

It takes three to tango: contested authority, violence, and rebel legitimacy in Colombia

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Abstract

Why do civilians' perceptions of the legitimacy of armed actors vary locally during civil war? Existing scholarship grounds legitimacy in the resonance between armed actors' justifications and civilians' beliefs, but struggles to explain why legitimacy frequently diverges across villages facing similar actors and conditions. This article argues that understanding wartime legitimacy requires attention to how legitimisation processes are shaped by armed actors' contestations of authority. I theorise two mechanistic logics of legitimisation under contested authority: intra-actions between armed actors and civilians, and inter-actions between competing armed actors. Drawing on fieldwork and process tracing, the article tests these mechanisms in a most-similar case study of two Colombian villages contested by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian army between 1990 and 2010. The analysis indicates that intra-actions between armed actors and civilians cannot fully capture variation in the legitimacy of armed actors. Rather, inter-actions between the FARC and the army influenced civilian beliefs and gave credence to the FARC's justifications in one case but not the other. These findings illustrate the role of contested authority within the literature on rebel governance and legitimacy while also informing policy debates on how to build efficient and legitimate authority during conflict.

Keywords legitimacy, legitimisation, Colombia, causal mechanisms, FARC, political violence

Introduction

During conflict, armed actors contest for authority among civilians, and frequently, also for legitimacy (Arjona, 2016; Duyvesteyn, 2017; Terpstra, 2020). Perceived legitimacy enables armed actors to mobilise resources, sustain operations, and stabilise authority (Podder, 2017; Schmelzle & Stollenwerk, 2018). Understanding why legitimacy varies during civil war is therefore crucial for analysing conflict dynamics.

Existing scholarship links legitimacy to the resonance between an armed actor's justifications and civilians' beliefs (Gippert, 2016; Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015) relative to other armed actors (Schoon, 2017; Terpstra, 2020). It points to how armed actors frame their justifications or how civilians understand these justifications (Dingwerth et al., 2019; Lenz & Viola, 2017; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019) to explain how they achieve such resonance. These studies provide valuable insights, but cannot account for why the legitimacy of armed actors frequently differs locally across villages, although the main explanatory variables of the model, an armed actor's justifications and civilians' beliefs, are similar across cases—a phenomenon repeatedly observed during conflict (Joshi, 2024; Schoon, 2017).

Addressing this puzzle requires us to inquire into the causal mechanisms of how armed actors *become legitimised*. The article argues that an analysis of wartime legitimisation must not start with an analysis of resonance between armed actors and civilians, but rather how beliefs and justifications are shaped during conflict to make resonance possible to begin with. It is doing so by taking the context of contested authority during conflict seriously and theorising how justifications and beliefs are shaped or gain importance through the *interactions* of the contesting armed actors. The article theorises two mechanistic logics: justifications and beliefs may be shaped by intra-actions between an armed actor and civilians, but also by an armed actor's inter-actions with other armed actors in the conflict.

I test this theory in the case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC) in a most-similar case study design of two Colombian villages, Buenavista and Santa Rosa.¹ During the 1990s, both villages perceived the FARC as legitimate and shared similar experiences of FARC authority. But by the late 2000s, while Buenavista still considered the FARC legitimate, Santa Rosa no longer did. Drawing

¹ Both villages are anonymised to protect participants.

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on immersive fieldwork and process tracing (Bennett & Checkel, 2014), I argue that this variation cannot be explained by the rebels' intra-actions with each community. Instead, it can be explained by inter-actions between the FARC and the Colombian army: the army's repression in Buenavista influenced inhabitants' beliefs about violence and allowed the FARC to sustain legitimacy in Buenavista but not in Santa Rosa.

This article makes three major contributions. First, it pushes forward the broader scholarship on legitimacy during conflict by offering ways to think about the causal mechanisms through which interaction effects come to bear on legitimation (Schoon, 2017; Terpstra, 2020; Voyvodic, 2021). Second, the article speaks to those interested in the relation between violence and legitimation by theorising how the normativity of violence plays into legitimation dynamics (Bateson, 2017; Fujii, 2017; Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015). Finally, it showcases a rigorous application of process tracing on ideational mechanisms during conflict, foregrounding the operationalisation of key concepts and mechanisms, spelling out tests for each of them and transparently providing evidence for its analytical claims (Checkel, 2017).

Legitimation and civil war

Most armed actors in irregular wars need civilian support to access recruits, information and shelter (Wickham-Crowley, 1992). To garner this support, armed actors have available three main pathways: coercion (Kalyvas, 2006), material benefits (Fisk & Cherney, 2017; Flanigan, 2008), and legitimacy—a “generalised perception that an entity's actions are desirable, proper, or appropriate within socially constructed norms” (Suchman, 1995, 574).

For armed groups, fostering legitimacy makes sense: it increases compliance (Podder, 2017), makes governance more efficient (Schmelzle & Stollenwerk, 2018), and is more stable than coercion or benefits, which falter once an armed actor's capacity declines (Kalyvas, 2006). Thus, civil wars are sites not only of contesting authorities (Kasfir et al., 2017; Lust, 2022) but also of “a struggle between competing legitimacies” where armed actors seek to convince civilians of their legitimacy while vying for control and territory (Gawthorpe, 2017, 840; Duyvesteyn, 2017; von Billerbeck & Gippert, 2017). At the same time, where armed actors have short time horizons (Arjona, 2016) or a stable influx of recruits and money due to the availability of natural resources or outside support (Weinstein, 2007), legitimacy considerations likely take a backseat.

The legitimacy of armed actors depends on their “sources of legitimacy” (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015; von Billerbeck & Gippert, 2017): where an armed actors' justifications along certain sources of legitimacy show resonance with civilians' beliefs about rightful rule, their “normative benchmarks,” this actor will be perceived as legitimate (Gippert, 2016, 524; Minatti, 2024). This resonance may be further influenced by armed actors' framing and rhetoric or civilians' cognition (Dingwerth et al., 2019; Lenz & Viola, 2017; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Many relevant sources are tied to rebel governance (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015) as it offers a pathway for armed groups to address basic needs, establish predictable norms or institutions, and foster a sense of normalcy (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2015). Service provision, in particular, has been shown to give rise to armed actors' legitimacy where they resonate with civilians' ideas of the “common good” (Grynkeewich,

2008; Loyle, 2020; Schmelzle & Stollenwerk, 2018). Other scholars have found that armed actors' procedures explain legitimacy perceptions (Fisk & Cherney, 2017), such as quick and fair justice procedures or rules of engagement (Nagamine, 2015; Weigand, 2022; Whalan, 2013). Even without governance, armed actors may still appeal to leaders' charisma (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015) or employ symbolisms of nationalism, foreignness or even divine authority (Hoffmann, 2015; Terpstra, 2020).

This literature has significantly contributed to our understanding of the causal relationship between armed actors' justifications and civilians' beliefs for legitimacy (see Figure 1). However, the model is less effective when trying to explain variation in legitimacy *on a local level*. There, the main explanatory variables of the model, armed actors' justifications and framing and civilians' beliefs and cognition, are often similar across cases. And still, various studies have shown such local variation in armed actors' legitimacy: Joshi (2024) reports in the case of the Nepalese civil war that state legitimacy differed starkly between localities without clear evidence of a difference in civilians' preferences or the state's offers. Schoon (2017), similarly, describes in the case of Turkey how the PKK's legitimacy varied across regions and over time despite the rebels' actions being markedly constant. This conundrum, I argue, begs us to further unpack how armed actors *become legitimised* by focussing on *the mechanisms* of how armed actors' justifications and civilians' beliefs are shaped during conflict to make resonance possible to begin with.

Legitimation under contested authority

This article develops a causal mechanistic theory of legitimation to account for *local* variation in armed actors' legitimacy. To do so, I make three arguments. First, wartime legitimation is deeply linked to armed actors' contestations for authority. Second, the resonance between justifications and beliefs *about violence* is crucial for perceptions of legitimacy during civil war. Finally, contestations of authority may shape armed actors' justifications and civilian communities' beliefs through three causal mechanisms both within and across authority relations.

Contested authority and legitimation

First, I argue that armed actors' legitimation must be seen as shaped by armed actors' contestations of authority (Kasfir et al., 2017). As Worrall (2017, 716) points out, an armed actor seeking legitimacy “will not encounter a *tabula rasa* [but] a complex socio-political field and must compete with the power and authority of existing actors, norms, traditions and structures.” On the one hand, during conflict, civilians are continuously exposed to the discursive contestations of different armed actors purposed to win the “hearts and minds” of the population (Gawthorpe, 2017). Civilians actively navigate these “arenas of authority” by contrasting and comparing the contesting armed actors (Lust, 2022). On the other hand, armed actors also aid or sabotage each other's legitimation attempts. Examples of positive-sum effects include international counterinsurgents lending legitimacy to a host state (Duyvesteyn, 2017), militias receiving discursive support from the state (Schneckener, 2017; Stel, 2017), or rebels gaining appeal whenever external intervention forces establish a foothold

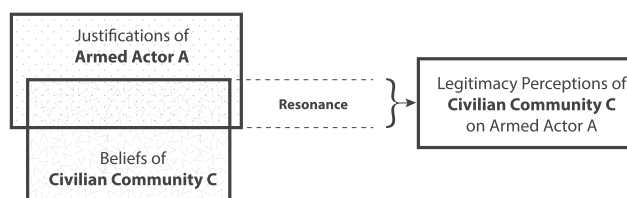


Figure 1 The sources of legitimacy approach.

(Terpstra, 2020). In terms of zero-sum effects, we have evidence of rebels gaining support relative to various state actions or even other rebel groups (Voyvodic, 2021; Weigand, 2022).

These studies make clear that armed actors' justifications and civilians' beliefs about rightful rule are continuously renegotiated as armed actors vie for support among the civilian population (Worrall, 2017). And while contestation and mutual influence are a feature of many authority relations (Dingwerth et al., 2019; Lenz & Söderbaum, 2023), this will be of special significance during conflict as the political projects of most non-state armed actors are a demonstration of viable alternatives to established authority relations (Schoon et al., 2020; Terpstra, 2020).

Taking these considerations as my starting point, I argue that to explain local variation in the legitimacy of armed actors, we need not only to look *within* the authority relations between an armed actor and a civilian community—such as where rebels influence civilians' beliefs to achieve greater resonance. Rather, we also need to consider legitimization dynamics *across* authority relations by competing armed actors active in a given territory and consider how the presence and actions of these third actors influence the resonance between rebels' justifications and civilians' beliefs (de Bruijn & Both, 2017; Minatti, 2024).

The normativity of violence

Second, this article argues that in an analysis of legitimization in civil war, a focus on justifications and beliefs about the rightful use of violence is merited. While legitimacy judgements can depend on resonance along different sources, including performance, procedure, legality, and symbolism (Dingwerth et al., 2019, 43), authority is almost always embedded in beliefs or narratives about the scope, goal and means of violence for any group or association (Apter, 1997, 11). This is especially poignant for rebel groups or paramilitary groups whose very existence builds on a conviction for the necessity of violence (Gurr, 1970). At the same time, civilians may hold normative beliefs about violence, such as its role in self-defence or punishing criminals, that—if resonant with an armed actor's justifications—foster legitimacy. In other words, beliefs and justifications about violence play a central role in the legitimization of armed actors, as they will implicate most other sources of legitimacy they employ.

At the same time, the actual enactment of violence can influence this resonance of justifications and beliefs about violence, where it makes existing justifications (un)tenable. Violence serves as a communicative act (Fujii, 2017) and its enactment may serve to highlight normative beliefs about violence, for instance, through harsh punishments of “unwanted” individuals in a community (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015, 415). However, violence misaligned with armed actors' justifications of violence—such as

atrocities or sexual violence—may undermine their credibility. Taking these dynamics into account, the remainder of this article thus focuses on the normativity of violence as a central source of legitimacy.

The causal mechanisms of legitimization

Third, given the analytical separation of legitimization within and across authority relations and the focus on the normativity of violence, we arrive at different causal mechanistic logics that can explain local variation in wartime legitimacy. Armed actors' contestations over authority among a civilian community may change the resonance between justifications and civilian communities' beliefs about rightful violence within authority relations through intra-actional legitimization, and across authority relations through direct and indirect inter-actional legitimization (see Figure 2).² In what follows, I introduce each of these mechanisms and also outline their observable implications, relying on Van Evera's (1997, 31–2) tests of necessary and sufficient conditions, particularly the non-sufficient, non-necessary straw-in-the-wind and the non-sufficient but necessary hoop test. I omit sufficiency tests, which are difficult to establish for ideational mechanisms, especially in (post-)conflict contexts with security constraints on interviews (for details see Online Appendix I). I end with a discussion of alternative explanations.

Resonance between an armed actor and a civilian community may change through *intra-action*. Here, armed actor A shapes the civilian community C's beliefs about rightful forms of violence in ways that resonate with its own justifications (see work on socialisation and legitimization, notably Fujii, 2017; Gronau & Schmidtke, 2016). Through persuasion or social learning (Checkel, 2017, 592; Wood, 2008), armed actor A socialises civilian community C into new expectations about violence, thus changing C's resonance with A. For example, Bateson (2017) shows how the Guatemalan army managed to socialise civilians into believing in the necessity for repressive violence in the countryside, thus increasing its legitimacy. Empirically, if the intra-actional legitimization mechanism was present, the observable implication would be, first, socialisation attempts by the armed actor, be it through meetings or propaganda media or speeches. Second, we would expect civilians to indicate that they have experienced a “subjective sense of changes in perspective” regarding the armed actor's justifications following such inter-actions (Hoover Green, 2018, 692). Third, the civilian community would cite beliefs about the conflict similar to the justifications employed by the armed actor.

Resonance between an armed actor and civilians may also change through the *inter-actions* of competing armed actors.

² Causal mechanisms are defined as “a theory of a system of interlocking parts that transmits causal forces between a cause (or a set of causes) and an outcome” (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, 29).

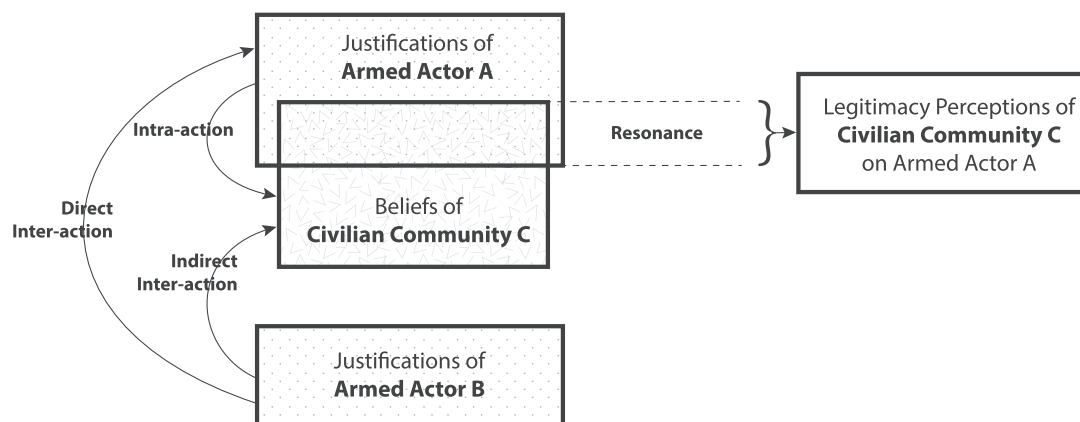


Figure 2 Legitimation under contested authority.

Here, we can identify two mechanisms. First, the competing armed actors might inter-act *directly*. The actions of armed actor B induce an adaptation in armed actor A's justifications about violence in ways that alter civilian community C's resonance with A (see also recent work on interactions and legitimation, notably Schoon, 2017; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). For example, B's military pressure may incentivise A to change its behaviour and justificatory narratives to maintain control over a given territory (Kalyvas, 2006). These adaptations may influence the resonance between the armed actor and civilians regarding rightful violence, shaping legitimacy perceptions. The observable implication for direct inter-actional legitimation would be another armed actor, either in military confrontations or other ways, putting pressure on the extant armed actor. We would also expect the extant armed actor's justifications to change following this pressure. Finally, civilians would report a change in perception of this armed actor's justifications following such occurrences.

Second, the competing armed actors might inter-act *indirectly*. Here, the actions of armed actor B shape how the civilian community C perceives and interprets A's justifications, thereby affecting C's resonance with A (see also recent work on heuristics, notably Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2015; Lenz & Viola, 2017). Civilians, faced with competing authority relations, weigh their options based on the offered overlapping or conflicting justifications (Lust, 2022, 33–37). In doing so, civilians may adapt their beliefs about what rightful violence entails (Arjona, 2016). This may influence their resonance with the former armed actor, increasing or decreasing legitimacy perceptions. The observable implication for indirect inter-actional legitimation would be, first, a (partial) takeover of a community by another armed actor. Further, we would expect civilians to frame evaluations of the extant armed actor relative to the new armed actor as they compare the extant armed actor to existing alternatives. Finally, civilians would indicate that they experienced a subjective sense of change in their perception of the extant armed actor's justifications in light of the new authority relation.

Let me contrast these three legitimation mechanisms with two major alternative explanations for the local variation in legitimacy following a logic of consequence rather than one of appropriateness (March & Olsen, 1989): First, resonance may change due to civilians' strategic allegiance in light of armed actors' violence (Kalyvas, 2006; Zhukov, 2013). Armed actors may provide certain benefits to civilians—from medical care to education to

security and order—which allows them to build and maintain popular support (Malthaner, 2015, 432). Especially over time, these utilitarian interactions may transform into relations of trust and ultimately, legitimacy (Migdal, 1974, 249–250). This strategic allegiance—what Schlichte (2009, 95) calls “basic legitimacy”—thus does not rest on normative claims and the idea of resonance between justifications and beliefs but instead on rational considerations among civilians, which may differ locally. The observable implication for strategic allegiance would be, first, civilian support growing and waning in line with an armed actor's security provision. Second, we would expect civilians to side with the armed actor who is capable of providing other material benefits and services. Finally, civilians would frame their evaluations of the armed actor's violence as pragmatic or calculated rather than ideological or ideational.

Second, resonance may change due to displacement, where a significant number of civilians who share a political outlook leave (Portes, 2010). The coerced displacement of civilians to make sure a territory is only populated by supporters is a common reality in civil war, tried and tested by state and non-state actors alike (Balcells & Steele, 2016, 26; ?, 368). For example, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army in Myanmar actively sought to repopulate areas under their control by displacing existing inhabitants and encouraging migration from sympathisers (Cusano, 2015). Similar dynamics have been observed during the Colombian conflict (Sanchez & Rudling, 2019). Rather than changing resonance by influencing people's beliefs or armed actors' justifications, displacement creates legitimacy on the local level by taking dissidents out of the equation altogether through forced migration. The observable implication of displacement would be, first, the mass displacement of civilians. Second, we would expect this displacement to be dominantly of people with one set of political opinions or loyalties. And finally, we would see civilians reporting a change in the perceived community's political or normative orientation concerning the armed actor's violence following the displacement.

Research design

To explain why the legitimacy of armed actors differs locally, where armed actors' justifications and civilians' beliefs are similar, this article tests my theory in the Colombian conflict between

the rebel group FARC and the Colombian state. Dating back to the 1960s and lasting over five decades, the conflict involved not only the Colombian army and the FARC but also other leftist rebel groups and right-wing paramilitaries. The conflict intensified in the 1990s until the Colombian state, supported by US military aid, systematically weakened the FARC during the 2000s. In 2012, President Santos initiated peace talks, culminating in the 2016 peace agreement and FARC demobilisation, although armed groups persist.

Using a subregional, most-similar case design, I examine two communities in the region of Sumapaz (Figure 3). The region revolves around the *páramo de Sumapaz*, an extensive marshland at an altitude of up to 4,000 metres. It has been strategically important as it connects Colombia's centre to its eastern territories and experienced intense conflict between the FARC and the Colombian army in the 1990s (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, 43). The cases are Buenavista, a small village of around a hundred inhabitants located in the upper marshland of Sumapaz, and Santa Rosa, a town of about a thousand inhabitants located at the foot of the marshland (for the case selection, Online Appendix I). Both communities are markedly similar (Online Appendix III 1): they share a history of peasant organisation ever since the 1920s (Varela Mora & Duque Ortiz, 2011, 49), similar experiences of political violence over the 20th century (Morales Acosta, 2017), and a communist political tradition (Baquero Monroy, 2022). Moreover, the same FARC fronts controlled both communities in the 1990s before the Colombian state dispelled the rebels in the early 2000s (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). However, while the FARC were widely popular in both communities at the beginning of the 1990s, the FARC's legitimacy varied by 2010: the FARC managed to sustain perceptions of legitimacy in Buenavista, but they lost them in Santa Rosa.

I conduct within-case process tracing for both communities between 1990 and 2010 (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, 7). For each of my two cases, I map the communities' relations to the FARC and the Colombian state over time to test whether variation in the FARC's legitimacy can be explained by my mechanisms of intra- and inter-actional legitimation or the alternative explanations. I operationalise my explanatory factors, intra- and inter-actional mechanisms of legitimation, as well as the alternative explanations by looking for evidence for the observable implications outlined above in each of my cases over time—from 1990 to 2010. I operationalise justifications and beliefs about violence with (historical) discursive and organisational patterns about the normativity of violence of the two communities and the FARC, taken from published accounts of regional history, archival material and interview data with community leaders. Resonance is operationalised by ascertaining whether justifications and beliefs about violence between the FARC and a civilian community align or misalign at a given point in time. The explanandum of legitimacy perceptions—perceptions that the FARC's actions are desirable and appropriate—are operationalised with expressions of support for the FARC among the civilian community for both the early 1990s and the late 2000s. Specifically, I draw on interview data with community leaders, community-wide voting data for leftist, FARC-friendly political parties, and newspaper reporting at the time. These imperfect proxies approximate FARC legitimacy where micro-level opinion data is unavailable. The mechanisms and dependent variable are summarised in Figure 4.

The study's data comes from immersive fieldwork, which I conducted for four months in Colombia in 2021 with my research assistant Laura Ramírez Rodríguez, drawing on 43 semi-structured interviews and seven weeks of participant observation in the two communities. In the two communities, we interviewed inhabitants about the communities' past experiences with the FARC and other armed actors. We furthermore spoke with ex-combatants of the FARC in one nearby demobilisation camp (*Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación*, ETCR) to approximate the view of the armed actor. Finally, I also collected archival sources such as pamphlets and speeches of the FARC, newspaper articles and election data made available through Colombia's *Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil*.

Let me discuss three challenges in this data collection. First, I did not use the individual as the unit of analysis in my questionnaires to avoid collecting politically sensitive data and keep participants secure in the volatile post-conflict context of the research. Instead, I followed Lee Ann Fujii's suggestion that projects focussing on "situated meaning," on a normative system of beliefs, require the "intentional and mindful selection of participants" (Fujii, 2015, 38): I mostly (though not exclusively) interviewed community leaders active during my period of interest; persons whose opinions were widely esteemed and who had a grasp of the perception of the FARC among the wider community. Local elites have been shown to shape the civilians' responses to armed actors (van Baalen, 2021; ?). Thus, I work under the assumption that leaders' views are largely representative of the wider community.

Second, a fundamental problem of tracing a process that started several decades ago is that participants' accounts hinge on their memory, which tends to be selective and is often shaped by later social and cultural processes. Participants might adopt the framings reproduced by other actors, such as the media, reinterpret past events in light of more recent experiences, or even suppress certain memories altogether (Wood, 2003, ch. 2). I sought to alleviate the effects of memory by asking different participants the same set of questions to hear about the notable events of each community from different perspectives. Talking to community members who had not been in leading positions and consequently had less training in interviews and public speech also proved crucial to getting a different and more nuanced view of events within each community. Moreover, I triangulated evidence from interviews with my archival material wherever possible.

Third, my positionalities and that of my research assistant shaped the information gathered during my fieldwork (Ramírez Rodríguez & Minatti, 2024). Our roles as outsiders from the communities meant we often initially faced mistrust, although my European origins had contextually different implications than my research assistant's Colombian nationality. Similarly, I found an easier rapport with men, while the same was true for my assistant with women. We sought to overcome the limiting factors of our positionalities through repeated visits and participation in community events while taking potential limitations into account during data analysis.

More information on the data collection and the full, anonymised list of interviews is given in Online Appendix I. Ethical considerations are discussed in Online Appendix II. In the empirical analysis, I back up major tests with additional evidence in Online Appendix III, loosely following the propositions about active citation outlined by Moravcsik (2014).

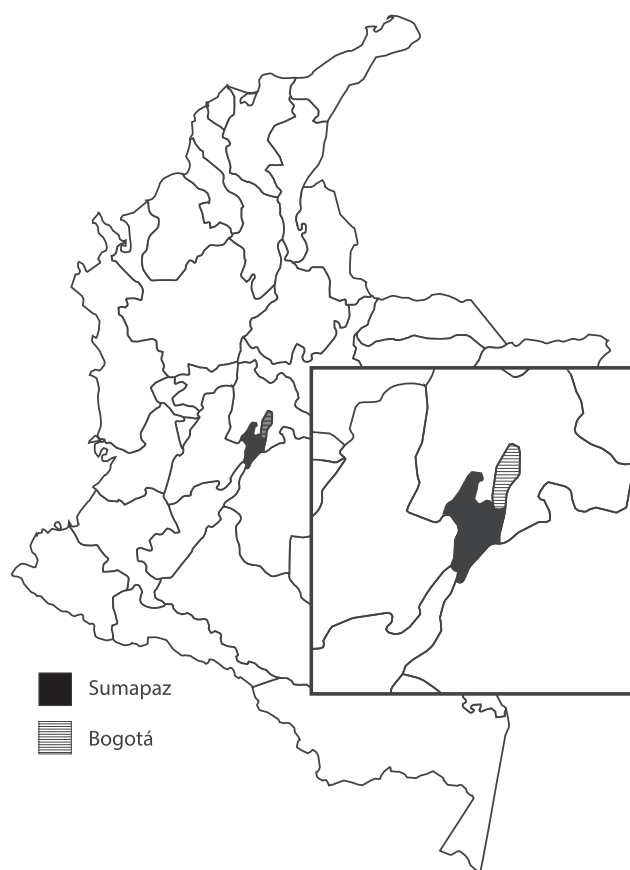


Figure 3 Map of Colombia and Sumapaz.

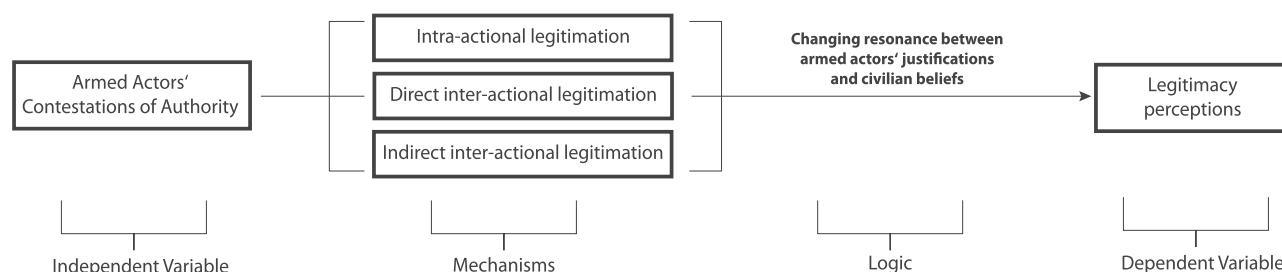


Figure 4 Visualisation of theorised process.

Rebel legitimacy in Santa Rosa and Buenavista

The communities of Santa Rosa and Buenavista share a history of armed resistance against landowners to fight for land rights dating to the civil war *La Violencia* (1948–1960) (Morales Acosta, 2017, 48). Following a peace deal, people in both communities demobilised but kept organising into peasant unions (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, 11), committing themselves to “civil resistance” to achieve desired reforms such as land redistribution (Varela Mora & Duque Ortiz, 2011, 186). These policies soon influenced the communities’ leaders, who saw themselves in a tradition of reconciliation rather than violence (Rojas Suárez, 2020, 101). Thus, while the necessity for violence to achieve political ends was ingrained into Buenavista and Santa Rosa’s histories, by 1990, many inhabitants and community leaders had come to expect agrarian reform and

peasant rights to be achieved through means of political advocacy rather than armed struggle (Online Appendix III 2).

At the time, the FARC justified their violence as necessary in light of state inaction regarding land distribution (Online Appendix III 3). As one ex-combatant said, “the FARC were not born [...] because we liked war. We were born out of necessity” (FARC10). This belief had been a long-standing “foundational myth” within the rebel group (Beltrán Villegas, 2015, 140; see also Peña, 2014, 50), echoed by one ex-combatant, who noted that “the causes of the conflict were not generated by [the FARC] but by the state that did not want to give land to the peasants [...] and sent the army to kill us” (FARC05). The FARC had emerged out of communist self-defence groups following *La Violencia*. When the Colombian army tried in 1964 to disband these groups, the survivors remobilised as the Marxist-Leninist FARC rebel group (Peña, 2014, 66). Initially low-profile, they adopted the “strategic plan” from 1978 onward to

encircle Bogotá to take control of the country, increasingly escalating violence and relying on coca production for financing. By the 1990s, the FARC had grown into a considerable force with the explicit goal to expand its territorial control and take central power. Their violence, they held, would improve the social and material conditions of the peasantry who lacked any other pathway to pursue it. For example, one FARC ex-combatant noted that “the first thing we were taught was that we were the people’s army, okay? From the people and for the people” (FARC10). Another ex-combatant noted that “we were fighting against an army that was constituted to repress a part of the population that was using arms, namely us” (FARC13).

After a military operation targeting a FARC headquarters within Sumapaz called *Casa Verde* in 1990, guerrillas spread across Sumapaz, given its strategic role of being close to the capital but hard to penetrate due to the difficult terrain. From roughly 1991 onwards, the FARC started to control both Buenavista and Santa Rosa (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, 42–44). The FARC’s justification that violence was necessary to achieve their political goals and defend the peasantry resonated with Buenavista and Santa Rosa’s own histories of violent struggle. As we would expect, we see evidence that the FARC were perceived as legitimate by many inhabitants in both communities at that time (Baquero Monroy, 2022, 230). Their governance was widely seen as helpful, and the rebels’ violent struggle considered by many as an important catalyst for change. As one community leader in Buenavista told me, “the people were helping [the FARC]. At the time, people still trusted them that change could be achieved in Colombia” (BUEN11). Similarly, for Santa Rosa, another community leader remembered that “the FARC in the 1980s enjoyed extraordinary public prestige. You marched in the streets here [and heard]: ‘Long live the FARC’” (SANT02). Yet another community leader active at the time confirmed this, saying that “[in the early 1990s,] the guerrilla wasn’t harmful to the peasants, no, the guerrilla was, let’s say, accommodating the needs of the peasants” (BUEN02). This anecdotal evidence is mirrored in election results at the time. In the congressional elections of 1990, a large majority (68%) of Santa Rosa voted for the leftist, FARC-sympathetic *Unión Patriótica*, while more than two-thirds of Buenavista voted for the leftist candidate (76%) of the Colombian Communist Party in the elections of 1991.

Throughout the 1990s, the Colombian army gradually undermined the FARC's foothold in the marshlands of Sumapaz in two large military operations that sought to counter the threat to Colombia's capital (El Tiempo, 2001). The FARC receded its political activities and control over Buenavista and Santa Rosa more and more (El Tiempo, 2004), although fronts remained active in the region for the remainder of the decade (Baquero Monroy, 2022).

By 2010, the FARC still enjoyed legitimacy in Buenavista among large parts of the community. One community leader argued that the FARC fought “for an ideal. They demanded a just cause” (BUEN06). Another remembered the better times under FARC rule, saying “nowadays people complain about the lack of the guerrillas [...] They controlled cattle theft, and they controlled robberies. This was a very safe area here. These days no longer exist” (BUEN08). Conversely, in Santa Rosa, the FARC had lost legitimacy among many inhabitants. As one community leader reflects about that time, “[The FARC] had won the people initially, but with their [later] attitudes, they lost it again because we civilians could no longer support them” (SANT05). Another noted that the FARC

Table 1 Timeline of authority relations.

1990	Military attacks <i>Casa Verde</i>	↓	Legitimacy in Santa Rosa and Buenavista
1991	FARC assume control		
1991–1996	FARC dominance		
1996	Escalation of conflict and FARC violence		
1996–2003	Military escalation		
2001	Increase of military presence in Buenavista		
2003	Decrease of FARC control		
2004–2010	State dominance		
2010	Cooling down of conflict		Legitimacy in Buenavista, illegitimacy in Santa Rosa

had “lost their ideals” (SANT03). Voting behaviour confirms this variation. In Santa Rosa, only 20% of people still voted for leftist parties in 2006 and 28% in 2010, while in Buenavista, this number remained at 90% in 2006 and 86% in 2010 (Online Appendix III 4).

The mechanisms of rebel legitimisation

Why did the FARC lose legitimacy in the town of Santa Rosa but retain it in the village of Buenavista despite a similar conflict trajectory? In what follows, I will investigate in more detail the process of legitimation from 1990 to 2010 between the FARC and the communities of Santa Rosa and Buenavista. I separate the total time frame into three different periods marked by major conflict events (see [Table 1](#)). For each period, I test my proposed mechanisms of legitimation under contested authority as well as the alternative explanations and present evidence for each of them to explain why, by 2010, most inhabitants of Buenavista still perceived the FARC as legitimate, while community members of Santa Rosa no longer did.

FARC dominance, 1991–1996

Soon after the FARC started to control Buenavista and Santa Rosa, the Colombian army lost almost complete control of the region (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, 43), conducting only minor skirmishes against FARC positions (El Tiempo, 1994a, 1994b). The FARC established authority through leaflets and frequent meetings with locals. “They got involved in organising people,” one community leader reported (SANT10). The Colombian Truth Commission equally finds for communities in Sumapaz that the FARC “sought to reach the population by approaching the local *juntas*, building support networks, generating political sympathy among the peasant population and, through armed coercion, resolving problems of coexistence in the community” (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, 42). “In many of their speeches,” a leader in Buenavista noted, “they focussed on the defence of the territory [to ensure]

the well-being of the peasants” (BUEN08). Another inhabitant in Santa Rosa remembered attending a party in 1995 where the FARC promised to empower the peasantry, making their claims to emancipate the peasantry more explicit: “[The FARC said they] had the power to take all of Colombia and that we had to celebrate because we were finally going to own power” (SANT04).

The FARC increasingly were perceived as defenders of the peasantry in the area: “[The FARC] were telling us about the situation the country was going through and [...] that we had to defend the territory,” one leader noted, “Some of us are still trying today to defend our region.” (BUEN08). Leaders expressed respect for the FARC’s armed resistance, echoing its justifications of self-defence: “the guerrillas took up arms because of state persecution when all they did was demanding rights and guarantees to be able to farm the land” (BUEN06). The FARC sparked “an enthusiasm, an incentive to belong to the guerrilla” at the time (BUEN07). One inhabitant noted that at one FARC meeting, he “did realise that many people were motivated by the speech [of the FARC]—many. And they ended up [feeling] very close to the FARC” (SANT04). Another inhabitant remembered that with their speeches, the FARC “indoctrinated many young people” (SANT10). Many young people joined the guerrilla voluntarily, according to participants (SANT12, BUEN10).

Do we see evidence for FARC legitimization in this period in the communities? We can reject direct inter-actional and indirect inter-actional legitimization as we do not find evidence of either state pressure to alter the FARC's justifications or a meaningful presence of the state that may influence civilians' beliefs, given its retreat from the area in the early 1990s. But we do see evidence for intra-actional legitimization. The frequent meetings between the FARC and the two communities qualify as socialisation attempts by the FARC (Online Appendix III 5.1). Moreover, evidence suggests that the FARC successfully changed civilian beliefs about rightful violence as community members came to respect the struggle of the FARC and their reasons for violence, and many young people voluntarily joined the insurgency (Online Appendix III 5.2). Furthermore, community members shared the narratives of the FARC as being the defender of the peasantry (Online Appendix III 5.3).

Regarding alternative explanations, we can reject displacement to influence resonance as we do not see incidents of mass displacement in either community at that time. We cannot reject strategic allegiance, as the FARC did provide not only security but also services to the population. However, people's recollections about this time reflected ideational reasons much more than pragmatic ones, decreasing the explanatory power of strategic allegiance. In sum, the evidence suggests that the FARC managed to foster support and legitimacy during 1991 and 1996, either strategic allegiance or through intra-actional legitimation, altering beliefs about the righteousness of using violence within both communities. Neither mechanism, however, can explain the variation between Buenavista and Santa Rosa in 2010.

Military escalation, 1997–2003

From the mid-1990s, conflict between the FARC and army escalated (El Tiempo, 1994d). State offensives in Sumapaz left the FARC struggling to hold territory and influence (Baquero Monroy, 2022, 245). At this point, the FARC became increasingly coercive towards both communities. On the one hand, the FARC introduced militiamen—armed young men from the community—in the late

1990s, which ensured a stronger foothold within both communities. However, these militiamen harassed the population, stole goods and alcohol, kidnapped transports, extorted money from community members and even “killed people without justification” (SANT12, also SANT14, BUEN04, BUEN08).

On the other hand, FARC guerrillas themselves also started to target community leaders suspected to be informants, especially members of liberal parties (El Tiempo, 1994c, also BUEN01, SANT04). Most notably, important community leaders were killed in the early 2000s. In Santa Rosa, the FARC threatened one mayor to resign and leave town in the early 2000s. “When [the FARC] realised that the man was not resigning and that he was ignoring it, they murdered him,” one community leader told me (SANT10). Close to Buenavista, the FARC also killed community leaders in neighbouring villages (El Tiempo, 2008). The murders caused anger because, as one leader told us, “they were people of progress, good people” (BUEN04). The killings were “a very hard blow for us,” another remarked, which “the FARC weren’t able to explain” (BUEN02).

These actions made it untenable for the FARC to any longer justify their violence as serving the good of the peasantry. “When the FARC started to fight with the [state], they abandoned their political formation,” one leader noted (BUEN03). Another community leader said that the FARC “no longer defended the people, they attacked them” (SANT05). The militiamen, yet another noted, “were a failure of the guerrilla” (BUEN04). Especially the killings of community leaders created disbelief among civilians. “After having committed all these abuses,” one leader summarised, “the guerrillas really lost their credibility” (SANT10).

The escalation in violence led to displacements in both communities. Santa Rosa found itself “in the crossfire. Many people were displaced or left out of fear” (SANT14, also SANT12). While one inhabitant argued that “the majority of people who were living here [after the displacements] were people connected with the FARC” (SANT04), others made the opposite claim, noting that “many communists got caught up in the conflict and fled” (SANT02b). Moreover, population levels of Santa Rosa only saw a minor reduction between 1993 and 2005, according to the national census, suggesting people returned (DANE, 1993, 2005). With regards to Buenavista, the Colombian truth commission’s report on Sumapaz finds that many peasants were displaced by the army (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, 47). One leader remembered that “there was a lot of aggression, a lot of stigmatisation of our inhabitants by the army. They said that we peasants had something to do with the guerrillas” (BUEN02). The truth commission also reports displacement of suspected army informants and kidnappings by the FARC (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, 46). For example, one former leader recounted his displacement by the FARC due to allegations of corruption (BUEN01). However, “the displacement was [done] much more by the government and the military forces [...] that was where the repression came from” (BUEN06).

Do we see evidence for FARC legitimisation in the communities? We can reject intra-actional legitimisation as we see no socialisation attempts by the FARC at that time in light of the military escalation between the state and the FARC. For the same reason, we can also reject indirect inter-actional legitimisation as the Colombian army was unable to build any kind of stable relation to the civilian population in either case.

Regarding direct inter-actional legitimation, however, we see increasing military pressure by the state on the FARC towards the end of the millennium (Online Appendix III 6.1). Lacking the means to uphold control, the FARC could no longer justify their violence as serving the peasant community, as they introduced militiamen and killed community leaders (Online Appendix III 6.2). Furthermore, civilians contextualised this change as undermining the image the FARC had long presented and the credibility of their justification of using violence to aid the peasant cause (Online Appendix III 6.3).

Displacement appears to be a likely alternative explanation for variation in legitimacy. In Buenavista, we see selective mass displacement by the army, which we would expect to favour the state. However, we see the opposite effect with support moving towards the FARC by 2010, suggesting no or only limited effects of displacement on the observed variation. In Santa Rosa, mass displacement occurred, but we do not find sufficient evidence that it was selective. Taken together, this does not allow us to confirm that a mechanism of displacement shaped the variation of legitimacy within the two communities.

The second alternative explanation—that the variation in FARC legitimacy may be due to strategic allegiance in light of the security provided by the armed actors—must also be rejected. No actor had the control necessary to protect the communities in this period, nor to provide services. We also do not see evidence pointing towards pragmatic or calculated changes in support: civilians emphasised broken promises and lost credibility, suggesting ideational rather than pragmatic reasons. As such, we cannot confirm that a mechanism of strategic allegiance shaped FARC legitimacy within the two communities during this period.

In sum, we can plausibly conclude that through direct inter-actional legitimation, the FARC lost resonance with both communities regarding the righteousness of using violence in this period. However, as this mechanism had the same effect in both cases, it also cannot account for the variation between Buenavista and Santa Rosa.

State dominance, 2004–2010

After 2001, the army began to establish a permanent presence in Buenavista to disperse the FARC from Sumapaz and protect the capital, Bogotá, leading to the construction of a military base in the marshlands near Buenavista (Centro de Memoria Historica, 2018). This deployment was part of a wider effort to limit FARC control around the capital. As Buenavista's location high up in the marshlands was strategically more important than Santa Rosa to cut the FARC off from kidnapping and supply routes, the army's presence became strong in Buenavista but not in Santa Rosa (El Tiempo, 2000). At the time, a commanding officer claimed that "soldiers have been instructed to treat people well" and that "the army is not arriving alone" but together with an increased state presence (SANT10, also El Tiempo, 2001). However, throughout the 2000s, institutions other than the military remained dormant due to the ongoing conflict (Baquero Monroy, 2022). The greater military footprint did not bring greater security.

Instead, the army considered the region a "red zone" and a FARC stronghold, often taking drastic measures against the civilian population as part of its counterinsurgency strategy (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, 49). Thus, with the increase in military presence came an increase in complaints by community leaders about

alleged abuses and violations of human rights against the civilian population (Osorio Rendón, 2020, 74). Moreover, the army started threatening Buenavista's community organisations: "We were also forbidden to go to union meetings," one leader remembered. "There was fear, tremendous fear, yes. And in many cases, people preferred not to attend union meetings" (BUEN08). Finally, the army shot young peasants from the area "and they were written off as guerrillas having clashed with the army" (BUEN02).

Subsequently, people in Buenavista started to look back more kindly on the FARC. They highlighted that the FARC—in contrast to the army—had at least somewhat protected the community. As one *campesino* remembered, "the guerrillas were simpler. The army was more dominant, humiliating [us]" (BUEN09). Another remarked that "the guerrillas were less arbitrary, they were more humane [and] committed fewer injustices than the army" (BUEN02). Regarding the defence and protection of the peasantry, accounts differed starkly between the two armed actors, some going as far as framing the army as terrorising the population and the FARC as sheltering it. The guerrilla "helped to enrich and strengthen the social fabric, the opposite of what the army did when it entered. [The army] broke the social fabric, creating mistrust, uncertainty and vandalism" (BUEN02). Yet another leader told me that "We were not afraid when the guerrillas passed, but when the army arrived. Those killed, imprisoned, and disappeared [us]" (BUEN02). In summary, the continued transgressions, stigmatisation and harassment by the army gave urgency to beliefs among inhabitants of Buenavista about the need for violence to protect the peasantry, where "the only ones who defended us at the time were the FARC" (BUEN08).

In Santa Rosa, the army similarly had expelled the FARC by 2004 to the higher marshlands, but state presence remained limited in the years after. One leader remarked that "it was just the army – that was the [state's] presence in the area" which only changed with the decrease in conflict intensity in the 2010s (SANT10). Some participants recalled army abuses and the town's frequent stigmatisation as guerrilla loyalists (SANT02). However, the state seldom factored into civilians' reflections on the FARC.

Do we see evidence for FARC legitimation in this period in the communities? Given the loss of control by the FARC, we neither see socialisation attempts by the FARC nor FARC justifications towards the civilians changing in light of state pressure and can thus exclude intra-actional and direct inter-actional legitimation dynamics during this period.

Regarding indirect inter-actional legitimation, we see the army increasingly supplanting the FARC in both communities and building up relations with the civilian communities. In Buenavista, the army prohibited union meetings, exerted harsh punishments, and even killed inhabitants, while in Santa Rosa, army presence remained much more limited (Online Appendix III 7.1). The evidence above indicates that this led to a change in civilian beliefs in Buenavista, as the community reconsidered the necessity for violent peasant defence, something we have no evidence for in Santa Rosa (Online Appendix III 7.2). Equally, in Buenavista, civilians compared army actions with the FARC, which was far more limited in Santa Rosa (Online Appendix III 7.3). This allowed again for resonance with the FARC's justifications of violence.

As far as alternative explanations go, we can reject displacement as no major displacements occurred in this phase. In terms of strategic allegiance, in Buenavista, the army's violence certainly would have made it rational for civilians to shift their allegiances

to whoever could protect them. However, given that the FARC lacked the control to provide any meaningful security at this time, the evidence does not fully support this implication—in this scenario, strategic considerations would rather suggest submission to the state (Kalyvas, 2006). Nevertheless, some interviewees in Buenavista acknowledged the strategic calculus of aligning with the FARC due to the army's violent repression, but civilians predominantly highlighted normative categories such as humanity, humility and the FARC's role in defending the social fabric in the community. Meanwhile, in Santa Rosa, neither the state nor the rebels established control to the degree that they could meaningfully provide security and services to the population. As such, we cannot confirm strategic allegiance for 2004–2010.

Hence, available information makes it plausible that, faced with the alternative authority of the state, the people of Buenavista changed their beliefs about the necessity for violence in light of the sustained repression by the army, increasing the resonance between themselves and the FARC. Conversely, the community of Santa Rosa never experienced army interventions or violence to the same degree as Buenavista. Indirect inter-actional legitimation thus increased the FARC's resonance about rightful violence in Buenavista, but not in Santa Rosa.

In sum, this analysis has shown that local variation in wartime legitimacy can be explained by armed actors' contestations of authority and inter-actional legitimation dynamics. Resonance between the FARC and the communities changed repeatedly between 1990 and 2010. Initially, the FARC influenced through intra-actional legitimation both communities' beliefs about the necessity of using violence to further their political goals. As the state started to contest the FARC's authority, the rebels became more violent under military pressure from the army, and their justifications of peasant defence became untenable, losing resonance through direct inter-actional legitimation in both communities. But in Buenavista, the Colombian army's repression again changed civilians' beliefs about the need for violence. Consequently, the FARC's justification of using violence for peasant defence gained new resonance through indirect inter-actional legitimation. In light of limited evidence in favour of alternative explanations, the variation in FARC legitimacy between Santa Rosa and Buenavista is best explained by a mechanism of indirect interactional legitimation (see Table 2).

Conclusion

This article offered theory and empirical evidence to show that legitimacy is derived not solely from the relationship between an armed actor and civilians. Taking seriously the context of conflict as one of contested authority, it focussed on how legitimacy emerges through both intra-actional dynamics within authority relations and inter-actional dynamics shaped by competing actors. Comparing cases in Colombia revealed the mechanisms of wartime legitimacy under contested authority. FARC legitimacy in the two analysed Colombian villages varied not due to differences in the FARC's sources of legitimacy and justifications but because civilians variedly adapted their beliefs in light of the contesting authority relations, particularly the state.

This insight pushes the boundaries of existing frameworks of wartime legitimacy, urging scholars to investigate the mechanisms underpinning legitimation. Such an investigation allows

for a more nuanced explanation of how armed actors' legitimacy varies locally and over time, even where important explanatory factors are markedly similar (Joshi, 2024). In doing so, the article provides a unified framework to explore the hitherto largely separated studies on the effects of rebel governance (Malejacq, 2017; Weigand, 2022) and of third actors (Schoon, 2017; Terpstra, 2020) on wartime legitimacy.

The study also has theoretical implications for the study of political violence and its role in wartime legitimacy (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015). It positions the justification of violence as a central, albeit double-edged, component of legitimation. While the FARC's justification of violence initially resonated with communities, changes in coercion quickly undermined their credibility. Meanwhile, in one community, the state's violent repression paradoxically reinforced the FARC's justification, reshaping civilian beliefs about armed resistance. These findings speak to the varied normative dimensions of violence during conflict and suggest avenues to integrate them into theories of civilian support and wartime legitimacy (Fujii, 2017; Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015).

The article has focussed on the dynamics of wartime legitimacy in Colombia, which has been critiqued for its over-representation in micro-level conflict studies, raising questions about generalizability (Cederman & Vogt, 2017; Tappe Ortiz, 2023). Yet its accessibility for fieldwork makes it valuable for studying the micro-dynamics of legitimacy to be tested in other conflicts, as has happened with a plurality of theories first developed with relation to Colombia (Arjona, 2016; Hoover Green, 2018). Nevertheless, limitations apply: first, the article demonstrates how legitimacy evolves in conflicts with two contesting authorities, but it may not fully capture complexities in cases with multiple competing actors (Lust, 2022; Pischedda, 2020). Second, the absence of strong ethnic components in Colombia means that the findings on the normativity of violence may be less applicable in identity-based conflicts where other normative categories, such as kinship, take a front seat. Third, the FARC's long-term horizons—enabled by the protracted, territory-focussed conflict—provided incentives to seek legitimacy, unlike extractive conflicts driven by natural resources or external funding (Weinstein, 2007). Thus, the findings are most applicable to protracted, territorially contested conflicts with two contesting armed actors.

To conclude, this study has shown that wartime legitimacy is contingent and embedded in sets of authority relations. Efforts to delegitimise rebel groups or enhance state legitimacy must thus consider this broader ecosystem of authority, governance and civilians' comparative evaluations thereof. Ignoring these dynamics risks perpetuating cycles of violence and undermining stability and peace.

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Table 2 Evidence tests for mechanisms.

		FARC dominance, 1991–96		Military escalation, 1997–2003		State dominance, 2003–2010	
Observable Implications		Buenavista	Santa Rosa	Buenavista	Santa Rosa	Buenavista	Santa Rosa
Intra-actional legitimacy	FARC Socialisation Attempts	✓ Meetings & Leaflets	✓ Meetings & Leaflets	✓ Limited	✓ Limited	✓ Limited	✓ Limited
	Civilians reproduce FARC narratives	✓ Civilians echo FARC justif.	✓ Civilians echo FARC justif.	–	–	–	–
	Civilian perception change ensues	✓ Opinion shift & recruitment	✓ Opinion shift & recruitment	–	–	–	–
	Army pressures FARC	✓ Limited	✓ Limited	✓ Army operations in Sumapaz	✓ Army operations in Sumapaz	✓ Limited	✓ Limited
Direct inter-actional legitimacy	FARC behaviour towards civilians changes	–	–	✓ FARC become more coercive	✓ FARC become more coercive	–	–
	Civilian perception change ensues	–	–	✓ FARC justif. lose credibility	✓ FARC justif. lose credibility	–	–
Indirect inter-actional legitimacy	Army takes (partial) control	✓ No army control	✓ No army control	✓ No army control	✓ No army control	✓ Army control	✓ Limited army control
	Civilians evaluate FARC relatively	–	–	–	–	✓ FARC compared positively to army	✓ Few relative evaluations
Strategic Allegiance	Civilian perception change ensues	–	–	–	–	✓ FARC justif. gain credibility	✓ No perception change
	Security provision shapes civilian support	✓ FARC provide security	✓ FARC provide security	✓ None	✓ None	✓ FARC provide no security	✓ Army provides no security
	Service provision shapes civilian support	✓ FARC provide services	✓ FARC provide services	✓ None	✓ None	✓ FARC provide no services	✓ Army provides no services
	Pragmatic evaluations of FARC	✓ Civilians make normative evaluations	✓ Civilians make normative evaluations	–	–	✓ Civilians make normative evaluations	–
Displacement	Mass displacement of civilians	✓ None	✓ None	✓ Displacement occurred	✓ Displacement occurred	✓ None	✓ None
	Selective displacement	–	–	✓ Selective displacement by army	✓ Indiscriminate displacement by FARC	–	–
	Change in political orientation	–	–	✓ No enduring shift	–	–	–

*✓ = confirming evidence present; X = No confirming evidence present.

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Conflicts of interest

No competing interest is declared.

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Data availability

The Online Appendices, which include additional information regarding the data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and interview documentation, are available at <https://www.prio.org/journals/jpr/replicationdata> and at <https://www.wolfgangminatti.com>.

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