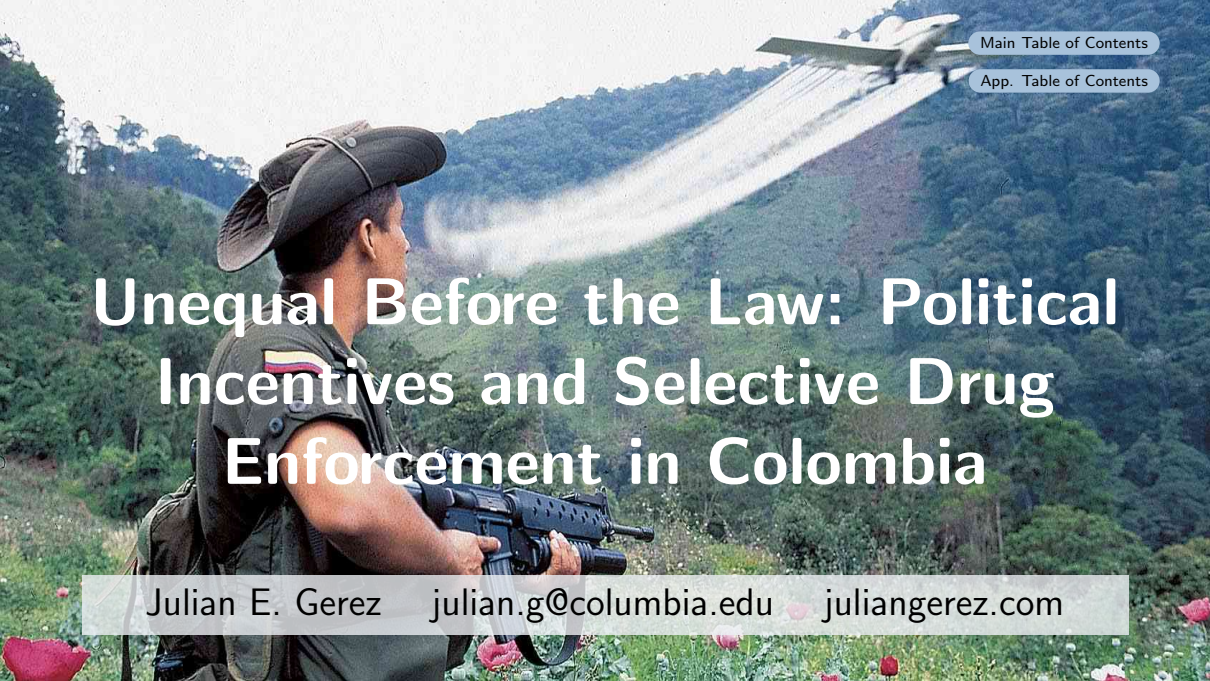
Main Table of Contents
App. Table of Contents



Unequal Before the Law: Political Incentives and Selective Drug Enforcement in Colombia

Julian E. Gerez julian.g@columbia.edu juliangerez.com

What explains variation in drug enforcement?

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"For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law."

– Óscar R. Benavides

A Tale of Two Coca-Growing Municipalities

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- Neighboring municipalities

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$\approx 6.5\times$ more cultivation in Tarazá

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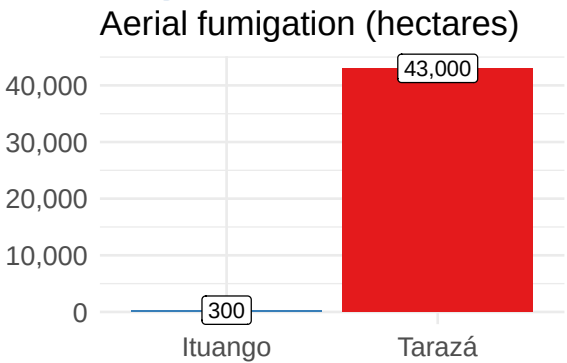

143× **more** eradication in Tarazá

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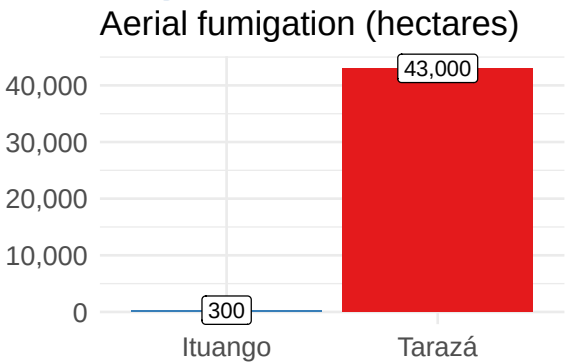

143× **more** eradication in Tarazá

- 1/4 of Tarazá's land area
- $>$ 1/2 of NYC area, $\approx$ 1/5 of OC area
- 70× UC Irvine's campus area

Ituango and Tarazá: Friends and Foes

Friendly criminal groups in Ituango, **enemy** criminal groups in Tarazá

Preview of Results

Intensification of enforcement to criminal **foes**

Restraint in enforcement to criminal **friends**

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- Dozens of semi-structured interviews for context
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Urbanicity | Ideology | Candidates

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Conventional wisdom: constraints

Enforcement varies due to

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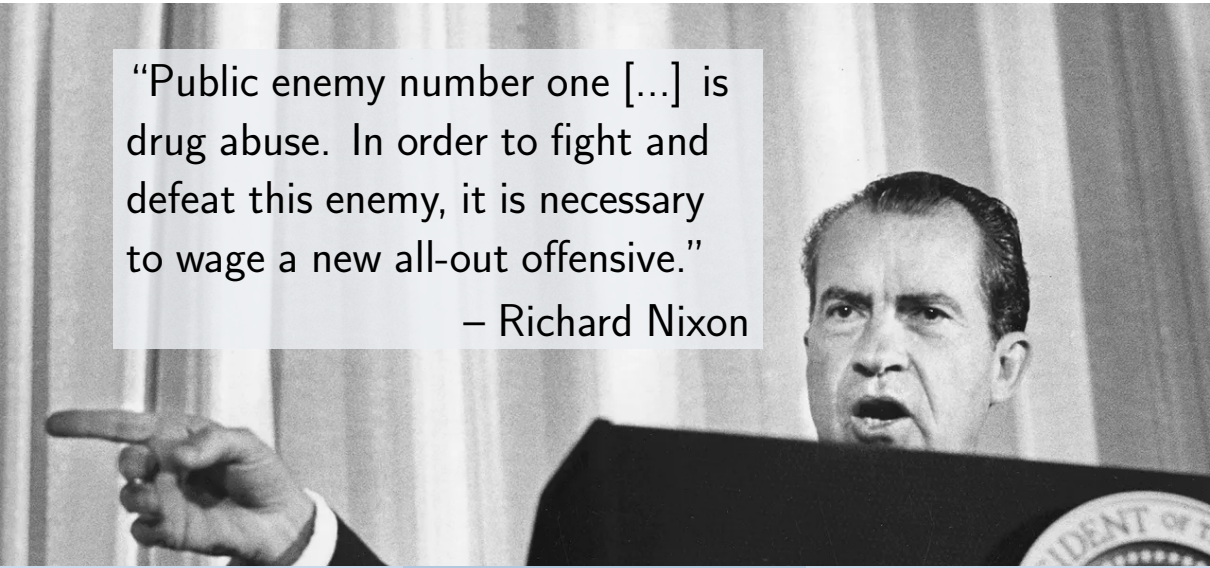
- International pressure (Andreas and Nadelmann, 2008; Bewley-Taylor, 2012; Crandall, 2002)

Argument: agency – "able and *sometimes* willing"

Political incentives of elected leaders shape enforcement

Building on: Bobo and Thompson (2006); Durán-Martínez (2018); Fagan et al. (2010); Felbab-Brown (2009); Freedman, Owens and Christopher (2022); Holland (2017); Jones and Olken (2005); Linnemann and Kurtz (2014); Lynch et al. (2013); Mitchell (2005); Mitchell and Caudy (2015); Musto (1999); Provine (2008); Trejo and Ley (2020)

Elected Leaders Shape Drug Enforcement



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(Fondevila and Quintana-Navarrete, 2015; Lessing, 2017)

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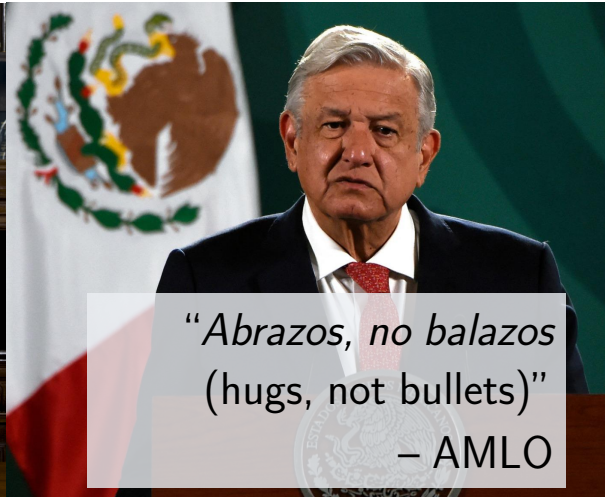

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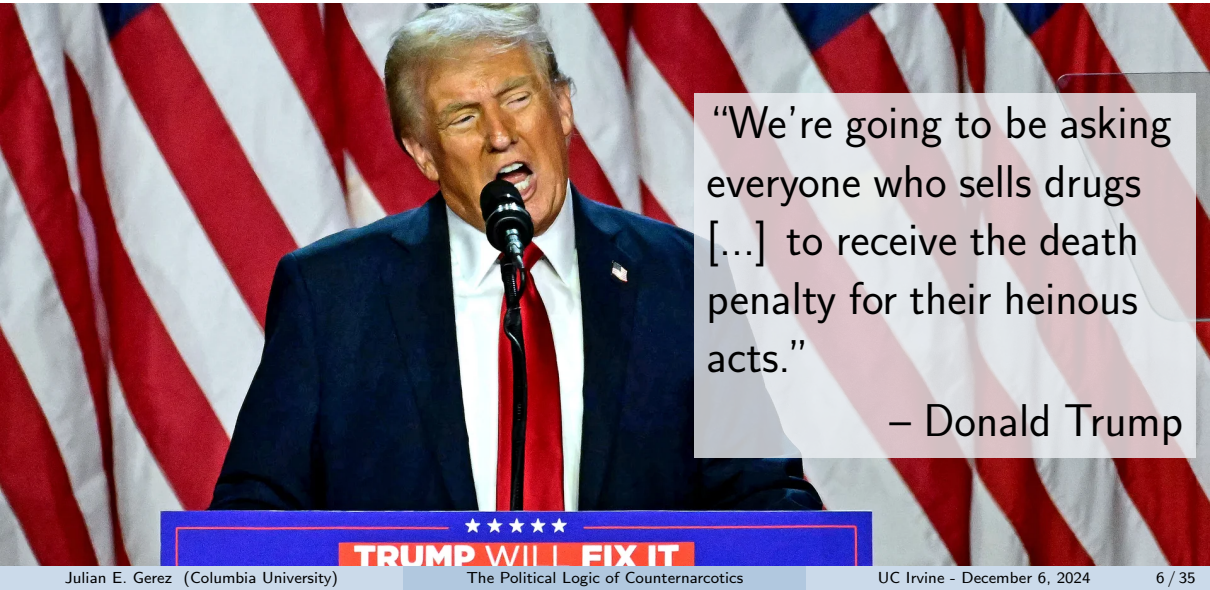


"We're going to be asking everyone who sells drugs [...] to receive the death penalty for their heinous acts."

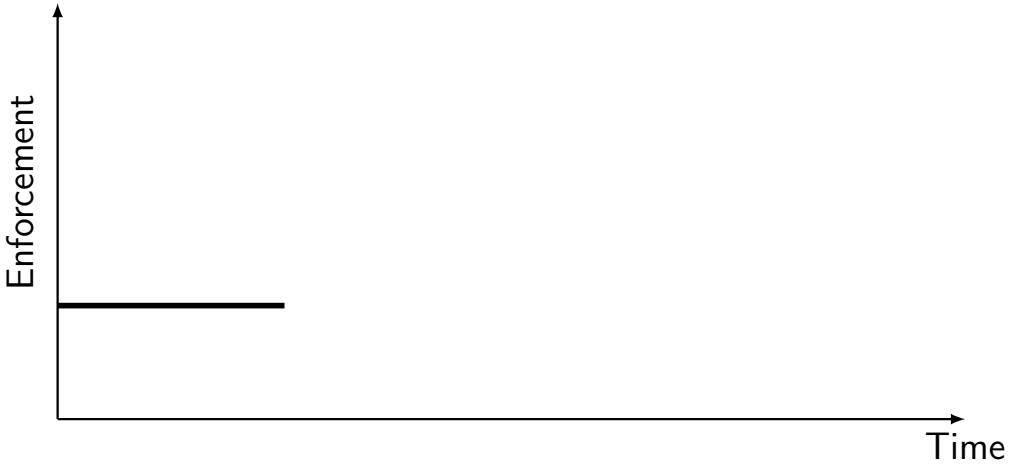
– Donald Trump

Elected Leaders Shape Drug Enforcement

Alvaro Uribe, President of Colombia: 2002-2010

Selective Enforcement

Influence of criminal groups creates differential incentives for crackdowns



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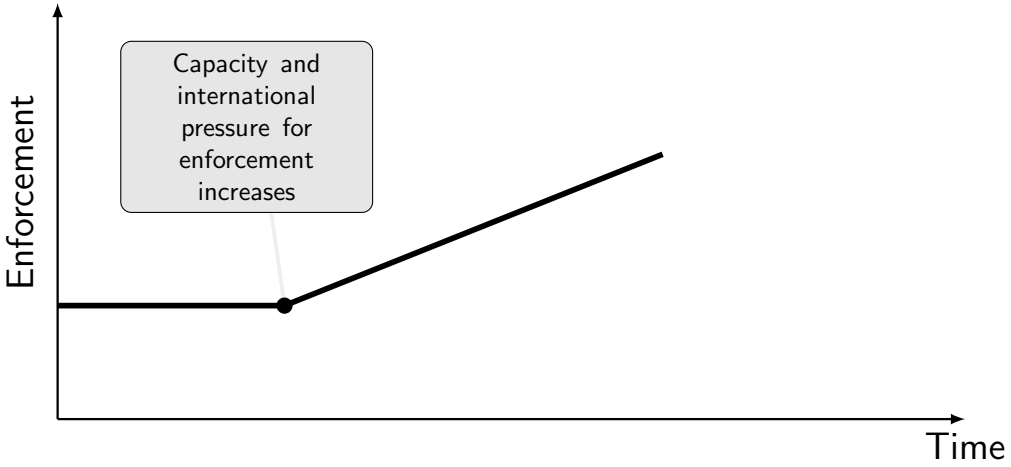

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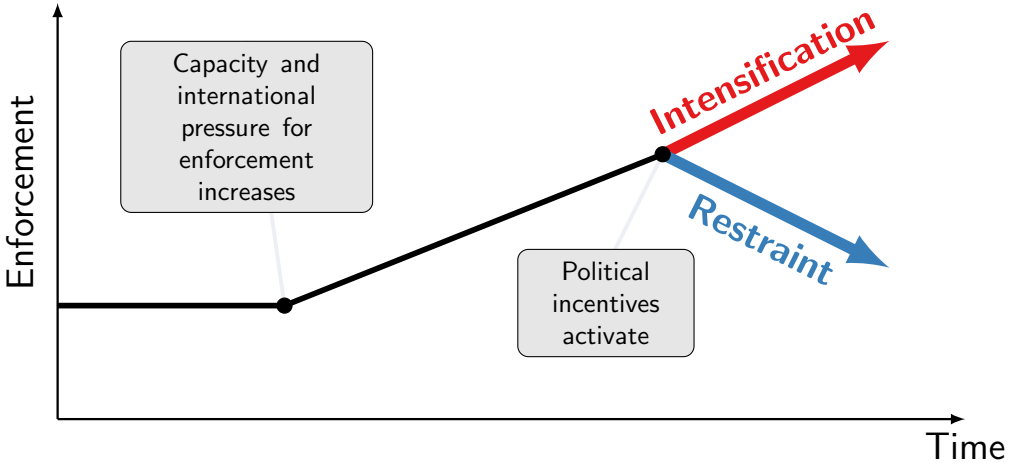

Road Map

1. Introduction
2. Theory: The Politics of Counternarcotics
3. Context, Research Design, and Data
4. Results: Political Incentives and Selective Enforcement
5. Mechanisms: Paramilitary Demobilization
6. Conclusion

2

The Politics of Counternarcotics

Leaders Control, Benefit from Enforcement

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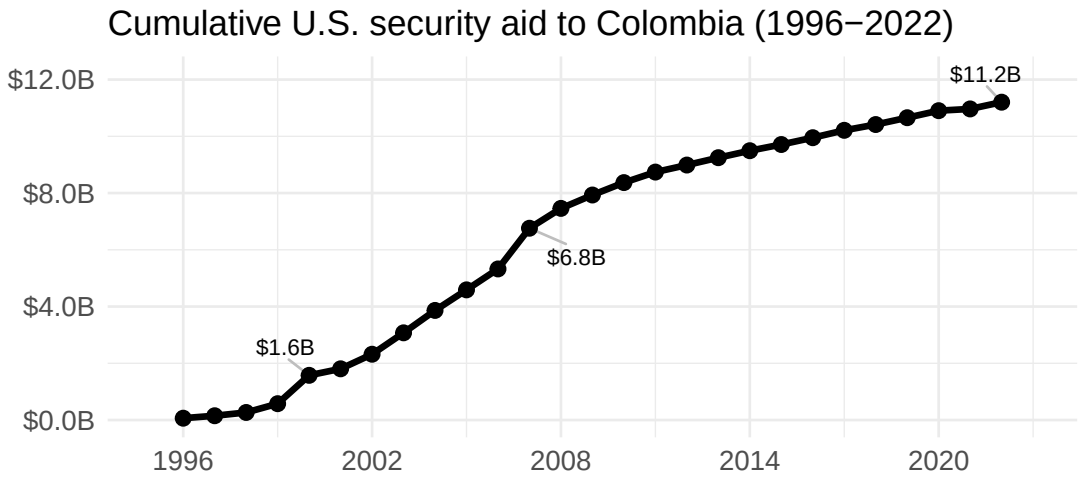
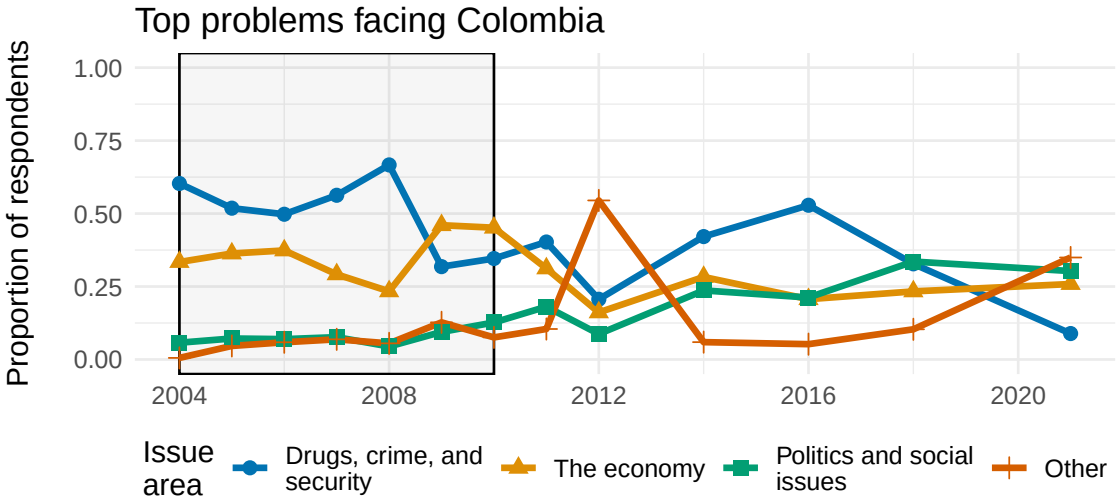
International politics, U.S. bilateral aid



Leaders Control, Benefit from Enforcement

Salient domestic issue in elections



The Burden of Enforcement is Local

International considerations less relevant at the micro level

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Affected voters (*campesinos*) are politically marginalized

- Like many Latin American countries, Colombia is very urban (80%)
- $^2/_3$ turnout in largest cities, $^1/_3$ in rural municipalities

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- Like many Latin American countries, Colombia is very urban (80%)
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Consequences of counternarcotics strategies highly local

(Abadie et al., 2014; Camacho and Mejía, 2017; Calderón et al., 2015; Dell, 2015; Lessing, 2017; Phillips, 2015; Ramírez, 2011; Rincón-Ruiz et al., 2016; Rozo, 2014)

Leaders Respond to Political Incentives

International and domestic pressure for enforcement

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But how do leaders target enforcement if affected voters are marginal?

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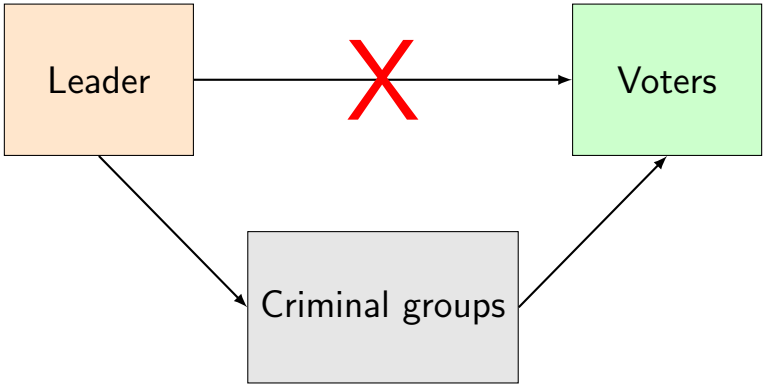
Selective enforcement depending on **criminal group** influence

Electoral Oversight with Criminal Groups

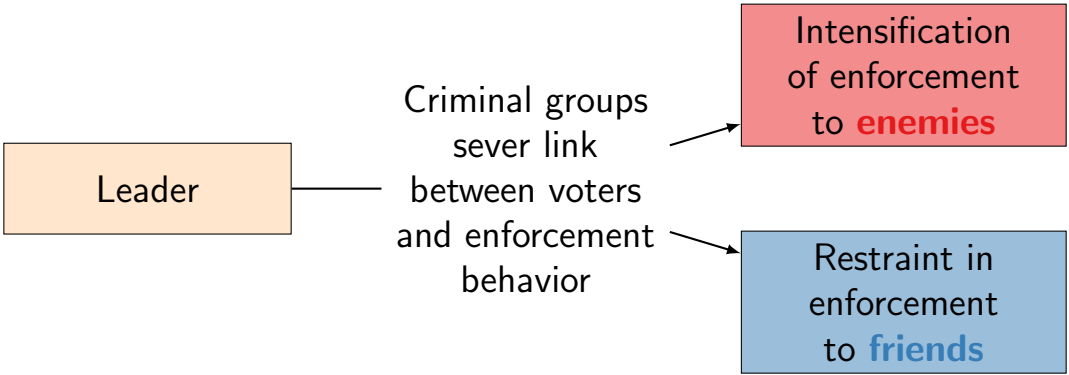
Criminal groups mediate the distribution of enforcement



Leader acts on behalf of **criminal group** preferences for enforcement

Leaders Target Foes, Leave Friends Alone

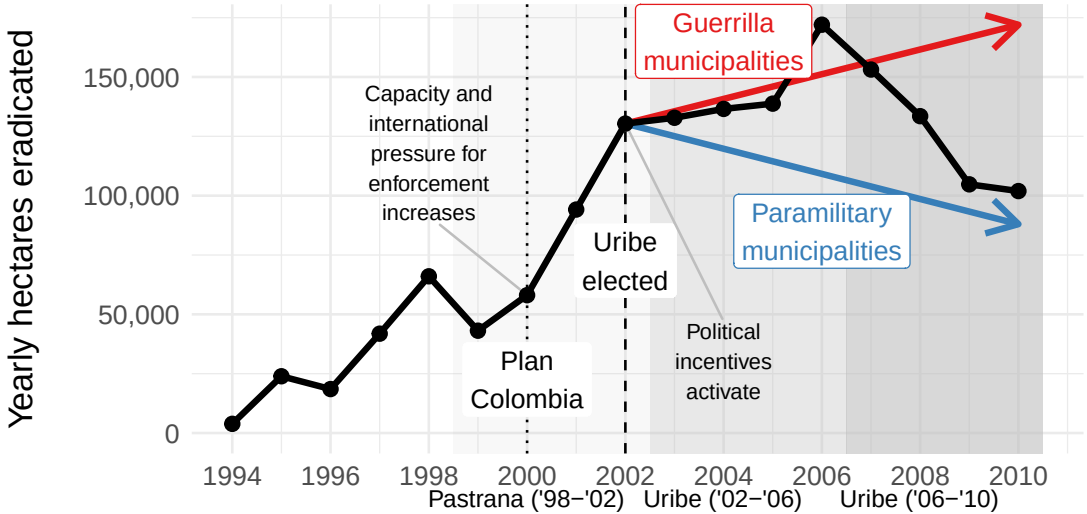
Criminal group influence creates differential incentives for crackdowns



3

Context, Research Design, and Data

Aerial Crop Eradication in Colombia



Criminal Groups and Illicit Markets

Characteristics of cocaine create opportunities for organized crime:

- Illegality
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Leverage coercive power for influence

(Ch et al., 2018; Fergusson et al., 2021; Hirschel-Burns, 2021)

Criminal Groups and Politics

Guerrilla groups (e.g., FARC, ELN) opposed the state, Uribe

1960s: Foundation of FARC, ELN as left-wing insurgent groups

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- 1980s: Shift to narco-financing, decline in ideological coherence
- 2000s-2016: Local dominance, criminal governance

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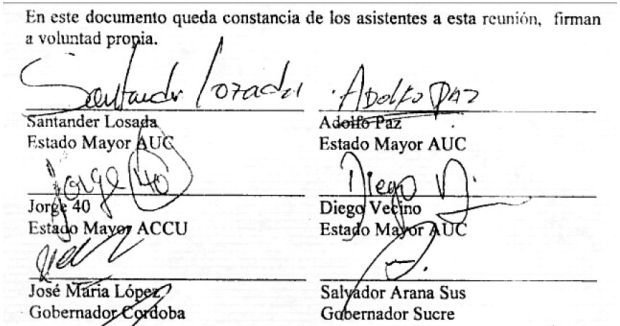
Paramilitary groups (e.g., AUC) favored Uribe

2001: Secret pact between AUC and politicians, "refounding"



En este documento queda constancia de los asistentes a esta reunión, firman a voluntad propia.

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Adolfo Paz
Estado Mayor AUC

Jorge 40
Estado Mayor ACCU

Diego Vecino
Estado Mayor AUC

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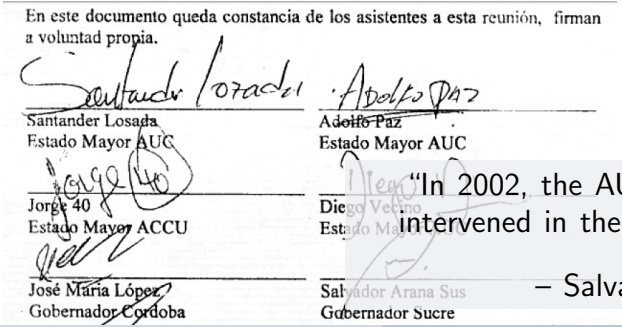
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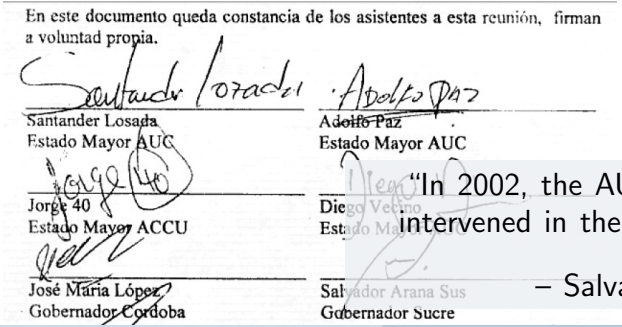
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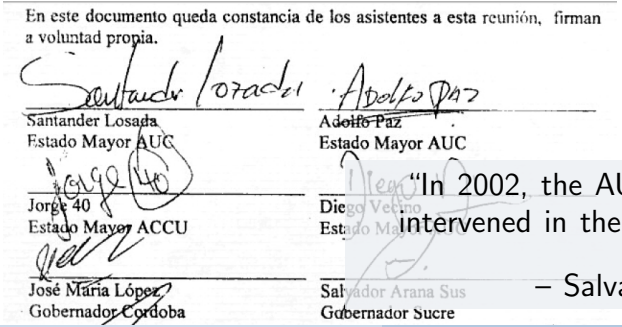
- 2006-present: *Parapolítica* scandal, dozens investigated, convicted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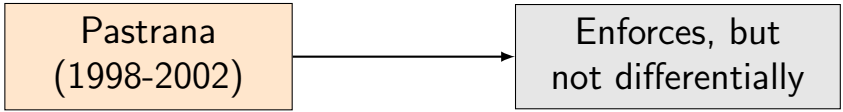
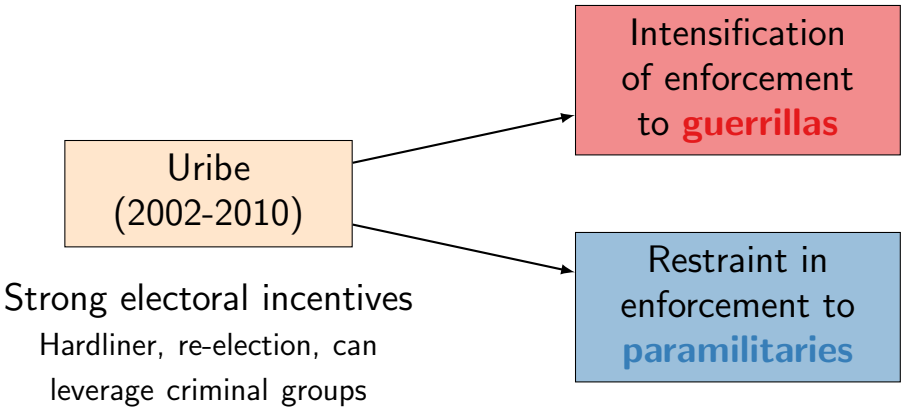
Differential Incentives for Eradication



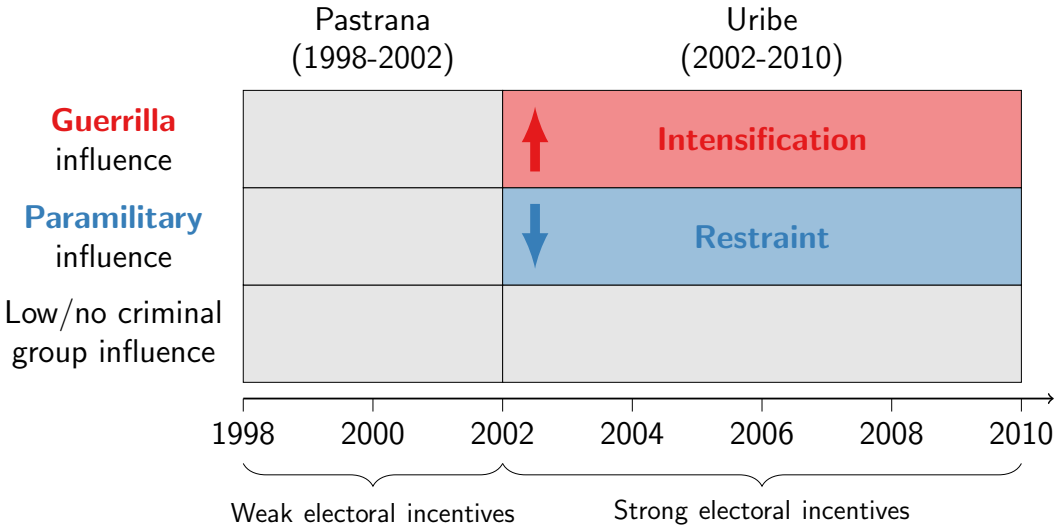
Weak electoral incentives

Softer, no re-election incentives,
weaker ties with criminal groups

Differential Incentives for Eradication



Difference-in-Differences Design



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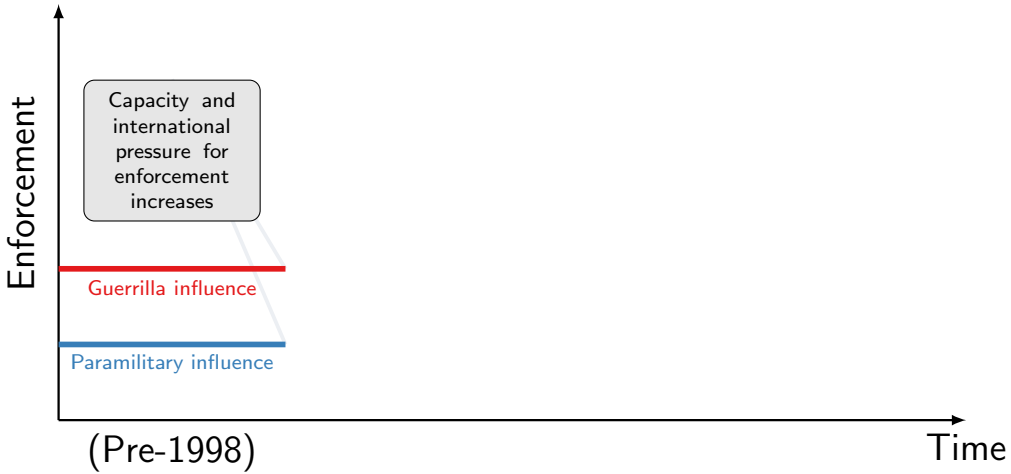

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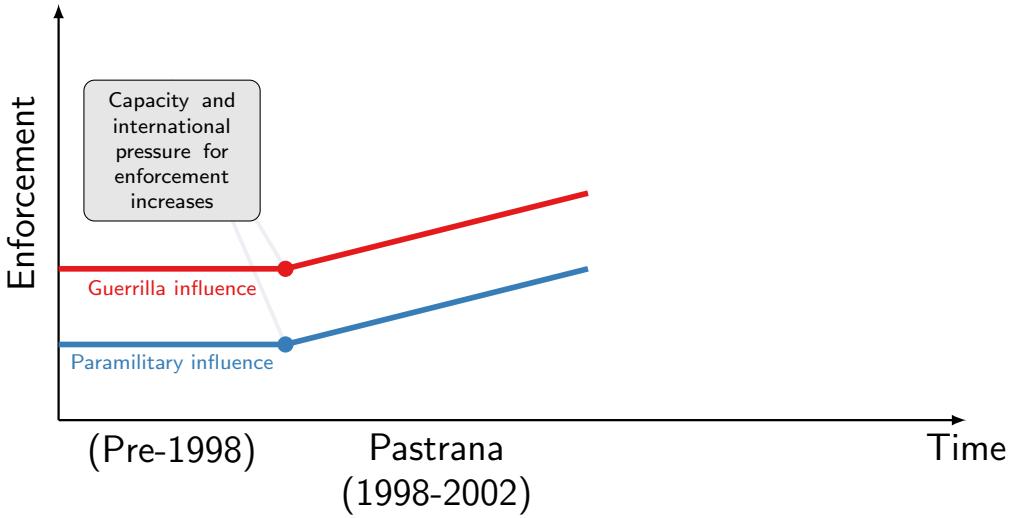

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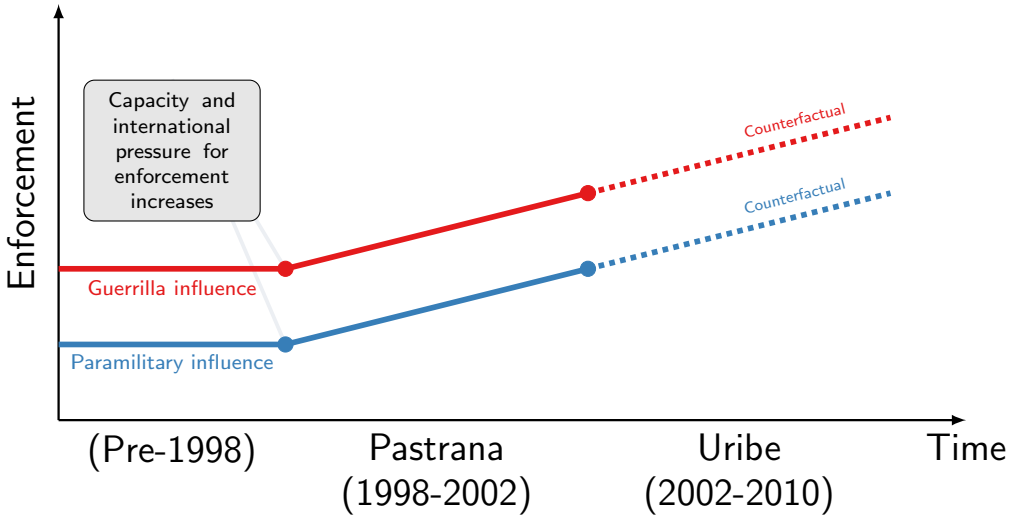

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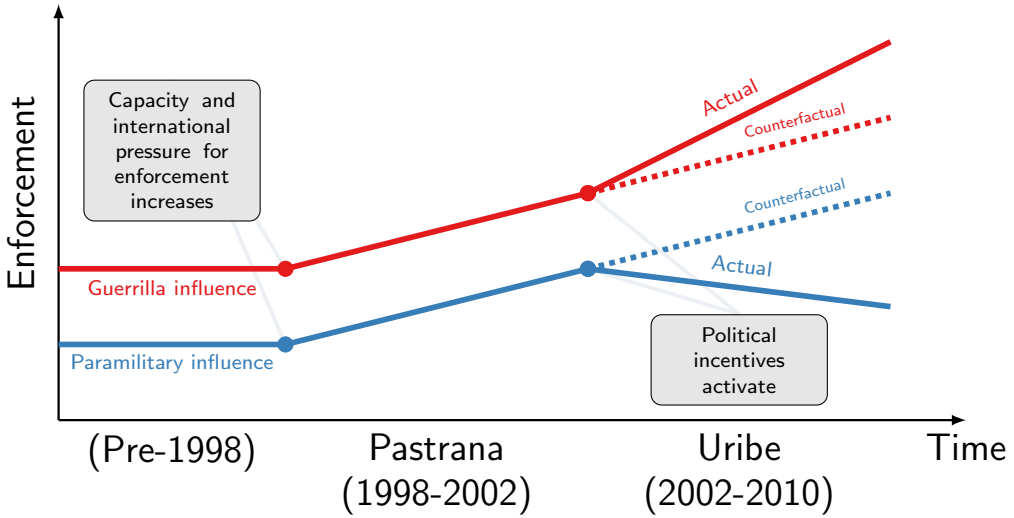

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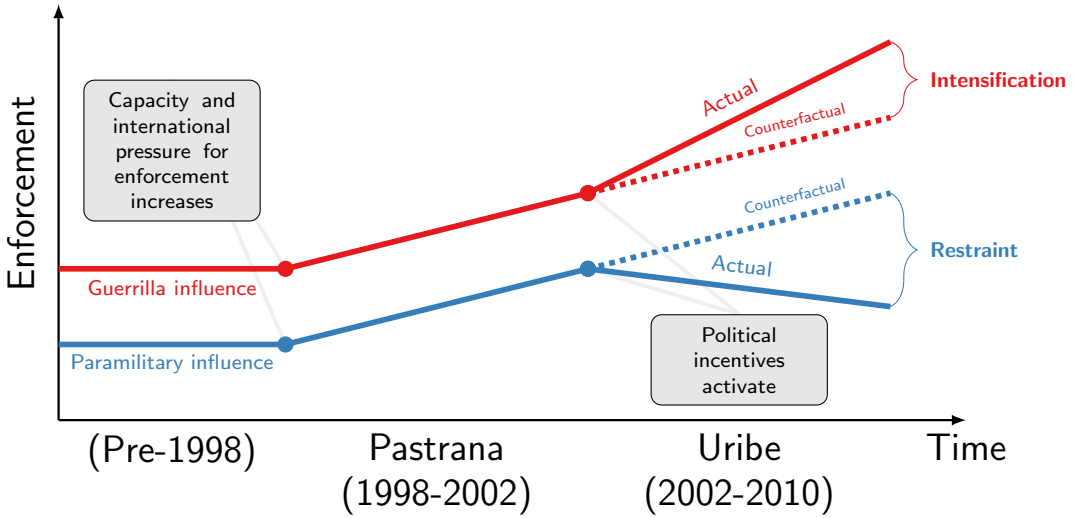

Data: Monthly Municipal Panel (1998-2010)

Crop eradication data sourced via information request

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Criminal influence proxied by historical violence Violence Map

(Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos, 2013; Aponte González, Hirschel-Burns and Uribe, 2024; Ch et al., 2018)

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Time-invariant: creates geographic variation

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Estimation sample: 318 of 1,122 municipalities Sample Map

Testing Differential Enforcement

$$\underline{Eradication_{i,t}} = \beta_{\mathbf{1}} G_i \times \mathbb{1}[\text{2002-2010}] + \beta_{\mathbf{2}} P_i \times \mathbb{1}[\text{2002-2010}] + \mathbf{X}_{i,t}^{\top}\gamma + \delta_i + \zeta_t + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

$Eradication_{i,t}$: eradication in municipality i in year-month t

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$\mathbb{1}$[2002-2010]: indicator for Uribe's presidential terms

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$\mathbb{1}[\text{2002-2010}]$: indicator for Uribe's presidential terms

$\mathbf{X}_{i,t}^{\top}$: controls; δ_i and ζ_t: municipality and year-month fixed effects

Testing Differential Enforcement

$$\textit{Eradication}_{i,t} = \beta_1 G_i \times \mathbb{1}[\text{2002-2010}] + \beta_2 P_i \times \mathbb{1}[\text{2002-2010}] + \mathbf{X}_{i,t}^{\top}\gamma + \delta_i + \zeta_t + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

$\textit{Eradication}_{i,t}$: eradication in municipality i in year-month t

G_i: historical **guerrilla** attacks in municipality i

P_i: historical P_i: historical **paramilitary** attacks in municipality i

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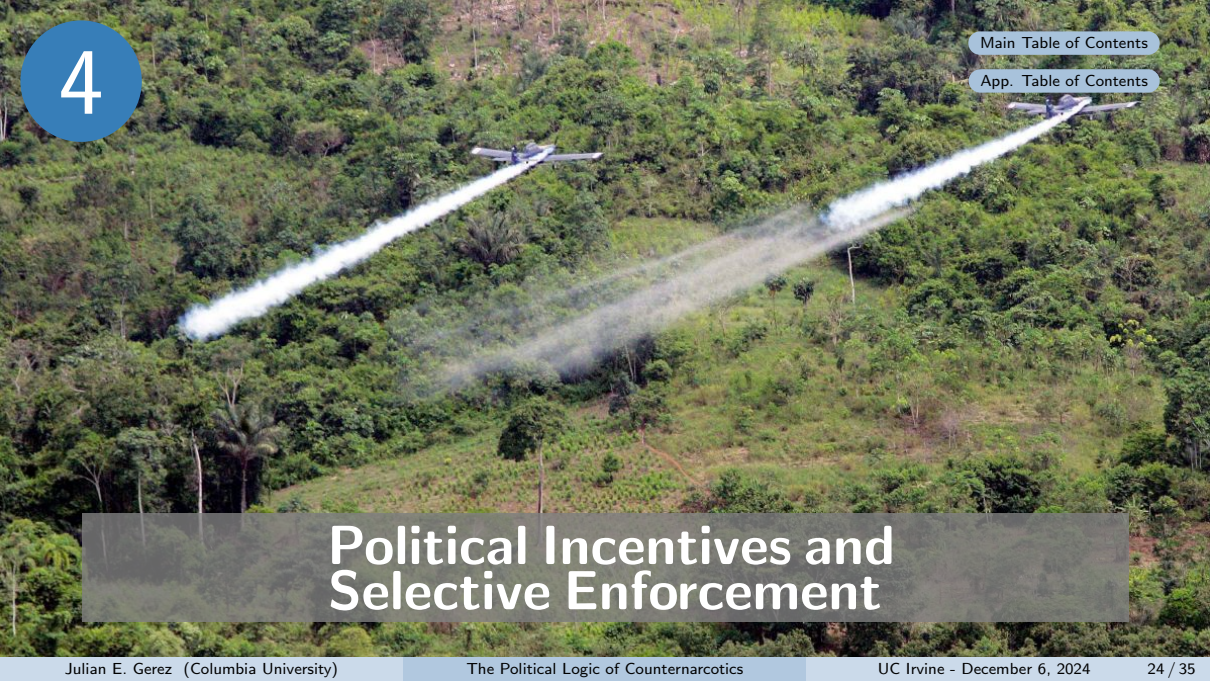
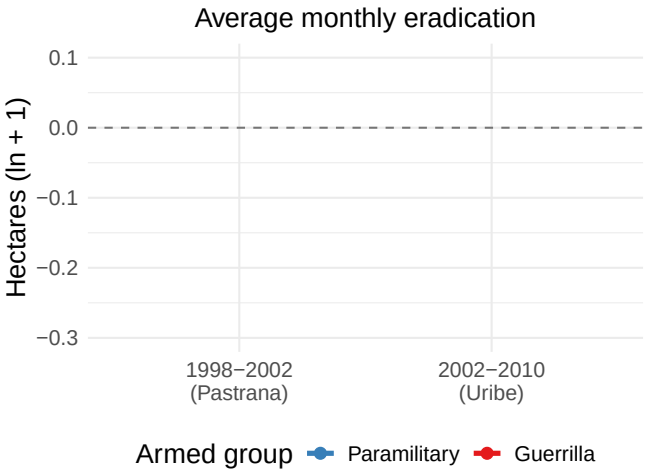
4



Political Incentives and Selective Enforcement

More for Guerrillas, Less for Paramilitaries



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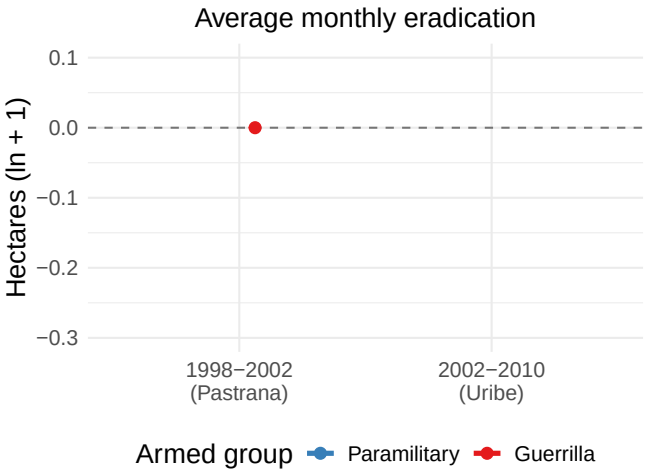

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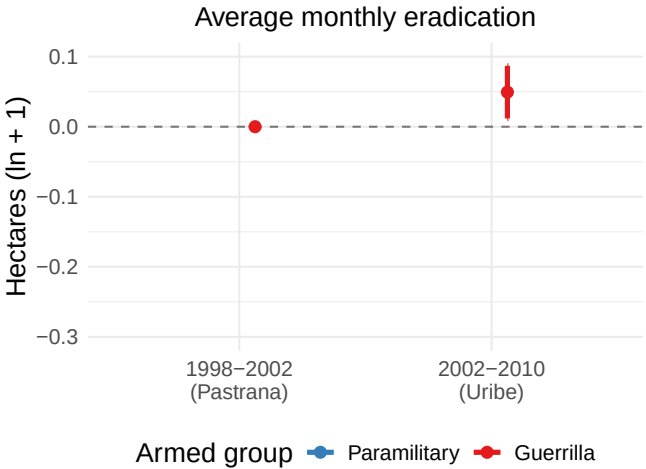

Guerrilla areas experienced an **increase** in fumigation (400 hectares over 4 years)

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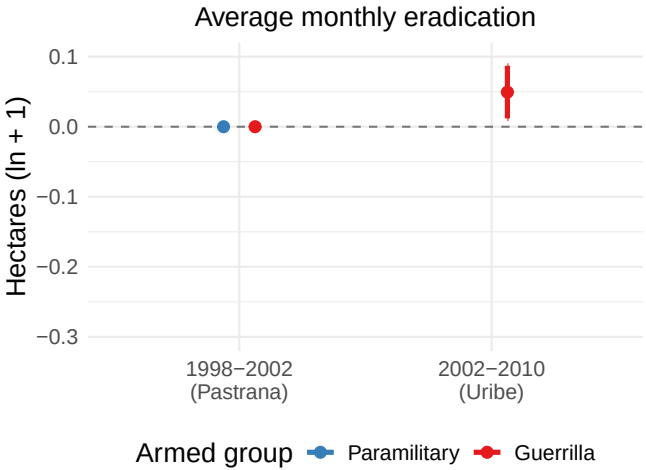

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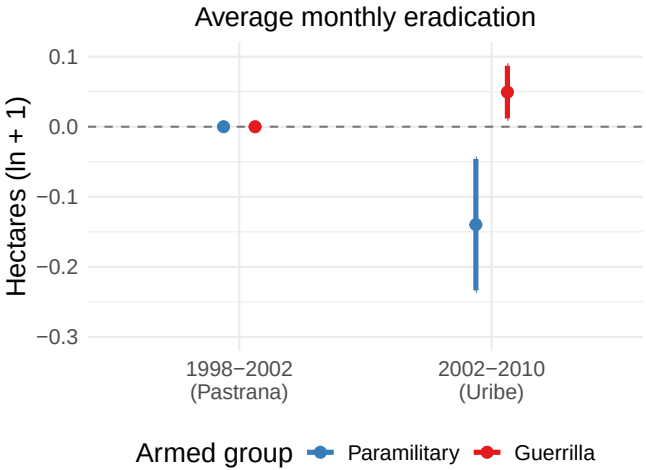
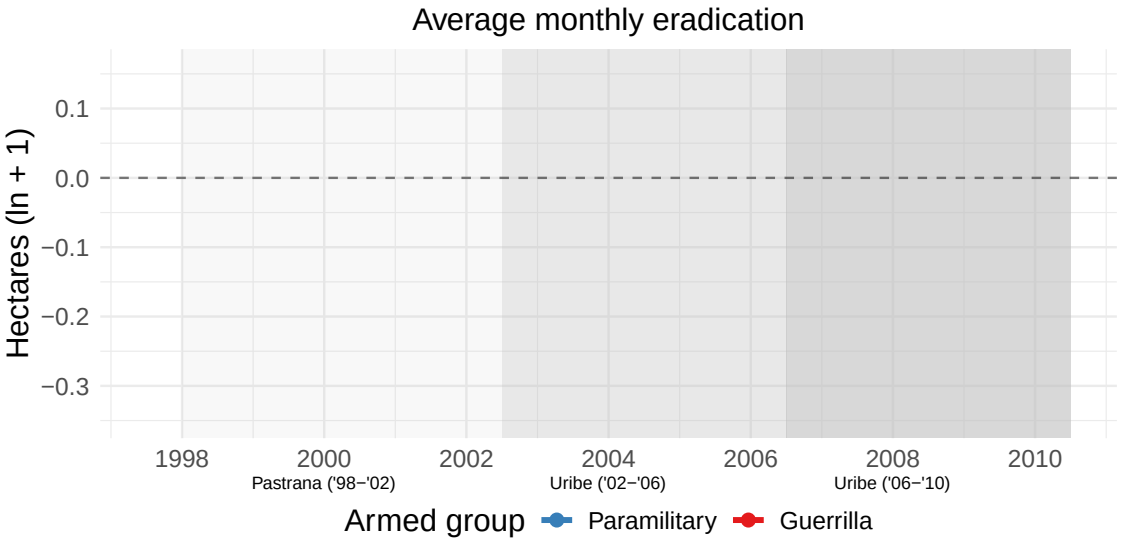


Guerrilla areas experienced an **increase** in fumigation (400 hectares over 4 years)

Paramilitary areas experienced a **decrease** in fumigation (500 hectares over 4 years)

Year-by-Year Results

Estimating Equation



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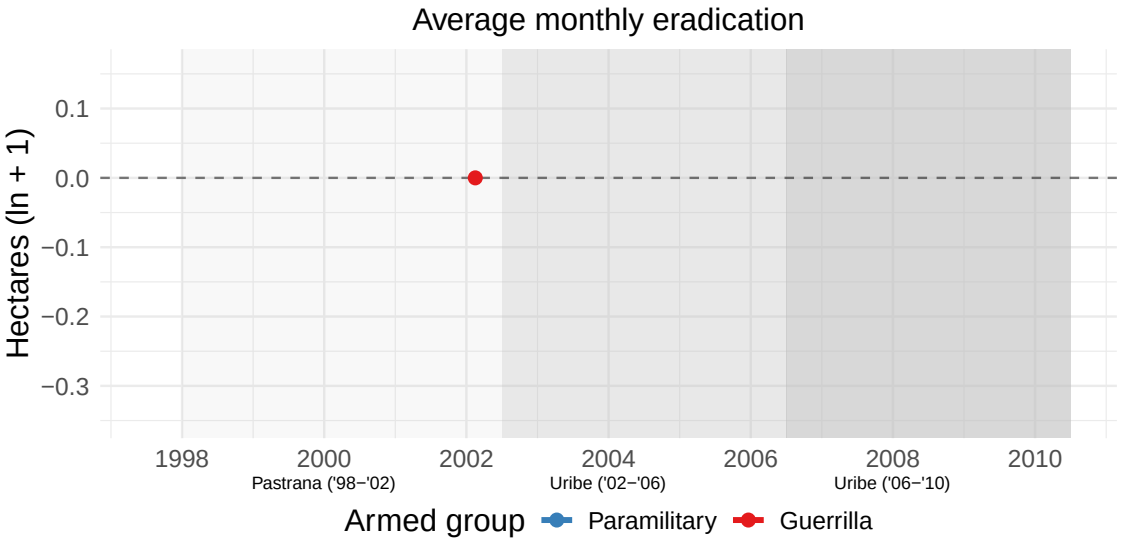

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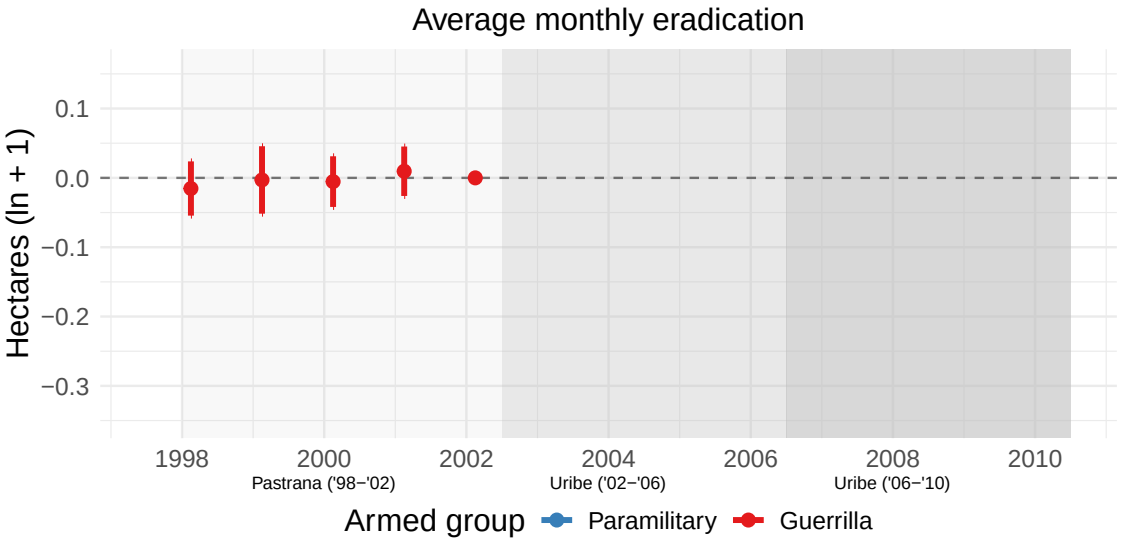

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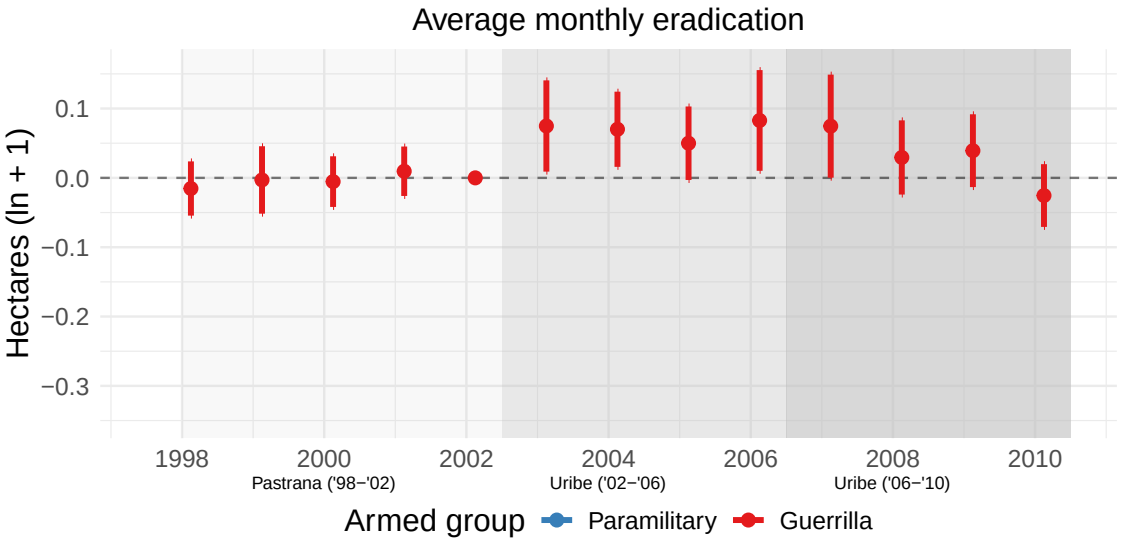

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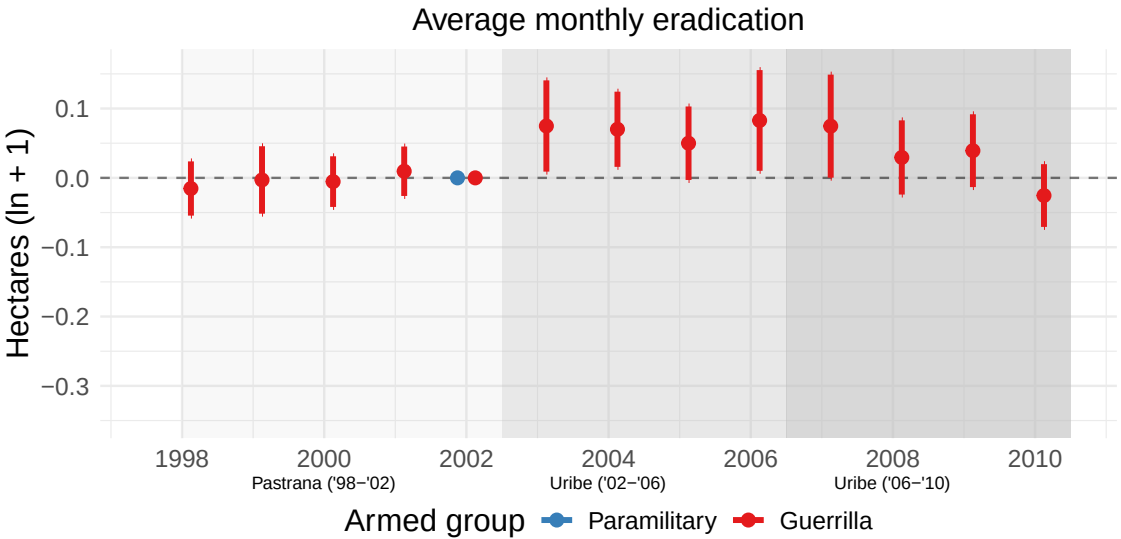

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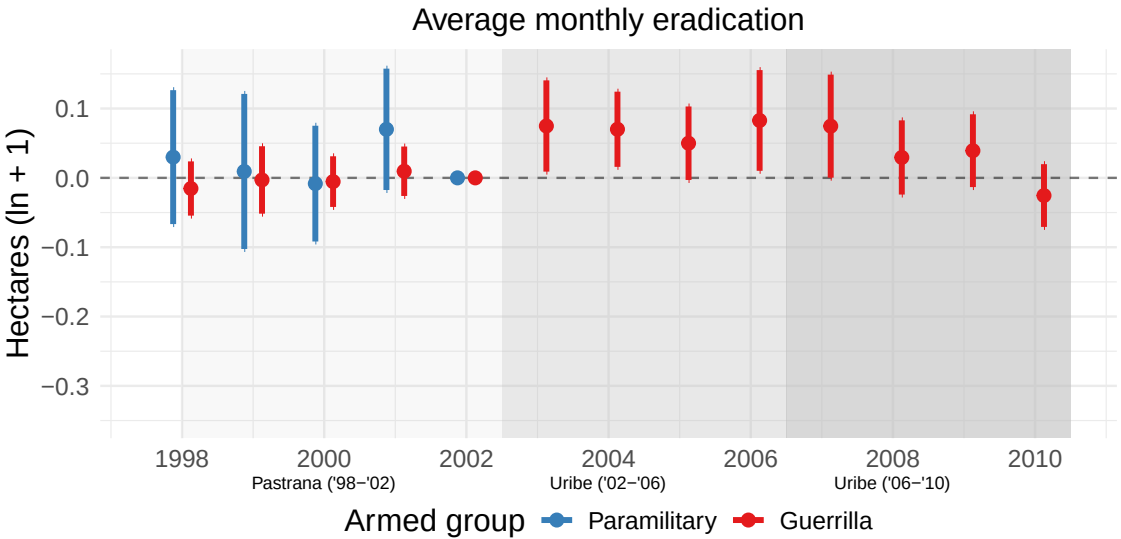

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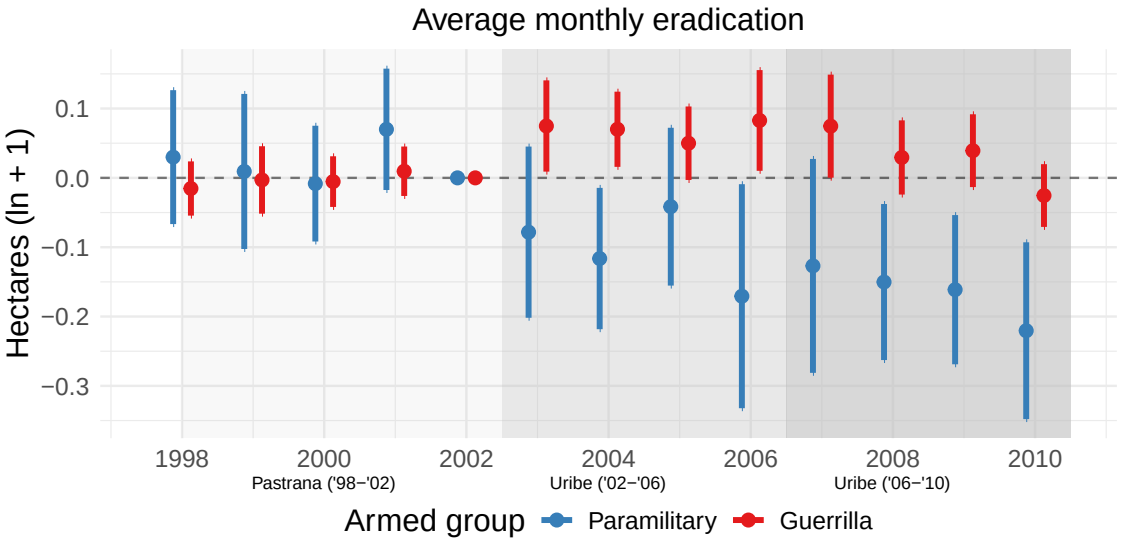

Selective Drug Enforcement

Eradication patterns under Uribe reflect differential enforcement

- **Decreased** eradication where greater past **paramilitary** violence
- **Increased** eradication where greater past **guerrilla** violence

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- Despite geographic constraints
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Results robust to different measurement, functional forms Appendix Contents

5

Paramilitary Demobilization

Paramilitaries Mostly Demobilized by 2005

Favorable conditions, despite accounting for $\approx 9,000$ civilian deaths

- Eight year sentence max, sentences could be served on private farms, could keep profits from criminal activities

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Groups have less direct electoral influence post-demobilization

Electoral Overperformance

Leader holds back on enforcement to friendly criminal groups

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Paramilitaries deliver votes $\rightarrow$ receive relief from enforcement

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Examine Uribe's overperformance in paramilitary areas and eradication

Electoral Overperformance

Leader holds back on enforcement to friendly criminal groups

Paramilitaries deliver votes → receive relief from enforcement

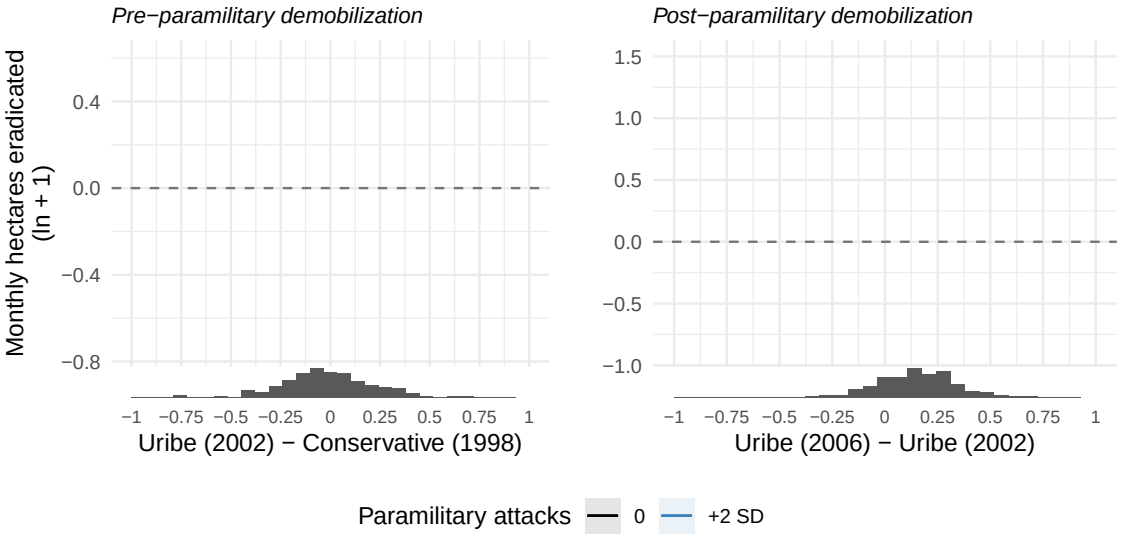
Examine Uribe's overperformance in paramilitary areas and eradication

Vote Difference	Used to Predict	Restraint
2002 relative to 1998	Eradication 2002-2006	More likely
2006 relative to 2002	Eradication 2006-2010	Less likely

Expect **restraint** in **paramilitary** areas with **2002** overperformance

Elections and Demobilization

More Results | Electoral Violence



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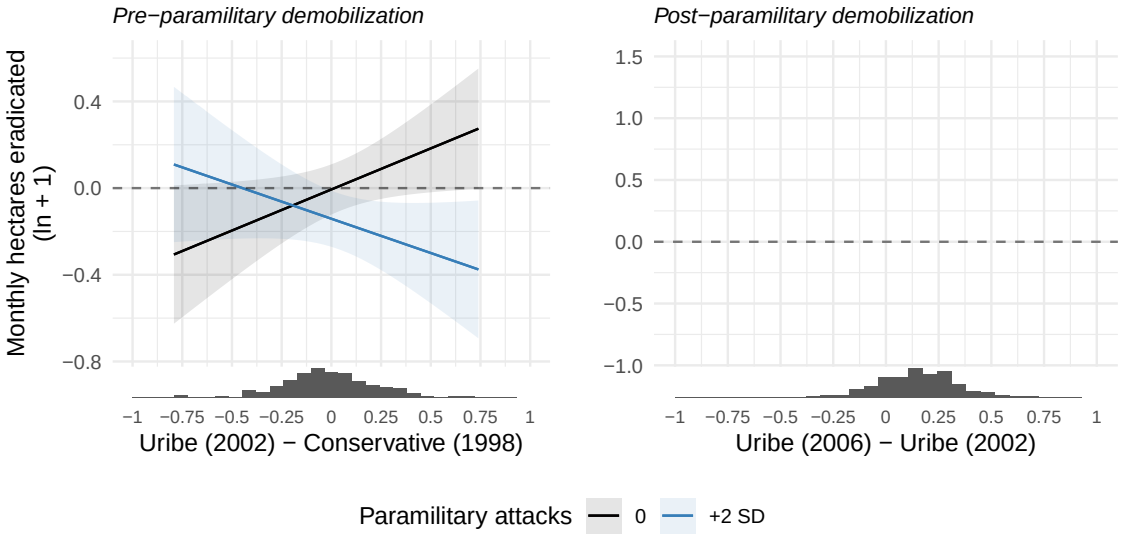

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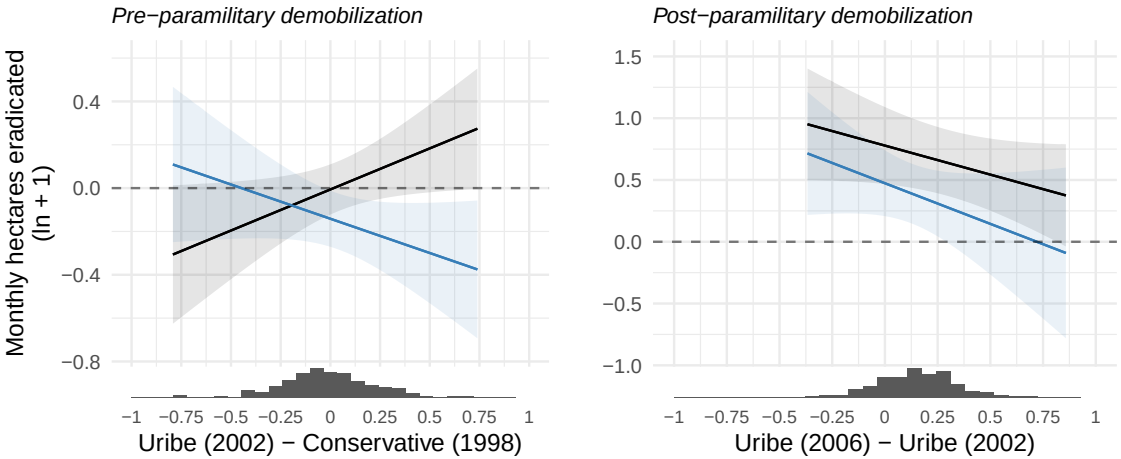

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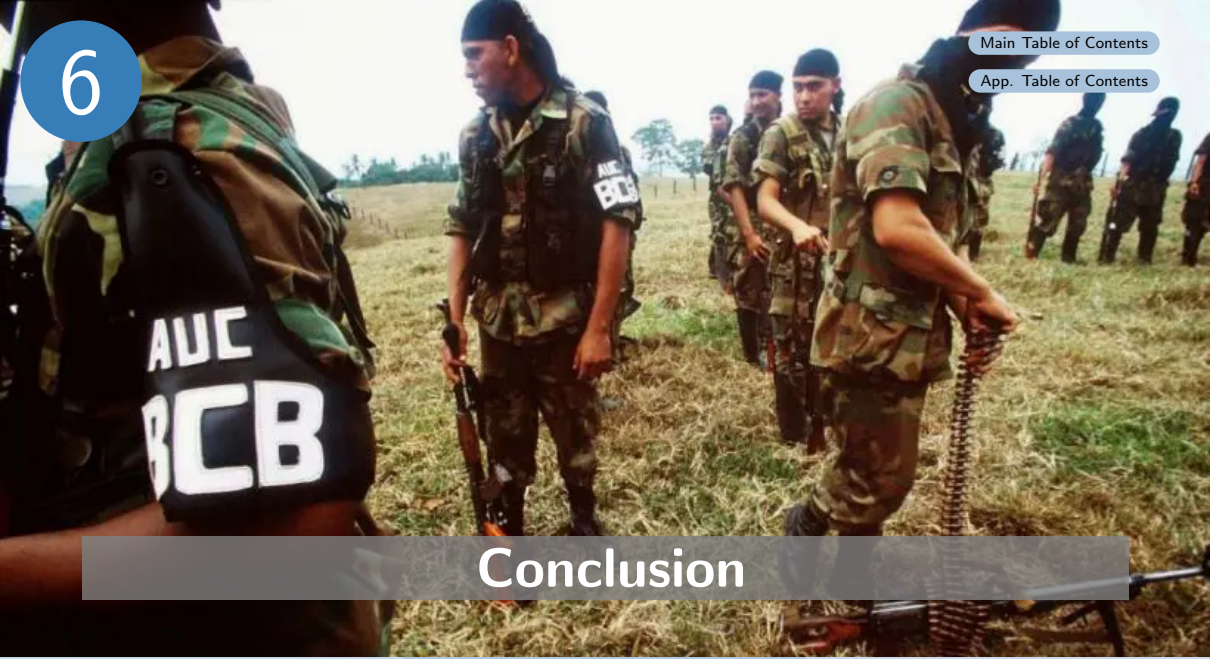


Conclusion

Discussion: Theory

When does the state target competitors to its monopoly on violence?

Discussion: Theory

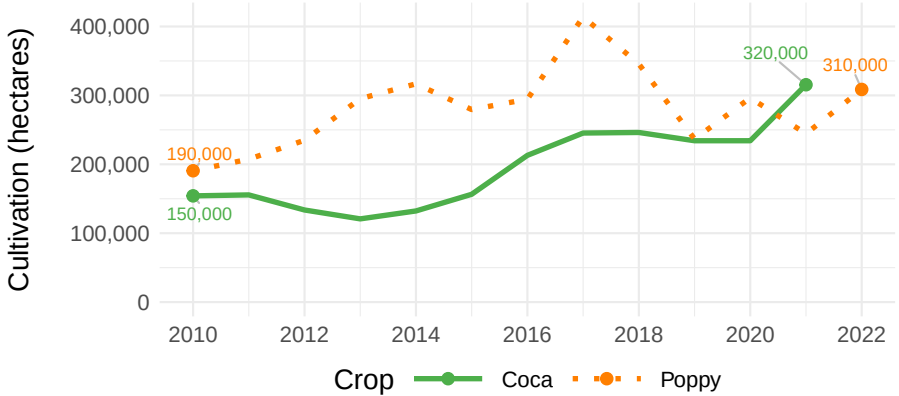
When does the state target competitors to its monopoly on violence?

> *"The purpose of this process is achieving national peace through the strengthening of democratic governance and the restoration of the monopoly on violence to the State."*
>
> — Santa Fe de Ralito agreement between Colombian national government and AUC

Discussion: Policy

Harshly punitive policy has **limited proven effectiveness**

(Baumgartner et al., 2021; Blair and Weintraub, 2023; Brinks, 2007; Geller et al., 2014; Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2021; Kleck and Barnes, 2014; Toth and Mitchell, 2018) Consumption Production



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Harsh punitive policy has **limited proven effectiveness**

...but preventive policy demonstrates **increasing promise**

(Prieto-Curiel, Campedelli and Hope, 2023; Blattman, Jamison and Sheridan, 2017; García-Ponce et al., 2023; Heller et al., 2017; Mitchell, Wilson and MacKenzie, 2012)

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(Prieto-Curiel, Campedelli and Hope, 2023; Blattman, Jamison and Sheridan, 2017; García-Ponce et al., 2023; Heller et al., 2017; Mitchell, Wilson and MacKenzie, 2012)

Understanding **how these policies are implemented** and under what circumstances is vital

Discussion: Policy

Agency of elected leaders matters for drug enforcement

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De facto enforcement can shift significantly across government

...even if the letter of the law remains unchanged

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Instead make policy goals **incentive compatible** for leaders

Conclusion

Political incentives of elected leaders shape drug enforcement

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Tested variation in political incentives to enforce:

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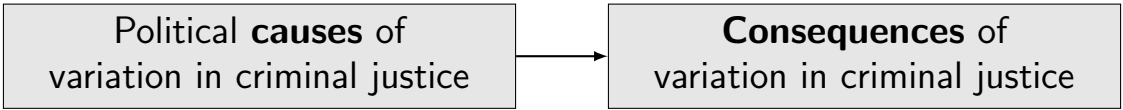

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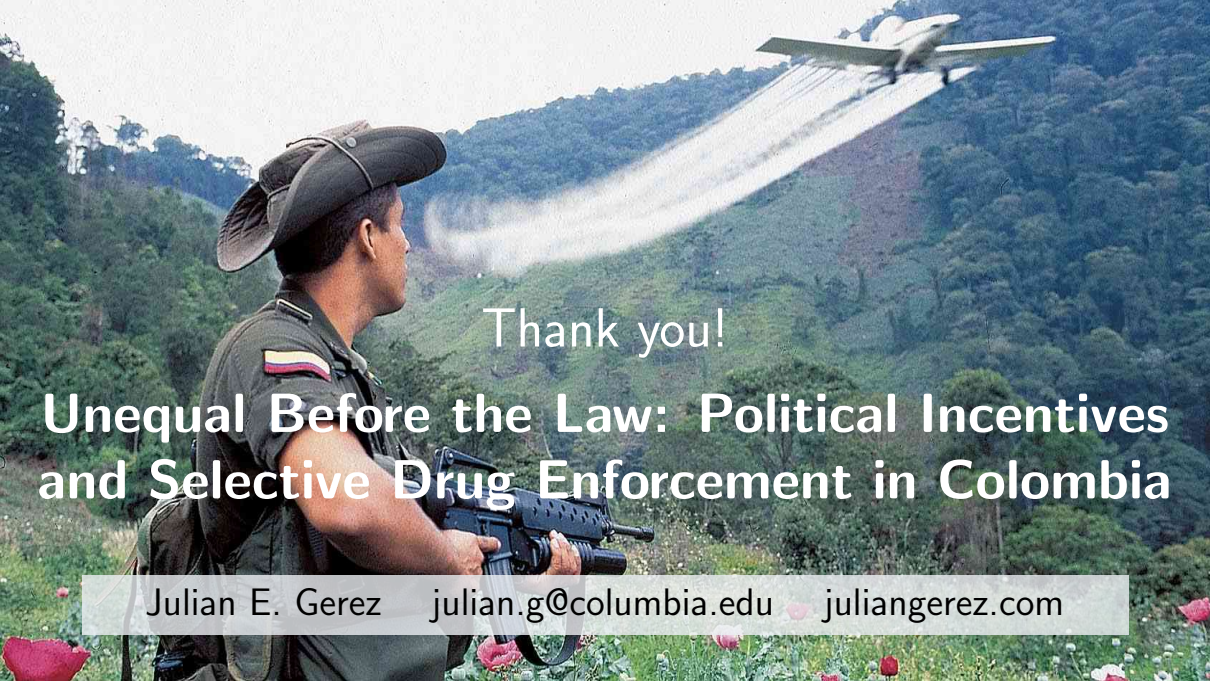
Individual political behavior, economic diversification of criminal groups, extradition dilemma



Thank you!

Unequal Before the Law: Political Incentives and Selective Drug Enforcement in Colombia

Julian E. Gerez julian.g@columbia.edu juliangerez.com

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Theory: The Politics of Counternarcotics
3. Context, Research Design, and Data
4. Results: Political Incentives and Selective Enforcement
5. Mechanisms: Paramilitary Demobilization
6. Conclusion

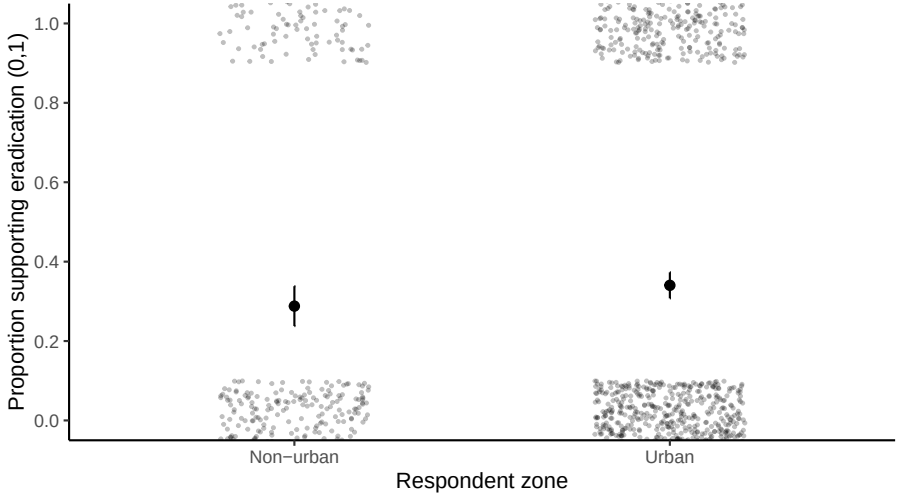
Appendix Table of Contents

Back to alt. explanations

Eradication and public opinion — Urbanicity | Ideology | Candidates
Maps (geographies of production and cultivation) — Violence map | Sample map
Event study estimating equation — Estimating equation
Full set of results — All main results | All event study results
Formal test of parallel trends — July 2001 placebo | July 2000 placebo
Cross-sectional results — Cross-sectional results
Controlling for coca cultivation — Baseline cultivation | Lagged cultivation | Proportion
Including time-varying covariates — Additional covariates
Mayoral RDD — Mayoral RDD
Pre-baseline violence data (1988-1997) — Pre-baseline violence data
Binary measure of violence data — Binary treatment
ln + 1 transformed violence data — ln + 1 treatment
Squaring violence measures — Squaring violence measures
Interacting violence measures — Interacting violence measures
Electoral overperformance table — Additional results overperformance
Electoral violence results — Additional results violence
Global drug production and consumption — Consumption | Production

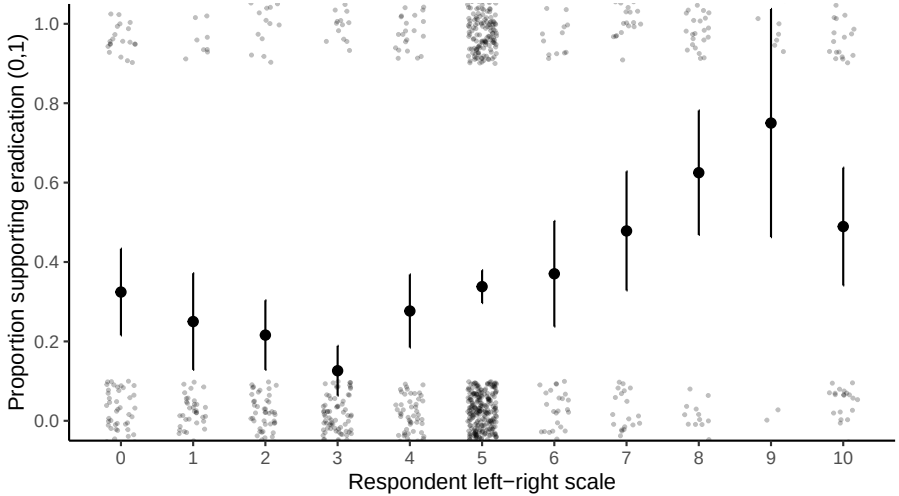
Eradication and Area

Back to theory | Back to approach | Back to app. contents



Ideology

Back to theory | Back to approach | Back to app. contents



Ideology and Candidates

Back to theory | Back to approach | Back to app. contents

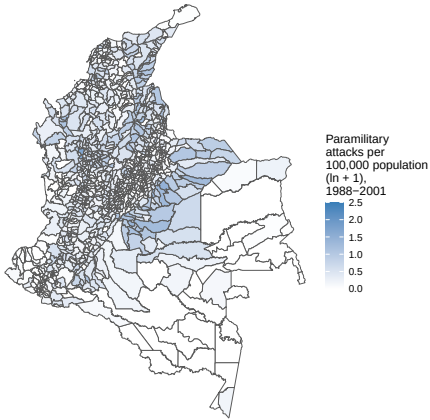
Table: Relationship between ideology and political opinions.

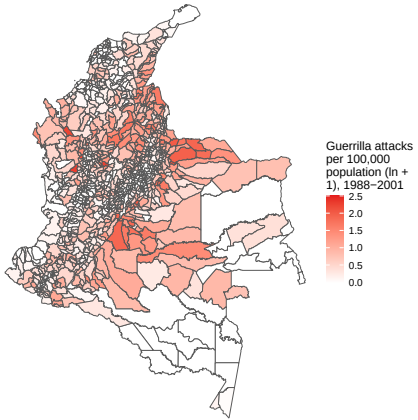
Outcomes:	Approval	Self-reported vote: Round 1				Vote intention: Round 2	
	Duque *Right Incumbent*	Any	Petro *Left*	Fico *Right*	Hernández *Right*	Petro *Left*	Hernández *Right*
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Predictor is respondent self-reported left-right scale placement, range: {0,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10}							
Ideology	0.219***	-0.006	-0.104***	0.055***	0.030***	-0.106***	0.086***
	(0.016)	(0.004)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
R^2	0.17	0.001	0.22	0.13	0.03	0.23	0.19
Observations	1,132	1,109	966	966	966	1,128	1,128

Notes: All specifications are estimated using OLS. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Geographies of Violence

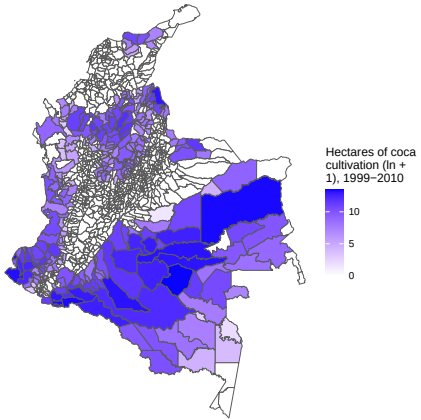
Back to data | Back to appendix contents

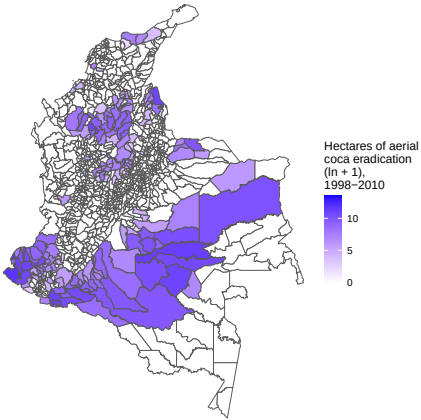




Geographies of Coca

Back to data Back to appendix contents





Event Study Estimation

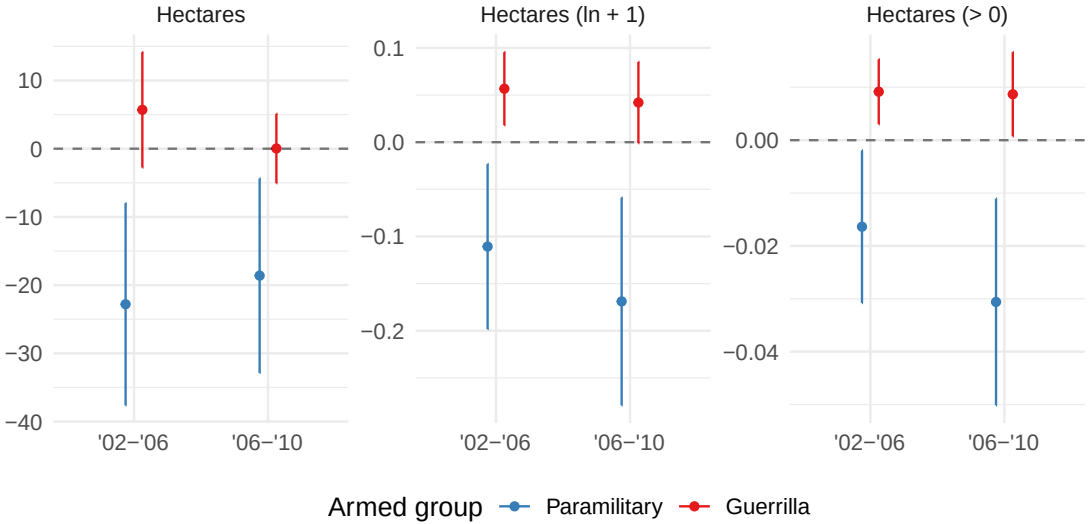
Back to results Back to appendix contents

$$Eradication_{i,t} = \sum_{j \neq 2002} \beta_j P_i \times \mathbb{1}[y = j] + \sum_{j \neq 2002} \zeta_j G_i \times \mathbb{1}[y = j] + \gamma_i + \delta_t + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

- $Eradication_{i,t}$: measure of eradication in municipality i in year-month t
- P_i: time-invariant measure of paramilitary attacks
- G_i: time-invariant measure of guerrilla attacks
- $\mathbb{1}[y = j]$: year indicators
- γ_i: municipality fixed effects
- δ_t: year $\times$ month fixed effects

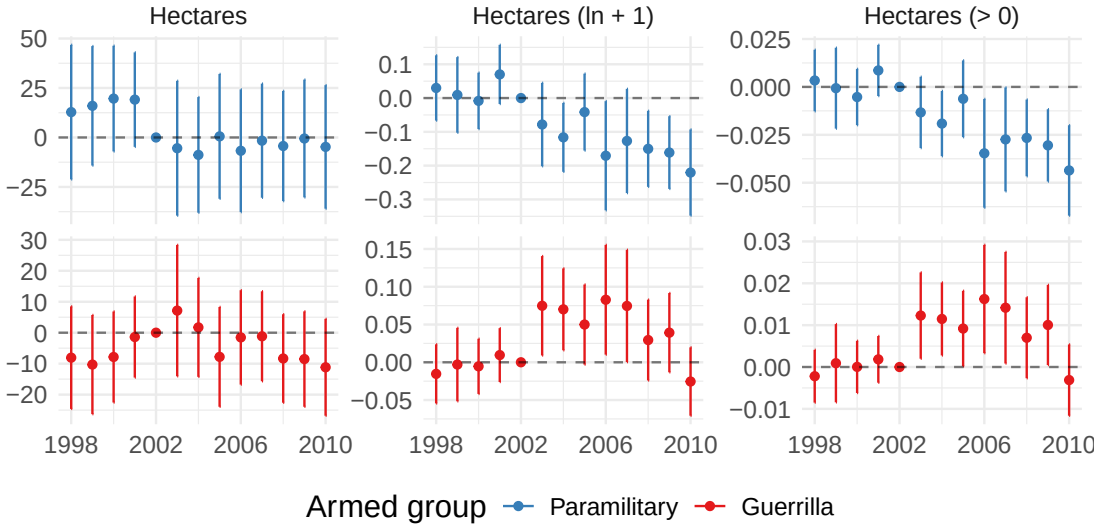
Full Main Results

Back to results summary Back to appendix contents



Full Event Study Results

Back to results summary | Back to appendix contents



July 2001 Placebo

Back to results summary Back to appendix contents

Table: Formal test for parallel trends (Plan Colombia placebo), continuous treatment.

	Hectares (1)	Hectares (ln +1) (2)	Hectares (> 0) (3)
Paramilitary attacks × 2001-2002	-7.338	-0.009	0.001
	(6.095)	(0.036)	(0.007)
Guerrilla attacks × 2001-2002	3.021	0.007	0.000
	(2.572)	(0.014)	(0.003)
R^2	0.10	0.28	0.29
Observations	15,264	15,264	15,264
Municipalities	318	318	318

Notes: All specifications are estimated using OLS and include municipality and year × month fixed effects. Robust standard errors clustered by municipality are in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

July 2000 Placebo

Back to results summary Back to appendix contents

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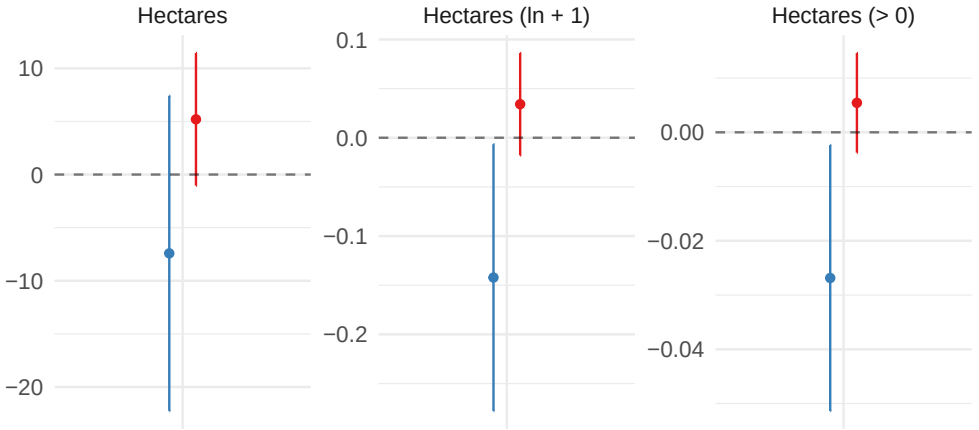
	Hectares (1)	Hectares (ln +1) (2)	Hectares (> 0) (3)
Paramilitary attacks × 2000-2002	-4.924	0.017	0.004
	(7.335)	(0.039)	(0.007)
Guerrilla attacks × 2000-2002	6.046*	0.013	0.001
	(3.602)	(0.017)	(0.003)
R^2	0.10	0.28	0.29
Observations	15,264	15,264	15,264
Municipalities	318	318	318

Notes: All specifications are estimated using OLS and include municipality and year × month fixed effects. Robust standard errors clustered by municipality are in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

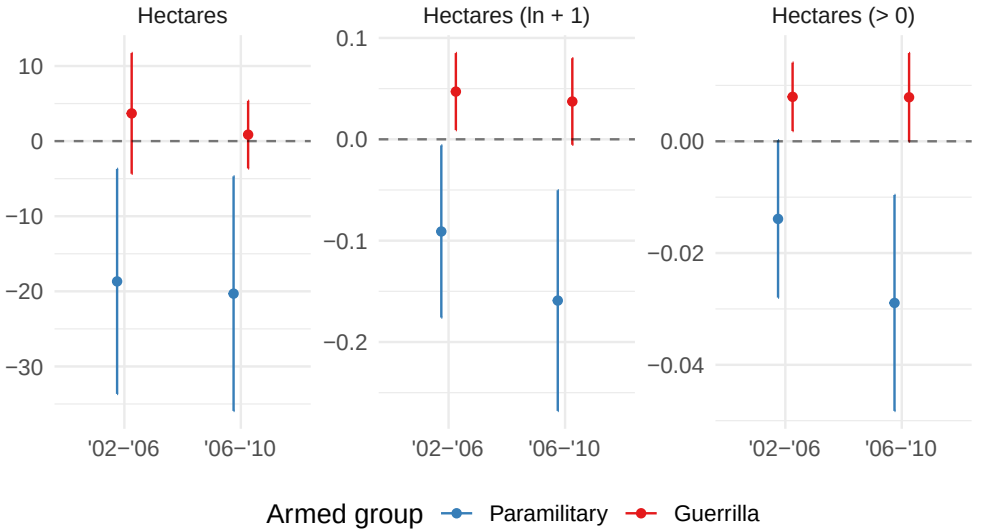
Cross-sectional Results

Back to results summary Back to appendix contents



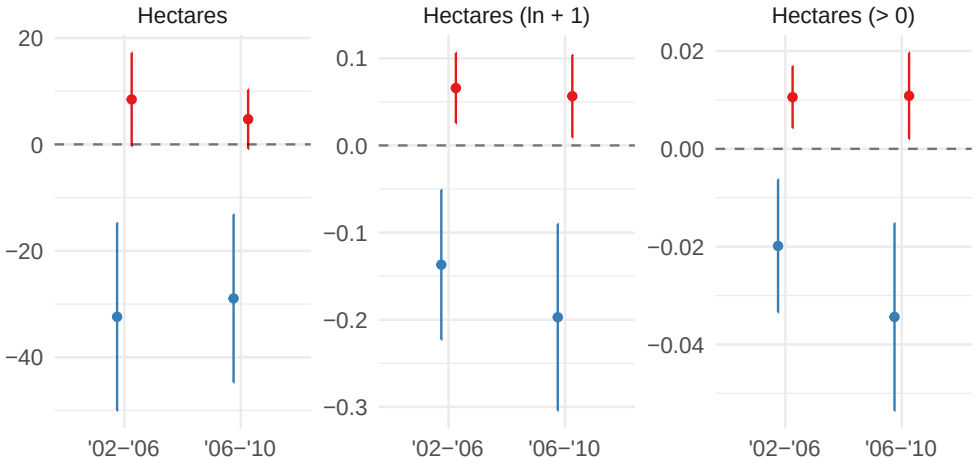
Baseline Cultivation

Back to alt. explanations Back to appendix contents



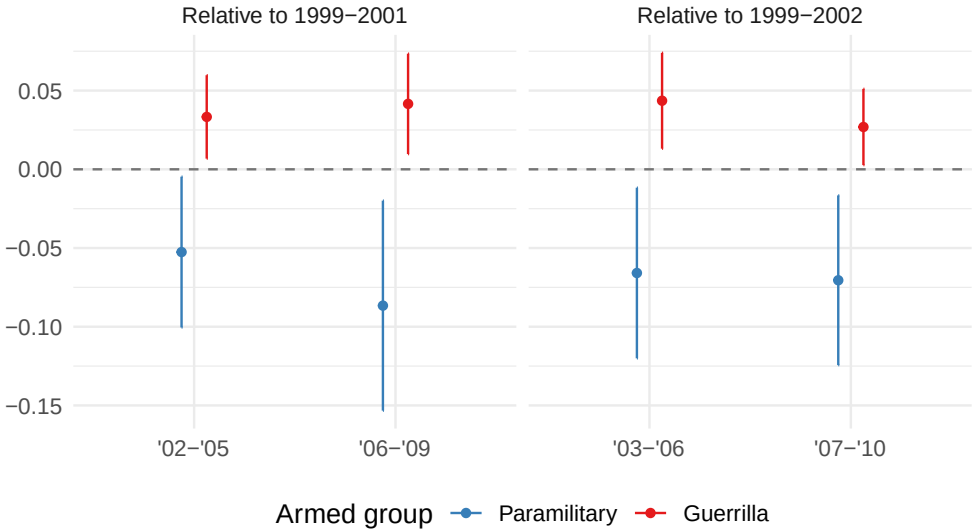
Lagged Cultivation

Back to alt. explanations | Back to appendix contents



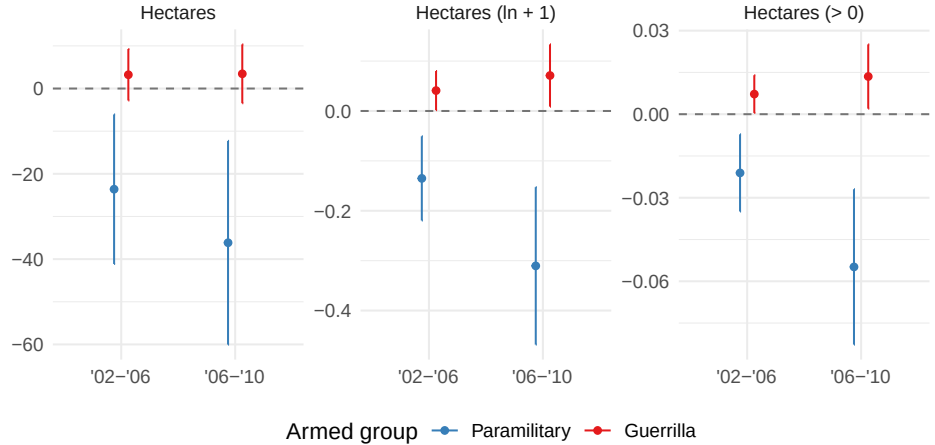
Proportion Eradicated

Back to alt. explanations | Back to appendix contents



Additional Covariates

Back to alt. explanations | Back to appendix contents



Year-month fixed effects interacted with department fixed effects, municipality area, coca suitability, altitude, and distance to Bogotá, as well as measures of the pre-violence right/left lean of each municipality

Mayoral RDD

Back to alt. explanations Back to appendix contents

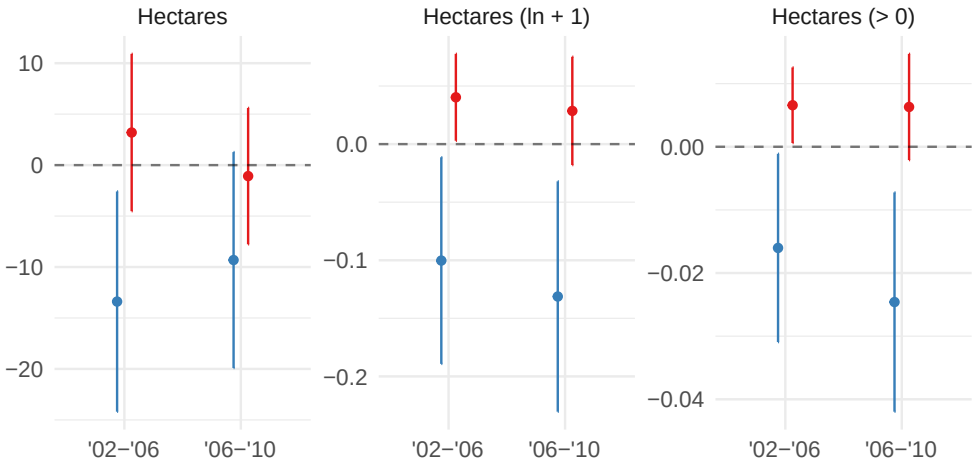
Table: Regression discontinuity: election of partisan mayors on eradication.

	Avg. yearly aerial eradication hectares (1)	Avg. yearly aerial eradication hectares (ln +1) (2)	Avg. yearly aerial eradication hectares (> 0) (3)
Panel A: Right-wing mayor			
Mayor elected	2.952	0.188	0.049
	(18.430)	(0.406)	(0.087)
Observations	187, 172	187, 172	187, 172
Effective obs.	93, 86	102, 93	95, 88
Bandwidth	0.067, 0.067	0.076, 0.076	0.07, 0.07
Panel B: Left-wing mayor			
Mayor elected	414.558	-0.532	-0.175†
	(577.374)	(1.062)	(0.141)
Observations	41, 44	41, 44	41, 44
Effective obs.	13, 21	12, 20	10, 20
Bandwidth	0.06, 0.06	0.055, 0.055	0.049, 0.049

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

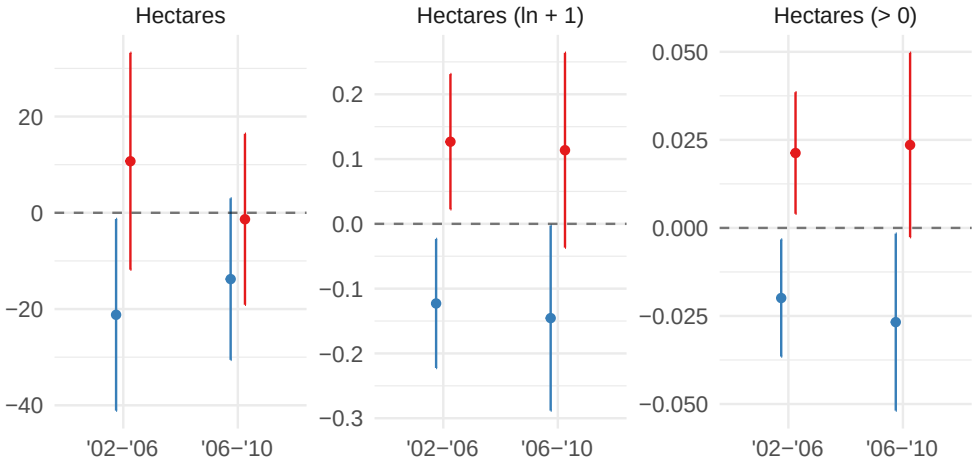
Violence (1988-1997)

Back to alt. explanations Back to appendix contents



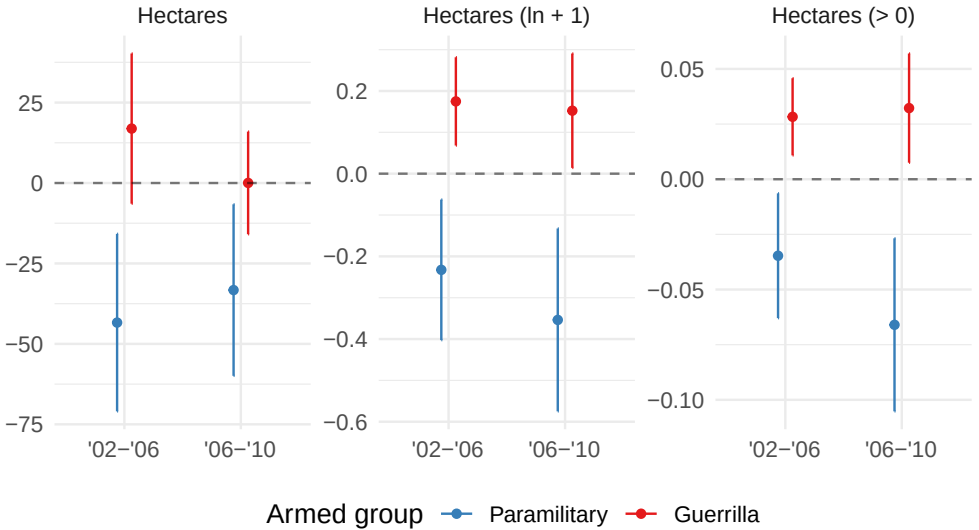
Binary Violence

Back to alt. explanations | Back to appendix contents



ln + 1 Violence

Back to alt. explanations | Back to appendix contents



Squaring Violence

Back to alt. explanations | Back to appendix contents

	Hectares (1)	Hectares (ln +1) (2)	Hectares (> 0) (3)
Paramilitary attacks × 2002-2006	-39.628**	-0.227*	-0.033
	(17.936)	(0.124)	(0.021)
Paramilitary attacks^2 × 2002-2006	7.634	0.049	0.007
	(6.849)	(0.046)	(0.008)
Paramilitary attacks × 2006-2010	-30.790*	-0.351**	-0.065**
	(17.483)	(0.170)	(0.030)
Paramilitary attacks^2 × 2006-2010	5.924	0.076	0.014
	(6.861)	(0.063)	(0.011)
Guerrilla attacks × 2002-2006	10.238	0.115***	0.019***
	(8.640)	(0.041)	(0.007)
Guerrilla attacks^2 × 2002-2006	-0.697	-0.010*	-0.002
	(1.173)	(0.006)	(0.001)
Guerrilla attacks × 2006-2010	0.759	0.131**	0.028***
	(6.632)	(0.058)	(0.010)
Guerrilla attacks^2 × 2006-2010	-0.045	-0.015*	-0.003**
	(0.819)	(0.008)	(0.001)
R^2	0.12	0.22	0.21
Observations	45,792	45,792	45,792
Municipalities	318	318	318

Notes: All specifications are estimated using OLS and include municipality and year × month fixed effects. Baseline category is Pastrana's term from 1998-2002. Robust standard errors clustered by municipality are in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Interacting Violence

Back to alt. explanations | Back to appendix contents

	Hectares (1)	Hectares (ln +1) (2)	Hectares (> 0) (3)
Paramilitary attacks × 2002-2006	-23.064*	-0.115†	-0.016
	(10.492)	(0.063)	(0.010)
Paramilitary attacks × 2006-2010	-19.332*	-0.191*	-0.034*
	(9.436)	(0.084)	(0.014)
Guerrilla attacks × 2002-2006	5.557	0.054	0.009†
	(7.330)	(0.034)	(0.005)
Guerrilla attacks × 2006-2010	-0.368	0.030	0.007
	(5.086)	(0.045)	(0.008)
Paramilitary attacks × guerrilla attacks × 2002-2006	0.165	0.003	0.000
	(4.814)	(0.025)	(0.004)
Paramilitary attacks × guerrilla attacks × 2006-2010	0.454	0.013	0.002
	(5.349)	(0.035)	(0.006)
R^2	0.12	0.22	0.21
Observations	45,792	45,792	45,792
Municipalities	318	318	318

Notes: All specifications are estimated using OLS and include municipality and year × month fixed effects. Baseline category is Pastrana's term from 1998-2002. Robust standard errors clustered by municipality are in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Electoral Overperformance

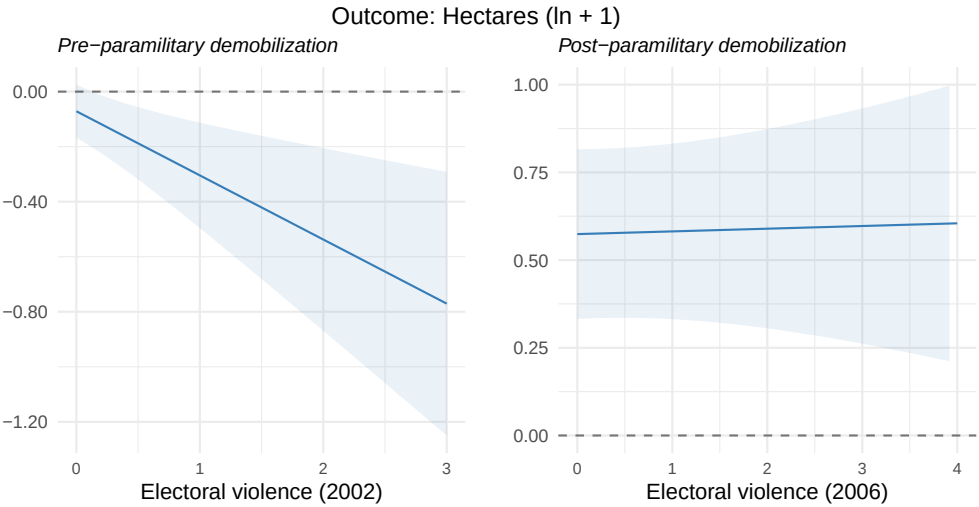
Back to results Back to appendix contents

	Hectares (1)	Hectares (ln +1) (2)	Hectares (> 0) (3)
Panel A: Aerial eradication (2002-2006)			
$\Delta^{2002}\times$ Paramilitary attacks	-100.954*	-0.419*	-0.066*
	(58.624)	(0.233)	(0.036)
R^2	0.04	0.10	0.09
Panel B: Aerial eradication (2006-2010)			
$\Delta^{2006}\times$ Paramilitary attacks	-1.33	-0.113	-0.018
	(37.945)	(0.427)	(0.079)
R^2	0.05	0.10	0.10
Observations	13,680	13,680	13,680
Municipalities	285	285	285

Notes: All specifications are estimated using OLS and include department and year $\times$ month fixed effects. Robust standard errors clustered by municipality are in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Electoral Violence

Back to overperformance results | Back to appendix contents



Electoral Violence

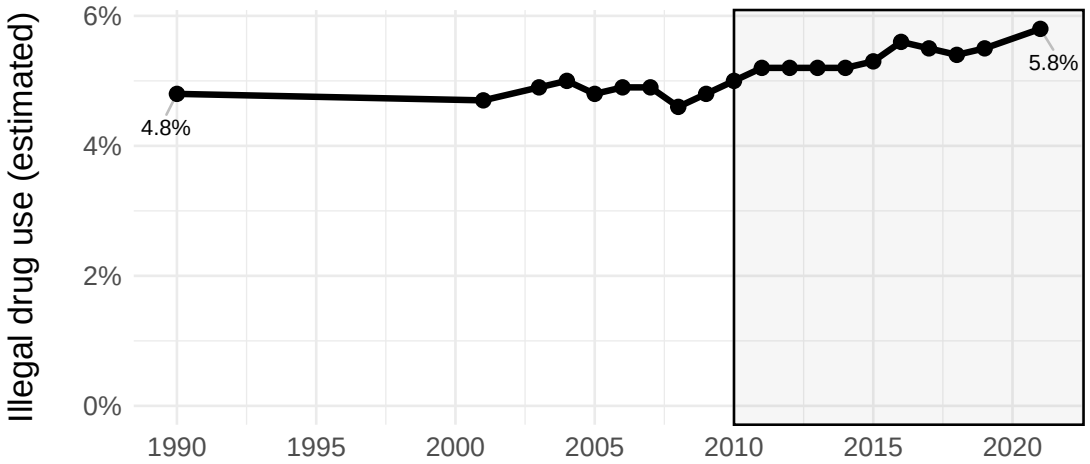
Back to overperformance results | Back to appendix contents

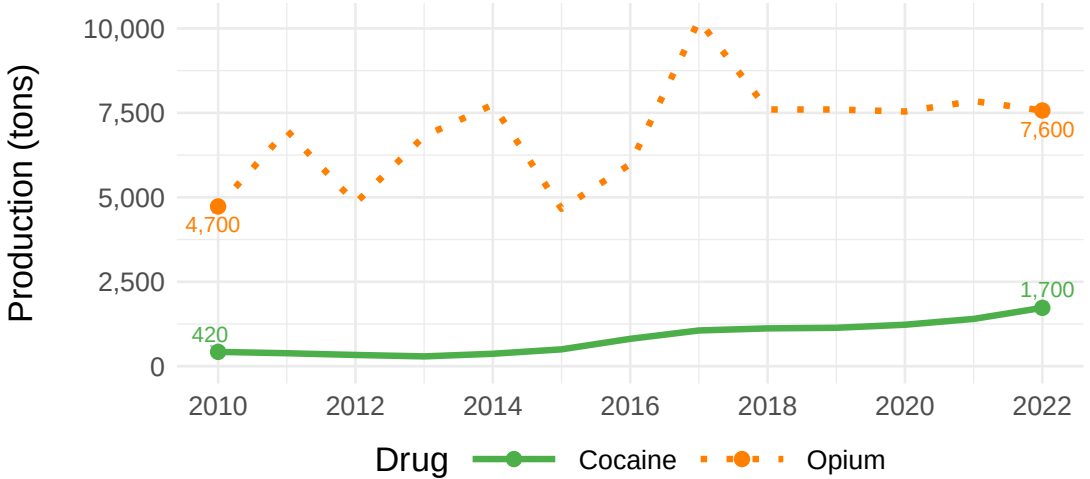
	Hectares (1)	Hectares (ln +1) (2)	Hectares (> 0) (3)
Panel A: Aerial eradication (2002-2006)			
Electoral violence (2002)	-42.064	-0.235**	-0.037***
	(30.472)	(0.092)	(0.014)
R^2	0.04	0.11	0.10
Panel B: Aerial eradication (2006-2010)			
Electoral violence (2006)	-5.210	0.008	0.007
	(4.591)	(0.050)	(0.010)
R^2	0.05	0.10	0.10
Observations	14,208	14,208	14,208
Municipalities	296	296	296

Notes: All specifications are estimated using OLS and include department and year × month fixed effects. Robust standard errors clustered by municipality are in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Global Drug Consumption

Back to policy Back to app. contents



Global Drug Production

Back to intro Back to app. contents