Monopolies of Violence?

How Insurgent Threats Motivate Accountable Governance

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Abstract

Researchers of civil conflict and state-building often argue that governments should possess a "monopoly on violence" with which to enforce laws, facilitate commerce, and provide security. Monopolists, however, are notorious for predatory behavior. How can citizens simultaneously empower a government to maintain order while also deterring the ruler from engaging in abuse? Combining insights from models of distributive conflict with research on counterinsurgency, we demonstrate that rulers can be held accountable by latent threats of insurgent violence. Although the presence of armed insurgents can provoke escalatory violence, under general conditions the threat of unrest can also inhibit government predation, encourage the development of institutional safeguards, and motivate rulers to extend generous political and economic guarantees to citizens. Our results challenge popular conclusions regarding the benefits of democratic rule, the desirability of state consolidation, the causes of civil violence, and the optimal use of foreign intervention in civil conflicts.

1 Introduction

How can disaffected citizens secure durable economic and political rights from powerful regimes? From citizens of Hong Kong holding pro-democracy demonstrations to Palestinians appealing for human rights reforms; from Black Lives Matter supporters seeking restrictions on police behavior to women marching for credible guarantees of gender equity, civilians around the world frequently organize in mass opposition to established policies only to watch as indifferent governments leave those complaints unaddressed.

Although these movements differ in many ways, they also follow a consistent logic. In each case, citizens disagree with the government about the balance of two desirable goods: state power and state accountability. Citizens and governments alike understand—whether explicitly or not—that strong, centralized governments can improve conditions for everyone. Whereas life without government is "nasty, brutish, and short," leaders empowered with a monopoly on violence can establish norms, enforce rules, facilitate exchange, and provide security.[1] At the same time, however, both groups acknowledge a trade-off between monopolistic power and accountable rule. For civilians, this is particularly concerning. Absolute rulers are rarely benevolent; once empowered to enforce the law, they are sorely tempted to live above it. Civilians therefore worry that powerful governments will implement policies that privilege some groups while sacrificing the well-being of others. Incumbents, in turn, view unaccountable rule as tempting but risky. Governments that lack domestic constraints struggle to obtain credit, often encounter civil unrest that proves costly even when quelled, and commonly suffer direct opposition to their hold on power. Given these trade-offs, the enduring challenge facing citizens and state officials is the construction of a political environment that will "first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."[2]

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[1] Hobbes 1651; Weber 1919.

[2] Madison 1788.

Distributive conflict theorists envision a solution prominently illustrated by Acemoglu and Robinson (2005). In short, governments reform in the face of mass civilian protest. When popular dissent is sufficiently intense, autocrats quell discontent by offering citizens an improved share of contested goods. To demonstrate these promises are credible, governments may also extend the franchise or enact constitutional reforms, thereby granting citizens durable policy influence even after the revolutionary moment subsides. Although this narrative provides the foundation for a productive literature, it nonetheless faces several persistent challenges. First, several of the core predictions appear inconsistent with empirical patterns. As referenced above, even mass demonstrations with broad social support regularly fail to achieve their goals.[3] Likewise, researchers increasingly question the relationship between distributive conflict and democratization: many countries have democratized in the absence of civil unrest, and autocrats sometimes increase redistribution without committing to the types of political liberalization that prevailing theories consider necessary.[4] Finally, even when governments adopt formal constitutions or expand enfranchisement, prevailing models leave unspecified why such actions make credible the promise of sustained redistribution. Democratic backsliding is commonplace, constitutions are frequently challenged, distribution can be reversed, and newly-extended liberties are easily repealed—behaviors that call into question the significance of written institutions as safeguards of civil and minority rights.

We address these concerns by introducing an alternative mechanism that can facilitate a durable and desirable balance between government power and accountability. Our solution builds upon growing literatures on counterinsurgency and civil violence, moving beyond distributive conflict models that focus solely on bilateral relations between citizens and an incumbent regime. Instead, we examine how these groups respond to the presence of a third strategic actor: *militant political activists*. Although these activists initially lie dormant within the fabric of civil society, they can respond to government intransigence or overreach by leveraging their talents for social organizing, their extreme preferences, and their capacity for militant activity to credibly threaten acts of insur-

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[3] An estimated one million citizens joined the recent protests in Hong Kong—roughly 13% of the country's population—but achieved little long-term success.

[4] Haggard and Kaufman 2012; Albertus and Menaldo 2018.

gent violence or civil unrest.[5] Put simply, our model examines the influence of activists who, in the words of Malcolm X, are not "hand-cuffed by the disarming philosophy of nonviolence."

In keeping with counterinsurgency research, we recognize that if tensions escalate the potential insurgents would rely on their fellow citizens, either for direct support or for concealment from authorities. Accordingly, both the would-be insurgents and the incumbent are motivated to gain favor with civilians before escalation occurs. Whether insurgents genuinely care for their compatriots' well-being or simply pander in the service of ulterior motives, they pose as champions of the citizenry in hopes of amassing support. At the same time, the threat of insurgency applies pressure on the incumbent, which realizes that dissatisfied citizens may favor the insurgents and embolden them to mobilize. The desire to preempt insurgent activity motivates the government to provide citizens an increasingly generous set of political and economic goods. In sum, the presence of latent insurgents and the accompanying threat of violence enable citizens to extract valuable concessions from recalcitrant governments, even when insurgents are themselves predatory and self-interested.

Our results contrast with popular conclusions regarding state consolidation, democratic rule, and the causes of civil unrest. In particular, we argue that democratic institutions are neither necessary nor sufficient for accountable governance. Citizens in our model obtain durable restrictions on government abuse without relying on formal enfranchisement. Moreover, we argue that democratic protections are often more fragile than researchers acknowledge. When institutional protections are challenged or norms begin to decay, the threat of organized insurgency remains a useful means of deterring governments' most predatory impulses.

Likewise, our findings challenge a longstanding approach to foreign intervention that depicts internal stability as a prerequisite for productive and accountable government. Strong, centralized governments will rarely expand public benefits or construct self-regulating institutions once credible domestic challengers have been wholly suppressed. Instead, government reforms and concessions require motivation. We illustrate how latent threats of instability encourage rulers to offer generous concessions to citizens and also provide a mechanism that makes such promises credible.

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[5] In our model, violence need not result in regime change as long as incumbents are sensitive to disruptive activity.

This is not to say that citizens should always nurture the growth of latent insurgencies. Instead, they must weigh potential improvements in accountability against the risks of costly destabilization. Although insurgents induce redistribution in a wide array of settings, in the second half of the paper we showcase how insurgents can also succumb to state prevention, provoke state repression, or incite full-blown civil war. In the process, we demonstrate that our theory generates new insights into the causes of civil conflict and government reform while also offering an adaptable platform for continued research on civil governance, counterinsurgency, and foreign intervention.

2   Theories of Government Constraint

Thomas Hobbes characterized life without government as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."[6] In this view, nothing prevents the strong from plundering the weak, the unscrupulous from preying upon the unwitting, or the dishonest from defrauding the less discerning. Anarchic conditions also suppress economic exchange. Without external enforcement, individuals struggle to establish durable contracts over goods and services. Governments, according to Hobbes, emerge in response to these challenges. Rather than suffer anarchy, individuals submit themselves to an authority they hope will provide order, stability, and security. Variants of this narrative are widely invoked to explain state consolidation, centralization, and the monopolization of force.[7] As North (1981, p. 24) summarizes, "throughout history, individuals, given a choice between a state… and anarchy, have decided for the former." Unfortunately, however, the benefits of state authority are neither automatic nor risk-free. Governments are inherently coercive: by design they are empowered to use threats and acts of violence to motivate changes in civilian behavior.[8] Nearly all government actions—even those that provide overall social benefits—make some individuals worse off. Thus, a primary concern for citizens is that rulers empowered to use coercion for the collective good will instead exert their authority for private gain. Powerful governments routinely select policies to enrich

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[6] Hobbes 1651.

[7] Weber 1919; Olson 1993; North et al. 2009.

[8] Governments can facilitate coordination without exercising coercion, but that role alone would not necessitate the types of formalized and monopolistic states to which we devote our attention.

themselves or their supporters while predating upon subjects they oppose. As Rousseau argued in 1762, the chief difficulty in building a society is to find an "association which will defend and protect… the goods of each associate," while still allowing each citizen to "remain as free as before."

The trade-off between a government's coercive power and its accountability may seem archaic to researchers in mature democracies who are accustomed to the notion that political checks and balances inhibit government abuse. In contrast, however, this dilemma remains a prominent concern in more brittle states where institutional safeguards have decayed or are yet to emerge. In Libya, Syria, Iraq, and the DRC, for example, the central government's fragility has left citizens vulnerable to predation from violent opportunists. Elsewhere, in places like Palestine, Egypt, and Bahrain, governments monopolize violence so comprehensively that they can themselves prey upon citizens with impunity. Put simply, examples at both ends of the spectrum attest to the suffering that results when governments are armed either with too little coercive power or too much.

Political theorists describe several means by which societies can establish order while avoiding abuse. At the most formative level, civilians need not worry about state predation if governments are inherently benevolent or, alternatively, are perfectly responsive to sociotropic constituents.[9] Such proposals, however, offer little explanation of how citizens could induce accountable behavior by leaders who are not naturally altruistic or in societies where other-regarding norms are not widespread. Another set of explanations rely on foreign intervention. For example, supranational authorities might safeguard the interests of citizens by penalizing government misbehavior. Unfortunately, this mechanism leaves unspecified from whence these motivations should originate. Why would a world sovereign, once empowered, use its influence for liberal rather than authoritarian ends? Moreover, relying on supranational authority is impractical given the myriad difficulties in establishing durable international bodies that can challenge state sovereignty.[10] Even the strongest and most successful examples, such as the European Union, remain limited in policy scope, face

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[9] Plato suggested "philosopher kings" could rule with social interests in mind, watched by "guardians" themselves trained to prioritize community well-being over personal gain. Similarly, Chinese political theorists argued political leaders would enact benevolent policies if properly guided by mandarin advisors (see Xuetong 2013 and Qin 2016). Both prescriptions prompt the question, "Who guards the guardians?"

[10] Waltz 1979; Axelrod and Keohane 1985; Oye 1985; Milner 1991; Wendt 1992; Mearsheimer 1994; Krasner 1999; Lake 2009; Schneider and Slantchev 2013; Lee 2020.

jurisdictional conflicts with national authorities, and are ill-equipped to prevent governments or particularist majority groups from acting against minority interests.

Researchers who study political authority and economic development suggest a third mechanism. In this view, citizens provide a renewing resource from which rulers extract taxes and rents. Just as property rights motivate individuals to avoid over-exploitation of natural resources, governments that consolidate local authority may avoid over-taxation that would deplete the long-term productivity of their citizens.[11] In this respect, the relationship between these sovereigns and their subjects is "similar to the relation between a parasite and its host," with the former relying on the latter for sustainment.[12] Although some theories further suggest governments will restrict their own capacity to extract,[13] they leave unaddressed why civilian protections would extend beyond those that are minimally conducive to growth. States concerned with fostering economic development need neither engage in generous social spending nor offer extensive political liberties to citizens.[14]

Perhaps the most popular argument for how citizens can restrain the state's predatory impulses relates to the role of democratic and social movements. Acemoglu and Robinson (2005) advance the theory that elites voluntarily extend the franchise to avoid mass revolution, with citizens using their continued political influence to obtain additional redistribution. This account, however, faces its own set of challenges. First, despite popular discussion in the literature, mass "peasant revolts" rarely succeed in toppling incumbent governments. Only the most optimistic citizens expect to gain as much by participating in a revolt as they stand to lose by doing so. As such, few protests involve the mass mobilization of all members of society. Instead, successful or credible challenges to state authority are often channeled through political insurgents and entrepreneurial networks who organize small groups of motivated participants.[15] Second, Acemoglu and Robinson assume that both revolutions and enfranchisement trigger transfers of power in which unitary citizens gain

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[11] Alchian and Demsetz 1973; Hardin 1968; Olson 1993.

[12] Wagner 2010, p. 119. In the parlance of the literature, such governments are known as 'stationary bandits' who continually extract the surpluses of production from those who inhabit their lands.

[13] See, for example, North and Weingast (1989) and Root (1989).

[14] Even the British slave trade was long justified on economic grounds (Eltis 1987).

[15] The American Revolution was instigated by a relatively small group of activists rather than by mass public support. Even when the war began in earnest, fewer than 15% of colonial residents participated in the conflict.

the capacity to set policy directly. This characterization of "democratic victory" in the aftermath of revolution appears empirically dubious.[16] In particular, it overlooks the possibility that the insurgents who participate in rebellion may, upon obtaining power, fail to fulfill their promises to former supporters.[17] Additional theorizing should acknowledge the possibility of post-war disagreement or conflict between ordinary citizens and the leaders of the revolutionary movement.

Finally, even if democracy is established as in Acemoglu and Robinson's (2005) framework, the system of government remains vulnerable to familiar criticisms. Democracies are often criticized for factionalized or oppressive majority rule. "Competition among factions is a necessary evil in democracies," but neither theorists nor policymakers have devised optimal rules for reducing the social harms of factional competition (Schmitter and Karl 1991, p. 78). On similar lines, Weingast (1997, p. 246) cautions that although democracy "requires that citizens agree on the limits of the state that they are to defend… such agreement is neither natural nor automatic." Finally, scholars of democratic politics are familiar with concerns about adequate representation, participation, and authoritarian reversion.[18] The idea that "constitution[s] and other political institutions…place restrictions on the state" is commonly offered by assumption, without specifying mechanisms that transform these sheafs of paper into durable guarantees.[19] Indeed, governments routinely engage in reversion and backsliding, even over commitments as ostensibly sacrosanct as the power of the purse.[20] Collectively, these challenges raise serious questions about whether formal democratic institutions can adequately and durably protect citizens from government abuse. In the next section, we introduce an alternative mechanism that enables citizens to obtain such protections even in the absence of democratic rule.

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[16] See Haggard and Kaufman (2012).

[17] Victorious revolutions often fail to facilitate democracy, peace, or stability. Thousands were massacred in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution—a popularly-supported rebellion that nevertheless yielded an authoritarian empire rather than a democratic state. Even when revolutionaries erect democratic institutions, victorious states often face subsequent challenges from within. In the early United States, these manifested in a series of civil dissent events, ranging from Shay's Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion through the American Civil War.

[18] Achen and Bartels 2017; Svolik 2008.

[19] North and Weingast 1989, p. 805.

[20] See Cox (2012). Indeed, as Ziblatt (2006, p. 312) summarizes, "the central empirical puzzle" that occupied democratic theorists in the mid-twentieth century was to explain "the democratic reversals of the interwar period… given that democracy had appeared so secure in the world's most advanced economies."
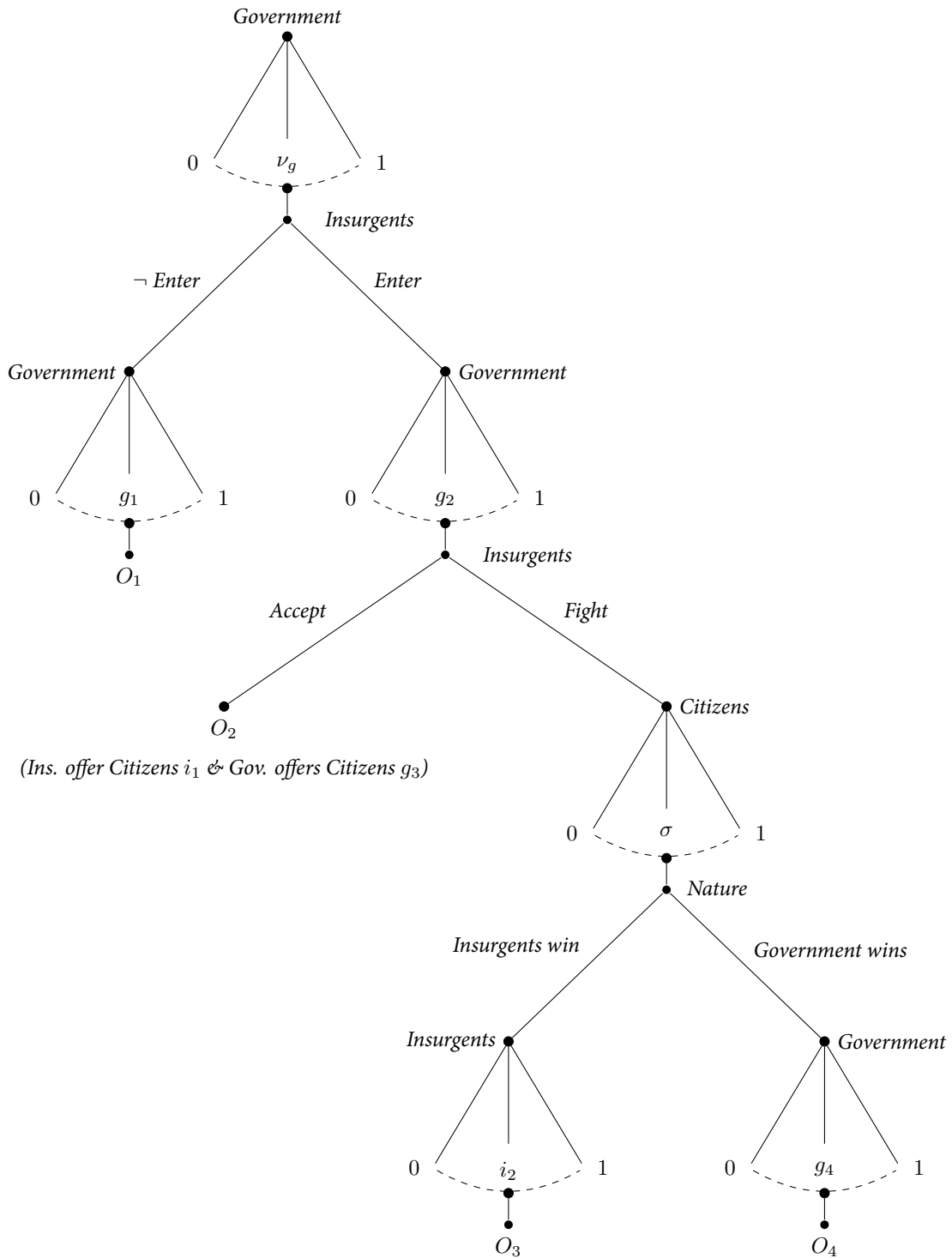
3   Baseline Model

We present our mechanism using a simple, trilateral model that depicts interactions between citizens, insurgents, and an incumbent government. Our model deliberately simplifies reality so as to highlight several key relationships.[21] In particular, the baseline model illustrates how latent insurgents can assist or inhibit citizens who seek government concessions. This complete-information version of the model highlights an outcome in which the actors *could* pursue civil war but instead avoid violence in the equilibrium of interest, with the government preemptively committing itself to redistribution so as to dissuade citizens from supporting the latent challenger.[22] The insurgents, in turn, recognize they lack the requisite support to extort additional concessions and so decline to mobilize. This 'no entry' equilibrium therefore exhibits precisely the welfare-enhancing dynamic we believe citizens can harness in optimal circumstances: bolstering government accountability via the *threat* of organized insurgency even if the threat remains unrealized.

In subsequent sections, we discuss how minor modifications from the baseline setup generate many familiar phenomena documented in research on distributional conflict, civil war, and counterinsurgency. Introducing information asymmetries, commitment deficits, frictions within the citizenry, and heterogeneous insurgent groups produce outcomes in which civil violence can occur instead of peaceful reform. The model therefore serves as an easily customizable platform for sustained theoretical work on civil governance and intrastate conflict. Nevertheless, through all of these modifications, citizens continue to confront the same basic trade-off between an environment in which the government monopolizes force to preserve domestic stability and an alternative environment where government accountability is improved at the risk of civil violence. Importantly, the core result of our baseline model is robust to these modifications. In each case, areas of the parameter space continue to exist in which the improvements in accountability associated with insurgent threats outweigh the accompanying risks of destabilization.

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[21] On the use of abstract models to clarify social behaviors, see Wagner (2010) and Clarke and Primo (2012).

[22] For example, the government may institute land reforms (Kapstein 2017), extend suffrage (Acemoglu and Robinson 2005), or subsidize the costs of housing and food (Bates 1981).

Baseline Model of Insurgency and Governance

Government

0 ν_g 1

Insurgents

$\neg$ Enter Enter

Government Government

0 g_1 1 0 g_2 1

O_1 Insurgents

Accept Fight

O_2 Citizens

(Ins. offer Citizens i_1 & Gov. offers Citizens g_3)

0 σ 1

Nature

Insurgents win Government wins

Insurgents Government

0 i_2 1 0 g_4 1

O_3 O_4

Appendix A lists the payoffs associated with each outcome (O_i).

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3.1   Baseline Setup

Our baseline game tree is displayed below (see Appendix A for the payoff table). Following recent theoretical work on counterinsurgency (COIN),[23] we consider a country in which three strategic, unitary actors exist: citizens, insurgents, and an incumbent government. In keeping with research on crisis bargaining,[24] we suppose there exists a finite, rivalrous resource whose total value is normalized to 1 and which is continuously divisible on the interval $[0, 1]$. At the start of the game, we assume the resource is controlled by the government. Following distributive conflict theories, we assume the government can allocate a portion of the resource to citizens. Thus, if the government provides citizens $g_1 \in [0, 1]$, it retains for itself only $1 - g_1$.[25]

The insurgents begin the game as a *latent* actor that has not yet decided to enter the political arena. One can conceive of these insurgents as a group of political entrepreneurs with whom citizens interact as part of the community's associational life: religious groups, community associations, networks of business affiliates, and so on.[26] If the latent actor anticipates sufficient support from citizens, it can evolve into a viable challenger to the incumbent by taking the form of a labor union, social movement, militant group, or rebel faction. Even in its latent capacity, however, the potential insurgency achieves an arbitrary degree of legitimacy among citizens.[27] We translate this into material terms via the parameter ν_i, which represents the extent to which insurgents would

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[23] See, for example, Berman et al. 2011.

[24] Fearon 1995; Powell 1999.

[25] Although this setup is conventional in formal models of interstate conflict, it may seem unusual to those who analyze civil-government relations. Citizens, after all, rely on the government for the supply of many public goods, most notably protection from external predation. The government, in turn, depends on citizens as a tax base. One might expect these mutual dependencies to imply complementary interests and a positive-sum game whereby the government benefits by obtaining taxes when citizens prosper (Olson 1993; North et al. 2009). As we know from analyses of labor-firm bargaining, however, two actors can engage in a productive and mutually beneficial relationship while simultaneously locked in zero-sum conflict over how to split the surplus of production. It is in this respect that governments enable their citizens to operate as a productive tax base while simultaneously denying those citizens human rights, civil liberties, and distributive economic benefits. It is over these *additional* rights, liberties, assets, and opportunities that governments and citizens engage in the type of zero-sum distributive conflict our model depicts. For example, neither the members of Hong Kong's anti-extradition movement nor the protestors involved in France's Yellow Vest Movement face economic deprivation that forces them below subsistence levels. Rather, both groups seek additional political or economic rights from their respective states.

[26] Many successful militant groups originated as charities and community associations and did not conceive of themselves as latent insurgents until much later in their development (Berman 2011).

[27] Roy 2013; Cammett 2014.

redistribute goods toward citizens if in the future the insurgency achieved a position of political authority. More precisely, the insurgents' ties to the community before entering the political arena ensure that the citizens will obtain a fraction ν_i of any concessions won by the insurgents later on. The incumbent government, meanwhile, sets an analogous commitment parameter ν_g.[28]

After observing ν_g and ν_i, the insurgents decide whether to mobilize politically so as to challenge the government. If the insurgents *do not enter* the political arena, they obtain a payoff of 0, while the government provides citizens $g_1 = \nu_g$ and retains for itself $1 - \nu_g$. To outside observers, this behavior generates no remarkable phenomena: no civil war is fought and no peace deals are brokered. Indeed, the insurgency, by remaining latent, is never observed—a point whose implications we discuss at length in Section 4. Alternatively, the insurgency can mobilize politically and threaten to oppose the government, suffering cost c_f in the process. In this case, the government has a chance to avert civil violence by offering the insurgents a take-it-or-leave-it peace deal. Under the terms of the deal, the government offers g_2 to the insurgents and retains $1 - g_2$ for itself. If the insurgents accept this proposal, the government and insurgents rule as a duopoly,[29] fulfilling their commitments to citizens by distributing, respectively, $\nu_g(1 - g_2)$ and $\nu_i g_2$ of the finite resource. If the insurgents instead reject the government's offer, a costly, all-or-nothing civil war is imminent and citizens must determine the level of support they will allocate toward the insurgents, $\sigma \in [\sigma_{min}, \sigma_{max}]$, a decision that will influence the insurgents' probability of victory, $p = p'(\sigma)$ in the war. Regardless of which side prevails, both the insurgents and government suffer fighting costs c_i and c_g, respectively, and a fraction c of the finite resource is also destroyed. This latter parameter can be thought of as capturing the loss of civilian life, destruction of property, loss of tourism revenues, capital flight, or various other costs the society suffers as the result of the conflict. Finally, the victor allocates to citizens the fraction (ν_g or ν_i) of the remaining resource ($1 - c$) to which it was originally committed.

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[28] Leftist autocrats, for example, may be predisposed to support redistribution.
[29] See Grossman (1995) for an analysis of how this might work.

3.2 Baseline Solution

In the baseline game, finding a sub-game perfect equilibrium in which citizens benefit from the threat of insurgency is straightforward. To see this, note that if insurgents enter the market at cost c_f and accept a peace offering of g_2 from the government, they share $g_2\nu_i$ with the civilians while retaining for themselves a final payoff of $(1 - \nu_i)g_2 - c_f$. If instead the insurgents reject the peace deal and go to war, their expected payoff is $p(1 - c)(1 - \nu_i) - c_i - c_f$. Accordingly, the insurgents will accept the government's peace offer whenever $g_2 \geq p(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1 - \nu_i}$. The government, if it desires peace, will therefore offer exactly $g_2 = p(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1 - \nu_i}$ to the insurgents, retaining $[1 - p(1 - c) + \frac{c_i}{1 - \nu_i}](1 - \nu_g)$ for itself. The government's expected payoff from war, meanwhile, is $(1 - p)(1 - c)(1 - \nu_g) - c_g$. The government therefore always prefers peace over war with the insurgents, since $[1 - p(1 - c) + \frac{c_i}{1 - \nu_i}](1 - \nu_g) > (1 - p)(1 - c)(1 - \nu_g) - c_g$.

The civilians anticipate that insurgent entry will always lead to peace, with a payoff of $[1 - p(1 - c) + \frac{c_i}{1 - \nu_i}]\nu_g + [p(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1 - \nu_i}]\nu_i$. Because the coefficients in the preceding expression sum to one, the citizens' peace payoff is a convex combination of the government's and insurgents' commitments: $(1 - \lambda_p)\nu_g + \lambda_p\nu_i$. If the insurgency does not mobilize politically, citizens obtain a payoff of $g_1 = \nu_g$ from the government. It immediately follows that citizens are supportive of the insurgency whenever $\nu_i > \nu_g$. In other words, citizens support insurgent entry precisely when the insurgency is more committed towards citizens than is the incumbent government.

Knowing this, the insurgents can make an informed choice about whether or not to mobilize and challenge the government. Whenever $\nu_i > \nu_g$, insurgents feel emboldened by the prospect of citizens' support, $\sigma = \sigma_{max}$. They enter the political arena, anticipating a peace deal with payoff $(1 - \nu_i)(p_{max}(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1 - \nu_i}) - c_f$, where $p_{max} \equiv p'(\sigma_{max})$. On the other hand, when $\nu_g \geq \nu_i$, the insurgents anticipate that citizens will not support them ($\sigma = \sigma_{min}$), and entry results in payoff $(1 - \nu_i)(p_{min}(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1 - \nu_i}) - c_f$, where $p_{min} \equiv p'(\sigma_{min})$. Notice that if the insurgents' payoff is positive in both of the above expressions, then the insurgents always decide to mobilize, even if the citizens would prefer they not do so. Similarly, if the insurgents' payoff is negative in both of the above expressions, then insurgents never mobilize, even if the citizens would prefer insurgent

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entry. The most interesting part of the parameter space, of course, is where the insurgents' payoff is positive when they anticipate the citizens' support (when $p = p_{max}$), but is negative when they do not (when $p = p_{min}$). In this part of the parameter space, citizens have enough leverage over war outcomes to incentivize or discourage insurgent mobilization, and so the citizens can give or withdraw their support so as to induce the insurgents to enter or stay out of political conflict.

Using the above, we can also understand how the government chooses its commitment level ν_g. If the government chooses $\nu_g < \nu_i$, citizens will support insurgent entry and a peace deal is reached with a government payoff of $[1 - p_{max}(1 - c) + \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i}](1 - \nu_g)$. Indeed, in this case, the government should set $\nu_g = 0$ to maximize its peace payoff, obtaining $1 - p_{max}(1 - c) + \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i}$. Alternatively, if the government chooses $\nu_g \geq \nu_i$, citizens dissuade the insurgency from entry and the government obtains $1 - \nu_g$. In this case, the government should choose $\nu_g = \nu_i$ to maximize its payoff. The government therefore prefers to deter insurgent entry whenever $1 - \nu_i > 1 - p_{max}(1 - c) + \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i}$, which simplifies to $\nu_i < p_{max}(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i}$. Note that the righthand side of this expression is the offer g_2 derived earlier, which is positive in the relevant area of the parameter space. Furthermore, because marginal increases to ν_i cause an increase to the lefthand side and a decrease to the righthand side, the inequality is violated for sufficiently large ν_i. As such, there exists an inflection point $\nu_i^* \in (0, 1)$ such that the government raises its commitment to citizens and deters insurgent entry whenever $\nu_i \leq \nu_i^*$, but in contrast abandons its commitment to citizens and invites insurgent entry whenever $\nu_i > \nu_i^*$. We therefore identify two subgame-perfect equilibria in pure strategies: the *no-entry* equilibrium, where $\nu_i \leq \nu_i^*$; and the *entry* equilibrium, where $\nu_i > \nu_i^*$. This latter equilibrium represents an extreme in which the incumbent is a government in name only: it offers citizens nothing and uses its military threats to extort and consume a significant portion of the country's resources before washing its hands of the responsibilities of governance.[30] Because we are concerned with the continued provision of governance, our discussion focuses instead on the more conventional *no-entry* equilibrium, where the insurgents offer a good outside governance option to citizens, but one that is not so generous that the government opts not to compete.

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[30] We can interpret this equilibrium as an incumbent choosing to relinquish control of an area of territory to an insurgent group. For similar results, see Spolaore (2014) and Acharya and Lee (2018).

4 Discussion of the Baseline Model

In Section 5, we modify the model to incorporate additional realistic nuances, including government suppression of potential insurgencies, asymmetric information, heterogeneous citizens, fragmented insurgent groups, and intervention by foreign powers. Before considering these extensions, however, we highlight several insights about distributional conflict and civil governance that emerge from the baseline setup.

4.1 Rethinking Accountability and Regime Type

First, the model should motivate researchers to revisit theories that depict democratic governance as a centerpiece of accountable rule. Although we agree that citizens *can* thrive under the umbrella of durable democratic institutions, democratization is not the *only* means by which citizens can secure civil protections and public goods from recalcitrant governments.[31] Instead, democratic governance represents only one of several mechanisms that enable citizens to accomplish this goal. As the model demonstrates, latent insurgencies offer a valuable method by which citizens can secure economic redistribution or civil protections in environments where democratic rule is non-existent, where democratic backsliding is likely to occur, where institutional safeguards are under threat, or where leaders are tempted to repeal existing concessions.

In these difficult situations, latent insurgents can place competitive pressure on incumbent governments, thereby motivating the incumbent to engage in redistribution and reform. When insurgents promise citizens increased redistribution or improved political protections compared to the incumbent ($\nu_i > \nu_g$), the government faces an *accountability deficit* and citizens have an incentive to support insurgent mobilization. On its face, the *accountability deficit* recalls the 'sovereignty gap' introduced by Ghani and Lockhart (2009), wherein governments become vulnerable to violent opposition and state failure if they deliver lower levels of governance than what a legitimate

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[31] Likewise, civilians may enjoy generous economic and political rights when governments are headed by altruistic rulers or when international organizations deter abusive government behaviors. Unfortunately, these conditions are unlikely to prove reliable over extended time spans. Political leadership can change hands and international supporters may retreat from foreign human rights enforcement as their political will evaporates.

sovereign *ought* to provide. In contrast, the *accountability deficit* highlighted in our model is not measured against a normative standard of government behavior. Rather, it reflects the difference between the levels of redistribution or civil protection that citizens expect the government or insurgency will provide. This distinction is valuable because it demonstrates that the anticipated quality of rebel governance, ν_i, operates as a reservation threshold that incumbents must match in order to avoid civil strife. As ν_i rises, an incumbent must raise its own parallel commitment, ν_g. These reforms are motivated not by social norms, but rather because the incumbent seeks to draw citizens' support away from the insurgent competitor, thereby avoiding the outcomes of state collapse and violent conflict that Ghani and Lockhart (2009) predict will occur.[32]

These results yield important implications for empirical research on the relationship between domestic conditions and state reforms. For example, our theory suggests the relationship between democratization and subsequent redistribution should be weaker than many researchers assume. Instead, we expect autocratic states to also engage in substantial redistribution when they encounter latent insurgencies—a prediction consistent with recent empirical findings that document public concessions offered by dictators and autocrats.[33] Similarly, researchers should not expect to find a consistent relationship between mass public mobilization and subsequent democratization or state reform. Instead, autocrats should reform preemptively in order to quell unrest they believe is likely to emerge. Widespread, public mobilization against the incumbent should occur only in contexts where governments are highly resistant to the process of preemptive reform.[34] Rather than emphasize relationships involving regime type, our results therefore suggest empiricists should assess the influence of three alternative factors that can motivate state reform: the *accountability deficit* as explained above, the capacity of an insurgent group to mobilize and impose costs on the incumbent or society writ large (c_g and c), and civilians' ability to influence the outcome of a potential conflict between a mobilized insurgent group and the incumbent government (σ).

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[32] In the model extensions section, we discuss alternative government strategies, including the use of preventive tactics against the insurgency or attempts to target subsets of a divided civilian population.

[33] See, for example, Egorov et al. (2009) and Haggard and Kaufman 2012. North (1981) introduces a similar argument but omits the possibility that threats of violence can apply productive pressure on a monopolist governments.

[34] See Wood (2000) on mass opposition to the apartheid government in South Africa.

4.2   Nonviolent Demonstrations and Latent Coercive Threats

Our model investigates how citizens can hold a government accountable even when they cannot rely on leaders to act generously or respond to foreign pressure. In such cases, the coercive threats that induce state concessions must arise from elsewhere. Researchers of mass social movements and non-violent protests have long recognized that some degree of pressure can be applied through peaceful means.[35] Likewise, citizens in consolidated democracies may consider their governments passively constrained by a range of institutional checks and balances, including independent judiciaries, professional police and security services, openly contested elections, and the accumulated inertia of social norms that render these institutions durable.[36] Unfortunately, even well-respected institutions and norms can decay; history abounds with situations in which governments reversed or rolled back institutional safeguards that citizens once thought inviolable.[37]

Although peaceful protests and widespread public mobilization may thwart political reversals in specific circumstances, elsewhere governments can ignore or directly suppress such demonstrations and institutions.[38] For example, although efforts by citizens to conduct letter campaigns, public protests, and boycotts were associated with long-term success in the American Civil Rights and Black Freedom movements, these efforts might have faced insurmountable challenges if they instead confronted less conciliatory political regimes.[39] It is difficult to envision peaceful opposi-

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[35] See, among others, Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, Sharp 2012, Francis 2014, Keck and Sikkink 2014, Gause 2016, Wood (2000), and Wasow 2020.

[36] See, for example, Weingast (1997). Most broadly, the simplest means by which citizens can impose a cost on state officials is when robust democratic institutions provide citizens with voting rights in open elections. Unfortunately, democracy do not itself guarantee the protection of minority rights: popular majorities can deny protections to marginalized groups and rulers can rescind the franchise when it threatens their interests, as evidenced by the experiences of Black Americans even after formal enfranchisement.

[37] In the United States alone, presidents Lincoln, Grant, and Franklin Roosevelt each suspended the writ of habeus corpus, and Jim Crow laws undermined the political and economic rights Black Americans gained under reconstruction. Likewise, the Trump administration rolled back civil protections for Muslims, immigrants, and women. Even the American Revolution was itself in some ways a response to British encroachment on the prevailing norm of colonial home rule.

[38] Consider, for instance, an extension of the model in which citizens can confront the state directly rather than channeling their support toward an insurgency that will fight on their behalf. This new means of direct confrontation would prove preferable to citizens only if the state was also sensitive to these actions and direct confrontation could be achieved at relatively low cost to the citizens themselves. Along these lines, see Lake (1992).

[39] McAdam 2010; Wright 2013; Francis 2014.

tion movements meeting great success against governments akin to those of Germany in the late 1930s, modern China and Russia, various governments throughout the Middle East, or others that face minimal costs when busting boycotts, imprisoning protesters, or censoring political speech. In circumstances where conventional protests are likely to fail, citizens will instead benefit from the presence of latent insurgents who threaten the government with more robust forms of what John Lewis termed "necessary trouble." As the model highlights, latent threats of organized insurgency—though inherently risky, as we explain in Section 5—provide citizens with alternative means of securing concessions from hardened autocracies or backsliding democracies.[40]

These results should motivate significant shifts in how empiricists assess the link between social movements and state reform. In particular, researchers should not interpret an observed association between nonviolent public protests and subsequent reforms as evidence that nonviolent tactics are inherently more successful than coercive threats. As our model highlights, the specter of insurgency can motivate state concessions even when threats are not realized and unrest does not escalate. Indeed, latent insurgent threats may exist directly alongside *nonviolent* actions to which researchers mistakenly assign exclusive credit. For example, although civilians who demonstrated peacefully during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement are rightfully celebrated, our findings suggest they owe a portion of their success to the groups of more radical peers who threatened to use violence if reforms were denied.[41] More broadly, the influence of latent insurgents in motivating state reform remains under-appreciated by researchers due to an inherent challenge in the study of coercion: threats of violence are most productive when they remain *unfulfilled*. As we discuss in Section 5, insurgent groups are only motivated to enact substantial violence when governments refuse to adopt sufficient reforms or when additional factors create obstacles to compromise. Left unacknowledged, these underlying selection effects lead observers to over-attribute success to peaceful movements and to under-acknowledge the role of coercive threats in eliciting reform.

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[40] Although this statement may appear similar to views espoused by supporters of the USA's second amendment, the logic of our model differs substantially. In particular, the insurgents in our model do not act independently and without civilian influence; instead, they are organized collectively and their success hinges on whether civilians swing support to the insurgent group or the incumbent government.

[41] See recent work relating to the Black Freedom Movement and organized Black insurgencies in the American south, including Hill 2004, Umoja 2013, Cobb 2014, and Levy 2018.

4.3 Opposing Characterizations of Insurgency

The baseline model illustrates how insurgent presence can benefit civilians by inducing government redistribution and reform—even if the insurgents are themselves predatory and self-interested. Our results therefore challenge two polarized characterizations of insurgents that researchers and policy-makers often invoke. The predominant view, represented widely in COIN research, casts insurgents as 'bad actors' whose presence directly undermines peace and stability. The depiction of insurgents as violent opportunists provides an ethical and practical justification for foreign intervention designed to suppress insurgent activity and restore government control.[42] An alternative view, widely adopted by scholars of social movements, casts insurgents more sympathetically as 'freedom fighters' who share the interests of citizens, deserve acclaim from outsiders, and resort to violence only in hopes that doing so will allow them to better meet the needs of their peers.

According to our model, insurgents deserve neither universal censure nor universal praise. On the one hand, the characterization of insurgents as inherently destructive overlooks a censoring problem in insurgent activity. Because insurgencies attract attention when they utilize violence or operate in conflict-affected states, policymakers tend to interpret them either as a symptom of government's incapacity or as the instigators of civil violence that otherwise would not occur. Insurgents, however, exist in latent form even in the model's 'no entry' equilibrium—they simply act in ways that avoid drawing attention from conflict researchers.[43] Even in this form, however, the unrealized militant potential of proto-insurgent groups can benefit civilians by helping to keep the incumbent honest. On the other hand, we also reject sweeping characterizations of all insurgents as friends of the people. Insurgents in our model vary widely, with some preferring to avoid redistribution and others closely aligned with regular civilians. Because insurgents rely on civilian support to mobilize effectively, in practice we tend to observe those that appear civilian-aligned relative to the incumbent. Nevertheless, even the existence of self-interested insurgents can improve civilian welfare by motivating the government to increase preemptive redistribution so as to avoid conflict.

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[42] Indeed, "after the US and other Western militaries became involved in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan... counterinsurgency attained a lofty pedestal among policymakers and academics" (Jones 2017).

[43] As Jones (2017) notes, "most would-be insurgents may only make it to the 'pre-insurgency' stage."

5 Model Extensions and the Causes of Civil Violence

We now adapt the baseline model to capture several additional behaviors that are central to the study of civil governance and counterinsurgency. Most importantly, whereas actors avoid civil conflict in the baseline setup, the following extensions allow violence to occur for preventive reasons, due to information asymmetries, because the actors face internal heterogeneity or factionalization, or because of poorly calibrated foreign intervention. Collectively, these extensions highlight a second dilemma facing citizens: against hardened, autocratic governments that are unwilling to compromise, citizens can either tolerate existing conditions and allow the government to remain unaccountable or, alternatively, can attempt to induce redistribution at the risk of instability and civil violence. We show that in some situations, the risks and costs of conflict escalation overwhelm the distributive benefits citizens could realize by facilitating insurgency, but in other areas of the parameter space the possibility of violence is offset by expected returns of state reform.

5.1 Preventive Violence and Counterinsurgency

In the baseline model, the government can only avoid negotiations with the insurgency by winning the citizens' hearts and minds with larger redistributive promises prior to insurgent entry. In reality, of course, governments have another choice: they can attempt to suppress likely insurgents with preventive action, thereby inhibiting the insurgents from maturing into credible challengers.[44] In practice, these actions may take the form of targeted government violence against political dissidents, activists, journalists, academics, religious figures, community organizers, and so on. Along with targeted arrests and disappearances, governments may also pursue campaigns of censorship, propaganda, and disinformation to reduce public capacity for collective action.

Several model extensions allow for preventive action. To sketch one simple example, consider a government that can attempt prevention as an alternative to institutionalization at the beginning of the game. Preventive action, undertaken at cost $c_{g,prev}$, can either successfully crush the latent insurgency (probability q), or fan the flames of discontent by provoking outrage at the government's

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[44] Powell 1999, Powell 2006, Leventoğlu and Slantchev 2007, Krainin 2017, Merrell and Abrahams 2019.

crackdown (probability $1 - q$). We can also allow this preventive action to consume a portion of the contested resource, so that only $1 - c_{prev}$ remains.[45] Successful prevention eliminates the insurgency, removing the government's incentive to institutionalize ($\nu_g = 0$) and allowing it to consume the entire remaining finite resource, obtaining $1 - c_{prev} - c_{g,prev}$ while providing citizens with 0. If prevention fails, the game proceeds as in the baseline model with the resource reduced in size to $1 - c_{prev}$. Because $\nu_g = 0$, an accountability deficit exists ($\nu_i > \nu_g$) and citizens support insurgent entry. The government's decision to undertake preventive action therefore reduces to a calculation of whether the expected payoff of attempting prevention, $q(1 - c_{prev} - c_{g,prev}) + (1 - q)[(1 - p_{max}(1 - c) + \frac{c_i}{1 - \nu_i})]$, exceeds the payoff for heading off insurgent entry, $1 - \nu_i$. This reduces to an assessment of the costliness of preventive action and the likelihood of success.

Within this framework, technologies provided by foreign countries, companies, or researchers that facilitate government counterinsurgency operations—surveillance, arrests, detentions, extraditions, etc.—will raise the probability of successful prevention, motivate the government to suppress potential insurgents rather than enact reforms, and therefore reduce citizens' welfare.[46] Consider the behavior of Joseph Kabila's government in the DRC following the signing of the February 2013 "Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework." According to the terms of that deal, Kabila agreed to reform Congolese institutions. In turn, the U.N. authorized the deployment of a new and more aggressive Force Intervention Brigade that was tasked with suppressing rebels. Within eight months, these measures enabled the U.N.-backed Congolese army to force the disbandment of the M23, the most violent Congolese rebel movement. Although the results of this initiative were widely praised at the time and likely facilitated *immediate* reductions in civil violence, the longer-term implications were less well understood. Framed within the context of our theory, however, the outcomes are clearer to understand: the expansion of U.N. peacekeeping efforts improved the Congolese state's preventive capacity and raised the costs that challenger groups faced for combating Kabila directly,

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[45] Censorship of the internet in China, for example, imposes transactional costs on Chinese firms, reducing economic output below what would have been possible in the absence of a preventive campaign.

[46] At the same time, it is also worth mentioning that when governments can already more efficiently suppress insurgencies through preventive action than via credible governance reforms, increasingly potent threats of insurgency—i.e., larger values of ν_i—will merely induce preventive action, thereby reducing civilian welfare rather than improving it.

enabling him to further consolidate political control and ignore the interests of his citizens. Kabila's behavior in the following years is consistent with this analysis. In the absence of viable opposition, he began to delay institutional reforms and initiated crackdowns on political freedoms. In January 2015, he jailed hundreds of non-violent political protestors, expanded a campaign of political intimidation, imposed widespread media censorship, and announced plans to delay a promised round of presidential elections that were originally scheduled for 2016.[47] Only through mounting international pressure and the reemergence of widespread internal violence did Kabila agree to step down from power and allow elections to occur in late 2018.[48]

5.2 Mutual Optimism and Signaling Violence

In the baseline model, insurgencies that survive preventive violence can enter politics if they anticipate citizen support ($p = p_{max}$). The government can avert insurgent entry by offering a peace deal, g_2, which is accepted if $g_2 \geq p_{max}(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i}$. Disagreement over these parameter values, however, would potentially cause the bargaining process to break down. For example, if the government believes the insurgents would face a higher cost of war than is really the case ($\widehat{c_i} > c_i$) the government will offer an insufficiently generous peace deal, $g_2 = p_{max}(1 - c) - \frac{\widehat{c_i}}{1-\nu_i}$, causing the insurgents to reject the offer and civil violence to occur. Events can unfold similarly if the insurgents underestimate their own costs of fighting. Finally, conflict can likewise occur when actors are overly optimistic about the allocation of civilian support. For example, suppose the insurgents believe they will enjoy widespread support from the civilian population ($p = p_{max}$), but the government believes civilians will in fact side with it ($p = p_{min}$). In this case, the insurgency will only accept $g_2 \geq p_{max}(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i}$, while the government will only offer $g_2 = p_{min}(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i} < p_{min}(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i}$, and civil violence will once again ensue.[49]

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[47] A Congo Research Group poll found that Kabila would have earned only 7.8% of the vote if elections were held.

[48] Even the results of these elections were widely contested. Election observers report that opposition candidate Martin Fayulu received a landslide share of the vote, but Félix Tshisekedi was instead installed as president.

[49] To model decision making in this context, we can follow the standard approach of introducing subjective beliefs for each actor, namely probability distributions over parameter values. As a result, civil strife occurs with nonzero probability in equilibrium. In the baseline model, citizens support insurgent entry whenever an accountability deficit

Mutual optimism is a widely invoked explanation for conflict. In the context of civil governance, it can motivate governments to undertake costly wars rather than provide citizens preemptive concessions. One example readers may find intuitive and familiar is the interaction between the leaders of Great Britain, colonial patriots (insurgents), and civilian colonists in the prelude to the United States' War of Independence. Although the British were aware of growing frustration among colonial citizens, they also doubted that a large proportion of the population would back the extremist insurgents if conflict escalated. Moreover, the colonists appeared to lack sufficient weaponry, possessed neither a standing army nor a standing navy, and had never previously coordinated on military defense. As a result, British leaders assumed the patriots possessed relatively low coercive capacity and that Britain could secure an easy victory. These perceptions led them to resist offering concessions that might have appeased colonists and prevented war. By denying colonial demands, the British instead motivated larger sections of the populace to support the insurgency, eventually inspiring the insurgents to mobilize wholesale and engage in active conflict.[50]

5.3 Heterogeneous Citizens and Insurgent Fragmentation

Our baseline model depicts the citizens, insurgents, and government as unitary or homogeneous actors. We now relax this assumption, exploring how internal heterogeneity among citizens and insurgent fragmentation can prevent peaceful redistribution and instead provoke conflict.[51]

We first consider heterogeneity among citizens. According to the hearts-and-minds approach to COIN, insurgents rely on civilian support in conflicts against the state. Because popular models of counterinsurgency depict ongoing disputes in which violence has already occurred, researchers often take the existence of insurgent groups as exogenously given.[52] Our model differs by depicting

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exists $\nu_i > \nu_g$. With a nonzero risk of civil strife, the calculation amends to $\nu_i - \textit{risk of violence} > \nu_g$. The term *risk of violence* is merely the product of the probability of violence and the loss associated with that outcome. Rearranging, we obtain $\nu_i - \nu_g > \textit{risk of violence}$, which clarifies that the accountability deficit only provokes the citizens to support insurgent entry if the risks of civil strife are outweighed by the anticipated benefits.

[50] See discussion in, variously, Wood (2002), Middlekauff (2007), Phillips (2013), and Stewart (2014). An alternative reading suggests the *patriots* overestimated their likelihood of victory, though this error was obscured by repeated strokes of good fortune during the war. Similar dynamics occurred in Kenya during the Mau Mau Rebellion.

[51] Modeling incumbent fragmentation may also be productive, though we omit this in the current paper.

[52] See, for example, Berman et al. (2011) and models in this tradition.

a political environment prior to the outbreak of insurgent violence, with insurgents initially latent rather than overtly combative. The model therefore illustrates how insurgent entry is a strategic response to anticipated political conditions, with insurgents mobilizing only when the incumbent fails to offer redistribution at acceptable levels and insurgents anticipate a sufficient level of civilian support. By the time observable violence occurs between the government and insurgents—in other words, the start of the Berman et al. (2011) model—the government has continually failed to convince citizens and insurgents that it will credibly pursue reforms.[53] After all, if the citizens remained optimistic about the government's willingness to redistribute, insurgents would not have risked mobilizing unless through miscalculation. How can a hearts-and-minds strategy work in a context where citizens harbor significant doubts about the government's willingness to reform?

If citizens are heterogeneous, the government may attempt to exploit the citizens' collective action problem by recruiting informants using privately-distributed incentives. Even if all citizens prefer the insurgents over the incumbent, citizens also understand that their private actions contribute negligibly to this outcome. As such, a government may bribe or blackmail individuals to induce collaboration. If a sufficient mass of citizens can be recruited in this fashion, the insurgents' probability of victory p will be meaningfully reduced, perhaps enabling the government to prevail. These salami tactics become even easier if civilian support for the insurgents is not universal. In self-determination or secessionist struggles, for example, there are often ethnic or sectarian groups who are neither members of the government nor even the elite classes but who nevertheless are hesitant to support non-coethnic insurgent groups.

Our model can easily account for civilian heterogeneity. For example, recall that in the baseline model, citizens are homogeneous and collectively support insurgent entry whenever an accountability deficit exists such that $\nu_i > \nu_g$. With a nonzero risk of civil strife, the calculation amends to $\nu_i - \textit{risk of violence} > \nu_g$. If we assume instead that each citizen k has an idiosyncratic preference ϵ_k for the incumbent, drawn from a continuous and infinitely supported distribution F with mean 0, then as ν_i rises or *risk of violence* falls, a larger mass of citizens—but not all citizens—will support

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[53] In the framework of the model, citizens have no reason to suppose the government will share anything more than ν_g of their post-war spoils.

insurgent entry. Indeed, citizen k supports insurgent entry only if $\nu_i - risk\ of\ violence > \nu_g + \epsilon_k$.[54] With this setup, we can further allow the government and insurgents to bribe individual citizens. For example, if citizen k initially supports the insurgency ($\nu_i - risk\ of\ violence > \nu_g + \epsilon_k$), we can enable the government to offer her a bribe of at least $\nu_i - risk\ of\ violence - \nu_g - \epsilon_k$ to induce her to switch sides. Researchers could extend this line of inquiry to introduce some probability that collaborators will be caught and executed, thereby disincentivizing collaboration, or an alternative possibility that insurgents and the government target the same citizens with offsetting inducements.[55] The insurgents' capacity to retain support is therefore a function of the mean position of citizens' support ($\nu_i - \nu_g - risk\ of\ violence$), the bribery budgets of either belligerent, and the quality of counterintelligence each side can utilize to disincentivize illicit cooperation with the opponent.

Insurgent groups are similarly susceptible to internal fragmentation or factionalization.[56] On the one hand, dissent among or between insurgents can create competitive pressure to win citizens' support; indeed, the insurgents' redistributive promise of ν_i may itself rely on this mechanism. On the other hand, insurgent factions may engage in counterproductive internecine violence that reduces their collective capacity to present a coherent front against the government. Consider a modification of our model in line with Krause's (2017) theory of rebel consolidation. In this case, an insurgency must first resolve its internal disputes before focusing on an external adversary (the government, in our model). To incorporate this possibility, suppose the insurgents suffer a 'hegemonization' cost $c_{hegemony}$ after entering the political arena but before confronting the government.[57] In effect, this cost would raise the insurgent's price of entry from the baseline model's level c_f to a

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[54] In essence, this extension modifies the baseline model's discrete question of whether "citizens support the insurgents" into the more realistic question of whether "a *critical mass* of citizens support the insurgents."

[55] We omit analysis of simultaneous targeting in this sketched example on the assumption that distinguishing marginal supporters from strong opponents would be relatively easy in the ethnic separatism context. On the discovery and targeting of illicit collaborators, see alternatively Merrell and Abrahams (2019).

[56] See, among others, Christia (2012) and Krause (2017). Lake (2019) further discusses how insurgent groups can encourage state failure when they are "too powerful" relative to the state. Our model clarifies this logic by showing that when citizens' support is influential they can leverage the insurgents and government against each other. Although we emphasize throughout the paper that this mechanism allows citizens to hold autocratic *governments* accountable, influential citizens can also side with the government to prevent the emergence of undesirable insurgent groups.

[57] We could alternative interpret this as the cost of signaling to attract supporters, as in a terrorist "outbidding" strategy (Kydd and Walter 2006).

new level c_f^* that also reflects the hegemonization process, such that $c_f^* = c_f + c_{hegemony}$. Following the logic of the baseline model, when the hegemonization process is costly, desirability of insurgent mobilization decreases and insurgents become less willing to compete against the government.[58]

Finally, spoiler violence can occur if insurgent movements fail to consolidate prior to negotiations with the government.[59] Suppose, for example, that a dominant group within the broader insurgent movement accepts the government's peace offer. If an opposing insurgent group remains dissatisfied with the proposed terms, it may attempt to spoil the deal with violence. To achieve peace, the government would be required to sweeten the peace terms with a premium large enough that the insurgent movement could buy off the splinter group. If the splinter group is especially demanding, however, the government may be unwilling to pay the premium and civil war might ensue. From a modeling perspective, we can simply add a premium $c_{spoiler}$ to the government's minimum acceptable offer g_2, so $g_2 = p_{max}(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i} + c_{spoiler}$. For a large premium $c_{spoiler}$, the government prefers to eschew peace and take its chances in war. Thus, fragmentation narrows the continuum of feasible bargains, making insurgent entry a less attractive option for citizens overall.

5.4   Foreign Intervention

Our final extension evaluates foreign intervention by outside players. The baseline model depicts a civil conflict environment in which civilians, insurgents, and governments operate without foreign interference. In reality, countries are embedded in an international system, and observable levels of domestic strife may attract external interest. Empirically, "of the 181 insurgencies since 1946, 148 cases (82 percent) involved some form of outside support" (Jones 2017). In some cases, foreign powers genuinely seek to assist civilian communities by suppressing local violence. At other times, countries quell unrest while pursuing regional or global agendas that are only peripherally related to

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[58] One might further assume violence among insurgent factions would affect citizens' support for the insurgency, such that the anticipated support level σ reflects the difference between support prior to internecine violence and the disillusionment loss associated with such violence: $\sigma = \sigma^* - disillusionment$. The probability of victory in the fight against the government, $p(\sigma)$, therefore internalizes these shifts in citizen support.

[59] Kydd and Walter 2006.

the needs of citizens in the client state.[60] Likewise, forms of intervention vary substantially, ranging from military deployment to the provision of supplies and intelligence.

We can consider foreign support in the context of the model by allowing it to affect the insurgents' or government's cost of fighting. In this manner, foreign influence can quell civil conflict if appropriately calibrated but can also provoke or intensify violence when applied incorrectly. At the most immediate level, of course, foreign intervention might benefit civilians by preventing counter-productive violence—such as conflicts triggered by mutual optimism—thereby reducing the intensity of violence to which residents are exposed. In a broader sense, however, the consequences of foreign intervention on citizens' livelihoods hinge on whether intervention encourages or disrupts the ongoing competition between governments and insurgents for civilian support.

First, intervention may backfire if it enables a belligerent to operate independent from civilian support, thereby removing the group's natural incentive to curry civilians' favor. To see how this might occur, consider a main result from the baseline model: latent insurgencies can motivate government redistribution as long as insurgent mobilization hinges on civilian support.[61] Suppose, however, a foreign power provides insurgents with arms and funding that reduces the insurgents' costs of mobilizing (c_f) and fighting (c_i) and also shrinks the citizens' capacity to influence the probability of insurgent victory: $p'(\sigma_{max}) = p'(\sigma_{min})$. In this case, the insurgency may feel emboldened to engage in violence even without the blessing of the citizens. By reducing or eliminating the insurgents' reliance on civilians, such intervention facilitates destructive violence by groups whose presence and victory might not benefit citizens in the long-term.[62] Intervention can prove

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[60] See, for example, Jamal (2012); Lake (2016); Berman and Lake (2019); or Lee (2020). As a largely hypothetical example, if the United States relies on Bahrain's deep-water harbor to maintain naval influence within that region, agitation by Bahraini citizens for increased government accountability could motivate American intervention for several reasons. First, U.S. officials might support the liberal agenda of the Bahraini citizens. Second, substantial unrest could threaten to undercut the military signals sent by U.S. presence in the harbor. Likewise, domestic problems in Bahrain could threaten wider diplomatic relations between the government and the U.S.

[61] Thus, the insurgents' expected payoff for entry should be positive with civilian support $(1-\nu_i)[p_{max}(1-c) - \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i}] - c_f > 0$, and negative without citizen support, $(1 - \nu_i)[p_{min}(1 - c) - \frac{c_i}{1-\nu_i}] - c_f < 0$.

[62] During the 1980s, the U.S. and other foreign actors provided arms and funding to Afghani insurgents because the governments of the states in which those movements operated were Soviet-aligned. By facilitating the growth and success of these insurgent groups beyond what would have been possible if they relied more heavily on civilian support, foreign support made possible costly civil conflict and extremist government policies in the years that followed.

equally harmful, however, at the opposite extreme, when foreign support is directed heavily toward the incumbent. As the model illustrates, foreign efforts that disarm or entirely eliminate insurgent groups—thereby setting c_f arbitrarily high—will reduce the likelihood of insurgent mobilization, facilitate extractive government behaviors, and reduce civilian welfare by leaving dissatisfied citizens without recourse or alternative.[63] In general, foreign actions that forcibly restore monopoly power to one actor—or, alternatively, render civilians politically impotent and unable to exert influence over the competing factions—will prove counterproductive in the long run from the standpoint of citizens' interests.

Finally, foreign actions can also backfire when they suppress the possibility of productive conflict between insurgents and the incumbent. One obvious means by which this can occur is territorial deconsolidation. An intervention effort that separates political competitors into discrete regions, leaving each as the sole monopolist within its own territory, can reduce each government's incentive to engage in redistribution. Civilian outcomes in Gaza and the West Bank showcase the negative consequences that result when former political competitors—in this case, Fatah and Hamas—each consolidate control within a separate region. An alternative means by which intervention can circumvent the possibility of productive opposition between the incumbent and its challengers is via *shortcutting*. In this case, foreign assistance quickly ousts an incumbent government rather than allowing latent threats of insurgency to motivate incumbent reform. By expediting the elevation of an insurgent challenger, foreign displacement of the former government bypasses the process of pre-conflict organizational maturation described in Section 5.3. Instead, insurgent infighting may occur in the type of chaotic, post-transition environment that may exist following a government's quick defeat. NATO's intervention in Libya produced just such an outcome, disrupting a state that stood poised to undergo reforms and producing instead a quagmire of violence and political anarchy.

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[63] See, for example, discussion of U.N. intervention in the DRC in Section 5.1. Likewise, Iraqi civilians fell victim to predatory government behavior after the removal of ISIS from Mosul. Intervention that allowed citizens to retain latent opposition to the incumbent might have deterred such post-conflict abuse. Finally, excessive incumbent support may also occur in the pre-conflict period. When the United States installed Nouri al-Maliki's government in Iraq, they shielded him from domestic backlash and enabled him to dismiss the human rights appeals of his Sunni opponents.

6   Conclusion

This paper clarifies several interactions that are central to the study of distributional conflict and foreign intervention. In contrast to common sentiment, we demonstrate that democratization is neither the only nor always the most practical means of inducing government accountability. Rather, latent insurgencies can motivate redistribution and accountable rule even in the absence of institutionalized constraints. Likewise, we depart from polarized interpretations of insurgent groups as either opportunistic antagonists at one extreme or the well-intended allies of civil society at the other. Instead, we show that citizens can benefit from the existence of latent insurgents even when those insurgents would act in self-interested and predatory fashion if given an opportunity. Although providing systematic empirical support for our model is beyond the scope of this paper, throughout previous sections we demonstrate how empirical researchers can incorporate the mechanisms we expose to better predict and understand observed behaviors.

By presenting a model in which insurgencies emerge within a parsimonious framework, this project also establishes a new path forward for researchers and policymakers. Rather than seek better methods of suppressing insurgents or, alternatively, of helping rebels depose and supplant predatory governments, researchers should attempt to identify and address the various frictions in the political environment that can produce violence or generate other undesirable outcomes for civilian populations.[64] Moreover, we should recognize that in situations where such frictions cannot be entirely resolved, redistribution and political stability are inversely related: improvements in the former may be achievable only via reductions in the latter. The fundamental tension between reducing structural repression at risk of civil violence (or vice-versa) is an ethical challenge that researchers and practitioners have a responsibility to confront with further study.

Our analysis also yields several implications for the conduct of policy. By highlighting the productive role of insurgent threats, our argument challenges longstanding approaches to state-building that depict internal stability as a prerequisite for generous and accountable governance. Monopolists, once empowered and consolidated, are unlikely to pursue redistribution or internal

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[64] In other words, information asymmetries, credible commitment deficits, etc.

reform on their own accord. Instead, the motivation for such changes must come from elsewhere. Where Tilly argued that the threat of international conflict "made the state" by encouraging governments to increase their efficiency, we argue an underlying threat of insurgent instability can make states *accountable*. The risk of insurgent activity encourages rulers to offer generous concessions to citizens and also provides a mechanism that makes such promises credible. Although information lapses, commitment problems, and heterogeneity of either citizens or insurgents can provoke violence, there remain conditions in which citizens obtain better outcomes by nurturing an insurgent threat than by suffering the rule of a despotic government.

This is not to say that policymakers should always tolerate insurgencies. When an insurgent group's decision to mobilize hinges on citizen support, its activity will potentially prove productive. On the other hand, when insurgents enjoy sufficient funding and arms that their decision to challenge the government is decoupled from civilians' interests, insurgent mobilization and the destruction that may result should indeed be deterred. When assisting citizen-supported insurgencies, international actors should take care not to provide assistance that enables insurgents to operate independent of citizen support or replace the outgoing government as new monopolists. Perhaps most importantly, researchers and policymakers must break the longstanding habit of gauging the impact of insurgents on civilian welfare based purely on observed associations between insurgent violence and the occurrence or absence of government reforms. As Yasser Arafat emphasized in his 1974 speech to the UN General Assembly, latent coercive threats can exist directly alongside—and can even underline—peaceful appeals.[65] In situations where latent threats are highly effective, the empirical record will show little evidence of such violence actually being used. Instead, insurgents are most likely to mobilize and civilians are most likely to suffer significant violence when governments persistently refuse to grant concessions, when peaceful demonstrations have repeatedly failed, or when other obstacles limit the possibility of successful compromise. Together, these selection effects lead popular accounts to over-emphasize the apparent success of peaceful protests while under-acknowledging the role of latent threats in motivating redistribution or reform.[66]

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[65] "I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom-fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand."
[66] See, in particular, Chenoweth and Stephan 2011.

In this regard, our model also suggests a productive reframing of research on domestic conflict and state-building. While we agree with popular research that *observable* violence should be rare in well-governed states, we challenge the notion that the mere appearance of tranquility and monopolistic government tell a complete story. Instead, incumbent governments may face significant competition from latent actors who threaten to mobilize visibly if the government misbehaves. Are these forms of latent coercion a ubiquitous feature of accountable governance? In one view, only under-institutionalized countries require insurgent threats to motivate government reforms and concessions. The possibility of underlying insurgent activity is of course most familiar to researchers who study fragile and conflict-affected states. At the same time, however, many Americans have also expressed surprise in recent years at the brittleness of norms and laws meant to constrain the behaviors of those in high office. Perhaps the most solicitous way to interpret our model is that insurgent threats motivate governments to hold themselves accountable *for the foreseeable future.* Governments under pressure may erect credible checks and balances that are hard—but not impossible—to deconstruct. When these norms and institutions begin to decay, however, citizens must once again rely on organized insurgency as a final check against totalitarian behavior.

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Online Appendix A: Payoffs for Baseline Model

Payoff #:	Outcome:	Government:
O_1:	No Ins., Peace	$1 - g_1$
O_2:	Ins, Peace	$(1 - g_2)(1 - \nu_g)$
O_3:	Ins, Fight, Ins wins	$-c_g$
O_4:	Ins, Fight, Gov wins	$(1 - c)(1 - g_3) - c_g$

Payoff #:	Outcome:	Insurgent:
O_1:	No Ins., Peace	0
O_2:	Ins, Peace	$(1 - \nu_i)g_2 - c_f$
O_3:	Ins, Fight, Ins wins	$(1 - c)(1 - i_2) - c_i - c_f$
O_4:	Ins, Fight, Gov wins	$-c_i - c_f$

Payoff #:	Outcome:	Citizens:
O_1:	No Ins., Peace	g_1
O_2:	Ins, Peace	$\nu_g(1 - g_2) + \nu_i g_2$
O_3:	Ins, Fight, Ins wins	$(1 - c)i_2$
O_4:	Ins, Fight, Gov wins	$(1 - c)g_3$