

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Unlikely Expropriators: Why Right-Wing Parties Implemented Agrarian Reform in Democratic Brazil

Matias López 

Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy, Graduate Institute of Geneva
Corresponding author. Email: matiaslopez.uy@gmail.com

(Received 9 October 2020; revised 19 July 2022; accepted 10 August 2022)

Abstract

What motivated right-wing and conservative parties to endorse a policy of land expropriation and redistribution in Brazil? I argue that urban-dominated right-wing parties endorsed agrarian reform in order to: (i) reduce crime in wealthier metropolises by reversing rural–urban migration; and (ii) gain competitive advantage against left-wing challengers. To test this argument I conduct process tracing, analysing over 500 elite statements about agrarian reform, drawn from archival, interview and survey data. In addition, I model land expropriations at the municipal level and show how right-wing administrations disproportionately expropriated land in the states of origin of migrants and, within those, in localities where the Left was more competitive. My results portray how two externalities of inequality – crime and competition with the Left – motivated conservative support for agrarian reform in Brazil.

Keywords: agrarian reform; conservative parties; distributive conflict; expropriation; landed elites

Introduction

After democratisation in the 1990s, Brazil was ruled by elite right-of-centre coalitions with strong ties to business and a credible commitment to the market economy.¹ In contrast with their ideological affiliations, parties such as the PSDB, PMDB, PFL, PTB and PPB agreed upon legislation that allowed the

¹Frances Hagopian, C. Gervasoni and Juan A. Moraes, 'From Patronage to Program: The Emergence of Party-Oriented Legislators in Brazil', *Comparative Political Studies*, 42: 3 (2009), pp. 360–91; Peter R. Kingstone, *Crafting Coalitions for Reform: Business Preferences, Political Institutions, and Neoliberal Reform in Brazil* (Philadelphia, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999); Timothy J. Power, 'Brazilian Politicians and Neoliberalism: Mapping Support for the Cardoso Reforms, 1995–1997', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 40: 4 (1998), pp. 51–72; David Samuels, 'Incumbents and Challengers on a Level Playing Field: Assessing the Impact of Campaign Finance in Brazil', *Journal of Politics*, 63: 2 (2001), pp. 569–84.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Federal Government to expropriate and redistribute land.² The literature on distributive conflict suggests several reasons why this should *not* occur, such as the role of conservative parties in preventing redistribution and elites' reliance on democratisation as a means to protect property rights.³ Brazil is not an exception to these postulates. Therefore, what motivated right-wing parties to embrace land expropriation?

Some authors claim that the Right passed agrarian reform because the programme did not damage the landed elites.⁴ Others ascribe agrarian reform to the mixed ideological identity of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso.⁵ However, the most widely accepted explanation for the actions of these unlikely expropriators focuses on how violence against the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers Movement, MST) shifted public opinion in favour of agrarian reform, allowing the movement to pressure the government more effectively.⁶ These accounts neglect the role of elite interest during the policy-making process, portraying the Right as simply reacting to pressures from below.

In this paper, I argue that agrarian reform was triggered from above, i.e. by elites proactively endorsing redistribution in order to mitigate externalities of inequality. Threatened by a wave of urban violence and by voters' demands for redistribution, right-wing and conservative parties endorsed agrarian reform in order to (i) prevent crime in urban areas by settling the poor in the countryside and (ii) gain competitive advantage against more distributive left-wing challengers. In contrast to

²The abbreviations stand for Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (Brazilian Social Democratic Party), Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party), Partido da Frente Liberal (Liberal Front Party), Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (Brazilian Labour Party) and Partido Progressista Brasileiro (Brazilian Progressive Party).

³Edward Gibson, *Class and Conservative Parties: Argentina in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Political Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Michael Albertus and Victor Gay, 'Unlikely Democrats: Economic Elite Uncertainty under Dictatorship and Support for Democratization', *American Journal of Political Science*, 61: 3 (2017), pp. 624–41; Michael Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution: The Politics of Land Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ben W. Ansell and David J. Samuels, *Inequality and Democratization: An Elite-Competition Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴Saturnino M. Borras, 'Questioning Market-Led Agrarian Reform: Experiences from Brazil, Colombia and South Africa', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3: 3 (2003), pp. 367–94; Leonilde Servolo de Medeiros, 'Social Movements and the Experience of Market-Led Agrarian Reform in Brazil', *Third World Quarterly*, 28: 8 (2007), pp. 1501–18; Anthony Pereira, 'Brazil's Agrarian Reform: Democratic Innovation or Oligarchic Exclusion Redux?', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 45: 2 (2003), pp. 41–65; João Márcio Mendes Pereira, 'Estado e mercado na reforma agrária brasileira (1988–2002)', *Estudos Históricos*, 28: 56 (2015), pp. 385–404; Wendy Wolford, 'Agrarian Moral Economies and Neoliberalism in Brazil: Competing Worldviews and the State in the Struggle for Land', *Environment and Planning A*, 37: 2 (2005), pp. 241–61.

⁵José de Souza Martins, 'A reforma agrária no segundo mandato de Fernando Henrique Cardoso', *Tempo Social*, 15: 2 (2003), pp. 141–75.

⁶Gabriel Ondetti, *Land, Protest, and Politics: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for Agrarian Reform in Brazil* (Philadelphia, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008); see also Miguel Carter (ed.), *Challenging Social Inequality: The Landless Rural Workers Movement and Agrarian Reform in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); A. Pereira, 'Brazil's Agrarian Reform'; J. Pereira, 'Estado e mercado'; Wilder Robles and Henry Veltmeyer, *The Politics of Agrarian Reform in Brazil: The Landless Rural Workers Movement* (New York: Springer, 2015).

other policy options available, agrarian reform allowed the majoritarian urban elites to assign the costs of redistribution to the minoritarian landed elites.

To test this theory, I coded archival, interview and survey data accounting for over 500 elite statements about agrarian reform. These data were analysed according to protocols of Bayesian process tracing,⁷ which consists of estimating the likelihood of evidence in light of working versus rival hypotheses. In addition, I modelled land expropriation in a panel of Brazilian municipalities whilst accounting for rural–urban migration and the performance of the Left and controlling for key covariates in alternative explanations. Results from both methods strongly indicate that right-wing parties instrumentalised agrarian reform policies to shield urban elites against redistributive threats related to crime and electoral competition.

The study complements previous research on agrarian reform in Brazil by outlining the causal mechanisms that led right-wing coalitions to pass progressive land legislation early in the 1990s. While the cited literature highlights the role of organised peasants in pressuring for land redistribution, the present study demonstrates how redistribution to the rural poor was caused by urban elites' own protection strategies.

More generally, the study contributes to the scholarship about the impact of externalities of inequality on attitudes towards redistribution by describing how the latter translate into concrete policies.⁸ The study also bridges the gap between the literature on right-wing endorsement of progressive policies and that on agrarian reform and conflict resolution.⁹

In the remainder of this article, I first place agrarian reform in Brazil in its historical context. I then summarise my causal argument. Methods and data, and results, are presented in the following two sections, followed by a final section with conclusions and the main discussion points. The [online supplement](#) presents a step-by-step formalisation of the process tracing methodology.

Agrarian Reform in Brazil

Agrarian reform in Brazil took place via a series of laws and policies through which the Federal Government redistributed land to poor landless peasants. Contradicting

⁷Tasha Fairfield and Andrew E. Charman, 'Explicit Bayesian Analysis for Process Tracing: Guidelines, Opportunities, and Caveats', *Political Analysis*, 25: 3 (2017), pp. 363–80. See also Tasha Fairfield and Andrew E. Charman, *Social Inquiry and Bayesian Reasoning: Rethinking Qualitative Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁸Abram de Swaan, *In Care of the State: Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and the USA in the Modern Era* (New York: Polity, 1988); Elisa P. Reis and Mick Moore (eds.), *Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality* (London: Zed Books, 2005); David Rueda and Daniel Stegmüller, 'The Externalities of Inequality: Fear of Crime and Preferences for Redistribution in Western Europe', *American Journal of Political Science*, 60: 2 (2016), pp. 472–89.

⁹Candelaria Garay, *Social Policy Expansion in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Tasha Fairfield and Candelaria Garay, 'Redistribution under the Right in Latin America: Electoral Competition and Organized Actors in Policymaking', *Comparative Political Studies*, 50: 14 (2017), pp. 1871–1906; Sara Niedzwiecki and Jennifer Pribble, 'Social Policies and Center-Right Governments in Argentina and Chile', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 59: 3 (2017), pp. 72–97; Felipe González, 'Can Land Reform Avoid a Left Turn? Evidence from Chile after the Cuban Revolution', *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy*, 13: 1 (2013), pp. 31–72; Michael Albertus and Oliver Kaplan, 'Land Reform as a Counterinsurgency Policy: Evidence from Colombia', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 57: 2 (2013), pp. 198–231.

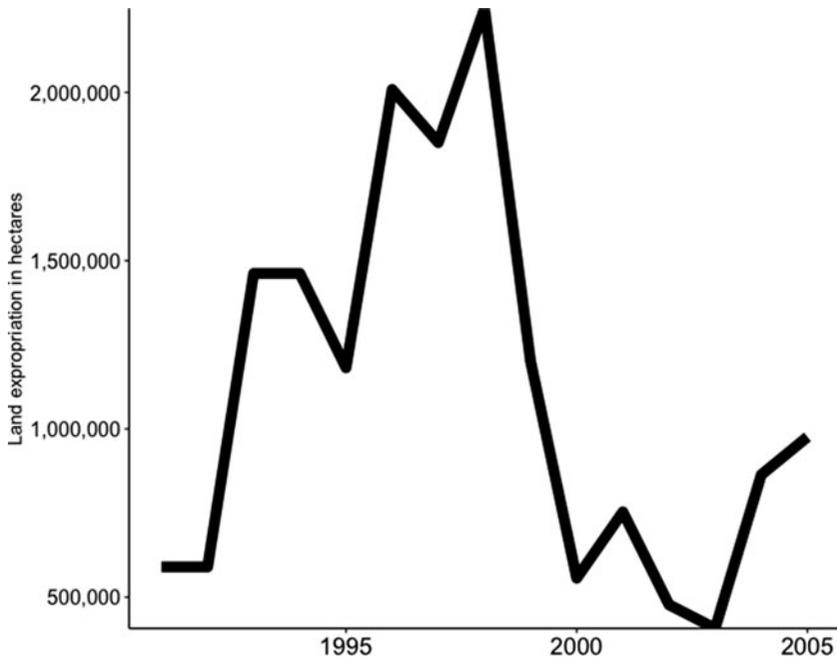


Figure 1. Land expropriation (in hectares per year)

Source: INCRA: <https://www.gov.br/incra/pt-br> (all websites last accessed 30 Jan. 2023)

their neoliberal pedigree, centre–right coalitions in the 1990s relied extensively on the expropriation of unproductive private farms to boost agrarian reform, as shown in [Figure 1](#).

Why did right-wing and conservative parties endorse an expropriation policy that ultimately damaged the landed elites? An important piece of this puzzle is that agrarian reform was on the table of Brazil’s politics long before it was finally passed into law. Debates about the ‘agrarian question’ date back to the 1930s amid Brazil’s projects of modernisation.¹⁰ At that time, Brazil was a typical case for agrarian reform, i.e. an autocratic rural country with work relations akin to serfdom.¹¹ However, conservative elites blocked early attempts to redistribute land. After the failure of agrarian reform projects in the 1930s and again in the 1960s, the issue resurfaced during the military dictatorship of the 1970s.¹² As in

¹⁰Thiago da Costa Lopes, *Em busca da comunidade: Ciências sociais, desenvolvimento rural e diplomacia cultural nas relações Brasil–EUA (1930–1950)* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FioCruz, 2020); Juliana Marques da Silva, ‘Disputas intra-elites e agendas distributivas no Brasil rural de 1920 a 1945: Mineração de texto no Arquivo Juarez Távora’, Doctoral dissertation, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2021.

¹¹Afrânio R. Garcia Jr., Beatriz M. A. de Heredia and Marie France Garcia, ‘Campeinato e “plantation” no nordeste’, *Anuário Antropológico*, 3: 1 (1979), pp. 267–87; Beatriz Alasia de Heredia, *Formas de dominação e espaço social: A modernização da agroindústria canavieira em Alagoas* (Rio de Janeiro: Marco Zero, 1989); Victor Nunes Leal, *Coronelismo, enxada e voto: O município e o regime representativo no Brasil* (São Paulo: Alfa-Omega, 1975 [1948]).

¹²Agrarian reform was one of President João Goulart’s many ‘Basic Reforms’; he was ousted by a military coup in 1964.

Prussia, Russia, France and elsewhere in Latin America,¹³ Brazil's autocrats planned on catering to peasants in order to consolidate power, which contributed to elite desertion and consequently to democratisation in the 1980s.¹⁴

With growing urbanisation and democratisation, Brazil became a least-likely case for agrarian reform. As noted by Bernardo Sorj, urbanisation rendered agrarian reform obsolete and unappealing to the material interest of a majority of urban constituents.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it was in this new scenario that agrarian reform finally came to fruition. During the transition to democracy, newcomer left-wing parties and social movements embraced agrarian reform as a flagship of their agenda, in particular the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party, PT) and the MST. The PT originated in São Paulo's industrial belt, in the southeast, born of an alliance between labour unions and progressive sectors of the Catholic church; the PT's rural ally, the MST, was from the southern state of Paraná.

In their opposition to agrarian reform, the landed elites organised under the leadership of Congressman Ronaldo Caiado (PSD, later PFL), founder of the União Democrática Ruralista (Democratic Association of Ruralists, UDR), whose mission was the obstruction of progressive land legislation. Representatives of the landed elites made up the agrarian caucus (*bancada ruralista*) in Congress.¹⁶

In 1988, during the José Sarney presidency, a constitutional assembly was established. Although the assembly was dominated by right-wing and conservative parties, the resulting new (and current) constitution stated that any private land that did not fulfil a 'social role' could be expropriated (Article 184).¹⁷ The support for agrarian reform by President Sarney and powerful conservative bosses, such as Antônio Carlos Magalhães, was a clear threat to latifúndia and an early sign of the conservatives' tolerance of land redistribution. Subsequently, President

¹³Prussia: Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Beacon Press, 1966); Russia: Evgeny Finkel, Scott Gehlbach and Tricia D. Olsen, 'Does Reform Prevent Rebellion? Evidence from Russia's Emancipation of the Serfs', *Comparative Political Studies*, 48: 8 (2015), pp. 984–1019; France: Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: Wildside Press, 2008 [1852]); Latin America: Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution*.

¹⁴Following its implementation of the *Estatuto da Terra* (Land Statute Law no. 4.504, 30 Nov. 1964), the military dictatorship created the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform, INCRA) in 1970. Albertus in *Autocracy and Redistribution* associates this with autocrats' strategy to garner support. See also Regina Bruno, 'O Estatuto da Terra: Entre a conciliação e o confronto', *Estudos Sociedade e Agricultura* (1995), pp. 5–31. On democratisation, see Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution* and Frances Hagopian, *Traditional Politics and Regime Change in Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For a review of the literature on elites, democracy and inequality in the region see Matias López, 'States, Elites, and Inequality in Latin America', *Sociology Compass*, 12: 8 (2018), article e12598.

¹⁵Bernardo Sorj, 'A reforma agrária em tempos de democracia e globalização', *Novos Estudos CEBRAP*, 50 (1998), pp. 23–40.

¹⁶Regina Bruno, 'Revisitando a UDR: Ação política, ideologia e representação', *Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros*, 40 (1996), pp. 69–89; Regina Bruno, 'Bancada ruralista, conservadorismo e representação de interesses no Brasil contemporâneo', in Renato S. Maluf and Georges Flexor (eds.), *Questões agrárias, agrícolas e rurais: Conjunturas e políticas públicas* (Rio de Janeiro: E-papers, 2017), pp. 155–68.

¹⁷The Constitution was passed on 5 Oct. 1988. See http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/constituicao.htm.

Fernando Collor of the Partido da Reconstrução Nacional (National Reconstruction Party, PRN) opposed agrarian reform, in line with his anti-communist rhetoric. Embroiled in corruption scandals, Collor was impeached in September 1992 and replaced by his vice-president, Itamar Franco (PMDB), who shifted the government's position on agrarian reform.¹⁸

Regulation and Implementation (1993–2002)

Committed to neoliberal reforms and the market economy, the Itamar administration rested on an alliance between the right-of-centre parties PMDB and PSDB and the conservative parties PFL and PTB, which together accounted for over 50 per cent of seats in Congress. The programmatic Left – the PT and the Partido Comunista do Brasil (Brazilian Communist Party, PCdoB) – accounted for less than 10 per cent of Congress, while a myriad of mostly conservative parties occupied the remaining seats. In 1994, two smaller conservative parties merged to form the PPB, a powerful conservative force which joined the governing coalition. Landed elites were in the minority in Congress but continued to be represented in all main right-wing parties.¹⁹

The same coalition of parties supported Itamar's successor Cardoso (PSDB). Itamar's and Cardoso's ideological affiliations are a source of debate. However, the coalition of parties sustaining their administrations clearly leaned heavily towards the Right in economic terms. Figure 2 shows the ideological distribution of parties during the two administrations.

During the 1990s, the coalition parties moved further toward the Right and consolidated their neoliberal identity, as shown by research on the party leaders' estimated and self-reported ideology.²⁰ Apparently contradicting this tendency, the right-wing parties passed a series of laws allowing the Federal Government to expropriate and redistribute land.

First, Congress passed two bills regulating agrarian reform, which Itamar signed into law in 1993: the Agrarian Law and the Summary Process Law.²¹ Itamar vetoed the agrarian caucus' amendments to the laws and moreover legitimated the MST by receiving its leaders in the Alvorada Palace.²² President Cardoso expanded on

¹⁸It is unclear whether Itamar was formally a member of PMDB while president, since he was elected vice-president as a member of the PRN, a party which he left soon after his election. Itamar was a PMDB traditionalist before he left it for the PRN and continued to be associated with the party while in office. He would later run under the PMDB banner for the governorship of Minas Gerais and for the Senate. See 'Franco, Itamar': <http://www.fgv.br/cpdoc/acervo/dicionarios/verbete-biografico/itamar-augusto-cautiero-franco>.

¹⁹Bruno ('Revisitando a UDR') estimates the core group of the agrarian caucus to have accounted for 20 lawmakers at the time (about 4 per cent of Congress), grouped under Caiado and the UDR.

²⁰Hagopian *et al.*, 'From Patronage to Program'; Scott Mainwaring, Rachel Meneguello and Timothy Power, 'Conservative Parties, Democracy, and Economic Reform in Contemporary Brazil', Working Paper no. 264, Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies (1999); Power, 'Brazilian Politicians and Neoliberalism'.

²¹The Agrarian Law (*Lei agrária*, no. 8.629, 25 Feb. 1993) was passed 'Em globo', i.e. by a voice vote (votes not counted). Later that year members of the Lower Chamber passed the Summary Process Law (*Lei do rito sumário*, no. 76, 6 July 1993) by 249 votes in favour and 45 against. This law accelerated land expropriations.

²²The meeting took place on 2 Feb. 1993.

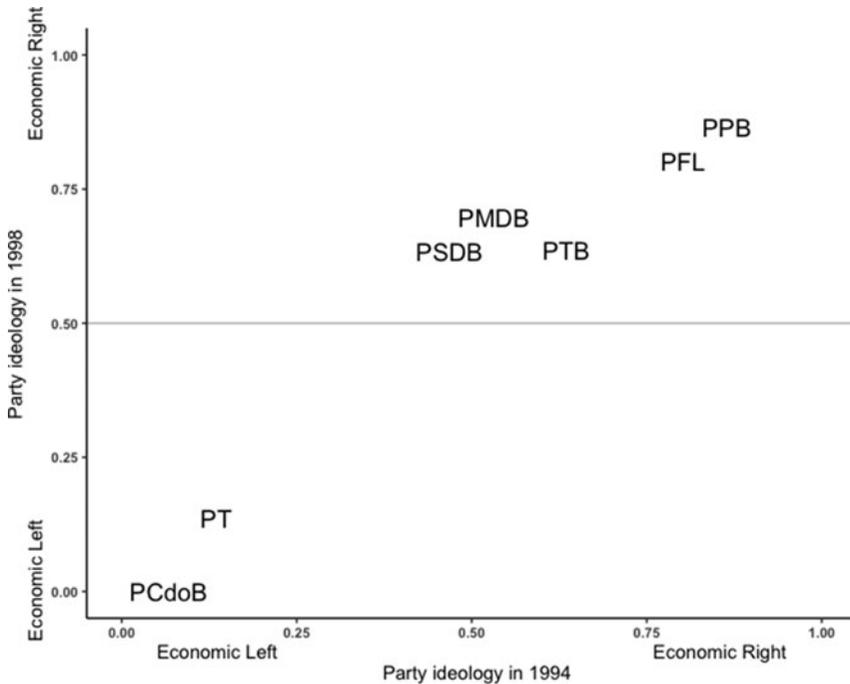


Figure 2. Parties' ideology in 1994 (Itamar administration) and 1998 (Cardoso administration)
 Source: Staffan I. Lindberg *et al.*, 'Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party) Dataset V1', <https://doi.org/10.23696/vpartydsv1>; not all parties are included in the dataset. V-Party, under the aegis of the V-Dem project (<https://www.v-dem.net/>), provides datasets of expert survey estimates about parties' internal structure, behaviour and ideology.

Itamar's approach. During his term, Congress passed a second Summary Process Law, which further facilitated expropriations, as well as a law mandating a tax on rural land holdings.²³ Between them, the Itamar (1992–5) and Cardoso (1995–2003) administrations expropriated over 13 million hectares of land (circa 32 million acres).

The bulk of expropriations occurred during Cardoso's first term (1995–9), when 6 per cent of the country's private farms were expropriated.²⁴ The cost of agrarian reform to landed elites was significant. In accordance with the Agrarian Law of February 1993, expropriated farmers were compensated with agrarian debt bonds (*títulos da dívida agrária*), which entailed lower costs to the government than other bonds (such as internal debt bonds) and could be cashed in only between five and 20 years after issue.²⁵ Members of the agrarian caucus described them

²³The Summary Process Law (*Lei do rito sumário*), no. 88, 23 Dec. 1996; Law on Rural Land Holdings (*Lei do Imposto sobre a Propriedade Territorial Rural – ITR*, no. 9393), 19 Dec. 1996.

²⁴Gabriel Ondetti, 'An Ambivalent Legacy: Cardoso and Land Reform', *Latin American Perspectives*, 34: 5 (2007), pp. 9–25; Gabriel Ondetti, 'Up and Down with the Agrarian Question: Issue Attention and Land Reform in Contemporary Brazil', *Politics and Policy*, 36: 4 (2008), pp. 510–41.

²⁵José Garcia Gasques and Carlos Monteiro Villa Verde, *O financiamento da reforma agrária no Brasil* (Brasília: IPEA, 1999), pp. 26–7.

as ‘rotten bonds’ (see [online supplement](#)). To the urban elite, the cost of agrarian reform was low. The programme represented around 20 per cent of government expenditure on agriculture.²⁶

The implementation of such a massive programme did not compromise the government’s commitment to neoliberal reforms and fiscal austerity. However, implementing agrarian reform demanded coordination between right-wing parties, all in the name of a policy that was a flagship of the Left. Given that right-wing and conservative parties are normally regarded as guardians of private property, why did they endorse agrarian reform?

Up to now, explanations have focused on pressure from organised peasants, claiming that the massacres of Corumbiara in 1995 and of Eldorado do Carajás in 1996 increased public sympathy towards the MST, pushing the government to side with the peasants.²⁷ Whereas the two massacres are key in the chain of events that characterised the unfolding of agrarian reform in Brazil in the late 1990s, I contend that they cannot explain why the Right passed agrarian reform legislation early in 1993, before such events occurred. In what follows, I propose a causal argument focused on the elites’ own interest prior to the popularisation of the MST’s fight for land equality.

Explaining Right Wing Support for Land Reform

The argument proposed and tested in the present study shows how two dimensions of distributive conflict, which are not directly related to land inequality, triggered elite support for land redistribution: urban crime and the emergence of left-wing challengers. In what follows I unpack how elites came to associate these two issues with the agrarian question.

For decades, industrialisation in Brazil incentivised poor peasants to migrate to big cities, where they lived in densely populated favelas. These communities became stigmatised as sources of crime and violence.²⁸ In light of these externalities, Elisa Reis noted that elites in the late 1990s framed agrarian reform in terms of their desire to send the poor ‘back’ to the countryside.²⁹ Building on Reis’ observation, I theorise that the right-wing parties mirrored urban elites’ aspirations, i.e. they expected agrarian reform to have an effect on crime.

However, mitigating the effects of crime was not the only potential benefit of implementing a redistributive land tenure policy. As shown in recent studies about right-wing coalitions embracing progressive policies, conservative incumbents seek to gain leverage against the left-wing opposition by selectively endorsing

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 6. The programme was also financed through the reallocation of non-discretionary expenditure, i.e. moving resources from other areas. For a detailed account of revenue for agrarian reform see *ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁷Ondetti, ‘Up and Down with the Agrarian Question’; Ondetti, *Land, Protest, and Politics*; see also Carter (ed.), *Challenging Social Inequality*; A. Pereira, ‘Brazil’s Agrarian Reform’; J. Pereira, ‘Estado e mercado’; Robles and Veltmeyer, *The Politics of Agrarian Reform*.

²⁸Teresa P. R. Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

²⁹Elisa P. Reis, ‘Percepções da elite sobre pobreza e desigualdade’, *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, 15: 42 (2000), pp. 143–52; see also Reis and Moore (eds.), *Elite Perceptions*.

policies that appeal to median voters and the poor.³⁰ In the same way, I theorise that right-wing parties anticipated electoral gains from agrarian reform. The programme could increase right-wing incumbents' credibility as redistributors, making the governing coalition more competitive against left-wing challengers and therefore preventing the emergence of more committed redistributors. Thus, fear of crime and competition with the Left together triggered support for agrarian reform within right-wing and conservative parties, ultimately leading to the regulation and implementation of land expropriation on a large scale.

A third relevant aspect of the 'agrarian reform' solution relates to its relatively low cost. Contrary to other redistributive policies, agrarian reform allocated the cost of redistribution to landed elites, maximising gains for the broader set of urban elites at their expense. In comparison with other avenues of redistribution, agrarian reform was inexpensive.

In a nutshell, right-wing parties became aware that inequality was a source of threat to elites in the form of urban crime and through the increasing popularity of left-wing political alternatives. As elites coordinated policy solutions to these externalities of inequality, agrarian reform stood out as the most cost-efficient alternative and for this reason the Right endorsed it, betraying the landed elites. If this argument is correct, this means that agrarian reform was caused by social turmoil in big cities after democratisation and the emergence of left-wing challengers, and not by the more visible role of the MST towards the late 1990s.

There are important clues suggesting that this was indeed the case, i.e. that the public validation of the MST's mission was not the root cause of the set of laws and policies that allowed the reform to take place. First, the convergence of right-wing parties in support of agrarian reform preceded the wide media exposure of the MST in the mid 1990s, which is credited with the movement's high popularity. In fact, the positive coverage of the agrarian question can itself be attributed to the interests of elites, as the media conglomerates leaned heavily towards the Right.³¹ Second, land redistribution relying on expropriations of private land dwindled when the PT coalition finally won the presidency, despite the party's strong links with the MST. The ending of expropriatory agrarian reform under PT rule is consistent with the argument put forward: as the crime wave reduced in the 2000s (see [Figure A.1](#)), and with the PT abandoning its adherence to democratic socialism in favour of an alliance with conservative sectors, the triggers for the Right's support for agrarian reform faded.

There are two mutually exclusive counterfactual scenarios which would either confirm or invalidate the causal role of fear of crime and competition with the Left.

Counterfactual 1: Agrarian reform would not have occurred in the absence of fear of urban crime and competition with the Left, all else being equal.

Counterfactual 2: Agrarian reform would have occurred regardless of fear of urban crime and competition with the Left, all else being equal.

³⁰Garay, *Social Policy Expansion*; Fairfield and Garay, 'Redistribution under the Right'; Niedzwiecki and Pribble, 'Social Policies and Center-Right Governments'.

³¹See Matias López, 'Elite Framing of Inequality in the Press: Brazil and Uruguay Compared', *Brazilian Political Science Review*, 10: 1 (2016), pp. 1–31.

If Counterfactual 1 is true, my causal argument is confirmed. If the second counterfactual is correct, then something else caused right-wing support for agrarian reform. In the following section I outline the methodology and data utilised to estimate the level of confidence in my theory vis-à-vis rival explanations.

Data and Methods

The research question of this study is: Why did right-wing majorities sponsor a redistributive agrarian reform programme in Brazil? To answer it, I propose the following theory:

T_1 : Elite-backed right-wing parties endorsed agrarian reform in order to mitigate urban violence and to gain credibility as redistributors against left-wing challengers at a low cost.

Theory T_1 accounts for two mutually reinforcing causal mechanisms linking inequality to elites' policy preferences: fear of crime and electoral competition with the Left.³² To test the theory, I subdivide it into two working hypotheses:

H_1 : Concern with urban crime increased support for agrarian reform among right-wing political elites.

H_2 : Concern with the left-wing opposition increased support for agrarian reform among right-wing political elites.

Both hypotheses need to be true in order for T_1 to be true. To test these hypotheses, I integrate process tracing and regression models in a two-step multi-method design. First, I rely on protocols of Bayesian process tracing to estimate the likelihood of observations in light of H_1 and H_2 , as well as their likelihoods considering rival explanations. Second, I use regression models to estimate whether covariates derived from the motivations described in H_1 and H_2 predict how right-wing administrations targeted farms for expropriation. The protocols applied in each step of the design are described below.

Process Tracing

I adopt a Bayesian framework for process tracing building on Tasha Fairfield and Andrew Charman's formal approach and in line with recommendations from other case study methodologists.³³ The Bayesian approach entails estimating how

³²A causal mechanism can be understood as an intervening event or factor that accounts for a causal relationship between a cause X and an outcome Y . See Tullia G. Falletti, 'Process Tracing of Extensive and Intensive Processes', *New Political Economy*, 21: 5 (2016), pp. 455–62; for an alternative understanding of causal mechanisms see James Mahoney, 'Mechanisms, Bayesianism, and Process Tracing', *New Political Economy*, 21: 5 (2016), pp. 493–9.

³³Fairfield and Charman, 'Explicit Bayesian Analysis for Process Tracing'; Rodrigo Barrenechea and James Mahoney, 'A Set-Theoretic Approach to Bayesian Process Tracing', *Sociological Methods and Research*, 48: 3 (2019), pp. 451–84; Andrew Bennett, 'Process Tracing: A Bayesian Perspective', in Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady and David Collier (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political*

likely (or expected) the evidence is under the working theory as compared to rival hypotheses. Confidence in the working theory is updated favourably whenever it makes the evidence more expected and unfavourably when rivals better predict the evidence. Mathematically, this is expressed as

$$\frac{\Pr(T_1|K)}{\Pr(T_a|K)} = \frac{\Pr(T_1)}{\Pr(T_a)} \times \frac{\Pr(K|T_1)}{\Pr(K|T_a)}$$

where *Pr* means probability, *T_a* represents each alternative causal explanation and *K* represents the evidence. Departing from a state of ignorance, I assume disadvantageous prior odds for my theory (20 per cent) in contrast with the combined prior likelihood of four mutually exclusive alternative hypotheses (80 per cent) described in detail in the [online supplement](#). Posterior odds are not expressed numerically, as this would increase subjectivity, but using comparisons. For instance, let us assume that *K* = the speech of party leader *X* prior to the vote on law *Y*. If *K* is clearly more expected under *T₁*, then

$$\frac{\Pr(K|T_1)}{\Pr(K|T_a)} > 1$$

In the present article I focus on the strongest alternative hypothesis in the literature; however, a more exhaustive account of the other three alternative explanations is presented in the [online supplement](#). The main alternative hypothesis *T_{a_i}* affirms that agrarian reform occurred after massacres against MST peasants generated visibility and sympathy for peasants, granting the movement the opportunity to expand its operations and pressure the government, which then conceded land redistribution.³⁴

To update the confidence in *T₁* vs. alternative hypotheses I built a dataset of 546 elite attitudes related to agrarian reform policies. The data were mostly collected through term searches (using ‘agrarian reform’ as the keyword) in transcripts of Congressional debates and of President Cardoso’s personal audio diary, official documents, press and TV coverage and campaign materials.³⁵ In addition, I analysed data from in-depth interviews from Elisa Reis’ project and a survey of elites.³⁶

Methodology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 702–21; Macartan Humphreys and Alan M. Jacobs, ‘Mixing Methods: A Bayesian Approach’, *American Political Science Review*, 109: 4 (2015), pp. 653–73.

³⁴Ondetti, *Land, Protest, and Politics*.

³⁵The main sources consulted were the Congressional archives (<https://www.congressonacional.leg.br/>), the presidential archives in the Fundação Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the archives of *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *Veja*, the recordings of the public broadcaster TV Cultura (<https://www.youtube.com/c/rodaviva>), biographical materials of the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil (Contemporary Brazilian History Research and Documentation Centre, CPDOC) and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *Diários da presidência*, vol. 1: 1995–1996 (Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das Letras, 2015). The dataset is available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/RSCFBG> (restricted access).

³⁶Interviews were conducted for Reis and Moore (eds.), *Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality*, and for a follow-up project (‘Public and Private Reactions to Inequality’) at the Núcleo Interdisciplinar de Estudos sobre a Desigualdade (Interdisciplinary Network for the Study of Inequality, NIED) at the

Table 1. Statements about agrarian reform, by elite group

	Type of elite				Total
	Right-wing	Left-wing	Landed	Business	
Speeches on the floor of Congress	135	55	34	–	224
IUPERJ survey answers	53	77	(no information)	95	225
In-depth interviews	6	5	–	3	14
Notes in Cardoso's audio diary	34	–	–	–	34
Press coverage and official documents	24	8	9	8	49
Total	252	145	43	106	546

Notes: In order to distinguish urban from landed elites I coded elites' ties to rural interests. (This was not possible for the IUPERJ survey data, which are anonymised.) The 'right-wing' group consists mainly of urban members of the PSDB, PMDB, PFL, PTB and PPB. The 'left-wing' category comprises mainly PT leaders and their allies, such as the MST leadership itself. The 'landed' elite group consists of Congress(wo)men identified with the agrarian caucus in those same right-wing parties and elites in agribusiness. The 'business' group consists of elites at the head of corporations and business organisations, excluding agribusiness.

Sources: See notes 35–7.

Reis conducted interviews with legislators, party leaders, Federal Government officials and businesspeople in 1998, 1999 and 2012, sampled using the positional method; the elite survey sampled members of Congress, people in top positions in the Federal Government and business leaders.³⁷ I then coded the material, separating favourable from unfavourable statements about agrarian reform, and whether a practical reason for the policy was stated. The data are summarised in Table 1.

Regression Models

I ran multilevel regressions to model the number of expropriated farms in each locality using both fixed (i.e. the same for every cluster/nest) and random slopes.

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Interviewees were asked for their opinions on the externalities of inequality and about the pertinence of agrarian reform. The positional method identifies the most influential institutions in a given country and, within them, the main positions. Individuals occupying such positions are assumed to be elites. See Ursula Hoffmann-Lange, 'Methods of Elite Identification', in Heinrich Best and John Higley (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 79–92.

³⁷The elite survey ($n = 225$) was conducted by the Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro (Rio de Janeiro University Institute for Research, IUPERJ) between October 1993 and July 1994. Two questions in the IUPERJ survey covered elites' preferences regarding agrarian reform: the first asked participants to choose two priorities from a list of policies, giving them the possibility of naming agrarian reform as a priority. The second asked directly if participants considered agrarian reform to be important, irrelevant or harmful to the economy. The questionnaire also included an open question about the consequences of poverty, and asked participants to identify as left-wing or right-wing. Ideology was measured using a 5-point Likert (psychometric) scale. I coded all respondents who selected 1 or 2 in the ideological scale as left-wing and the others as conservatives, consistent with the ideological distribution of parties shown in Figure 2.

The predictors that are consistent with T_1 are the number of emigrants from each state and the vote ratio for Luis Inácio Lula da Silva in the presidential elections of 1989. The first measure accounts for the migratory pressures that one state imposes on other states, mainly the emigration of poor peasants from northern states to the metropolises of the wealthier states of the south. The second measure accounts for the level of electoral competition with the Left in each municipality. In simple terms, if Ta is true the effect of migratory pressures and Lula's vote ratio should be zero after accounting for the levels of demand for land and of conflict in each locality.

The data are nested in three levels: municipalities (Level 1) within states (Level 2) within years (Level 3). The reference model is specified as

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta \text{Lula's votes} + \text{Controls} + E_1$$

$$\beta_0 = \gamma_{00} + \theta \text{Emigrants} + E_2$$

$$\gamma_{00} = \delta_{000} + \text{Controls} + E_3$$

where Y is the yearly number of expropriated farms in a municipality (see Table 2), all the '0' constants represent the different baselines (intercepts) in each level, 'Lula's votes' represents the ratio of votes that PT candidate Lula received in the run-off presidential election of 1989 in a given locality, 'Emigrants' represents the number

Table 2. Panel of Brazilian municipalities: descriptives

	Mean	SD
Number of expropriations	0.07	0.43
Lula's vote ratio	0.36	0.15
Emigrants per 1,000 inhabitants	0.08	0.30
Income per capita in R\$	122.98	73.04
Land occupations by MST	0.074	0.54
Murders in the countryside	0.01	0.66
Unproductive estates per 1,000 inhabitants	1.60	2.40
Press coverage	1768.75	570.86

Notes: The panel to which the regression models were applied is structured in hierarchical fashion, with municipalities nested in states and states nested in years.

The data account for the 48,785 municipality-years for which all measures are available.

Sources:

Expropriations and rural conflict at the municipal level: Michael Albertus, Thomas Brambor and Ricardo Ceneviva, 'Land Inequality and Rural Unrest: Theory and Evidence from Brazil', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 62: 3 (2018), pp. 557–96

Voting data for the 1989 elections: Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (Supreme Electoral Commission, TSE): <https://www.tse.jus.br/eleicoes/>

Brazilian states' emigration rate: 1991 Census: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, IBGE): <https://www.ibge.gov.br/>

Municipal income per capita: Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (Institute of Applied Economic Research, IPEA): <http://ipeadata.gov.br/>

Land occupations by MST: Albertus *et al.*, 'Land Inequality and Rural Unrest'.

Murders: Albertus *et al.*, 'Land Inequality and Rural Unrest'.

Number of unproductive estates per 1,000 inhabitants in each municipality: IPEA: <http://ipeadata.gov.br/>

Press coverage of rural conflict: Ondetti, *Land, Protest, and Politics*, p. 152: number of mentions of rural conflict and agrarian reform in the *Folha de S. Paulo*, by year.

of emigrants per 1,000 inhabitants in each state and E is an error term. The controls in Level 1 are the number of land occupations carried out by the MST, the number of murders in the locality (as a proxy for rural violence), the number of unproductive estates per 1,000 inhabitants, and municipal income per capita. Level 3 controls are press coverage of the agrarian question in each year and dummies for the two massacre events. Controls account for the alternative explanation Ta_i (based on violence against the MST and issue salience), as well as for the suitability of the land for expropriation in accordance with the Agrarian Law of February 1993 (see [note 21](#)) and the economic characteristics (income per capita) of each locality (see [Appendix](#) for regression coefficients of all covariates included). All covariates are centred at their mean.

Results

The results are presented in the following fashion. The first subsection presents estimates of the level of elite support for agrarian reform. The second and third subsections show the evidence informing H_1 and H_2 , which define fear of crime and competition with the Left as the causal mechanisms that explain support for agrarian reform. The fourth subsection shows the results from the regression models.

How Supportive Were Conservatives?

[Figure 3](#) illustrates attitudes about agrarian reform among different elite groups surveyed during the Itamar administration.

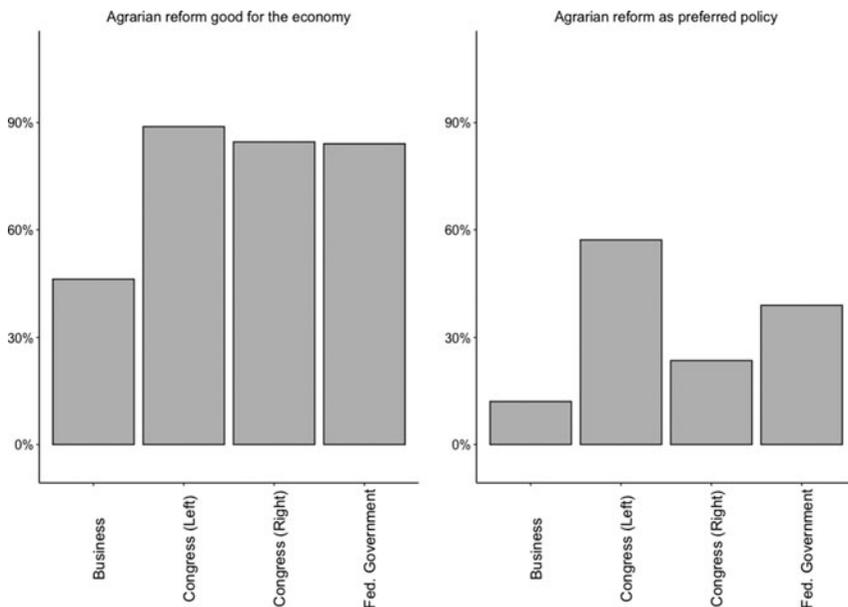


Figure 3. Elite support for agrarian reform, 1993-4 (Itamar administration)

Source: IUPERJ elite survey (see [note 37](#))

The figure shows that members of Congress who identified as right-wing as well as elites in the Federal Government during the Itamar administration were supportive of agrarian reform, even when compared with those who identified as left-wing. The absolute majority of right-wing partisans in the survey sample regarded agrarian reform as very important for the country, and about one quarter of them portrayed it as either the most important or the second most important policy for solving the problem of inequality in Brazil. Within the Federal Government, agrarian reform was even more popular. Even business elites portrayed agrarian reform as important, although not yet a priority at that point.

The timing of the IUPERJ elite survey coincided with the regulation of agrarian reform in Congress and Itamar's endorsement of the policy in 1993. The policy approval rates among elites and the endorsement by right-wing parties in 1993 seem unlikely if the conservatives' true preference was indeed antagonistic to agrarian reform, as previously believed. In the following subsections, I demonstrate how two main mechanisms, apparently unrelated to the rural question, explain why the Right deserted landed elites and became supportive of agrarian reform.

Mechanism 1: Fear of Urban Crime

Living in luxury properties in big cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, often just a few blocks away from favelas, the elite felt threatened by a wave of criminal violence in the 1990s and early 2000s (see murder and kidnapping rates in Figure A.1). Affluent residents of the southeast were targeted by kidnappers and taken hostage until ransoms were paid.³⁸ Not infrequently, mobs of poor people would storm affluent neighbourhoods, robbing those who got in their way – a criminal and rebellious tactic known as the *arrastão*.³⁹ The wealthiest neighbourhoods in southeast metropolises gradually became a very hostile territory for elites, overcrowded with beggars and surrounded by rebellious poor.

Around 65 per cent of the politicians and 45 per cent of the business elites surveyed by the IUPERJ between 1993 and 1994 perceived urban violence as the most relevant consequence of poverty. The overwhelming human misery in the metropolises of the southeast was in part the result of cities' failures to absorb the mass migration from poorer rural areas in the north. It is estimated that the rural exodus accounted for 33 per cent of urban demographic growth between 1990 and 2000.⁴⁰ Many of those migrants ended up in favelas, perceived by elites as the source of criminal violence.⁴¹ In a session of Congress in 1994, Congressman Osmânio Pereira (PSDB) claimed:

³⁸Cesar Caldeira, 'Segurança pública e sequestros no Rio de Janeiro (1995–1996)', *Tempo Social*, 9: 1 (1997), pp. 115–53.

³⁹In the early 1990s, TV Manchete, owned by the powerful Bloch family, produced the documentary *Os pobres vão à praia* ('The Poor Go to the Beach'), which showed the discomfort of upper-class residents at sharing public spaces with poor people from distant neighbourhoods and favelas, as well as reporting on the problem of *arrastões*. The documentary can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOzGFJZZV88>.

⁴⁰Eliseu Alves and Renner Marra, 'A persistente migração rural-urbana', *Revista de Política Agrícola*, 18: 4 (2009), pp. 5–17.

⁴¹Caldeira, *City of Walls*.

The favelas, the homeless families, the street kids, unemployment ... all are but the reflection of the prevalence of a perverse socio-economic structure, *the injustices of which are bound to be taken out on the dominant classes too. This has been widely demonstrated by the violence of our daily life ...* Fortunately, the Itamar Franco administration has so far proven its intention of implementing agrarian reform for real. We hope it continues on this path.⁴²

In line with Congressman Pereira's reasoning, to many elites agrarian reform represented a step forward in mitigating urban violence, at an acceptable cost. The rationale is unlikely but not illogical: if the rural exodus was a cause of conflict in cities, then providing for the rural poor would help solve that problem. More importantly, agrarian reform was less costly to the majority of elites when compared with other redistributive policies, as its costs were allocated to landed elites. PFL Congressman José Alves argued on 7 April 1995 that 'government expenditure on health, education, housing and sanitation' cost more than improving 'living conditions in the countryside'. The cost efficiency of agrarian reform was mentioned even more explicitly by PPB's conservative leader Espiridião Amin in 1996. He claimed:

One truth has been stated repeatedly here on the floor of the Senate, as well as throughout our huge [country of] Brazil, a truth which all people with common sense are convinced of, but that the government is reluctant to accept: *it is cheaper to invest in keeping peasants in the countryside than it is to later solve the social problems that they cause when they migrate to the cities.*⁴³

The following statement from a conservative PFL politician further illustrates such rationale.

First of all, I am in favour of agrarian reform. I am in favour. What is agrarian reform? Agrarian reform to me means to provide some land to the average Joe and just letting him be there ... *You may think at first that the investment needed would be too great, but it would not be really. You have to think that, if you don't do that, that same guy will go to a big city to create problems.*⁴⁴

In the eyes of Amim and the PFL interviewee, agrarian reform could be a means of keeping poor peasants from migrating to big cities, preventing them from becoming threats to the urban rich and mitigating violence at a low cost. Excluding those by members of the agrarian caucus, 40 per cent (76) of the speeches in Congress about agrarian reform between 1992 and 1997 explicitly mentioned urban criminal violence and the overcrowding of big cities as a key motivation for the policy. Elites anticipated that, by redistributing land in the countryside, they could stop or even reverse the rural exodus and consequently

⁴²Osmânio Pereira (PSDB, Minas Gerais), Lower Chamber, 2 June 1994. Translations are by the author; emphases are added.

⁴³Espiridião Amin (PPB, Santa Catarina), Senate, 23 July 1996.

⁴⁴PFL politician interviewed in 1999.

mitigate distributive conflict in big cities. Below are extracts from speeches from the floor illustrating this reasoning:

*What about urban violence? And the state of violence that the country watches in astonishment? ... In the wonderful city of Rio de Janeiro, there were three kidnappings occurring almost simultaneously last week ... Social inequalities will only soften when we truly have conditions to promote agrarian reform.*⁴⁵

Agrarian reform is one of the most urgent matters within the context of the current state of degradation of the Brazilian social fabric. The consequence of our indecision can be seen in the *panic of the middle and rich classes, facing the hordes of poor that surround us on every corner ... We are now in a dilemma, between a serious and responsible agrarian reform and barbarism.*⁴⁶

The idea of agrarian reform as a cure for urban violence resonated on the Left as well. 'With agrarian reform, we will have more food and jobs, as a consequence, violence will decrease', said a PT interviewee in 1999. Noting that linking agrarian reform and urban violence was beneficial to the MST, the movement's leader João Pedro Stedile made a similar statement to the press in 1995, arguing that 'one way of fighting violence in big cities is by implementing agrarian reform'.⁴⁷ Overall, private and public discourses on inequality followed a similar pattern: elites looked more favourably on agrarian reform as they realised that inequality was generating conflict in urban settings, which ultimately affected their own security.

Meanwhile, violence in the countryside was on the rise as well. Following that of Corumbiara in 1995, the rather more notorious massacre of 19 landless workers in the city of Eldorado do Carajás in April 1996 increased public support for the MST, further pressuring Congress to legislate in favour of agrarian reform. Excluding those by members of the agrarian caucus, 30 per cent (57) of speeches about agrarian reform between 1992 and 1997 mentioned violence against the MST. Nevertheless, massacres did not replace criminal violence as the main motivation for agrarian reform expressed during speeches on the floor of Congress. In 1997, the Cardoso administration defended agrarian reform policy and justified land expropriation in the light of urban problems: 'Expelled from the countryside, this man [the rural man] and his family went on to form the armies of ill-employed, under-employed and unemployed in the ghettos of Brazil's big cities, crafting the dramatic social landscape, marked by profound inequalities, which lasts to this day.'⁴⁸

As noted above, the main explanation in the literature for the Right's endorsement of agrarian reform relates it to shifts in public opinion after the massacres of 1995 and 1996. However, the data portray how agrarian reform was more frequently justified by right-wing partisans as a measure to mitigate urban crime. This does not imply that the massacres had no impact on the policy. The

⁴⁵Ramez Tebet (PMDB, Rio Grande do Sul), Senate, 30 Oct. 1995.

⁴⁶Romeu Tuma (at the time a member of the Partido Social Liberal (Social Liberal Party, PSL), later of the PMDB, São Paulo), Senate, 11 July 1996.

⁴⁷*Folha de S. Paulo*, 27 Nov. 1995.

⁴⁸Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *Reforma Agrária – Compromisso de Todos* (Brasília: Documentos da Presidência da República, 1997).

Eldorado do Carajás massacre in particular pressured President Cardoso to show a policy response, as described in the next section. In terms of the number of expropriations, the massacre may or may not have had an effect (see [Figure S1](#) in the [online supplement](#)). Overall, the arguments made by right-wing partisans in Congress, the rationale expressed during the open-ended interviews conducted by Reis, elites' responses in the IUPERJ survey and public statements reported by the press (see [notes 35–7](#)) are much more expected assuming H_1 as true than assuming alternative explanations as true.

Mechanism 2: Electoral Competition with the Left

Although the Right implemented agrarian reform, the policy had been a flagship of the left-wing opposition since the 1980s, in particular of the PT. The party was born under the leadership of Lula da Silva, a prominent union leader who coordinated huge strikes during the military dictatorship. The PT united key segments of the Left, from former guerrilla fighters to unions, scholars, sectors of the Catholic church and, unofficially, also the MST. In a party event in Brasília in 1987, Lula warned the economic elite that 'with the PT in government ... banks will be nationalised, and the working class and the government will have control over banks'.⁴⁹

In the 1989 presidential election, Lula made it to the runoff but ended up losing to Fernando Collor de Mello by a 6 per cent margin. The defeat of Lula in 1989 demanded massive elite coordination, including from the heads of media outlets, in particular the Globo group.⁵⁰ Since the 1989 election, the PT had been perceived as a major threat to conservative and economic elites, and portrayed as such by the press. The idea of Lula winning the presidential election terrified the economic elites,⁵¹ including the landed elites. To them, the PT was a prototypical socialist threat, with its red flag and bearded leaders.

PT's flagship programme for agriculture was agrarian reform. However, after the meltdown of the Collor presidency, newly installed President Itamar Franco placed himself one step ahead of the PT by endorsing the Agrarian Law and the Summary Process Law of 1993 (see [note 21](#)) in an outright commitment to agrarian reform.

As the 1994 presidential elections neared, Lula's candidacy was clearly ahead, according to early opinion polls.⁵² Itamar's finance minister Cardoso was considered by many conservatives to be the most competitive candidate against PT. He was credited with ending hyperinflation, which provided him with extensive

⁴⁹Speech, 6 Dec. 1987, in 'Documentos – O PT e as eleições presidenciais de 1989', Centro Sérgio Buarque de Holanda da Fundação Perseu Abramo, no. 8 (2012), p. 130: <https://fpabramo.org.br/csbh/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2017/05/11-PTeleicoesPresidenciais.1989.pdf>.

⁵⁰For estimated effects of media bias in favour of Collor see Taylor C. Boas, 'Television and Neopopulism in Latin America: Media Effects in Brazil and Peru', *Latin American Research Review*, 40: 2 (2005), pp. 27–49. For a description of media content and manipulation favouring Collor against Lula see Mauro Porto, 'Democratization and Election News Coverage in Brazil', in Jesper Strömbäck and Lynda Lee Kaid (eds.), *The Handbook of Election News Coverage around the World* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 252–72.

⁵¹The weekly *Veja* published what it called the 'Map of the Elites', according to which 80 per cent of the Brazilian business elites interviewed feared Lula (2 March 1994).

⁵²Eleições 1994 – 01/10/1994. Intenção de voto presidente – 1994', Datafolha: http://media.folha.uol.com.br/datafolha/2013/05/02/intvoto_pres_01101994.pdf.

positive media exposure. A moderate with previous socialist credentials, Cardoso signalled commitment to both redistribution and neoliberal reforms. Like Collor, he could count on massive support from business and media corporations against Lula. As the government's candidate, he renewed the alliance with the PFL and PTB, and received unofficial support from PMDB factions despite the party having its own presidential candidate.

Fighting the Left over ownership of the redistribution issue was key in the election, with debates centred on social justice. At this point, agrarian reform delivered double benefits for urban conservatives: it addressed the issue of mass migration and, more immediately, helped the Right in its competition with the Left. In a Congress session in May 1994, PFL Congresswoman Maria Valadão drew Cardoso's attention to the electoral appeal of agrarian reform. She contended: 'I hope that this deserves the attention of candidate Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *allowing his campaign to take off* ... I am talking about a fair agrarian reform, which should return to the countryside the people who wish to produce.'⁵³

The congresswoman's remarks illustrate how the two motivations of the Right in supporting agrarian reform were mutually reinforcing. First, expropriation would protect the elite by settling the poor in the countryside. Second, the policy would provide competitive advantage against left-wing challengers. Cardoso indeed introduced the issue of agrarian reform in his campaign later that year, committing first to settle 100,000 landless families and later increasing that number to 280,000 families.

Other right-wing presidential candidates also came out in support of agrarian reform. Orestes Quércia (PMDB), a multimillionaire political boss, promised to deliver 'the greatest agrarian reform the world has ever seen'.⁵⁴ Agrarian reform was also a campaign promise of the ultraconservative Esperidião Amin (PPB) and even of the far-right nationalist leader Enéas Carneiro, a member of the Partido da Reedificação da Ordem Nacional (Party of the Reconstruction of the National Order, PRONA).⁵⁵ Astonishingly, agrarian reform appeared in the 1994 elections as a consensual policy across the ideological spectrum. In a presidential debate on national TV, Cardoso contended: 'All the parties feature agrarian reform in their programmes. The only thing left is to actually do it. I am going to do it.'⁵⁶

As the race converged on a dispute between the PT and PSDB candidates, Lula complained that Cardoso's programme of agrarian reform was a copy of his own: 'They [the PSDB] wrote their programme in one weekend, because they plagiarised [ours]. It would have been more dignified for them if they admitted that our programme was the best one.'⁵⁷

Despite the strong initial appeal of Lula and the PT, by the end of the campaign Cardoso was victorious. A few months after taking office, he expropriated 1 million

⁵³Maria Valadão (PFL, Goiás), Lower Chamber, 26 May 1994.

⁵⁴*Folha de S. Paulo*, 17 July 1994.

⁵⁵José Juliano de Carvalho Filho, 'Reforma agrária: De eleições a eleições', *Estudos Avançados*, 11: 31 (1997), pp. 99–109.

⁵⁶Candidate Cardoso in Presidential debate, TV Bandeirantes, Aug. 1994, available at 'Debate na Band: Presidencial 1994 – 1º turno – Parte 2': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIFNzxa1ZGE>; quote is from 06:13.

⁵⁷*Folha de S. Paulo*, 26 Aug. 1994.

hectares (2.5 million acres) of land for agrarian reform in a single shot. In a ceremony held at one of the expropriated farms in the state of Ceará, the President argued:

Never has a government expropriated one million hectares of land before. We forced that half-dozen people [the left-wing opposition] to shut up ... Brazil is going to change and the minority group which I defeated in the polls will not prevent that from happening. The agrarian reform will be done and it has already started, for the benefit of all of us.⁵⁸

Expropriating land helped President Cardoso to counterbalance his depiction as a neoliberal politician and prevented the Left from gaining ground. In early May 1995, he made note of this in his private audio diary: 'The government has to make an effort in the matter of *assentamentos* [expropriated land provided to the landless] ... This is what I call a social agenda. And this agenda now needs to be promoted in order for us to occupy [electoral] spaces. Otherwise, the left-wing opposition will say that we are paralysed regarding social matters.' On 12 October, he added: 'With [us pushing] agrarian reform ... it becomes harder [for others] to say that the government only cares about inflation.'

With the aim of fighting the PT's ownership of the agrarian reform issue, Cardoso and allied conservative political elites remained committed to its implementation. The PT, on the other hand, faced the dilemma of either trying to obstruct legislation on agrarian reform, showing a consistent opposition to the government but betraying its base and principles (and siding with the landed elites), or approve it, remaining loyal to their programme but strengthening Cardoso's administration.

The costs for the landed elites were significant as well. The agrarian debt bonds used as compensation for expropriated land were deemed highly unattractive, making land 'worthless', in the exaggerated words of Senator Júlio Campos (PFL).⁵⁹ Perhaps more importantly, the agrarian caucus had been defeated over the core of its agenda. Its leadership in Congress showed great frustration with the government, threatening to leave the coalition and to counter-attack. 'We will play hardball ... the government will lose our support', threatened Congressman Nelson Marquezelli (PTB).⁶⁰ Cardoso largely ignored such a threat: it is not mentioned in his diary nor was any action by the government offered in response. Marquezelli complained about the treatment that landed elites were receiving. 'If Volkswagen or any other company can have armed guards, why can't the farmers?' he asked in an attempt to justify the private militias that were terrorising the MST.⁶¹ Months earlier, the police, along with members of such private militias, had killed nine landless peasants and wounded dozens more in Corumbiara.

Up to that point, the violence against the MST did not merit the attention of the president, to judge from notes in his audio diary. This changed after the massacre of

⁵⁸President Cardoso in a ceremony in the state of Ceará, quoted in *Folha de S. Paulo*, 25 March 1995.

⁵⁹Júlio Campos (PFL), Senate, 11 Nov. 1996.

⁶⁰*Folha de S. Paulo*, 13 Dec. 1995.

⁶¹*Folha de S. Paulo*, 5 Dec. 1995.

19 landless workers in Eldorado do Carajás in April 1996. The massacre received ample media coverage and was followed by increasing public support for the MST. PT leaders and members of the Church met with President Cardoso two days after the massacre, pressuring him to do more for agrarian reform. Cardoso replied that it was the opposition which was blocking amendments to the 1993 Summary Process Law.⁶² He recorded his response to PT leaders in his diary: 'Do you [the PT] want to help? Do you want to participate? I am all for it, but you have to give us the votes; [so far] you have not, you always vote against.' On 23 December 1996, the government got the votes to approve the second Summary Process Law, accelerating land expropriations. A few days earlier, on 19 December, Congress had passed a new tax on rural land holdings, despite resistance from landed elites (see [note 23](#)).

Consternation over the Eldorado do Carajás massacre provided the impetus for further legislation on agrarian reform, as Ondetti shows,⁶³ and was used to frame the implementation of a programme of financial aid to small rural producers, the Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar (National Programme for Strengthening of Family Agriculture, PRONAF). However, in the notes in his audio diary Cardoso more frequently expressed concern about fighting the Left than about the pressure of public opinion following massacres.

Cardoso mentioned competition with the Left in February, May and October 1995 in his private notes on agrarian reform. This motivation was therefore present both before and after the first massacre (in Corumbiara), which was not mentioned in the diary in 1995. In 1996, Cardoso made five references to violence against the MST, all in April, i.e. in the month of the second massacre, in Eldorado do Carajás. He made five additional references to agrarian reform and competition with the Left in 1996 in the months of September, November and December.

Given the government's reinforced commitment to agrarian reform, the landed elites adopted two new strategies of mitigation. First, they pushed for legislation that would shift the mode of land redistribution from expropriations to land acquisition through mortgages granted by a public bank, the Banco da Terra (Land Bank). This strategy had mixed results for landed elites, as the mortgages programme was implemented but expropriation remained the main mode of land redistribution, accounting for 90 per cent of distributed land.⁶⁴ The second strategy involved collusion with technocrats, i.e. establishing a direct relationship with top bureaucratic elites within the government to bias policy implementation in landed elites' favour, or at least to mitigate losses. Such a strategy accounted for increasingly generous compensations for expropriated land.⁶⁵ While this second strategy was deemed successful by some authors,⁶⁶ members of the agrarian caucus

⁶²The Summary Process Law (see [note 21](#)) was intended to accelerate expropriations.

⁶³Ondetti, *Land, Protest, and Politics*, pp. 151–4.

⁶⁴Ondetti, 'Up and Down with the Agrarian Question'.

⁶⁵Lee J. Alston, Gary D. Libecap and Bernardo Mueller, *Titles, Conflict, and Land Use: The Development of Property Rights and Land Reform on the Brazilian Amazon Frontier* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Jair Borin, 'Reforma agrária no governo FHC', in Alvaro Bianchi (ed.), *A crise brasileira e o governo FHC* (São Paulo: Xamã Editora, 1997), pp. 28–32; Sorj, 'A reforma agrária'.

⁶⁶E.g. Pereira, 'Brazil's Agrarian Reform'.

complained about how it distorted the land market and how the programme in general was a source of great insecurity for farmers (see quotes in the [online supplement](#)).

Overall, the reaction by landed elites, the statements made by right-wing elites during the presidential campaign of 1994, and the notes in Cardoso's diary up to May 1995 are highly expected under H_2 and very unlikely if alternative hypotheses are true, in particular with regard to the causal role of massacres in August 1995 and April 1996. It is clear that right-wing parties and Cardoso in particular envisioned land expropriation as an asset against the Left. For the 1998 re-election campaign, Cardoso portrayed himself as someone who was actually implementing redistribution, backed by a conservative coalition concerned with the externalities of distributive conflict. He was re-elected with over 50 per cent of the vote.

Effect on Expropriations

As shown in the previous sections, the urban elites believed that agrarian reform would reverse rural–urban migration and cripple the Left's electoral appeal. In what follows, I assess whether these motivations shaped the distribution of land expropriations. I ran regression models to test whether (i) the relative number of people emigrating from each state and (ii) Lula's vote ratio in the 1989 presidential elections in each municipality effectively predict the number of farms expropriated in each municipality, accounting for other predictors of agrarian reform.

Table 3 displays the regression coefficients in the five predictive models; Figure 4 shows the marginal effects of migration and Lula's vote ratio on the number of expropriations as well as the geographic distribution of expropriations.

As seen in Map 1 of Figure 4, the farm expropriations policy mainly targeted land in the north and northeast, not in the south where the MST was founded and was better organised. Land in the midwest was also highly targeted, hitting landed elites at the heart of agribusiness. This distribution appeared as a belt of expropriations around southern metropolises, such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Plot A in Figure 4 shows how the number of predicted expropriations is higher in states sending more migrants to other states in the 1990s. Plot B shows how Lula's performance had a similar effect, all other covariates kept constant at their mean. More importantly, the predicted number of expropriations is significantly higher when both the number of emigrants sent by the state and Lula's vote ratio are high, as seen in Plot C. The positive interaction between these two covariates is highly consistent with the policy goals of the Right, as shown with process tracing in the previous section.

In numbers, the models describe how for every 1,000 new migrants an additional farm was expropriated in their state of origin, considering the entire period (see Table 3). By the same token, for every point increase in the ratio of votes favouring Lula an additional farm was expropriated in the same period. Both effects are robust to changes in model specification. The effect of migration and of Lula's vote ratio are robust to controlling for poverty levels, the number of unproductive farms, the level of rural violence, MST occupations, press coverage and the year of massacres (see coefficients of control covariates in Table A.1). In other words, the government privileged the expropriation of farms in the states with higher

Table 3. Regression coefficients in the five predictive models

	Model				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Lula's vote	0.07 *** (0.02)	0.05 ** (0.02)	0.05 ** (0.02)	0.05 ** (0.02)	0.07 *** (0.02)
Emigrants	0.01 *** (0.00)				
Lula's vote × Emigrants			0.02 *** (0.01)	0.02 *** (0.01)	0.03 *** (0.01)
Intercept	0.10 *** (0.02)	0.07 *** (0.02)	0.07 *** (0.02)	0.08 *** (0.02)	0.08 *** (0.02)
Level 1 controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level 3 controls	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Random slopes	No	No	No	No	Yes
<i>N</i> years	11	11	11	11	11
<i>N</i> states	26	26	26	26	26
<i>N</i> municipality-years	48,785	48,785	48,785	48,785	48,785

Notes: Outcome: number of expropriated farms, standard error in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

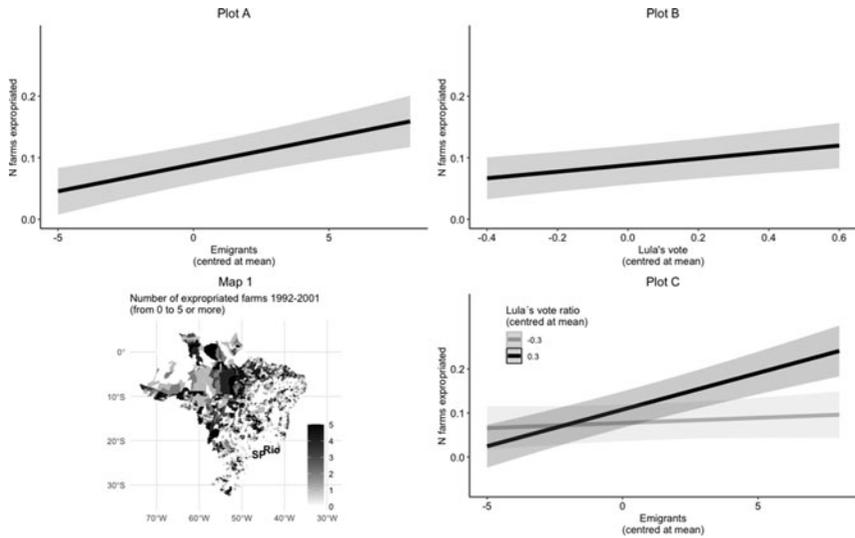


Figure 4. Effect of migration and Lula’s vote ratio on expropriations
Notes: Confidence intervals at 95% level of confidence. Estimates based on Model (5) in Table 3. Data on MST land occupations in Map 1 based on Albertus *et al.*, ‘Land Inequality and Rural Unrest’.

emigration rates and, within those, in the municipalities in which the Left performed better. Such targeting of farms was independent of the local demand for land, technical suitability for expropriation and rural violence. These results add strong evidence in favour of the theory that fear of crime and competition with the Left triggered the Right’s sponsorship of agrarian reform.

Discussion and Conclusion

Three points of discussion derive from the evidence: How do these data inform our understanding of agrarian reform in Brazil? Do the causal mechanisms portrayed here apply to other cases of agrarian reform? What are the implications of these findings for understanding elite behaviour under distributive conflict?

In respect of agrarian reform in Brazil, the study shows how right-wing politicians conceived agrarian reform as a less costly policy to make metropolises safer for the rich (by reversing rural–urban migration), as well as instrumental for gaining competitive advantage against more redistributive left-wing challengers. The two mechanisms explain why right-wing parties (including those of strong conservative inclination) rallied around a flagship policy of the Left. Given that fear of crime and competition with the Left motivated right-wing majorities to regulate and implement agrarian reform, it can be inferred that the policy would not have been implemented in the absence of such motivations.

Previous explanations in the literature focused on two factors facilitating expropriations: public support for the MST following the two massacres of the mid 1990s and the generosity of compensation to land owners, which reduced resistance to the

policy from landed elites.⁶⁷ I sustain that the massacres are important landmarks that shaped the agrarian reform process but cannot be assumed as its cause for they occurred after the policy's approval in Congress. Regarding landed elites, the evidence suggests that their acceptance of agrarian reform has been largely over-estimated by the literature.

Overall, the public statements by both right-wing and left-wing elites, Cardoso's personal notes in his audio diary, the interview and survey data (see notes 35–7) and the distribution of expropriations constitute a body of evidence that is highly expected if the causal argument presented in this study is correct and extremely unlikely in light of alternative explanations (see the online supplement for the estimation of likelihood ratios). The study therefore contributes to the scholarship on agrarian reform in Brazil by portraying the causal mechanisms that explain why right-wing parties sponsored the policy.

The second point of discussion concerns whether the causal argument applies to other cases of agrarian reform under right-wing or conservative administrations. Two potential candidates in this regard are the agrarian reforms of Chile in the 1960s and of Colombia in the late 1980s and 1990s. Felipe González shows how Christian Democrats in Chile sponsored agrarian reform in the 1960s in order to compete with the Partido Socialista de Chile (Chilean Socialist Party), a left-wing challenger feared by urban elites.⁶⁸ Michael Albertus and Oliver Kaplan show how agrarian reform in Colombia targeted regions where left-wing guerrilla fighters were based.⁶⁹ Given that the conflict spilled over to urban areas through terrorism and kidnapping, it seems plausible that motivations parallel to those observed in Brazil were operating in Colombia.

Thirdly, regarding distributive conflict theory, the present study challenges the assumption that economic elites, and the right-wing parties representing them, act cohesively in defence of property rights. Right-wing parties can impose losses on minoritarian elites in order to reduce the costs to the broader set of elites, which problematises the idea of conservative parties as safe havens for the land-holding classes.⁷⁰ To some extent, the Right in Brazil replicated the spirit of conservative modernisation described by Barrington Moore,⁷¹ implementing social changes 'from above' in order to secure their privilege. But this version of conservative modernisation turned against the landed elites who had historically benefited from it in Brazil and elsewhere.⁷² It follows that elites should not be assumed as a monolithic group with mechanical solidarity ties, but rather as a heterogeneous group with potentially antagonistic preferences regarding property rights and redistribution.

⁶⁷Ondetti, *Land, Protest, and Politics*; Alston *et al.*, *Titles, Conflict, and Land Use*; Borin, 'Reforma agrária no governo FHC'; A. Pereira, 'Brazil's Agrarian Reform'; J. Pereira 'Estado e mercado'; Sorj, 'A reforma agrária'; Wolford 'Agrarian Moral Economies'.

⁶⁸González, 'Can Land Reform Avoid a Left Turn?'

⁶⁹Albertus and Kaplan, 'Land Reform as a Counterinsurgency Policy'.

⁷⁰Gibson, *Class and Conservative Parties*; Ziblatt, *Conservative Political Parties*.

⁷¹Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

⁷²Elisa P. Reis, 'The Agrarian Roots of Conservative Modernization in Brazil, 1880–1930', Ph.D. diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1979.

The study reinforces the prediction that externalities of inequality and competition from left-wing parties push elites and right-wing coalitions to endorse redistributive policies.⁷³ The case of Brazil shows that these two mechanisms, previously analysed separately in the literature, are mutually reinforcing and therefore more effective when in interaction.

Finally, the study shows that it is relevant to ask which redistributive policies result from these causal processes triggered by the externalities of inequality. The fact that redistributing land constituted a high-gain/low-cost policy played a key role in ensuring the Right's commitment to agrarian reform. My results therefore indicate that the politics of cost allocation are key for understanding elite coordination in favour of redistribution.

Appendix

Figure A.1 illustrates the 1990–2005 crime wave. While the murder rate expresses generalised violence, targeting the poor much more than the rich, the rate of kidnappings is informative of the threat of crime to upper-class citizens.

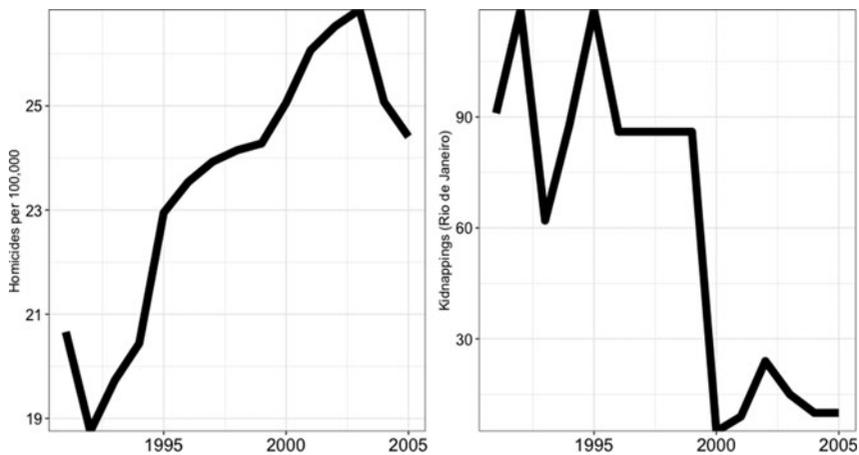


Figure A.1. Homicides and kidnappings, 1990–2005

Note: Missing values are imputed for kidnappings using decade averages.

Sources: IPEA: <http://ipeadata.gov.br/>; Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (National Institute for Space Research, INPE): <https://www.gov.br/inpe/>; Instituto de Segurança Pública (Institute for Public Safety, ISP): <http://www.isp.rj.gov.br/>; Caldeira, 'Segurança pública e sequestros'.

⁷³Reis and Moore (eds.), *Elite Perceptions*; Rueda and Stegmueller, 'The Externalities of Inequality'; Garay, *Social Policy Expansion*; Fairfield and Garay, 'Redistribution under the Right'; Niedzwiecki and Pribble, 'Social Policies and Center-Right Governments'.

Table A.1 shows regression coefficients for the control covariates included in the models outlined in Table 3.

Table A.1. Regression coefficients for controls in the four predictive models with controls

	Model			
	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Land occupations by MST	0.12 *** (0.00)	0.12 *** (0.00)	0.12 *** (0.00)	0.12 *** (0.00)
Murders	0.09 *** (0.00)	0.09 *** (0.00)	0.09 *** (0.00)	0.09 *** (0.00)
Unproductive estates per 1,000 inhabitants		6.85 *** (1.23)	6.08 *** (1.23)	6.95*** (1.22)
Income per capita		-0.00 * (0.00)	-0.00 * (0.00)	-0.00 * (0.00)
Press coverage			0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Corumbiara massacre				-0.07 (0.05)
Eldorado dos Carajás massacre				0.00 (0.07)

Note: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Acknowledgements. While carrying out this research I was fortunate to count on the intellectual generosity of Frances Hagopian, Tasha Fairfield, Lorenza Fontana, Ricardo Pagliuso, Jonas Pontusson, Livio Silva-Müller, Jan Teorell, Agustín Goenaga, Oriol Sabaté, Laura Garcia and Elisa Reis. I benefitted from discussions about this project in the contexts of the REPAL conference, the Unequal Democracies project at the University of Geneva, the STANCE project at Lund University and early on at the regular Political Economy seminars at Harvard University. Finally, I thank *JLAS'* editors and three anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism and pertinent suggestions.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X23000044>

Expropiadores inesperados: Por qué partidos de derecha implementaron la reforma agraria en el Brasil democrático

Spanish abstract

¿Qué motivó a los partidos de derecha y conservadores a apoyar una política de expropiación de tierra y de redistribución en Brasil? Argumento que los partidos urbanos de derecha apoyaron la reforma agraria para: (i) mitigar el crimen en las metrópolis más ricas al revertir el flujo migratorio rural-urbano; y para (ii) lograr una ventaja competitiva en contra de sus oponentes de izquierda. Testeo este argumento a través del *process tracing* bayesiano, analizando más de 500 declaraciones de élite sobre la reforma agraria, colectados en archivos, entrevistas y encuestas. Además, modelo las expropiaciones de tierra a nivel municipal y muestro cómo los gobiernos de derecha expropiaron la tierra de forma desproporcionada en los estados de origen de los migrantes y, al interior de

estos, en localidades donde la izquierda fue más competitiva. Mis resultados muestran cómo dos externalidades de desigualdad – crimen y competencia con la izquierda – motivaron el apoyo conservador a la reforma agraria en Brasil.

Spanish keywords: reforma agraria; partidos conservadores; conflicto distributivo; expropiación; elites agrarias

Expropriadores improváveis: Por que os partidos de direita implementaram a reforma agrária no Brasil democrático

Portuguese abstract

O que motivou partidos de direita e conservadores a endossar uma política de expropriação e redistribuição de terras no Brasil? Argumento que os partidos de direita urbanos endossaram a reforma agrária para: (i) mitigar o crime nas metrópoles mais ricas, revertendo o fluxo migratório rural-urbano; e (ii) ganhar vantagem competitiva contra os adversários de esquerda. Eu testo esse argumento através do *process tracing* bayesiano, analisando mais de 500 declarações de elite sobre reforma agrária, extraídas de dados de arquivo, de entrevistas e de pesquisas. Além disso, modelo as desapropriações de terras em nível municipal e mostro como as administrações de direita expropriaram terras de forma desproporcional nos estados de origem dos migrantes e, dentro deles, em localidades onde a esquerda era mais competitiva. Os meus resultados retratam como duas externalidades da desigualdade – crime e competitividade da esquerda – motivaram o apoio conservador à reforma agrária no Brasil.

Portuguese keywords: reforma agrária; partidos conservadores; conflito distributivo; expropriação; elites proprietárias de terras