpassing the twofold difference in 1993 and between 1999 and 2001. This was a particularly bloody region in an already violent country.
3.1.3 On Territorial Control and Intensities of Violence

One of the key contributions from the logic of violence in civil war school of thought (Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas 2015) is a theory that explains the incentives for two types of violence against civilians (selective vs indiscriminate) as determined by the levels of control among warring parties in a civil war. One of the key corollaries from this thesis are that the intensity of violence caused by an armed group is determined through an oscillating and punctuated pattern rather than a linear trend by the level of control that a group has over the population living in a territory (Kalyvas 2006, 203–5). This theory assumes that in such cases were the waging parties have incentives to “court” and profit from the presence of civil society, indiscriminate acts of violence are to be expected where one armed actor has less capacity to collect reliable information from the community; conversely, selective violence should be expected when the armed actor is able to collect reliable information from the community (Kalyvas 2006, 206–8).

Up to a certain degree, these corollaries can be framed in terms of the sources of social power theory. They are compatible with the fundamental definition of infrastructural political power as the capacity of authorities to penetrate society and extract information, of despotic power as the capacity of authorities to act without consulting civil society, and the description of military power as socially organized and concentrated means of coercion with a geographical reach that goes beyond the limits of political power (Mann 2008). One problem of this “translation” is that Mann describes political power in terms of the relative autonomy derived from the control over state institutions, and thus we would need to identify the means through which different warring actors in a civil war have taken control over preexisting state institution or have developed parallel means of governance (Arjona
2016, chap. 1; Kasfir 2015, 24; Ávila 2010). At the same time, we should be careful in not to automatically equate the territorial control held by the regular Armed Forces with a political sovereignty held by the incumbent government as understood in traditional Weberian terms. As previous chapters have made patent, in the Colombian case the regular Fuerza Pública held a degree of political autonomy regarding civilian authorities at the national executive. The role of members of the Armed Forces in sponsoring the paramilitares and in participating in the paramilitary alliances along with drug traffickers does not fit precisely nor in the models of allegiance towards local or national political leaderships as determined by the deployed vs locally recruited models offered by Soifer for historical Latin American cases (Soifer 2015), nor a Weberian model where the military and the political leaderships are implicitly supposed to have an alignment of interests (McDougall 2009).

Recent research on the Colombian armed conflict has benefitted from Kalyvas (2006) seminal work and models. Quantitative and mixed methods studies have tried to operationalize the levels of territorial control held by the guerrillas, paramilitares and the armed forces through several proxies. Unfortunately, as the next paragraphs will describe, I found no systematic measures (nor data repository from which to infer the measure) at the municipal year level for the whole period and region of study to feed this chapter’s panel regression inferential models.

Juan Vargas included CERAC’s BDCA data along with measures of number of National Police troops deployed per capita and dummy variables for the presence of regular military bases for the year 1995 into a cox regression type of survival analysis. His work sought to identify the robustness of factors correlated with the length of time that Colombian
municipios had been subject to political violence (J. F. Vargas 2012). Unfortunately for this project, the data on police personnel density is only available for 1995, and the data on military bases and police stations within the Magdalena Medio is time invariant during the period of study. Furthermore, no data on the territorial distribution of guerrillas or paramilitares was included.

Mario Chacón, James Robinson and Ragnar Torvik model political control before the start of political violence during Colombia’s La Violencia period (1946-1950) as a proxy for territorial control for the liberal and conservative parties. Their findings align with Kalyvas expectation, with the level of political violence negatively related to prior conditions of political electoral hegemony (Chacón, Robinson, and Torvik 2011, 391–92). While this work offers a viable model for La Violencia, it can’t be automatically applied to the late XXth century, when electoral mobilization did not longer correlate with military territorial control. On the other hand, this work inspired the operationalizations present in section 3.3.

Ana Arjona and Stathis Kalyvas obtained information on categorical levels of territorial control of the Colombian armed actors from interviews to demobilized members of the guerrillas and paramilitares. In a research on the determinants of recruitment of combatants, these authors asked a sample of almost 400 former combatants about their perception of the level of control that paramilitares and guerrillas had on the municipio they lived at the moment they were recruited (Arjona and Kalyvas 2011, 161–63). While I had not the opportunity to collect a wider sample of interviews that would yield a statistical significant measure of municipal control for the paramilitares, guerrillas, and Fuerza Pública for the whole region and period of study, Arjona and Kalyvas approach is very promising. In fact, the relevant information for year, place, and armed actor of enrollment of demobilized
combatants had been systematically captured in the biographic interviews of demobilizing combatants at least from 2004 to 2017 (IOM 2017). The caveat is that this information is security sensitive and is not currently in the public domain. Once its sensitivity lapses, it is not unlikely that this information might be released to the public. It will then become an invaluable source to test civil war theories based on metrics of territorial control.

Due to my inability to collect a systematical measure of territorial control at a municipal-year granularity for the three-armed actors, this dissertation can’t add too related to the geographical component of the logic of violence in civil war. On the other hand, by identifying the intensity of civilian casualties caused by each of the armed actors and operationalizing them along measures of the combat casualties caused by the war, we can at least identify what kind of roles were the armed actors concentrating in different scenarios. Were the paramilitares more concentrated on fighting the guerrillas? Or where they more focused on carrying out a dirty war, concentrating their attacks on the civilians? This is a question about the political responsibility of the armed actors. In order to identify the logic that determined such actions, I can not rely on the measures of conflict intensity presented in sections 3.1 and 3.2. To do so I need to recur to the context described in Chapter 1 and 2, and further developed in section 3.4 of this Chapter.

3.2 The State’s Infrastructural Capacity Variables

Following the literature on state infrastructural power (Soifer 2008; Soifer and vom Hau 2008), the model includes metrics for the provision of public services (see Table 3-5) and

13 The author worked in two opportunities with this data. First collecting it from demobilized combatants in 2006, and then, in 2008, processing it. Alas, these datasets are confidential and protected by legal agreements of non-disclosure.
for fiscal capacities (see Table 3-6). Variables measuring the provision of public services include an indicator of the accessibility of regional capitals measured in hours of travel time, the school enrollment rate, and the new indicator of judicial capacities distributions.

Two fiscal variables are also provided. The first fiscal variable measures the (in)dependence of a municipio vis-à-vis the central state. The second variable measures the amount of the land property-related taxes that the local authorities collect.

Table 3-5 Descriptive Statistics for Public Services Provision and Travel Times

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Average Travel Time to 3 Regional Capitals</th>
<th>School Enrollment Rate</th>
<th>Juridical Capacity Index</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>St.Dev.</td>
<td>Min</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.687</td>
<td>4.336</td>
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<td>3.487</td>
<td>4.322</td>
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<td>3.256</td>
<td>4.322</td>
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<td>3.200</td>
<td>4.322</td>
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Table 3-6 Descriptive Statistics for Fiscal Variables

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<th>St.Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.2.1 Average Travel Time to Three Regional Capitals

The possibility to access a public service can be weighted by the effort required to move from where it is needed to where it is provided. Certain public services are provided in centralized, specific places (e.g., a regional capital, the regional seat of a judicial circuit, or police headquarters), so an impedance\(^\text{14}\) metric measuring the travel effort required can be implemented (Escobar, Oviedo, and Moncada 2018). Alternative metrics have also been employed, including travel costs (Condeço-Melhorado, Gutiérrez, and García-Palomares \(\text{Impedance}\) is defined as one divided by resistance. It is a metric for effort.

\(\text{Impedance}\) is defined as one divided by resistance. It is a metric for effort.
and the perceived time required for authorities to respond to emergencies according to surveys (Luna and Soifer 2017). The common goal is to identify a metric that allows for the comparison of the effort required to connect the geographic locations in need of provision with the geographic location of supply points.

To obtain such a metric of travel effort across Central Colombia’s municipios, I created an origin-destination (OD) matrix based on a geographical information database weighting impedance across a time series of the road and riverine transport network. The result is a geographical information system that can determine, assuming ideal conditions, how much time it would take to move between different towns employing the most efficient route available in a given year. In other words, it is the equivalent of a GPS-based navigation system fed with data from the past (Bullock and Krakiwsky 1994).

3.2.1.1 The Travel Time Indicators

The basic “unit” of this indicator is the travel time in hours required to travel, under ideal transport circumstances, and between two municipal downtowns or “cabeceras”. There is one measure for each year, which reflects the evolution of the transport network. To operationalize this metric, a composite index averaging the distance between each municipio and three regional capitals was constructed.

This “average travel time to three regional capitals” is simply a geometric average of the distance in hours calculated from a municipio’s downtown to three department capitals from Central Colombia: its own department’s capital and the capitals from the two closest departments.

For instance, in 1990, Puerto Boyacá (Boyacá) was distant 8.9 hours from its department capital (Tunja), 4.5 hours from Medellín (Antioquia), and 5.3 hours from Manizales.
(Caldas). While Bogotá (Cundinamarca) was closer than Tunja at 5.5 hours, Bogotá is discarded in favor of Tunja to ensure that the munícipio’s own capital is included in the metric.

This indicator is meant to measure a position along the centrality-periphery scale as an expression of ease of access to services and markets. It is inspired by the studies on the multipolar distribution of urban primacies in Colombia, where multiple regional capitals dot a geographically fragmented landscape (Gouëset 2002; Gouëset and Mesclier 2003), and by the methods the IGAC employs to measure the projection of influence irradiating from urban center (1990, vol. 17, chaps. 184–92; IGAC 2002, sec. Centros Subregionals Urbanos).

The department capital was included based on its administrative hierarchy. In Colombia, numerous public services are in fact concentrated at the governor’s office (“gobernación”) or have a seat in the regional capital. The other two capitals, from other departments, were included for their relevance as subsidiary hubs for public services. All three capitals also represent large regional markets. Only three capitals were chosen because according to IGAC’s UCAI measures (Ibid.), no munícipio in Magdalena Medio fell within the overlapping influence of more than three capitals.

As Figure 3-3 illustrates, the characterization of Magdalena Medio as a region of peripheral municipios is confirmed but with considerable variations. On the one hand, more than three quarters of Magdalena Medio falls consistently above the Central Colombian median. Additionally, Magdalena Medio’s own median falls near or above the upper half of the last quartile from Central Colombia. This is a clear representation of a region well above the average levels of connectivity with regional urban poles. On the other hand, between 1985
and 2003, Magdalena Medio’s scores saw comparatively much more pronounced reduction. The median value shrank from 9.4 hours to 7.5 hours, and the mean shrank from 11.1 to 9 hours. Slowly but consistently, the territory was progressively penetrated by a denser transport network, including more kilometers of paved roads in certain cases.

![Figure 3-3 Distribution of average travel time to three regional capitals](image)

*Figure 3-3 Distribution of average travel time to three regional capitals
Source: The author.*

### 3.2.1.2 Construction of the Origin-Destination Matrix

The origin-destination (OD) transport matrix is the core of this dissertation’s geographic model. The matrix was built in two steps. The initial process took nine months. This time was needed to digitize the road networks into a GIS database from a series of analog atlases published by the *Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi (IGAC)*, the state’s geographical

The GIS database categorized the quality of the surfaces as the following four types: (1) paved highways, (2) unpaved highways, (3) dirt roads for motorcar transport (“carreteras”), and (4) bridle roads (“caminos de herradura”). Finally, the availability of a high definition digital set of maps for 2003 (IGAC 2003) allowed for a fast update through the superposition of the minor changes that occurred between 2002 and 2003. As this year would fall outside of the range of predictors for the panel dataset (1985-2002 for independent variables), only changes to paved highways were considered, and they had a negligible effect on Magdalena Medio.

Image 3-1 Crossing the Magdalena in underserved areas
Left: Steel bridge across the Upper Magdalena connecting two dirt roads during the 1980s. Photo by León Ruiz (1987). Right: Ferry from Gamarra (Cesar) unloading vehicles in a
“downtown “atracadero” in Morales (Bolivar) in 2013.” Image taken from Compañía Eléctrica de Norte de Santander (2013).

The second step modeled a riverine network based on the Ministry of Transport’s fare tables for river transport between stops along the Magdalena and Cauca Basins (Ministerio de Obras Públicas y Transporte 1995; Ministerio de Transporte 2012). While these fare tables do not necessarily correspond with the period of study, they nonetheless offer an origin destination cost matrix reflective of the effort invested in moving across the rivers (Perz et al. 2012; Salonen et al. 2012). As the general course of the Magdalena and Cauca Rivers remained largely unchanged during the period of study, the model assumes a constant efficiency for riverine transport.

After combining the road and riverine databases, a transport network impedance algorithm was run in the ArcMap software for each map-year. The effort to traverse a surface was calculated according to the equivalencies from Table 3-7.

Table 3-7 Surface Effort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surface</th>
<th>Speed (Km/H)</th>
<th>Per Node (Minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paved Highway</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaved Highway</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirt Roads</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittle Roads</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projected Road</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferry</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverine Port</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the municipalities city centers are just 15km apart, due to the lack of road transport infrastructure, it is still more efficient to transport medium to heavy loads through an ~85 km-long riverine route.

16 ArcMap 10.5, with ArcGIS Spatial Analysis package, running a network analysis.
The paved and unpaved highway values were chosen following the Ministry of Transports’ design for a typical Trans Andean and Inter Riverine Valleys highway connecting regional capitals and their subsidiary transport networks (DNP and Ministerio de Transporte 1993). Dirt and brittle road values were estimated following my field work experience and in accord with estimates for low quality roads in agrarian areas from Lozano and Restrepo (2016, 291–97). Ferry and port values were based on road vs. riverine cargo speed ratios for the Magdalena River in 2013 (DNP, Ministerio de Transporte, and Cormagdalena 2013, 7–8).

The “highway” speed values might appear for international standards. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that Colombia’s transport network remains well below Latin American standards (G. J. Pérez 2005). For instance, most of these paved “highways” were no wider than 2.2 meters per lane on a two-lane configuration, crossing through imposing terrain. For comparison, Fitzpatrick et al. (2001) reported that North American suburban street lanes have individual widths starting at three meters, where drivers in the faster 85th percentile reach a speed of 64 kilometers per hour (Fitzpatrick et al. 2001).

In any case, the model defines a proxy for impedance and thus a function of the effort required to move from one point to another. In that sense, it is unit “agnostic,” and the choice was a matter of mere convenience. Perhaps the first incongruence with reality is that this model posits perfect conditions that allow for uninterrupted travel between municipios. Natural and social circumstances permanently disrupted Colombia’s road network during the period of study.

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17 Port is employed as a general reference for riverine ports, makeshift piers, and “atracaderos”.
The most frequent natural disruptions were mudslides. A 1992 civil engineering survey reported an average of one mudslide every 17.8 km, with 85% concentrated in secondary and underserved roads (Beltrán, Haya, and Camargo 1992, 41). Newspaper chronicles of road transport from 12 years later still described a road network characterized by mudslides, armed checkpoints by guerrillas and paramilitares, and poor road qualities (Neira 2004). Recurrent social disruptions include traffic jams, protests, and armed roadblocks by guerrillas or paramilitares.

3.2.1.3 Space and time coverage

The resulting database connects municipalities through roads and navigable rivers in a comprehensive network that expands beyond Magdalena Medio. The digitized elements include all the municipalities of eight departments with shores on the Middle and Upper Magdalena Basins. They also include all the roads within those departments plus two additional road networks: the Cartagena–Sincelejo-Montería-Medellín highway and all roads to its east toward the Magdalena and Cauca Rivers as well as the Bogotá–Girardot–Ibagué–Manizalez Highway and all the roads to its north up to the Magdalena River and the Caldas-Tolima border. This operationalization ensures that the OD will include all the fastest possible paths between Magdalena Medio and their respective departmental capitals, while also enabling robust comparisons between the 52 Magdalena Medio and the 532

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18 In fact, the DB covers at least 720 municipalities across most of Colombia, but the high-quality OD matrix only covers the municipalities from the eight departments with shores on Middle and Upper Magdalena, an area referred throughout the document as “Central Colombia”.
19 Equivalent to the Ruta Nacional 25 – Tramos 10 to 15, according to the 1995 nomenclature. (Ministerio de Obras Públicas y Transporte 1995)
20 Equivalent to the Ruta Nacional 40 – Tramos 02 and 03, according to the 1995 nomenclature. (Ministerio de Obras Públicas y Transporte 1995)
remaining municipalities from the seven departments. This sample accounts for 52% of Colombian municipalities and 73% of its population in 1985, and 76% in 2005 (DANE 2011).

Public investment in upgrades to the transport infrastructure transformed parts of the Magdalena River Basin during the period of study (see Map I-2). Figure 3-4 shows how investment in road infrastructure between 1982 and 2002 was much greater in Magdalena Medio than in the rest of Central Colombia. While Central Colombia had doubled the length of paved highways in two decades, Magdalena Medio had a fivefold increase in the same period. Naturally, these percent increments must be taken into the context of a region that in 1982 had a baseline of pavement per municipality much lower than that of Central Colombia. Furthermore, the significant increases in 1986 and between 1996 to 1998 are largely due to the construction of the Bogotá Medellín Highway and Magdalena Medio Turnpike, two major national projects linking capitals in the central and eastern mountain ranges, as well as capitals in the Atlantic Basin (Ministerio de Transporte 2005, 48–50). These massive works did little to change the isolated condition of the northwestern area of Magdalena Medio, between the San Lucas Range and the Upper Cauca Basin.
Figure 3-4 Evolution of paved roads length across regions 1982-2002

Primary sources only provided data for seven years between 1982 and 2002. Two strategies were employed to populate the GIS database for the remaining gap years: 1. a press review of the advances of major highway projects, and 2. a geometrical projection between known values. The following paragraphs explain how these two strategies were combined.

The press review emphasized the identification of the inauguration of bridges and mountain passes. The opening of these landmark public works to traffic yielded punctuated decreases in transport times. These critical updates, few and far apart, were coded manually into the GIS database’s line objects and can be found in Annex 2 Infrastructural Events Not Covered by the Atlas Sources. These partial updates only affected the results for 1983 (i.e., Bogotá-Medellín Highway) and 1994-1997 (i.e., Magdalena Medio Turnpike). Provisional OD matrices were created for those years with the municipio to municipio travel time dyads impacted.

In a second step, the time values for the gap years were estimated as a geometrical projection between known years for all dyads, and the results were exported as a base data frame. In the third step, observations from the provisional and base data frames were compared, and the observations with higher travel time values dropped. This ensured that each year would only have one municipio to municipio observation, which is the one with the lowest possible travel time value.

3.2.1.4 Political science and historical justification for the GIS effort

The construction of this OD matrix was the most time-consuming task of this dissertation, but it was essential to the GIS operationalization of transport impedances that informs the
geographical independent variables of the project’s statistical models. It also offers a data capture method relevant to social research and a trove of data extending Colombia’s transport GIS footprint with previously unavailable data covering the last two decades of the 20th century.

First, it provides a model to recode historical analog cartographic information into georeferenced relational databases. Despite their widespread availability, printed maps storing valuable data are still rarely employed as sources of time series data in systematic ways. The capacity of analog maps to condense a great deal of categorical and numerical information is a promising source for future data science, data-driven social sciences, and digital humanities research projects.

While single maps are often valued and employed as one-time snapshots in political and historical research, the availability of cartographical time series allows for a more comprehensive use, including panel and time dependent analyses. For instance, recent research that has focused on the evolution of state capacities in Colombia has sought to operationalize the quantities and qualities of transport networks in Colombia at the subnational level (F. González 2014; Nieto-Parra, Olivera, and Tibocha 2013; McDougall 2009; F. González 2009; Otero 2009). The authors of these studies examined information in diverse statistical yearbooks and administrative logs and obtained incomplete and often incomparable time and spatial series from the tabular data available. To compensate, Otero (2009), McDougal (2009, 32–34), and Nieto-Parra et al. (2013, 32–36) settled for national summaries or departmental means. Unfortunately, these central tendency-based approaches dilute through their central tendencies the considerable geographical variations present in Colombia. Lina María Sánchez included an impedance regressor in a panel
analysis that investigated the effects of transport costs on regional economic growth, yet her IGAC sources only listed dyads between the larger capitals (2006, 110–12). Her pioneering work inspired this effort to extend the data available to peripheral municipios.

Image 3-2 Consistent cartographical representation of transport infrastructure, 1982-2002

To address these problems with textual sources, this project is innovative in that it extracted data from maps that held infrastructural information with comparable legends. Thus, I was able to obtain longitudinal information at a much granular spatial level. Image 3-2 offers an example of the equivalence required across maps. This data capture model is not restricted to Colombia. It can be applied to any historical case where the required cartography is available.
3.2.2 School Enrollment Rate

The model’s education variable is the enrollment rate of educación media and secundaria students at the yearly and municipal level (See Table 3-5, central panel). This range is largely equivalent to the K12 education system in North America and is colloquially known in Colombia as “bachillerato”.

The working dataset was built using student enrollment data from DANE’s “EDUC” municipal/yearly series, available for the years 1991-1994, and 1996-2003. The 1995 gap was estimated through a geometric mean. The different datasets were interpreted using the DANE’s official guide to navigate them (DANE 2016). To enable comparisons, the demographical normalization was carried out employed Ramírez and Tellez’s (2006) brute rate of scholarship model for residents between 11 and 18 years of age.

It is important to acknowledge and understand the limits of the EDUC source. It is also critical to explain why the variable excludes the first eleven years of this study (1980-1990). While EDUC’s series were implemented from at least 1978 onwards (DANE 2009, 16), I did not find paper or digital logs for most of the 1980s at the municipal level. Department level statistics were published for the 1964 to 1982 period (DANE 1977b; DANE 1984). Furthermore, due to budget cuts, from 1985 to 1989, DANE resorted to drawing regional samples that hid municipal variations and made time series comparisons troublesome—a

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21 The Antioquia Department is an exemption. The regional executive prints a semi-yearly statistical yearbook, the Anuario Estadístico, which is available in print. Regarding the rest of Colombia, I explored libraries and archives, including the central DANE depot in Bogotá, to no avail. During a visit in December 2016, DANE’s “ad-hoc” librarians expressed their concerns over the fate of such data. They stated that abundant “old printed material” had been carelessly discarded from the archives to make room for office space. Additionally, they lamented that a stock of electronic backups stored on tape cassettes had been damaged years ago. In sum, for practical purposes, there is a gap of systematic education statistics at the municipal level between 1983 (DANE 1985) and 1991 (DANE 2016).
fact acknowledged by the institution itself (DANE 1989b, 71; DANE 1989a, 590). In any case, according to DANE (1993, 314), by 1987, the central state lacked the information technology capacity to collect and store education statistics at their primary locations (i.e., the schools) or in their basic jurisdiction (the *municipio*). That capacity was gradually expanded from 1988 onwards, thanks in part to World Bank resources assigned to the Ministry of Education (DANE 2009, 16).

Press reports and interviewed DANE analysts have warned against taking DANE’s social and vital statistics at the municipal level prior to 1998 at face value (Camacho 2015; Barragán 2007). Nonetheless, in the absence of alternative systematic measures, the model employs DANE’s EDUC for 1991 to 2003. The reader should place more faith in the overall trends of central measures than on the perfect accuracy of each of the municipal/year observations. Figure 3-5 illustrates the resulting distribution.

![Figure 3-5 School enrollment rates’ distribution](source: Author’s calculation, with data from (DANE 2016))

School enrollment distribution figures exemplify Magdalena Medio’s peripheral condition. As a general trend, at least three quarters of the region’s *municipios* fall below Central Colombia’s medians. Nonetheless, both sets’ trends follow a similar path of a slow but
steady increase in coverage. This could suggest that national policies drove efforts to widen education coverage for teenagers or, at least, to coordinate efforts between the nation and the regions. Unfortunately, it is impossible to measure the effect grassroots’ initiatives effect on expanding education (i.e., ANUC’s literacy campaigns targeting peasant communities) had during this period (Méndez 2014; Celis 2013). On the other hand, the analysis of how and why the education statistics were collected—or rather, not collected—is indicative of a political power struggle that curtailed the central state’s capacity in the key area of education.

3.2.3 Juridical Density Index

In this dissertation, the judiciary’s levels of coverage and provision of services is measured through an analysis of the geographical distribution of civil jurisdiction courthouses (“juzgados”) and the density of judicial resources normalized by its population. The main source of the data on judicial services and infrastructure comes from the “Consejo Superior de la Judicatura - CSJ-” (High Judiciary Council), which is the judicial power’s administrative body (Consejo Superior de la Judicatura and IGAC 1998; Consejo Superior de la Judicatura and IGAC 2003; Consejo Superior de la Judicatura 1995; Consejo Superior de la Judicatura 1996b; Consejo Superior de la Judicatura 1996a). Secondary sources include statistical compendiums edited by national or regional statistical keeping institutions (DANE 1977a; DAP 1994; SDP 1992; DANE and Ministerio de Justicia 1996). These sources explain the judiciary’s administrative divisions (National-Districts-Circuits-Local), which do not necessarily follow the political geographical division (i.e., department-municipal hierarchy). According to de Zuburía, the spatial distribution of circuit and local courthouses is indicative of judicial municipal coverage (de Zubiría 2012).
The cumulative results for Central Colombia and Magdalena Medio are shown in Figure 3-6. Only moderate changes are seen across the years, with the only notable trend of Magdalena Medio’s turning of a small number of specialized civil courthouses into promiscuous courthouses between 1995 and 1998.\textsuperscript{22} The results suggest a trend of stagnation to moderate erosion during the period of study.

\textit{Figure 3-6 Distribution of courthouses by type, 1993-2003}

While the judiciary’s districts nominally cover the whole country, effective access varies widely across the land. Core regions enjoy a higher density of circuit and municipal courthouses (García Villegas and Espinosa 2013, 49–48). Some peripheral \textit{municipios} do not have a single courthouse inside their borders and must rely on neighboring towns to access judicial services. As research has shown, judiciary coverage in peripheral areas can be further constrained due to a lack of resources, the high cost of travel, and security

\footnote{\textit{Promiscuous} is the literal name of such courthouses in the Colombian judiciary structure.}
constrains (García Villegas 2008; E. M. Restrepo 2003; E. M. Restrepo 2002; Leal Buitrago and Dávila 2010; Arjona 2016).

To operationalize the concepts of the infrastructural penetration of civil courts, two indicators were built. First, a metric of transport impedance from municipal courthouses to their circuit and district seats based on the project’s transport model was established. Second, the Juridical Density Index, a municipal index of judicial resources weighted by population densities, distances, and access to courthouses, was developed.

3.2.3.1 The justification of a geographical distribution for civil jurisdiction services

Civil jurisdiction was selected as a proxy for judicial coverage for two main reasons. First, land ownership disputes—at the core of Magdalena Medio’s social struggles—are the responsibility of civil courts. Furthermore, the ethnographic and historical accounts that inform this dissertation’s understanding of the region’s problems stress the impact that education regarding civil and land rights had on the region’s social and peasant movements (Celis 2013, 115; Kleim 2018). As a consequence, landowning elites that fostered the paramilitary repression saw the increases in civil litigation concerning land rights during the 1980s as a threat to their interests (Celis 2013; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010b; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a).

The second reason for choosing civil jurisdiction was based on the availability of sources that enable the reconstruction of a panel dataset at the municipal-year level. In fact, after a judicious search for primary and secondary sources, only minimal content enabling the reconstruction of judicial services at municipal level was found for the years prior to 1993. Additionally, as Restrepo and Cuellar documented, there are even greater challenges regarding the collection of statistics for the criminal justice system. Records are
inconsistently kept and reported, and the “long hand” of the armed actors interferes more with the criminal justice than with the civil justice record-keeping procedures (E. M. Restrepo and Martínez 2004).

Following recent models for juridical capacity from García Villegas and Espinosa (2013, 58–64), a density index for criminal jurisdiction (“jurisdicción penal”) was initially considered, assembled, and included in the datasets. However, it was ultimately discarded as a source of independent variables for the inferential models. I was able to secure data for the distributions of criminal courthouses but could not assemble a systemic dataset measuring the geographic for the criminal services provided by the Fiscalía General de la Nación—the national attorney service—and nor from the multiple judicial police agencies active during the period (DAS, DIJIN, SIJIN, CTI).

Between 1993 and 2003, the CSJ produced a notable amount of research documents and public datasets on the workings of the judiciary. Many of those publications were looking into quantitative indicators of efficiency in the provision of service and the geographical distribution of the judiciary’s resources. For instance, the CSJ was a pioneer of GIS products in Colombia that created two atlases aimed at operationalizing, in terms of geographical reach, the provision of judiciary services across the territory. These works measured estimated travel times between local, circuit, and district courts, employing different modes of transport, including roads, rivers, and airplanes (Consejo Superior de

23 The general idea of assessing the transport efforts that judges would incur into was not necessarily new, as judiciary planning from the 19th century was already measuring travel times in terms of the “number of days between courthouses in mule.”
la Judicatura and IGAC 1998; Consejo Superior de la Judicatura and IGAC 2003). These GIS efforts informed this project’s own geographic model.

### 3.2.3.2 Magdalena Medio as a judicial periphery

Inequality characterizes the distribution of judiciary services in Colombia—a fact that is illustrated in the yearly distributions of the Juridical Density Index (see Figure 3-7). One percent of the upper outlier municipios enjoy at least three times more resources than the bottom 50% in either Central Colombia or Magdalena Medio. Magdalena Medio is further marginalized, with its upper three quartiles consistently below Central Colombia’s medians.

![Figure 3-7 Juridical Density Index Distribution](source)

*Note: Outliers above 45 Judicial Density points not shown*

*Source: The author, with data from Gaceta Judicial 1993-2003 and (Consejo Superior de la Judicatura and IGAC 1998; Consejo Superior de la Judicatura and IGAC 2003; Consejo Superior de la Judicatura 1995; Consejo Superior de la Judicatura 1996b; Consejo Superior de la Judicatura 1996a; DAP 1994)*

While other infrastructural capacity metrics such as rates of school enrollment and transport infrastructure had at least an overall positive trend during the period of study, if we judge by the evolution of the means from the leftmost panel of Table 3-5 and the
interquartile ranges from Figure 3-7, the findings indicate a pattern of erosion in judicial capacities per municipio.

3.2.3.3 Construction of the Juridical Density Model

The construction of a judiciary density dataset for 1993-2003 was the second most time-consuming effort of this project. A similar fine-grained source has been sought by Colombia-focused authors, with respect to previous works on the relation between density and the efficiency of judiciary services as predictors of political violence, with mixed results. Some works employed productivity proxies which were readily available from the 21st century onwards but were unavailable for the earlier 1990s (Castillo et al. 2008). Others opted to employ department level data and model rational choice incentives for municipal actors (Echeverry and Partow 2002). Even Senator Claudia López’s thorough research comparing three decades (1982-2010) of presidential interventions in municipios affected by the armed conflict was unable to find a transversal juridical density indicator and had to reluctantly employ crime intensity proxies (López 2016, pt. 2604).

The model accounts for Colombia’s judiciary hierarchies, geographical distributions, and courthouse capacities. In general, each municipio has main courthouses at the “local” and circuit level, while, at the same time, there are two courthouse categories: “promiscuous,” which deals with civil, criminal, and labor cases, and “specialized,” which deals with civil cases only. Additionally, certain municipios that lack a courthouse are administratively attached to the “local” jurisdiction of the courthouses from a neighboring town. These composed units are called judicial units (“unidad judicial”).

Municipal and circuit jurisdictions represent the first two levels of the four-tiered Colombian judicial structure, below “judicial districts” and the Supreme Court. According
to the CSJ, the majority of local civil jurisdiction suits enter at the local or circuit levels (Consejo Superior de la Judicatura 2001). Circuit level courthouses are moderately better off than municipal courthouses in terms of material resources but need to support and hear appeals from all of their municipal subordinates (E. M. Restrepo 2003; Prada 1997).

In regard to the category dimension, promiscuous courts tend to be staffed by junior judges, and they must distribute their human and material resources across several types of law. Specialized courts, on the other hand, concentrate more senior judges and focus their efforts on a single form of law (Dumez 2013; Acosta, Fainboim, and Rodríguez 1998).

The proposed model calculates an indicator of municipal access to civil justice by accounting for the number of courthouses, weighted by specialization level, and the distances between the municipio and its focal courthouses. Table 3-8 illustrates the proposed weights by category and hierarchical levels for courthouses.

Table 3-8 Courthouses Category and Hierarchical Weights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Hierarchy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promiscuous</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The model considers distinct municipal-level and circuit-level measures of access to justice. In its first step, it answers the following question: Under ideal circumstances, how many courthouse resources are available to each municipio? Each one is a function of the number of the number of courthouses (\( C \)) at each level (\( m \) – municipal; \( r \) – circuit), weighted by the values from Table 3-8 (\( p \) – promiscuous; \( s \) – specialised), and modulated by the distance in hours (\( D \)) from the municipio to the focal courthouses.
Municipios that are head of circuits will have immediate access to both circuit and municipal level resources. Those who have local courthouses will incur time penalties to access circuit level resources. Finally, those within a unidad judicial that lack their own courthouses will incur time penalties to access both municipal and circuit level resources. The more peripheral a municipio is, the more costs it must incur in accessing resources.

In a second step, the correspondent population (\( \text{Pop} \)) per 100,000 inhabitants normalizes the available resources for each jurisdiction to obtain a juridical density score. Finally, the model considers that the municipal index (\( J_m \)) is a sum of the normalized municipal and circuit resources:

\[
J_m = \frac{c_m \times 10^5}{\text{Pop}_m} + \frac{c_r \times 10^5}{\text{Pop}_r}.
\]

Again, due to a lack of systematic data, the municipal Judiciary Density Index’s values were only calculated for the 1993 to 2003 period (See Table 3-5, right panel).

### 3.2.4 Municipal Fiscal Dependency and Local Taxation Capacity

Two variables measuring municipal fiscal conditions were operationalized, drawing from the yearly fiscal figures compiled by the National Planning Department (DNP 2007; DNP 2012; DNP 2016). The first one measures the economic dependency of a municipio toward the central state as a share of national transfers as a percentage of the total municipal
The indicator measures the share of local tax income that was generated from land property taxes. This property tax—known in Colombia as “predial”—falls under the purview of the local state and represented at least a 50% of local tax incomes for the majority of rural municipios from 1988 to 2001 (Iregui, Melo, and Ramos 2004). The variation of yearly reporting municipios from Table 3-6 shows that the capacity of the central state to gauge its own municipal institutions was irregular across the period of study. This national condition was also replicated at the local level when dealing with land taxes. According to Kalmanovitz and López, by 2003, 58% of the municipal cadastral records were outdated by as many as three decades (Kalmanovitz and López 2006, 350). From a political point of view, this was a result of rural municipal councils dominated by large land owners who were not likely to support cadastral updates or greater land taxation measures (Iregui, Melo, and Ramos 2004; Kalmanovitz and López 2006).

The fiscal strength of a subnational unit such as a municipality is key to three different academic traditions regarding the Colombian paramilitary phenomenon. For the origins of social power school of thought, the capacity of the local state to cooperate with or resist the central state is largely determined by the economic dependence of the former from the latter (Mann 1984; Mann 2008). Within the variations dictated by the norms that determine the budgetary allocation within each regime, national leaders can “discipline” or “reward” local leaders through budgetary transfers from the national to municipal coffers. This is, of course, modulated by the norms of each regime as an expression of the despotic power of the state (Mann 1984; Soifer 2008).

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24 Total municipal income includes transfers, local taxes, royalties from extractive industries, investment returns, and a set of other items.
Thus, if the paramilitary phenomenon was indeed an instrument of local elites wary of real or perceived threats to their interest from national policies such as the democratic aperture, peace processes with guerrillas, or the possibility of progressive taxation (López 2016; F. González 2014), then these elites should make a greater investment in dominating those municipios less dependent on national transfers. This hypothesis is, of course, a corollary of the stated political justification that characterized the rhetoric from the paramilitares, their allies, and their supporters (Duque Gaviria 2006; R. Isaza 2005; El Tiempo 1996; El Provinciano 1990; ACDEGAM 1987).

A growing corpus of Colombia-focused literature drawing from the subnational authoritarianism and warlords’ theoretical approaches has rejected the previous theory. In such accounts, the paramilitary phenomenon was an instrument to capture the local state and its rents while fostering subnational authoritarian regimes through armed clientelism (Richani 2002; M. Romero 2003; F. Gutiérrez and Baron 2005; Ávila 2010; Barón 2011; Duncan 2015a).

From another perspective, the “governance” tradition of development studies has constantly inquired on the relationship between municipal fiscal capacity and “good governance”. For Colombia in particular, the CEDE think tank have led the research agenda linking municipal tax capacity building with competitive elections (F. Sánchez and Pachón 2013), and with lower rates of criminal and political violence (F. Sánchez and Chacón 2006; Sanchez 2007). Their overall conclusion points to a positive relationship between competitive municipal elections and the improvement of fiscal health through, among others, policies that increase the local capacity to measure land value and progressive taxation.
Despite their different emphases, the previous three schools converge on a theoretical expectation: local state’s actions to tax land properties are antithetical to the interests of the landowning elites who sponsored the paramilitary phenomenon and, thus, to the paramilitares themselves. Thus, municipalities with larger property tax rations to local tax incomes should be expected to attract paramilitary violence.

Expectations diverge with respect to the impact of the local state’s fiscal independence on the central state. The narrative of paramilitares as an expression of local elites’ desire for greater independence from the national state is inconclusive and sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, local elites wanted more investment from the state and thus would lobby for more resources; at the same time, they feared alleged redistributive national policies, causing them to seek greater fiscal independence. The other two theories, on rent seeking and governance, do converge on one causal expectation: Greater fiscal independence is related to a more capable and democratic state; thus, it should have a negative effect on political violence against civilians.

Compared to the public services provision measures, the fiscal variables show a smaller difference between Magdalena Medio and the rest of Central Colombia (see Figure 3-8). Both interquartile upper limits and general patterns follow a common trend, even if Magdalena Medio’s patterns show a slightly higher value. This last difference is indicative of the region’s peripheral condition but does not seem to diverge strongly from Central Colombia’s main tendencies.
A similar pattern can be described for the share of land property taxes on total local tax income, albeit more variation between years is evident. All of Magdalena Medio’s medians fall below those of Central Colombia, and, with the exceptions of 1985, 1986, and 2000, the same could be said for the upper three quartiles. Yet, the larger spread between the lower and maximum municipal cases of reliance on land tax income also points to the presence of a notable intra-regional variation. Some municipios were both willing to and capable of implementing land taxes. Others avoided or were unwilling to tax those resources. Law 44 from 1990 allowed municipal councils to set the land property tax’s tariff within 1 and 16% of its commercial value.

In sum, this set of fiscal variables tells more about Colombia in general than about the region of study. The trends suggest a pattern of increased municipal dependency on national transfers as well as a steady contraction of land tax shares of revenues from the

Figure 3-8 Transfers and property tax shares
Source: The author, with data from (DNP 2012; DNP 2007; DNP 2016)
mid-1990s onwards. Magdalena Medio simply shows a slightly more pronounced condition of this larger trend.

### 3.3 Social and Political Mobilization

Social movements and revisionist political expressions supporting redistributive policies strongly contradicted Magdalena Medio’s paramilitares and their allies. As indicated in previous chapters, the interests of peasants and *colonos* clashed with the interests of prominent landowners. The armed forces and many within the state and national elites viewed these clashes through the lens of the Cold War-era National Security Doctrine (Leal Buitrago 2006). Furthermore, the emergence of left-wing political expressions and parties were a challenge to the traditional Colombian liberal-conservative bipartisan structure (M. Romero 2003; F. González 2014). In these contexts, left-wing positions as well as redistributive policies concerning material wealth (i.e., land reform or increased taxation to fund public education), political participation (i.e., democratic aperture), and the contestation of traditional rural authority (i.e., the emergence of an independent peasant movement outside bipartisan tutelage) were met with suspicion from traditional local elites, conservative elements of the armed forces, and the emerging drug trafficker barons (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013a; Robinson 2014). The latter of these three groups came to Magdalena Medio looking to reinvest their profits into rural properties, and they were more interested in land concentration than in hearing about “land distribution” or agrarian reforms (Thoumi 1995, 249; Albán 2011). The paramilitares were an instrument of violent repression to counter these social and political challengers.

To account for such political contention, the model includes variables measuring peasant mobilization and the electoral weight of left-wing/pro-land reform parties (See Table 3-9).
3.3.1 Peasant Mobilization

As a proxy for the intensity of peasant social movements, I applied a count indicator of protests, marches, the occupation of public buildings and rural states, and similar events for this dissertation. The original data derive from the think tank CINEP’s database on social conflicts (2011) and are restricted to Magdalena Medio. Only those events with peasant participation were included and aggregated into municipal-year observations. The data show a general reduction of events over time, with two active periods separated by a brief pause (See Figure 3-9).

![Figure 3-9 Peasant mobilization events in the Magdalena Medio](source: The author, with data from CINEP (2011))

The first runs from 1985 to 1992 and, as mentioned before, is temporally correlated with the rise and fall of the original paramilitary structures from Puerto Boyacá and Puerto Berrio. The second active period runs from 1996 to 2001, at which point it abruptly stops. This period correlates with the constitution of the AUC and the return of paramilitary structures to Magdalena Medio. This later period also correlates with the increases in political violence and civilian victimization described in this chapter’s section 3.1.
Previous works have warned that protests and social movements were met with harsh repression in Magdalena Medio (Leal Buitrago 2006; van Isschot 2015; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a). Albeit according to case studies, in some cases, repression engendered more resistance, with social movements adapting their repertoire of contentions (Celis 2013; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010b).

**Table 3-9 Descriptive Statistics for Social and Political Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Peasant Mobilization Events</th>
<th>Electoral Weight of Left Wing/Revisionist Parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2.600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Peasant protests were politically symbolic, but, as Figure 3-9 shows, they were not widely distributed across municipios. As recent cultural, gender, and economic literature has stressed (Bedoya 2017; Manresa and Betancur 2014), protest events were certainly not the only forms of resistance and social coordination. Rather, they were merely the ones available during a municipal year level for the whole region. Furthermore, they were
designed to raise the awareness of the national public and/or regional and national authorities regarding the problems the peasant communities faced (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a, 156,477; Silva-Prada 2012a; Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra 2000, 7).

3.3.2 Electoral Weight of Left-Wing and Revisionist Parties

The model includes a measure of the electoral weight of left-wing and revisionist parties. These were the parties and candidates that, if elected into the offices of an infrastructural capable state, would then present a credible menace to the landowning and political elites, according to Boix’s theory of democratization (Boix 2003; Soifer 2013).

![Figure 3-10 Distribution of left-wing and pro-land reform electoral shares in Magdalena Medio. Calculations by the author, with data from (Pachón and Sánchez 2014).]
Electoral tallies include the municipal level values for the municipal council, departmental assembly, and the national House of Representatives (lower house). These elections were chosen because of their frequency and data availability and due to their shared electoral logic within the Colombian political system. In terms of their frequency, council and assembly elections were held every other year until 1994 and every three years until 2003. Parliament, which is elected every four years, was dissolved by the Constituent Assembly in 1991, which triggered an additional snap election in that same year. As Figure 3-10 illustrates, this combination results in 13 data-year points for the period of study, with only one data gap greater than a year (1995-1996). The vote tally comes from the official records of the Registraduría Nacional, as compiled by Pachón and Sánchez (2014). Unfortunately, no printed or digital records for the 1988 municipal council elections were found.

According to the vast body of literature on Colombian politics, these three elections are procedurally linked through coordinated campaign efforts from parties and candidates articulated through clientelistic practices (see specially Leal Buitrago and Dávila 2010; also, Duque 2006; Botero, Losada, and Wills 2016; Losada and Liendo 2015; Roll 2002; Crisp and Ingall 2002). Up until to 1991, a single candidate could register for the three levels simultaneously. After the 1991 Constitution, the practice was altered, but coordination between municipal, departmental, and national candidates remained common practice, as members of collegiate bodies were the only elected officials allowed to openly campaign in elections different than their own.

3.3.3 The Left-Wing/Revisionist Electoral Weight Indicator

To obtain a yearly measure of the electoral weight left-wing/pro-land reform parties, the following index was constructed. First, the share of left-wing revisionist votes was
averaged according to the electoral year within each municipio. The number of cases averaged depended on the types of election conducted. Second, to fill inter-election years of the maximum one year, a geometric average was calculated. This measure was expected to reflect the campaign activity as well as how menacing the political left’s chances would be from the perspective of the patrons of the paramilitary alliance (landowning and political local elites, members of the military indoctrinated into the National Security Doctrine, drug traffickers). For the 1995-1996 two-year gap, the electoral obtained values of 1994 were carried into 1995, and the geometric average between 1995 and 1997 was applied to 1996.

I carried out the categorical coding on the ideological dimension by comparing parties and candidates with academic anthologies regarding the evolution of Colombian parties and elections. This method was especially useful for identifying the over 100 different parties and movements with candidates in Magdalena Medio during the 1990s and early 2000s. In effect, the electoral changes brought about by the 1991 Constitution led a partisan atomization process, wherein, from a handful of parties active in 19, hundreds of new small parties emerged during the 1990’s (Botero, Losada, and Wills 2016; D. Hoyos 2007).

This dissertation relies on the partisan anthologies and ideological/clientelistic heritage compiled by the lists of parties and ideological/clientelistic heritage provided by Diana Hoyos (2007, sec. Annex I) and Javier Duque (2007, 45–60) for the liberal and conservative traditions and by Jaider Espinoza (2011, chap. 1) for the left-wing tradition. Further details about the municipal level were obtained from other municipal or regional case studies (e.g., Carlos Hernández 2015; Gaitán 2010; Acevedo 2010; C. Rodríguez 2008; Parra and Rincón 2001; Cabezas 2012; A. Romero 1994; Olaya 2017; Aguilera 2012; A.

3.4 A Panel Regression Model on Paramilitary Violence

The previous section described the individual elements for the proposed model to explain paramilitary political violence against civilians. The elements account for conflict intensity, public service coverage, transport infrastructure, fiscal capacities, and sociopolitical mobilization. The design principally follows logic inferred from the sources of social power theory, economic geography, and the Colombia-focused literature on clientelism, armed clientelism, and “warlords”. The selection of works on Colombia are themselves part of more general academic approaches—mainly, the studies on subnational variations of regimes and capacities (see Gibson 2010), the rent-seeking economic theory of armed insurgencies (see Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Weinstein 2007) and the “logic of violence in civil war” school on the breaks between macro narratives of war and micro foundations for individual behavior and local contexts (Kalyvas 2006). A simple text mining analysis reveals that three quarters of the academic works (thesis, academic books, and scholarly journals) referred to in sections 3.2 and 3.3 and published after 2004 cited at least two works by authors Michael Mann, Edward Gibson, Paul Collier, and Stathis Kalyvas.

To test the causal relationships this chapter will employ two types of panel regressions: fixed effects (FE) and first differences (FD). A key advantage offered by a panel regression is that its operationalization ensures that the observations from the independent variable always occur within one-time unit prior to the observations from the dependent variable. In other words, the hypothetical causes always occur before the hypothetical effects.

The inferential model is defined in the following terms:
With $C$ as the count of civilian victims per municipio, $K$ as the count of casualties per municipio, $A$ as the number of actions per municipio, and $P$, $F$, and $G$ as the paramilitares, Fuerza Pública, and guerrillas armed actors, respectively (See 3.1.1). With $H$ as the rate of armed conflict-related homicides, normalized at per 100,000 inhabitants (See 3.1.2).

With $T$ as the average travel time to three regional capitals in hours, $S$ as the high school enrollment percentage, $J$ as the juridical capacity score, $X$ as the share of national transfers to total municipal income (percentage), and $P$ as the share of land property tax to total local tax income (percentage) (see 3.2).

With $M$ as the count of peasant mobilization events, and $L$ as the score of the electoral weight index (See 3.3).

With $i$ as the municipal unit, $\theta$ and $t$ as the year time units for the dependent and independent variables respectively, where $\theta = t + 1$, then for models 1 and 2, let

$$C_{Pi\theta} = \alpha_i + K'_{Fit} \beta + C'_{Fit} \beta + K'_{Git} \beta + C'_{Git} \beta + K'_{Plit} \beta + T'_{it} \beta + S'_{it} \beta + J'_{it} \beta + X'_{it} \beta + P'_{it} \beta + M'_{it} \beta + L'_{it};$$

for models 3 and 4, let

$$C_{Pi\theta} = \alpha_i + H'_{it} \beta + T'_{it} \beta + S'_{it} \beta + J'_{it} \beta + X'_{it} \beta + P'_{it} \beta + M'_{it} \beta + L'_{it};$$

and, finally, for models 5 and 6, let

$$A_{Pi\theta} = \alpha_i + A'_{Fit} \beta + A'_{Git} \beta + T'_{it} \beta + S'_{it} \beta + J'_{it} \beta + X'_{it} \beta + P'_{it} \beta + M'_{it} \beta + L'_{it}.$$

Models 1, 3, and 5 are operationalized following a fixed effect panel clustered at the municipal level $i$ and where $t$ is a calendar year time unit, following

$$Y_{i\theta} - \bar{Y}_i = (X_{it} - \bar{X}_i)' \beta + (e_{it} - \bar{e}_i);$$

and models 2, 4, and 6 following
The results of the inferential models for the 1988-2003 period are summarized in Table 3-10. Both fixed effects (FE) clustering municipios at the unit level and first differences (FD) models are reported. The first one is meant to test the absolute intensities across time and within each municipio. The second one is a method that in past decades has lost popularity compared to fixed or random effects modeling. However, for the purpose of this study, it offers an analytical advantage: It measures the effects of inter-year variations in a variable rather than their absolute values. Those variations are representative of the amount of progress or decay in intensity that each variable had in a year, and thus are very useful to model the short-term effects of items such as the armed presence of waging actors, the capacities of the state, the evolution of fiscal health, and the chances of the political left to become a credible electoral or administrative threat.

A panel model was selected to profit from one valuable characteristic of the Colombian case: the availability of granular statistics on political violence and victimization in very fine spatiotemporal detail (J. Restrepo, Spagat, and Vargas 2003; Granada, Restrepo, and Sánchez 2009; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013a).

From a more qualitative perspective, following Soifer (2013), I argue that the contrast between those areas where the central state had greater difficulty collecting information (i.e., education, cadastral updates, local tax collection, and judicial figures at the municipal level) and those that it has captured regularly (i.e., demographic, economic, criminal, fiscal, and judicial at the regional level) are at least partially reflective of the balance of power between intra-state political actors. These include tensions between national and local authorities but also the interactions between the interests of national politicians, regional
politicians, and local bases—elite and grassroots—to obtain, deny, and exercise the political power derived from the infrastructural capacity of the state. Additional advantages of a panel method include an increase in the number of observations, the confidence that the alleged causes occurred prior to the alleged effects, a relief from heteroscedasticity (which was confirmed through a pooled ordinary-least-squares regression), and a clustering among units (municipios) compatible with robust standard error calculation. The following models include the universe of municipios under study, thus caution is warranted when interpreting the so-called “statistical significance indicators” or the \( p \)-value. While some predictors have very low \( p \)-values and the main model’s adjusted \( R^2 \) is relatively high, I also report alternative models operationalizing related but different predictors as contrasts. These are procedures the statistical community advises using in order to address the common misinterpretation of the \( p \)-values (Wasserstein and Lazar 2016).

This project is a (single) case study for Magdalena Medio during a given period. This is an ad-hoc region; it does not exist in legal or institutional terms. The criteria to include (or exclude) municipalities in the region followed a list compiled by Colombia’s Vice-Presidency office in 2001 (Vicepresidencia de la República 2001). This list has gained some popularity with judicial and academic researchers because it is based on geographic and social characteristics shared by its municipios (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a; Norman 2012; Sala de Justicia y Paz 2014a; Sala de Justicia y Paz 2014b; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2015). Nonetheless, the selection of units of analysis is not based on a clear-cut institutional or legal definition of Magdalena Medio. The external validity of this project must be understood accordingly.
Furthermore, the spatial units of analysis, i.e. the municipios, are also arbitrary administrative and geographical units. The temporal unit, i.e. the calendar year, is no less arbitrary. This project is from its roots limited in its inference due to the modifiable areal unit problem (Jelinski and Wu 1996) and its temporal sibling, the modifiable temporal unit problem (Cheng and Adepeju 2014). Therefore, the same limitations apply to a vast amount of comparative politics literature that relies on the observation of polities or jurisdictions and to most aggregate temporal unit econometric inference models.

3.4.1 The Conflict Intensity Variables

For the main models (1 and 2), the predicted variable is the number of civilians killed in acts of political violence involving the paramilitares. The strongest and fundamental predictors are the conflict intensity variables: civilian and general casualties caused in the previous year by the Fuerza Pública and the guerrillas, as well as the general casualties due to the actions of the paramilitares. These variables show low $p$-values ($<0.01$) and are, in fact, the principal contributors to the models’ relatively high adjusted $R^2$ scores. This strong influence is probably due to the evident correlation between the intensity of a civil war and the rising toll of civilian casualties.

The contrast between general casualties and civilian casualties by actor is revealing because of their contradictory directions. A positive relation characterizes the intensity of casualties caused by the Fuerza Pública and the paramilitares, but a negative relation characterizes the casualties caused by the guerrillas’. At the same time, the relation of civilian victimization by the Fuerza Pública (negative) and the guerrillas (positive) presents a second level of complexity.
Table 3-10 Paramilitary Violence Panel Models, 1988-2003

|                       | **Main Model** | | **Secondary Models** | |                     |
|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
|                       | Civilian Victims by paramilitares | Civilian Victims by paramilitares | Actions by paramilitares | |
|                       | Fixed Effects | First Difference | Fixed Effects | First Difference | Fixed Effects | First Difference |
|                       | (1)           | (2)             | (3)           | (4)             | (5)           | (6)             |
| Casualties by Fuerza Pública | 0.631***     | 0.609***        | 0.609***     | 0.511***        | 0.303***     | 0.303***        |
|                        | (0.027)       | (0.026)         | (0.026)       | (0.026)         | (0.026)       | (0.026)         |
| Casualties by guerrillas | -0.354***    | -0.434***       | -0.434***    | -0.236***       | -0.236***    | -0.236***       |
|                        | (0.106)       | (0.101)         | (0.101)       | (0.101)         | (0.101)       | (0.101)         |
| Casualties by paramilitares | -0.624***    | -0.626***       | -0.626***    | -0.626***       | -0.626***    | -0.626***       |
|                        | (0.023)       | (0.023)         | (0.023)       | (0.023)         | (0.023)       | (0.023)         |
| Civilian Victims by guerrillas | 0.672***    | 0.626***        | 0.626***     | 0.511***        | 0.303***     | 0.303***        |
|                        | (0.048)       | (0.046)         | (0.046)       | (0.046)         | (0.046)       | (0.046)         |
| Casualties by Fuerza Pública | 0.790***    | 0.784***        | 0.784***     | 0.784***        | 0.784***     | 0.784***        |
|                        | (0.020)       | (0.020)         | (0.020)       | (0.020)         | (0.020)       | (0.020)         |
| Conflict Related Homicides | 0.028***    | 0.027***        | 0.027***     | 0.027***        | 0.027***     | 0.027***        |
|                        | (0.003)       | (0.004)         | (0.004)       | (0.004)         | (0.004)       | (0.004)         |
| Actions by Fuerza Pública |                      |                  | 0.259***     | 0.259***        | 0.303***     | 0.303***        |
|                        |                  |                  | (0.028)       | (0.028)         | (0.030)       | (0.030)         |
| Actions by Guerrillas |                      |                  | -0.003       | -0.003          | -0.037*      | -0.037*         |
|                       |                  |                  | (0.017)       | (0.017)         | (0.020)       | (0.020)         |
| Average Travel Time to 3 | 0.052          | -0.004          | 0.115        | -0.056          | -0.020       | -0.020          |
| Regional Capitals     | (0.212)        | (0.512)         | (0.449)      | (1.114)         | (0.086)      | (0.214)         |
| School Enrollment     | -0.182         | 5.780***        | 8.815***     | 12.611***       | 0.152        | 0.438           |
|                        | (1.567)        | (2.272)         | (3.246)      | (4.900)         | (0.626)      | (0.945)         |
| Juridical Density Score | -0.018        | 0.079           | -0.075       | 0.247           | -0.027       | -0.027           |
|                        | (0.091)        | (0.175)         | (0.192)      | (0.382)         | (0.037)      | (0.074)         |
| Share of Transfers to Total Income | -0.567    | -0.525          | -0.692       | -0.119          | -0.123       | -0.123           |
|                        | (0.953)        | (0.896)         | (2.008)      | (1.946)         | (0.386)      | (0.375)         |
| Share of Land Property Tax to Local Income | 0.992*      | -0.005          | 1.352        | 2.209           | -0.287       | 0.278           |
|                        | (0.589)        | (0.729)         | (1.245)      | (1.568)         | (0.239)      | (0.304)         |
| Peasant Mobilizations Events | -0.202*     | -0.218**        | -0.096       | -0.367*         | 0.092**      | 0.076*          |
|                        | (0.111)        | (0.098)         | (0.234)      | (0.212)         | (0.045)      | (0.041)         |
| Electoral Weight of Left Wing Revisionist Parties | 5.575***   | 7.603***        | 7.420**      | 9.549**         | -0.511       | 0.361           |
|                        | (1.478)        | (2.118)         | (3.116)      | (4.580)         | (0.601)      | (0.883)         |
| CONSTANT                | -0.122         | -0.079          | -0.079       | 0.031           | 0.031        | 0.031           |
|                        | (0.137)        | (0.297)         | (0.297)      | (0.057)         | (0.057)      | (0.057)         |
| Observations            | 478            | 428             | 478          | 428             | 478          | 428             |
| Adjusted R-squared      | 0.802          | 0.815           | 0.114        | 0.117           | 0.242        | 0.3             |
| F statistic             | 165.952***     | 157.300***      | 14.763***    | 8.082***        | 23.344***    | 21.315***       |
|                        | (df = 12; 416) | (df = 12; 415)  | (df = 8; 420)| (df = 8; 419)  | (df = 9; 419) | (df = 9; 418)  |

**Notes:** ***p < .01; **p < .05; *p < .1
These combinations can be interpreted through the following matrix:

1. The positive relation with the overall *Fuerza Pública* military and guerrilla activity supposes a contradiction with the paramilitares as the “rural protectors of regions not defended by the state.”

2. The parallel positive relation of *Fuerza Pública* with paramilitary activity suggests that these forces fought in alongside each other rather than in an alternate pattern.

3. The positive sign of civilian victimization by guerrillas, even when accounting for overall guerrilla, paramilitary, and *Fuerza Pública* intensity, suggests that the guerrillas fought a dirty war, targeting civilians in those *municipios* where they could not target military objectives.

The first two interpretations imply that the intensity of paramilitary actions against civilians was caused by offensives from the regular armed forces and not necessarily by a strong presence of guerrillas in the territory. In fact, less intense guerrilla actions cause less paramilitary victimization. This is a clear contradiction to the political narrative that justified the paramilitary phenomenon as a self-defense mechanism to shield rural entrepreneurs from the predation of Marxist guerrillas because it posits that paramilitary and regular military martial intensities went hand in hand. This regional trend of Magdalena Medio is in line with previous research at the national level (J. Restrepo, Spagat, and Vargas 2003; Albertus and Kaplan 2012).

The third interpretation is in line with the corollaries from the geographical expectations of the logic of violence in civil war theories (Kalyvas 2006). It is also representative of the dirty war described at length in the works of the *Grupo de Memoria Histórica* (2013a), as
well as in narratives from demobilized paramilitares (Fiscalía General and Duque Gaviria 2007; Manrique and Tanner 2016).

A corollary of the second and third interpretations is in line with a characterization of the paramilitares as an ally of the traditional armed forces that complemented the latter’s “regular” actions with “dirty war” operations: massacres, assassinations, and all sorts of vigilante types of aggressions. A combination of national and international pressure, with the end of the Cold War and the pressure by the United states through the Plan Colombia’s military assistance conditions playing a significant role, gave a strong incentive to the Army, Air Force, and National Police to improve their human rights violations records (Bagley 2001; Leal Buitrago 2006; Holmes, Amin, and Curtin 2008). This “political economy” division of work, in which the state’s security forces concentrated on legitimate military targets while leaving the dirty war-type of actions like selective assassinations and the targeting of civilian suspects, was decried by human right activists, social movements, and scholars throughout the 1980s and 1990s (C. Medina and Téllez 1994; Human Rights Watch 1996; CINEP and CREHOS 2004). Yet, analyses of public opinion perspectives on victims and victimizers have shown that such claims gained only moderate traction (Cuellar 2000; Rettberg 2015). Nowadays, international human rights courts and the transitional justice process have confirmed beyond a doubt the existence of such a criminal connivance between members of the *Fuerza Pública*, political elites, and the paramilitares (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010a; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011b; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013a).

The data feeding these initial conflict intensity variables do not allow us to distinguish between “collateral casualties”–civilians killed or injured in acts of war targeting
combatants—and civilians purposely targeted outside of combats (i.e., selective assassinations, among others). Nonetheless, the low \( p \)-values of civilian causalities by actor and the contradiction in signs suggest that these civilians were consistently not targeted purely for military reasons.

3.4.2 Infrastructural Capacity Variables

The impact of the infrastructural power variables on the predicted outcomes was modest. Only school enrollment received low \( p \)-scores across the main and secondary models. Average travel time to regional capitals had a positive sign when predicting civilian casualties by the paramilitares and a negative sign when predicting paramilitary actions. The juridical capacity index had a negative sign in the fixed effects models for civilian casualties and for both the fixed and first difference models for actions. It had a positive sign for the first difference regressions on casualties. The share of transfers over total municipal income—a proxy for fiscal independence—had a negative sign across all models. The share of land tax income over total municipal taxation was positive in all models predicting civilian victimization, but it had a low \( p \)-value in model 1.

The modest statistical impact of these infrastructural metrics does not allow us to fully confirm or deny the initial theoretical intuitions inferred from Mann’s political power theory. They might, on the other hand, imply that either a 15-year span (10 years for the judicial score, 12 years for the education coverage) is too small of a period for such mechanics to play a significant role, or that the evolution of transport and judicial capacities in the region was so small that only a marginal effect was warranted. Authors have qualified Colombia’s infrastructural weakness as historically profound and persistent (Palacios and
Safford 2002; J. Restrepo and Moscoso 2011; Soifer 2015)—trends that might not be quickly reversed despite the relative increase in road qualities (See Figure 3-4).

Yet, a broad assessment can still be made. The positive sign for the travel time to regional capitals in models predicting civilian casualties is less aligned with the notions of the paramilitary fighting in the most distant peripheries. Rather, it is more consistent with a paramilitary phenomenon that was active in areas progressively connected to regional poles. Yet, the effect seems minute with a reduction of almost twenty hours of average travel time to account for each additional civilian casualty, according to model 1.

School enrollment has a positive sign and low $p$-values in models 2, 3 and 4. These results are again contrary to the traditional peripheral narrative and point to greater victimization in those municipios where school coverage was increasing. This pattern for the 1990s and early 2000s does follow the path described in the history of the ANUC’s literacy campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s, which were met with political resistance and whose leaders faced harsh repression by the earlier paramilitares (J. M. Pérez 2010; Celis 2013; Méndez 2014).

It is also consistent with the paramilitary leaders’ repression of secondary education, which has been documented in other peripheral regions (L. M. González 2016; Velez 2017).

The negative sign for the juridical density scores in all fixed effects models is unsurprising, given the sustained decline in these metrics across time (Figure 3-7). The project’s initial intuition posited that peasant movements during the 1990s were coordinating among them and educating their members on how to defend their rights and land titles in civil courts. This intuition was based on field visits to Magdalena Medio, on the active participation account from Celis (2013), and on the judicial activism narratives from van Isschot (2015). The expected result, with a control for the intensity of peasant mobilization, was, in fact, a
negative relation. While helpful, the outcomes from this linear model fall short of fully rejecting or confirming this aspect of my argument.

The share of national transfers to municipal coffers relative to all municipal incomes received a negative sign across all models. The share of local taxes coming from land property tax had, on the contrary, a positive sign for all models predicting the paramilitares’ victimization of civilians. Both findings are consistent with the descriptions of the paramilitares’ behavior as rent-seeking structures led by warlords and criminal and clientelistic local elites (Richani 2002; M. Romero 2003; F. Gutiérrez and Baron 2005; Ávila 2010; Barón 2011; Duncan 2015a), as well as with the governance literature that has shown a negative relationship between municipal dependency on transfers and political violence (F. Sánchez and Chacón 2006; F. Sánchez and Pachón 2013). Nonetheless, only one of the scores with the expected sign had a $p$-value below 0.1; it appears in model 1.

### 3.4.3 Social and Political Mobilization Variables

The social and political mobilization variables obtained medium-low to low $p$-values in certain models, yet their signs were not all as expected. The count of peasant mobilization events had a negative sign when predicting paramilitary civilian victimization, but a positive sign when predicting the number of their actions. The electoral weight of left-wing and revisionist parties had a positive sign and medium-low to low $p$-values in those models related to victimization; it also had a positive sign in the first difference model for paramilitary actions.

Both the literature on the paramilitares and their allies as well as the depositions from the paramilitary commanders during transitional justice proceedings clearly indicate that these armed groups regarded grassroots peasant movements as political enemies and, as such,
Paramilitary violence against peasant movements is a central theme in most narratives of social life in Magdalena Medio and surrounding regions during the period of study (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010a; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a; Celis 2013; van Isschot 2015; J. Vargas and Becerra 2016; Reyes 2016; L. M. González 2016). From these accounts, the initiation intuition posited a positive relation from the intensity of peasant movements to civilian victimization. The expected process was one of paramilitary revenge and unconstrained offensive action against the peasant organization. The opposite result, a negative relation with medium-low and mildly low $p$-value scores, was puzzling.

There is an alternative, “optimist” explanation based on the negative relationship between strong communities and the capacity of outsiders to harm them. This is indeed a common occurrence, amply documented in social movement and human security studies (Korovkin 2000; Barreto 2009; Idler, Belén Garrido, and Mouly 2015). Tightly “knit” communities are more resilient to outsider aggression. Social ties, knowledge of the terrain, and a sense of community are all deterrents of violence. Yet, the confessions from paramilitary leaders of Magdalena Medio plainly contradict this optimistic approach, as it documents their systematic aggression against rural communities (Fiscalía General and Duque Gaviria 2007; Sala de Justicia y Paz 2014b; Sala de Justicia y Paz 2014a). Furthermore, studies on forced displacement leave little doubt that the paramilitary groups were responsible for land theft and land grabbing, expelling scores of peasants and colonos from the region as a result (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011a; Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las

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25 The transitional justice process for the paramilitares includes sessions during which the members of the organization answered questions from the attorneys (“fiscales”) and the victims. These sessions are called “versiones libres.”
Additionally, the consistent positive and statistical significant relation between the electoral weight of the political left and the paramilitary victimization of civilians casts doubts on the “optimist” alternative. How could grassroots and political contestation of the regional rural order have contradictory effects on the behavior of the paramilitares?

A second, more mechanical explanation is tested in models 5 and 6. Instead of examining civilian victimization and the intensity of casualties (civilian or not) from acts of war, it operationalizes a count of the military actions by the paramilitares (independent variable), the *Fuerza Pública* and the guerrillas. In this scenario, the results for peasant mobilization have the expected positive sign and have medium-low and mildly low \( p \)-values for the fixed effects and first difference models, respectively. The logic behind this operationalization is based on the possibility that the paramilitares’ attacks on tightly knit peasant communities were less efficient (i.e., unable to damage communities or hurt/kill as many victims). In other words, there were more attacks, but they were less effective. A stronger local community might have the ability to mobilize in order to offer a certain level of protection to its members from third-party violence. It is a theory full of hope, but I was unable to find evidence that this was the case, at least not at a systemic level. Most stories of a community shielding one of their own against a paramilitary aggression end in a delay of the assassination or, in the best scenario, an internal or international exile (See, among others, Santamaría 1983b, 3A; Celis 2013, 113–14; Duzán 2015, chap. 7; L. M. González 2016, 249–50). Yet, the resilience of resolute social movements and communities is strong, and there is no lack of evidence that peasant organizations did in fact manage to face the wrath and depredation of the paramilitares, the *Fuerza Pública*, and the guerrillas.
The contrast between the models operationalizing victimization (1-4) and those operationalizing armed actions (5-6) signal that further, more detailed analysis is required to solve this puzzle. For instance, it is possible that the sources and operationalization employed as proxies for peasant mobilization are not reflective of the level of social cohesion required to solve this question. Narratives and qualitative literature cited in this dissertation have also suggested that certain areas—the South of Bolivar, the Cimitarra and Carare Basins—had stronger than average peasant movements. The sub-municipal nature of these movements may have had effects that a panel regression set on a municipal granularity did not properly capture.

The electoral weight of the left-wing and revisionist parties received the expected positive sign and has low to medium-low $p$-values across the civilian victimization models. These results are congruent with theoretical expectations, as well as with the paramilitares’ unapologetic targeting of all forms of left-wing and pro land-reform expressions as “military targets”. Narratives on the progressive and systematic political violence against leaders from left-wing political expressions such as the Unión Patriótica, the MOIR, the social-democratic wing of the liberal party, and unionist leaders seeking public office, among others, can be found in Medina and Téllez (1994), Romero (2003), and Valencia and Celis (2012). The paramilitary repression against the political left was certainly instrumental in paving the way for the electoral success of their allies and handpicked candidates.
By the turn of the century, the paramilitary or their allies had, in the words of the “parapolítica” literature, successfully “captured and reconfigured” the state at the local level in most of the region (M. Romero 2007, 14; M. E. Arango 2013, 77–78). The process had begun in the 1980s in southern Magdalena Medio with the Autodefensas de Puerto Boyacá, their political arms (within the liberal party and their own movement MORENA)—a fact that was admitted in interviews with elected officials from the paramilitary ranks (Rubio 1987 Mayor of Puerto Boyacá; Guarín 1987, Councilman and Congressman from Puerto Boyacá; Fiscalía General and Duque Gaviria 2007 Councilman of Puerto Boyacá and Deputy Secretary of the Department of Boyacá). It reached a regional high mark in December 2001 and January 2002 in the “Puerto Berrió” pacts, at which time regional paramilitary warlords and career politicians handpicked candidates and implemented “ad-hoc” electoral districts for the upcoming 2002 legislative elections (López and Sevillano 2008, 68; Sala de Justicia y Paz 2011, para. 486). The electoral success of such pacts, which were replicated across the country, allowed the AUC to claim that they had conquered “35% of Congress” for the 2002-2006 legislature (Salvatore Mancuso quoted by López and Sevillano 2008, 78).

3.5 Chapter Conclusions

This chapter offered a set of panel linear regression models that sought to characterize the intensity of paramilitary violence in municipios from Magdalena Medio during the 1988 to 2003 period through armed conflict, state infrastructural power, and socio-political mobilization variables. The design of the model was informed by theories on the political economy of territorial control in civil war (i.e., the “logics of violence in civil war” school of thought) and the political power dimensions of the sources of social power school of
thought, with an emphasis on the infrastructural power of the state. The political system was interpreted through the lenses of the literature on Colombian clientelism, and the political contentions through the Colombia-focused studies of the paramilitary phenomenon and the civil war. Two underlying questions drove the inquiry: How did the peripheral condition of the region’s municipalities affect the intensities of the paramilitary violence? How well do these variables align with the traditional political explanation of the paramilitary phenomenon as one of resistance by helpless rural entrepreneurs against the depredation of Marxist guerrillas?

The results showed some strong patterns as well as some weak patterns. Furthermore, not all results were aligned with theoretical expectations. In general terms, the findings with a higher level of confidence allow for the below characterizations.

The intensity of paramilitary violence increased in the aftermath of the following:

1. The general intensification of the armed conflict or civil war. This general trend can be broken down further to reveal the below characteristics where increases in the dependent variables follow:
   a. Increases in the Fuerza Pública’s military activity and decreases in their victimization of civilians.
   b. Decreases in the guerrilla’s military activity and increases in their victimization of civilians.

2. Variations in the intensity of sociopolitical mobilization, with
   a. Decreases in the number of peasant protests.
   b. Increases in the electoral weight of left-wing and revisionist parties.

3. Year-to-year (i.e., first-difference metric) increases in school enrollment rates.
The research design posited that variables from three broad categories should have an explanatory capacity: conflict intensity, infrastructural power of the state, and socio-political mobilization. Across the different models, each of these categories had at least one variable that demonstrated a low to moderately-low $p$-value score. The contrast of the main and secondary models shows that the main predictors are the intensity of casualties by actor, followed by the socio-political mobilization variables, and, finally, the state infrastructural capacity, in which only the rates of school enrollment showed an above average consistency for the first-difference regressions.

Sociopolitical mobilization variables were the second strongest determinants. Nonetheless, the intensity of peasant mobilization and the intensity of left-wing and revisionist parties’ electoral weights had contradictory signs. While the initial theoretical expectations assumed both would be positive regressors for the paramilitary victimization of civilians, the intensity of peasant mobilizations had a negative relationship. Alternative explanations were presented, including the possibility that mobilization intensity is also an indicator of strong communal ties in peasant communities—a strength that could shield those organizations from political violence. Nonetheless, considering available qualitative and judicial sources, I remain skeptical of this “optimistic” alternative explanation.

Two novel metrics were presented as infrastructural power proxies: the travel time through the transport infrastructures indicator and the juridical density index. None of them obtained remarkable $p$-value scores. From a methodological point of view, this lack of statistical significance is easy explained by the pattern of their distributions: the variables’ slow but sustained variation across time within most of the municipios. A panel linear
model is an ill-suited tool to identify the weight of such slowly evolving patterns within clusters of the dependent variables.

A researcher might hope that his original contributions to an inferential model yield dramatic results, in consideration of the “stargazing” culture where success is equated with very low \( p \)-values (Hlavac 2017; Cheng and Adepeju 2014). Both original metrics presented in this dissertation were indeed unavailable a-priori, and, as such, they represent a methodological and information contribution. Furthermore, finding the absence of a significant effect is a valid scientific contribution.

With these results, how well can the main political questions posed in this chapter be answered? The answer differs for each question. How did the peripheral condition of Magdalena Medio municipalities impact the intensity of the paramilitares’ violence? The distributions of conflict intensity confirm that the region was hit especially hard by the armed conflict and by the paramilitary phenomenon. This finding is in line with quantitative works on the region. From only one of the infrastructural power variables, i.e. the school enrollment rate, can an inference be drawn within a reasonable confidence range. Increases in school enrollment suppose an increase in the state’s capacity to penetrate society, as well as a step toward social and economic progress. Yet, these increases were followed by steeper paramilitary violence, especially against civilians. Fiscal variables did not yield enough statistical significance to make major inferences, but their results were in-line with a characterization of paramilitary violence being worse where the local state was more dependent on transfers and less capable or willing to tax land properties.

Was the paramilitares’ violent behavior in line with the political justification of their vigilantism? No, it was not. The results clearly characterize their behavior as inconsistent
with the more positive, supportive narrative. Rather, the results point to a predatory paramilitary organization that was aligned with the activity of the armed forces and negatively correlated with the military activity of the guerrillas. On the other hand, it was characterized by the predation on left-wing electoral activity. In summary, the data cast the paramilitary more as functional tool for the predation and repression of civilians rather than as a self-defense force against guerrilla activity.
Conclusions

The political narrative that justifies the paramilitares’ existence and behavior identified two main causes of social problems: one regarding the peripheries and the other regarding the whole nation. The first one was the absence of the state, expressed as the scarce capacity of the central state to project its power toward agrarian frontier regions to provide public services and protect their hard-working communities from Marxist guerrillas. The second one was the national elites’ sympathy toward the communists. The implicit or explicit corollary of the second thesis was the threat of an impending agrarian reform for rural entrepreneurs. According to the members of the paramilitary alliance, if the conditions expressed in these thesis were reverted, i.e. if the state mustered its forces and strengthened its presence and capacities in the peripheries, while at the same time demonstrated moral rectitude and a political will to beat the communists, then Colombia would have been saved, the war would have been quickly won, the rural entrepreneur would have thrived, political order would be established, and the economy would flourish, profiting from the vast resources exploited in the now domesticated agrarian frontiers.

This dissertation has systematically analyzed the behavior and discourses of both the paramilitary alliances that fostered Magdalena Medio’s paramilitares and the paramilitary militias themselves. The analysis covered the period from 1978 to 2003. The goal was to compare the behavior and narratives from these actors to the discourse that sought to legitimize the paramilitares and the associated political model. The question is, to what extent did they abide by their actions and statements?
The comparison was based on a deconstruction of the political justification, with special emphasis on the role that state capacities had in terms of affecting social life in Magdalena Medio as a peripheral region simultaneously experiencing an armed conflict and a democratic aperture. In consideration of this complex historical frame, I chose to rely on different but compatible social science approaches to study the most relevant dimensions.

To interpret the capacities of the state to penetrate the peripheries, I relied on the political power elements from the sources of social power theory, emphasizing the concept of infrastructural power of the state. To deal with the political system, understood as the relations between political parties, candidates, the state, and the electoral subsystem, I relied on Colombian politics literature on domestic clientelism. To make sense of the complex and multisided armed conflict and the relations between the armed actors, political parties, social movements, and drug traffickers, I relied on a corpus of recent literature about the Colombian conflict. In the following paragraphs, I will summarize how the behavior and narratives of those involved fared against the abovementioned dimensions.

State capacity and the penetration of the peripheries’ territory and communities

Were the paramilitares and the paramilitary alliance receptive to all forms of penetration of territory and society? No, clearly not. I argue across Chapters 2 and 3 that the paramilitary alliance behaved selectively toward the central state’s infrastructural capacities. Simply put, the local elites from the paramilitary alliance proactively requested from the central state’s investments in those capacities that benefitted economically prominent landowners and resisted investment in those capacities that threatened them economically, juridically, or politically (see Chapter 2). This is, of course, what can be expected of any political party representing the interests of a particular economic
constituency before national authorities. What makes the case of study relevant is the instrumentalization of violence through the paramilitares. These militias were employed as a parallel means to enforce the paramilitary alliance’s will.

**Transport infrastructure and security**

The landed elites and rural entrepreneurs benefitted from major works in transport infrastructure. This certainly had a positive impact on the value of their lands and represented an opportunity to access new markets. Those projects were certainly welcomed by a wider public, well beyond the elites. Yet, through the violent agency of the paramilitares, progress in the transport network amounted to greater incentives for peasant and *colono* displacement. In a comparable way, the deployment of larger number of units from the *Fuerza Pública* could provide more security. Furthermore, improvements in the road network could only increase the geographical reach of the troops. However, when members of the *Fuerza Pública* acted as agents of the paramilitary alliance, the provision of security was, in fact, privatized. This type of security provision was biased in favor of the interests of the large landowners. Furthermore, it was lenient towards the bloody crimes of the paramilitares and the economic crimes of the drug traffickers. Most importantly, it was a clear betrayal on the part of the military and the police in terms of their oath and responsibility to protect the rights to life, property, and peaceful living of scores of unarmed peasants victimized by the paramilitares, and even by the regular military themselves.

**Lands and Agrarian Reform**

The paramilitary alliance disliked the central state’s agrarian reform initiatives, regardless of how mild they had historically proven to be. The political narrative from the local elites of the paramilitary alliance highlighted their fear that an eventual political deal between
the president and the guerrillas might translate into a political decision to enact and execute a redistributive agrarian policy. What did these local elites fear? Were they perhaps afraid of the capacities of the same state they were referring to as weak and absent from the peripheries? Or, did the fear a boost in the political will to toward redistributive policies? Drawing from the historical and archival findings described in Chapter 1, I argue that if the central state had mustered the political will to develop a more vigorous agrarian reform policy, it would have been a credible threat to the economic interests of the local elites.

The challenges faced by the agrarian reform in Colombia are more substantial on the political will side than on the technical capacity side of the equation. However, as early as the 1980s, there were two data inputs that could be operationalized. The first one was to enforce a nationwide municipal cadastral update. Even if the resources from property taxes would go to the municipal coffers, and even if the town council could manage the fiscal burden placed upon its constituents by setting a low property tax, the information derived from the exercise regarding who owned what and how much someone owned would be tremendously valuable to rural and agrarian decision-makers. The second source were the property records still stored in the municipal notarías. The statistical collection capacities of the DANE had proven capable of systemically collecting fine-grained variables at the municipal level. These same capacities could have been directed to collect information regarding land property, land use, or real estate transactions.

The violence paramilitares exerted toward peasants and colonos constituted a veritable counter-agrarian reform. To paraphrase Harvey (2004), it was an example of accumulation through dispossession. Notably, though, in the case of Magdalena Medio, dispossession was not executed through neoliberal policies as much as through a lack of enforcement of
agrarian polices at the central level and the institution of subnational authoritarian regime
in the agrarian frontiers. It was outright theft from the peasants by the armed, politically
connected, and wealthy members of the paramilitary alliance. From the perspective of
Colombian history, the paramilitary enforced dispossession, and counter agrarian reform
was merely business as usual. It was simply the late 20th century’s iteration of the
Colombian tragedy that expelled peasants into the margins of the territory only to have the
prominent landowners expel these colonos again, once the state began to projects its power,
however dimly, into the frontier (Legrand and Molano 1994; Palacios 2011; Legrand 2016).

**Justice and Education**

Due to the criminal nature of much of the paramilitares’ behavior in the field, as well
as the criminal origins of the drug traffickers as members of the paramilitary alliance,
the alliance’s relations with the judicial power and the central state were bound to be
contentious. The paramilitary alliance expressed its sympathies toward a society
wherein the state would enjoy the monopoly over legitimate coercion. Yet, their
behavior clearly contradicted such claims.

The paramilitares and the members of the alliance certainly benefited more from
selective impunity than from a strong, capable, and independent judicial power. In that
regard, they behaved like any other criminal conglomerate that combines legal and
illegal business. The prominent landowners benefitted from the precarious legal
traceability of plots in the agrarian frontier. On the other hand, they benefitted from a
much clearer juridical capacity in the most integrated areas. The drug traffickers
profited most when they could produce far away from justice and police surveillance.
Moreover, they preferred to reinvest their profits in areas where the state offered better legal protection for private property rights.

The operationalization of juridical capacities from Chapter 3 suggests that the judicial power was not able to increase its capacities in Magdalena Medio between 1993 and 2003. In fact, the results indicate a slow but steady erosion of juridical capacities. In contrast, the narratives from Chapters 1 and 2, as well as the historical accounts briefly presented in Chapter 3 remind us that the local and regional judges were highly vulnerable to coercion. Celis and Van Isschot, as well as other authors, have pointed to how peasant movements focused on educating the peasants about their labor and property rights and how, to a certain extent, the judicial system eventually recognized the peasants’ claims of abuse by prominent landowners and state officials.

The paramilitares targeted educators and teacher unions. They accused the teachers of supporting communists and siding with the insurgency. The quantitative operationalization from Chapter 3 suggests that greater levels of school enrollment rates are a good predictor of future paramilitary violence. This was a pattern the interviewees described, but I could not find recent literature theorizing about the causal relationships. Naturally, there is ample historical evidence that prominent landowners and local clientelists have opposed projects of peasant and rural education. Furthermore, the largest peasant union, the ANUC, devoted significant efforts toward its self-administered literacy programs. The ANUC was a target of the early groups of paramilitares. I had hoped that the contrast between fixed effects models that highlight the long-term effects, and the first difference models that highlight the immediate term effects, would have yielded clearer signals. Yet, both the signs and the statistical
significance of the predictors were mixed (see Chapter 3). In summary, increases in school enrollment rates are a good predictor of future increases of paramilitary violence against civilians when the compounded intensity of the conflict is accounted for (models 5 and 6), but when the activity of the armed actors is disaggregated, school enrollment is significant and positive in the short term (model 2) but negative and with a high $p$-value in the long term (model 1).

In short, to the best of my knowledge, the absence of studies on the relation between education and the paramilitares during the 1990s and 2000s constrains me from proposing a firmer explanation for the difference between model 1 and models 2, 5, and 6. In consideration of this constraint, I will support the traditional liberal thesis that education is a form of individual capacity building and thus a tool to empower and emancipate. More educated communities would be less docile toward the interests of the members of the paramilitary alliance and all the armed actors.

**Armed Clientelism and the Control Over the Infrastructural Power Ladder**

The paramilitary leaders declared that they were the state’s “offspring” and that their “efforts” sought the consolidation of a stronger, more capable, and less corrupt state (see Chapter 2). The phrase reads like a slogan form any of Colombia’s political parties during the period, and it may be more than a coincidence. I argue that the paramilitares were an instrument of the politicians from the paramilitary alliance to capture the local state. This is in line with the conclusions from the “parapolítica” literature that covered the events from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s. This dissertation simply further explored the context from the 1980s and early 1990s.
The behavior of the paramilitares and the discourses from the politicians of the paramilitary alliance were not aligned with the support of a stronger central state or even with a stronger municipal state. Rather, I argue that their behavior expressed a desire to control the local state. They sought to profit in exclusivity from access to the local side of infrastructural and despotic political powers. The paramilitary alliance moved to suppress electoral rivals as a mean to secure their own access to local office and clientelistic resources. They meant to use both to improve their negotiating capacities vis-à-vis the central state.

During the 1980s, Colombia experienced a democratic aperture and a decentralization process, which were institutionalized in the 1991 Constitution. Because of these constitutional and legal reforms, local elected officials improved their bargaining position toward the central state. To some degree, the national executive lost some its despotic power toward subnational authorities. The clearer consequence was that the appointment of municipal mayors was no longer a prerogative of the president nor the department governor. Furthermore, the central state was constitutionally bound to increase transfers from the national treasure to the municipal budgets, regardless of the political sympathies the national executive might have toward the municipal officials, their parties, or their government programs.

Nonetheless, the democratization process was not exhausted at the level of local-national relations. The trend moved along into the sub-municipal, and, for the first time, the people could choose their local executive. If allowed to run its course, the traditional local political elites risked greater electoral competition. What if a local elected official was in fact willing to support and improve the meager agrarian reform
capacities that the central state maintained? In many cases, the mayor only needed to order an update of the cadastral records as a first but significant step. This act would immediately threaten the material interests of the landed elites. Furthermore, what if the local state acted to protect the victims of forced displacement? What if the mayor was suspicious of drug traffickers’ large investments in his municipio? These were credible threats in certain areas of Magdalena Medio where the political left was competitive.

I argue that the threats posed to the interests of the members of the paramilitary alliance from the eventual access to the local state of their political rivals was in fact more credible than the alleged threat of a communist-inspired agrarian reform that the guerrillas imposed to the national executive at the negotiating table. It seems unlikely that President Betancur, a member of the conservative party, was plotting a secret pact or succumbing to the pressure of the guerrillas. As clientelists themselves, the politicians from the paramilitary alliance surely knew better.

Infrastructural political power is a two-way link or ladder. It allows the state to irradiate its power across territories and into communities. It is also the means through which actors from civil society reach the state. Control over the state or influence over those exercising the power of the state grants a degree of political power (Mann 2008). The paramilitary alliance employed the paramilitares as a means to control the access to this ladder for local communities. Through the use of coercive measures, the paramilitares were able to ensure that political power was available for some individuals, while denying such power to many others. In consideration of that
circumstance, I regard these right-wing militias as the key to political power in Magdalena Medio’s peripheries.

The Armed Conflict and Political Violence

The creation of the paramilitares as a private militia was primarily justified as a self-defense reaction to the predation of Marxist guerrillas. Nonetheless, the conclusions from the qualitative and quantitative exercises conducted in this dissertation demonstrate a significantly different behavior from these right-wing militias.

The results from Chapter 3 allow for a condensed answer: The intensity of the guerrillas’ armed activity is a strong, significant, and negative predictor of future paramilitary violence. Therefore, the paramilitares cannot possibly be considered a reaction to what, in spatial and temporal terms, repels them instead of attracting them.

On the other hand, the intensity of the Fuerza Pública’s martial activity is a strong, significant, and positive predictor of future paramilitary violence against civilians. In other words, the activity of the paramilitares is better explained in their role as military allies of the Fuerza Pública than in the alleged role of defenders of hapless and static peasants and rural entrepreneurs against the aggression from guerrillas.

From a purely operative point of view, this coordination of activities between the paramilitares and the Fuerza Pública makes sense. They were concentrating their forces for offensive actions, as any sensible military commander would do. Politically, this behavior contrasts negatively with the political justification for the paramilitares. However, this does not mean that guerrillas and paramilitares did not face each other in battle. It only means that this was not the dominant trend. In addition, it cannot be
assumed that the *Fuerza Pública* never confronted the paramilitares. Only that the central tendency of their behaviors points to the contrary.

The narratives presented in Chapters 1 and 2 present the paramilitares as perpetrators of a dirty war. They were a private militia behaving as a private justice enforcer and as “cleanser” of those social actors that members of the paramilitary alliance considered undesirable. The results from Chapter 3 are consistent with that interpretation.

**Limitations, Contributions, and Opportunities for Future Research**

This dissertation is a case study of a single region during a rather brief period. It focuses on the activity of only one of three main armed actors in the context of a complex armed conflict and democratic aperture. In other words, it aims to focus on the dynamics of a narrow target that traverses a highly complex landscape. Its external validity is extremely narrow, as it adds little to the global debates on civil war. However, it does contribute to our understanding of the political roles of the paramilitares in the Colombian conflict.

The model developed to account for the political relations between the central state and the local state amid a three-sided war could be replicated to other regions of Colombia or other multi sided conflicts. Its main insight is that sustained investment in infrastructural capacity by the central state in a contested region during an civil war armed conflict will not necessarily yield a reduction in violence due to the greater capacity of the state to irradiate its power toward the territory.

The dissertation employs qualitative and quantitative approaches but is rather unbalanced in terms of how they dovetail temporally. The historical chapter traces the capacities of the Colombian state from the mid-twentieth century. The discourse analysis chapter focuses
on the 1980s and only minimally explains what happens after 1990. Moreover, the quantitative chapter only covers the period from 1988 to 2003, and two of its variables only appear from 1991 and 1993, respectively.

I made a conscious effort to support the historical and process tracing claims by referencing primary or secondary sources; the extensive bibliography reflects that.

A critical dimension that is absent from the regression models is a proxy for illegal drug production. The paramilitares’ behavior cannot be fully explained in the absence of such a variable. Alas, to the best of my knowledge, there are no systematic yearly measures of illicit crops or cocaine production at the municipal levels prior to 1998. The most precise data are only available from 2001 (SIMCI 2001). The inclusion of a regressor variable with missing values for more than two-thirds of the time periods for a panel model is not a recommended practice. The positive side of this issue is that while it may be difficult to move backwards in time, the model is ready to include drug crop variables in future research.

The most innovative contributions from this project might be related to the data capture models employed to construct the origin-destination matrix for transport infrastructure, and the text-mining routines designed to build the juridical capacity index. Nonetheless, the juridical measure includes a grand assumption that is difficult to justify: a constant degree of institutional quality. A recent authoritative study on the relation between municipal institutions from a Colombian town and the relations between guerrillas, civil government, and the peasantry described institutional quality as an important variable that should not be overlooked (Arjona 2016). In any case, the construction of the transport and juridical indexes, however imperfect, exemplify an effort to quantitatively operationalize
dimensions of infrastructural political power. Further development of their data capture methodologies is underway. Specifically, the inclusion of metrics related to institutional quality is a promising avenue for future research.
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Annexes

Annex 1 Political Parties and Left Wing – Revisionist Dimension in Magdalena Medio 1986:2003

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### Annex 2 Infrastructural Events Not Covered by the Atlas Sources

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