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ARTICLE

The Geography of Democratic Discontent

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Abstract

Understanding the determinants of support for democracy remains at the heart of many puzzles in international and comparative political economy. A central but still unresolved topic in this literature is the conditions under which such support dissipates. To answer this question, this article focuses on distributional politics: since democratic leaders possess limited budgets but need to win elections, they often skew resources toward one politically influential sector, leading to more negative attitudes toward democracy among electorally ignored populations. In particular, we argue that governments often face a key political trade-off: whether to direct resources to the agricultural sector or to encourage urban development. After developing this argument in a formal model, we detail historical accounts that substantiate the mechanisms identified in the model. Finally, we provide cross-national quantitative evidence that discontent with democracy increases among geographic populations when governments disproportionately distribute resources toward other sectors.

Keywords: democracy; coup; agricultural policy; geographic bias

At the end of the Cold War, democracy's prospects around the world seemed promising, with some scholars even suggesting that alternatives to liberal democracy were no longer relevant (Fukuyama 1989). However, democracy has fallen into a precarious position around the world, as authoritarian alternatives enjoy high levels of mass approval, even in consolidated democracies (Foa and Mounk 2016; Foa and Mounk 2017). Why do citizens of democracies oppose systems that empower them?

While scholars have highlighted a variety of structural and agent-based factors that may contribute to these sentiments, we argue that the divide between urban and rural populations represents a key but often overlooked factor in explaining public opposition to democracy. In particular, we show that since democratic leaders face limited budgets, they often must choose whether to direct their resources to urban or rural areas. Office-seeking incentives typically lead them to favor the most electorally pivotal segment of the population, but as they adopt biased policies, the other sector becomes resentful. Support for democracy then shrinks among members of the negatively impacted group as they realize that an alternative (non-electoral) system of government may provide them with increased goods and services.[1]

In making this argument, this article offers three main contributions. First, we provide a novel perspective on how distributional conflict can trigger the dissolution of mass support for democracy. While other work focuses on such factors as economic conditions and ethnic competition (Boix 2011; Collier and Hoeffler 2005; Londregan and Poole 1990), we highlight geographic

[1]Following Przeworski et al. (2000) and Schumpeter (1942), we adopt a minimalist definition of democracy as electoral competition, and we model it accordingly in the following.

distributional conflict as a critical component of this phenomenon. Further, existing scholarship that maintains a distributional focus tends to emphasize class or ethnic conflict as the most salient divides (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Levitsky and Way 2010; Tilly 2007; Ulfelder 2010). We show, however, that the urban–rural cleavage is highly salient in predicting attitudes toward democracy, thereby offering a more nuanced view of modernization theory, which associates greater urbanization with democratization (Lipset 1959). In our model, increased urbanization in a rural-biased democracy leads to more discontented citizens, greater unrest, and a higher likelihood of popular support for extra-constitutional interventions into electoral politics.

Secondly, our article helps make sense of otherwise puzzling mass attitudes. We build on recent accounts, reviewed subsequently, that highlight the importance of perceptions of geographic bias in preference formation. However, we show that it is not just impressions of sectoral bias, but actual bias—in this case, in government agricultural pricing policies—that drives preference formation for non-democratic forms of rule. Further, we move beyond anecdotal accounts to provide systematic empirical evidence that supports our model's predictions, demonstrating that our story drives observed variation across countries and over time.

Thirdly, our argument carries normative implications. Discontent with democracy can lead to alterations in both formal and informal institutions and structures that lessen citizens' capacities to hold their governments accountable. To the extent that political rights are valued intrinsically, understanding when and why they are violated can inform institutional design and other efforts to promote democracy.

The article proceeds as follows. We first develop our argument, situating it in relevant debates regarding the erosion of democratic support and distributional politics. We then formalize our theory, deriving testable implications from a game-theoretic model. Next, we present illustrative examples to illustrate how our argument affects support for democracy in real-world scenarios. After demonstrating the plausibility of our claims, we test them systematically over time and across countries in Latin America. We find strong support for our hypotheses that urban citizens exhibit greater dissatisfaction with democracy, as well as tolerance for military intervention in politics, in countries that concentrate benefits to rural producers. Conversely, urban support for democracy is heightened—and support for coups dissipated—in countries where urban citizens enjoy disproportionate material transfers. We conclude with directions for future research and a discussion of the broader implications of our findings.

Distributional Conflict and Popular Opposition to Democracy

Why would citizens of a democracy prefer a system of government in which they do not vote? Previous scholars have identified a variety of factors that contribute to these sentiments, including poor economic conditions (Boix 2011; Collier and Hoeffler 2005; Londregan and Poole 1990),[2] younger democracies, presidential systems (Maeda 2010), low state capacity, weak institutions (Linz and Stepan 1996), little political competition (Wright 2008), and polarization (Svolik 2018).[3] While we do not dispute the claims that these factors contribute to discontent with democracy, we argue that widespread discontent also hinges in large part on the presence of distributional conflict. Although some scholars have examined how class conflict (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Tilly 2007) and ethnic conflict can weaken democratic regimes, particularly because of fears of exclusion by groups in power (Levitsky and Way 2010; Ulfelder 2010), the nature of particular cleavages that do so remains underexplored. Indeed, a recent summary of the literature on this subject (Lust and Waldner 2015, 7) states that "coalitions or cleavage

[2]Although for dispute of this, see Lehoucq and Pérez-Liñán (2013) and Singh (2014).

[3]For a review of the causes of political instability, see Slater (2013); and for a review of the consequences and causes of democratic backsliding, see Lust and Waldner (2015). International factors may also matter (Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker 2021), such as countries' dependence on the United States, receipt of foreign aid (Carnegie et al. 2022; Muller 1985), or membership in international organizations (Poast and Urpelainen 2015).

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structures that drive backsliding … require more study." While many anecdotal reports suggest that such cleavages matter, few systematic studies show that the association holds more generally.

We concentrate our analysis on an under-studied cleavage, particularly in terms of its relationship to the erosion of popular support for democratic institutions: the rural–urban divide.[4] Of course, we do not claim that the urban–rural division constitutes the sole source of friction in electoral politics, nor that it always supersedes other cleavages. Indeed, there exist a variety of potential divides in any given society, including economic class, religious beliefs, and ethnic identities. However, while such divides may affect the political calculus of redistributive politics in particular instances, they do not always exist across countries and periods. On the other hand, a division of citizens into "city dwellers" and "country folks" typically pertains.

Furthermore, democracies tend to exhibit systematic rural bias. From price supports to tariffs (Barari, Kim, and Wong 2019), democracies usually protect rural producers at the expense of urban consumers, though the nature and extent of rural bias varies substantially across democracies (a point we return to later). We argue that this bias can yield disproportionate discontent toward democracy among urban citizens.[5] Such dissatisfaction stems, in part, from the zero-sum nature of policymaking for urban and rural citizens. This is important since "there is reason to believe that the extent to which underlying issues are seen as zero-sum games … can affect the likelihood the elites engage in backsliding" (Lust and Waldner 2015, 7).

Consider, for example, the issue of food subsidies, on which we focus. Such agriculture policy is used as a tool to appease rural voters "in virtually all democracies" (Persson and Tabellini 2002, 159) due to the tool's targeted nature and the homogeneity of the beneficiaries' interests, which makes them "an attractive source of cheap support" (Snyder and Samuels 2001, 152).[6] While urban citizens likely favor government interventions to keep food cheap—particularly in the developing world, where food purchases constitute a critical component of overall expenditures—rural agents often engage in the production of agricultural goods, including food crops. By suppressing food prices, government agencies can improve urban consumers' real purchasing power but often do so at a cost to agricultural production's profitability (Ballard-Rosa 2016; Bates 1981; Thomson 2019; Wallace 2013). However, many democratic governments prop up the price of food crops grown by their rural farmers in order to protect their earnings, though this may drive up the market costs for such goods and thereby damage urban consumers' well-being.

With limitless resources, governments could subsidize both groups by supporting the sale price of farm goods to marketing agents and then selling these overpriced goods at a loss in the city. Yet, such agricultural intervention often generates costly budget overruns. Thus, to the extent that governments possess finite resources, their agricultural policies tend to favor one group at the expense of the other.[7] This focus therefore allows us to identify geographically separable preferences over policy that are generally beneficial to one electoral bloc and costly to

[4]For work that considers this dimension explicitly, see Ballard-Rosa (2020), Bates (1981), Harding (2012), Hendrix and Haggard (2015), Pierskalla (2011), Thomson (2019), and Varshney (1993). Glaeser and Steinberg (2017) analyze the link between urbanization and transitions to democracy.

[5]Some scholars (e.g., Bates 1981) argue that urban masses are more effective at pressuring politicians and are therefore treated more favorably. However, other work (Thomson 2019) argues that when the rural sector is dominated by landed elites, rural bias occurs. Many of the examples of this phenomenon come from Latin America, which is the region in which we test our argument, and this may therefore explain why our findings differ from the former findings.

[6]Rural areas are also overrepresented commonly in Latin American legislatures (Snyder and Samuels 2001)—the domain in which we test our theory—so price supports represent an effective electoral strategy in this context. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Ecuador all have featured overrepresentation of rural provinces since the early twentieth century. Legislators in these "malapportioned legislatures are more likely to represent rural interests and presidents, are often 'held hostage' to rural interests in order to get their policies through" (Snyder and Samuels 2001). The homogeneity of their interests also means that many voters benefit from these policies.

[7]Thomson (2019) explains agricultural policy as a function of whether the urban or rural sector can better organize, whereas this bias is our independent variable, as we explain subsequently.

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another. This is key to generating discontent with democracy under our theory, as our theory requires one group to be disadvantaged relative to another group.[8]

To analyze these dynamics, we follow standard work on interest-group politics in democratic systems that emphasizes the role of electorally critical groups in obtaining preferential policies, as the backing of such groups is crucial in affecting election outcomes (Dixit and Londregan 1996; Persson and Tabellini 2002). Yet, as in many theoretical accounts of democratic political competition that emphasize favoritism toward pivotal voting blocs, the question arises as to why the perennial "losers" continue to support such a system. Our answer is: they do not. In countries where a particular bloc is pivotal in winning votes, excluded groups that lack electoral centrality often view their distributional gains from democratic politics as suboptimal. In our model, these groups do not continue to support democratic forms of government—and may even prefer rule by the military instead.

A Model of Urban–Rural Conflict and Democratic Breakdown

We introduce a formal model as a heuristic device to consider the strategic dynamics between elected politicians and citizens of different types, conducted in the shadow of possible military intervention in politics. The model allows us to generate testable empirical hypotheses, which guide the statistical analyses that follow, while making our assumptions transparent. We consider a state with three sets of players: citizens, political parties, and the military.

Citizens

Citizens are divided between "rural" (R, who comprise a fraction α of the total population) and "urban" (U, comprising the remaining $[1-\alpha]$ of the population) types, such that every citizen is of type$j \in \{R, U\}$. Citizens participate in economic activity in the region in which they live, with rural agents involved in agricultural production of "food" (f), while urban citizens engage in the production of other goods (x). Under the assumption that individuals require some baseline level of food to eat (θ as this baseline threshold), we employ the common Stone–Geary utility function to capture citizen consumption utility as:

$$w_{ij}(f, x) = (f - \theta)^{\gamma}(x)^{1-\gamma}. \tag{1}$$

Citizens seek to maximize this consumption utility, subject to a budget constraint defined by their market income, y_j. Without loss of generality, we normalize the price of good x to unity. Given the importance of agricultural pricing policies in many political contexts (Ballard-Rosa 2016; Bates 1981; Pierskalla 2011; Thomson 2019; Wallace 2013), we focus on the government's policy choice that affects the domestic market price of food. This price is $p = \pi + \phi$, where π captures the world price for agricultural products and $\phi \in [\underline{\phi}, \bar{\phi}]$ represents the government's intervention in food prices (where $\underline{\phi} < 0 < \bar{\phi}$). The government can either increase the price of agricultural goods by setting $\phi > 0$ or decrease the cost of food by setting $\phi < 0$. As detailed subsequently, the theoretically central property of this policy is that it induces geographically identified preferences, that is, we focus on government policies that strictly benefit one group at a cost to another group.[9] Finally, citizens generate an inelastic supply of the type of good in their production

[8]Other policy options are possible, for example, the government could change the type of food sold or consumed. This is a much less common strategy because it is more difficult to implement than price supports. It takes time and investments in land, seeds, and other supplies to alter food production, and people have well-known preferences for the type of food they are used to (Atkin 2013). Similarly, providing tractors is less common because they tend to benefit rural landowners, rather than rural workers, and thus do not target as many voters (Samuels and Thomson 2020). Finally, other policy options that could potentially please more voters are often prohibitively costly (Ballard-Rosa 2020).

[9]If governments could identify policies that pleased all electoral blocs simultaneously, they should clearly select these types of policies. In such an electoral environment, our model would have one degenerate equilibrium in which all parties always

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activity, with each rural agent growing $\bar{f}$ units of food and urban citizen producing w units of x. Given a price of 1 for x, this implies that urban citizens' market income is $y_U = w$; for rural agents, market income is $y_R = (\pi + \phi)\bar{f}$.

Consideration of $w_{ij}(\cdot)$ reveals a discontinuity in consumption utility that occurs if $f_i < \theta$, that is, citizen utility is undefined for cases when consumption falls below what we term the "hunger threshold" θ. In such cases, citizens respond to a lack of food by engaging in protest or revolt, which captures the historically recurrent instance of riots triggered by shortages in food availability. Formally, we declare that citizens always engage in revolt (choose $\rho_i = 1$) whenever $f_i < \theta$ and refrain from protest otherwise (choose $\rho_i = 0$). To ease computation, we define citizen consumption utility as equal to 0 whenever $f_i < \theta$ but also impose a utility penalty of ω from the protest activity.[10]

Citizens cast their vote for the political party they favor based, in part, on whichever party platform maximizes their consumption utility. Since electoral contests are not decided purely by material considerations, we also introduce citizen preferences over the identity of the government. While we remain agnostic as to what constitutes these individual-level preferences for one government over another, we note that this could arise from partisan identification with one party. Formally, a voter i of type j receives additional utility of σ_{ij} when the incumbent party is in office. These partisan preferences are separable from the effects on voters from changes to their material welfare (w_{ij}).[11] Beyond this individual-specific preference for (or against) the incumbent party, there also exist societal "valence" preferences for each party shared by all voters (ϵ). As is common in the literature on probabilistic voting models (Dixit and Londregan 1996; Persson and Tabellini 2002), an individual voter's particular views on each party are unknown to the parties, but the distribution of such preferences in society is known. More precisely, $\sigma_{ij} \sim U[-(1/2\psi_j), (1/2\psi_j)]$ and $\epsilon \sim U[-(1/2\eta), (1/2\eta)]$. Those voters with $\sigma_{ij} > 0$ represent voters with a natural inclination toward the incumbent party, whereas those with $\sigma_{ij} < 0$ instead lean toward the opposition. Given these additional components, the full utility for an individual citizen is given by:

$$u_{ij}(f, x) = w_{ij}(f, x) + 1\{G = I\}(\sigma_{ij} + \epsilon), \tag{2}$$

where $1\{G = I\}$ is an indicator function that equals 1 while the incumbent party I is in office and 0 if the challenger C assumes power.

Finally, given our conceptual interest in the determinants of citizens' perceptions of the legitimacy of democratic institutions, we expect that such calculations are likely to be impacted by a citizen's beliefs about their material well-being under democracy, as compared to that under an alternative arrangement. As such, given indirect citizen utility over food-price policy $v_i(\phi)$, we define the perceived material legitimacy of democracy as:

$$\Lambda_i(\hat{\phi}) = \mathbb{E}\big[v_i(\hat{\phi})\big] - \mathbb{E}[v_i(\phi_M)]. \tag{3}$$

When $\Lambda_i > 0$, citizens believe that democracy increases their material well-being; when $\Lambda_i < 0$, citizens expect their quality of life to improve following the termination of electoral politics. This requires that we define the expected policy outcome in equilibrium arising from electoral politics (we denote the policy that wins the election as $\hat{\phi}$), as compared to the policy that the military is expected to select (ϕ_M) following a successful coup, which is detailed in our later discussion of equilibria.

propose policies favored by all voters. However, providing subsidies to all members of the public is likely to be prohibitively costly (Ballard-Rosa 2020). Given our core interest in the possibility of material dissatisfaction with democratic outcomes, we instead focus on cases where there exists clear distributive conflict across identifiable groups.

[10]In practice, ω could represent the costs of collective action, the threat of punishment for protest behavior, or the negative experience of hunger.

[11]While political parties typically differentiate themselves by ideology, agricultural support policies often cut across traditional left–right divides, which helps buttress our abstraction away from partisan considerations.

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Parties

In the functional democracy we consider at the outset of the game, two political parties, $p \in \{I, C\}$, compete for office. We refer to the two parties as the "Incumbent" (I) and "Challenger" (C), though no difference between the two exists, and so the discussion can be equivalently framed as between any two office-motivated parties. We follow standard workhorse models of democratic competition in modeling these parties as Downsian actors, so that they do not inherently prefer some policy, but seek only to win elections, attaching value Ω to holding office.[12] Political parties each choose a policy platform ϕ_p, with $\hat{\phi}$ denoting the platform that successfully wins the election. This policy must be affordable given existing government resources β.[13]

Military

Given our interest in understanding democratic breakdown and the military's prevalent role in democratic collapse (Houle 2009), we extend this standard probabilistic voting framework by introducing the military (M) as an additional agent in the political sphere. The military likely enters politics for a variety of reasons, which may be affected by such factors as professional norms on non-interference, integration in economic production and profitability, and the heterogeneity of ethnic groups within society and the military. We simplify the military's motivations by assuming that it seeks to opportunistically take control of the government to capture access to the government's resources, β, and remain agnostic as to how it would use the resources (for example, for personal enrichment, greater military expenditures, ethnic patronage, or otherwise).

Once in office, the military minimizes the likelihood of public unrest, as this may generate additional instability that could lead to its downfall. Thus, $f_i^* \geq \theta \forall i$, so that the military ensures that food consumption meets the hunger threshold for all groups, forestalling the possibility of revolt. We abstract away from military governments' potential use of repression in the face of unrest. Given our focus on unrest generated by specific pricing policies, the military should find it more straightforward to remove the material sources of dissatisfaction than persist with such policies and resort to costly repression.[14] Given a cost for food policy of $C(\phi)$, we define the military's utility from holding office as:

$$u_M(\phi) = \beta - C(\phi). \tag{4}$$

Even if the military chooses to intervene in politics, such coups may not succeed and often generate large costs from infighting within the military, mobilizing troops to occupy the capital, and so on. We represent these costs by the parameter κ and specify that the military is successful in overthrowing electoral democracy with probability μ. Again, while a host of factors might affect coup success, military intervention has often occurred during periods of mass unrest. We leverage this historical intuition to suggest that the probability of a successful coup increases with the fraction of the citizenry engaged in revolt. More formally, we define this probability as:

$$\mu(\rho) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if} \rho_i = 0 \forall i \\ \mu & \text{if} \rho_i = 1, \rho_{\sim i} = 0 \\ 1 & \text{if} \rho_i = 1 \forall i \end{cases} \tag{5}$$

[12]We normalize the value of being out of office to 0.

[13]To simplify exposition, we assume that the budget constraint never binds the government, that is, the government can always afford to provide the electorally optimal price policy. Formally, we assume that $C(\bar{\phi}) \leq \beta$ and $C(\underline{\phi}) \leq \beta$.

[14]This is most likely to be violated in instances where military rule is meant to shore up preferential price supports for powerful landed interests. We address this possibility later by conditioning our main results on support for the military.

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Thus, the likely success of a military coup increases with the degree to which citizens are engaged in mass unrest. As detailed more precisely later in our case study of Thailand, this captures the idea that military coups often occur during periods of widespread public protest against the outcome of party politics.

Solution

We solve for subgame-perfect Nash equilibria via backwards induction. Full proofs appear in the Online Appendix, and we discuss two equilibria that arise in our game here. While our basic electoral setup follows directly from standard probabilistic voting models, our introduction of the military as a strategic actor complicates the considerations of office-seeking political parties. Critically, politicians now face a potential trade-off when selecting their electoral platforms, especially if the electorally dominant strategy would encourage a coup.

To begin, it should be noted that a rural voter's ideal policy is to set $\phi_R^*=\bar{\phi}$, the highest feasible price support. This increases the price of food substantially—as shown in the Online Appendix, this price increase is always preferred by rural agents, as this increases their market income and thus improves their consumption utility.[15] However, urban consumption strictly decreases as the price of food rises,[16] so urban citizens always prefer $\phi_U^*=\underline{\phi}$, which is the largest feasible price-decreasing subsidy.

In such a setting, any attempt to win more voters of one bloc can only come by losing voters from the other bloc, which closely matches accounts that emphasize the dangers to democracy that may arise from "zero-sum" politics. With full knowledge of the societal distribution of voter preferences, parties only increase ϕ when doing so increases votes. In the Online Appendix, we detail the precise probability-of-victory function for parties as a function of their food-price policy ($V_p(\phi_p)$). By taking the first-order conditions on this probability-of-victory function,[17] the vote-maximizing food-price platform is given by:

$$\phi^*=\frac{(w-\pi\theta)\alpha(1-\gamma)\psi_R-w(1-\alpha)\psi_U}{\theta\alpha(1-\gamma)\psi_R} \tag{6}$$

This optimal subsidy increases as the share of the population that lives in rural areas increases. With more rural votes to be won, all else equal, the greater the incentives to pander to rural voters.[18] In addition, the more easily rural voters can mobilize over food pricing for a given population distribution, the higher the food-price support selected.[19] This suggests that as the rural vote becomes more electorally crucial (whether because of larger population sizes or because of greater capacity to mobilize voters over pricing policy), it becomes more likely that politicians choose to provide benefits targeting agricultural producers, even at the expense of urban consumers (Ballard-Rosa 2020; Bates 1981; Thomson 2019).

For ease of explication, we assume in the following that rural citizens enjoy electoral dominance,[20] which fits with descriptions of democratic politics in many developing countries, where a preponderance of the population lives in rural areas, as well as accounts of the central role of rural voting blocs for electoral success (Harding 2012; Hendrix and Haggard 2015; Pierskalla 2011;

[15] $\partial v_R/\partial\phi > 0$.

[16] $\partial v_U/\partial\phi < 0$.

[17] As is standard, we assume concavity of this function. If this assumption were violated, the convexity of $V_p(\phi_p)$ would translate into a corner solution at one voter group's ideal policy. This would represent an even more extreme version of geographic electoral bias.

[18] $\partial\phi_p^*/\partial\alpha > 0$.

[19] $\partial\phi_p^*/\partial\psi_R > 0$.

[20] That is, α and ϕ_R are large enough to ensure that $\phi^\star > 0$.

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Varshney 1993). However, our results are symmetric if urban voters are electorally dominant; we thus suppress this discussion for the sake of brevity.

Equilibrium 1: "Contentious Democracy"

Via standard probabilistic voting logic, one equilibrium involves both parties opting for policy that maximizes the probability of winning the election, such that $\phi_I^* = \phi_C^* = \phi^* = \hat{\phi}$. If urban consumption still falls above the hunger threshold at this higher price, this represents the unique equilibrium of the game, as urban actors never protest and therefore the military never intervenes.[21] We focus on the more theoretically interesting segment of the parameter space such that $f_U^*(\phi^*) < \theta$, which implies that at post-intervention food prices, urban agents are pushed below the hunger threshold. As this generates urban unrest, the military considers staging a coup as long as $\kappa \leq \mu(\beta - C(\phi_M))$.

Even with perfect information, military coups can occur on the equilibrium path. When both parties propose $\phi_p = \phi^\star$, each wins office with probability of 50 per cent, but loses office due to a successful coup with probability μ. A political party's expected utility from adhering to electorally optimal policy, even when doing so would instigate a coup, is thus $u_p(\phi_p = \phi^\star | K = 1) = (1 - \mu)/2^*\Omega$. While a party might desire to deviate to a lower price support (that is, propose $\phi_p < \phi^\star$) in order to prevent unrest and forestall a coup, there exists no unilateral deviation that achieves this goal. Any deviation to a lower price support results in the party losing the election with probability 1; given that the opposing party's platform is realized following the election, this results in unrest and a subsequent coup. When political parties lack the ability to coordinate their platforms —such as in particularly competitive electoral environments—military coups are therefore possible even when democratic governments recognize that their platforms may instigate them.

Equilibrium 2: "Shadow of the Military"

Suppose that rather than proposing $\phi_p = \phi^\star$, both parties propose $\phi_p = \tilde{\phi}$, where $f_U^*(\tilde{\phi}) = \theta$. The term $\tilde{\phi}$ represents the highest price support for food production that prevents urban citizens from falling below the "hunger threshold," thereby forestalling unrest and removing a threat of military intervention. In this case, the expected utility for a party of proposing this compromise policy is $u_p(\tilde{\phi}) = (\Omega/2)$. In contrast, deviating to electorally optimal policy not only results in winning the election with certainty, but also induces protests by the neglected group of citizens that may incentivize military intervention; in expectation, the payoff for this deviation is $u_p(\phi^\star | K = 1) = (1 - \mu)\Omega$. Rearranging, this compromise policy constitutes an electoral equilibrium whenever $(\Omega/2) \geq (1 - \mu)\Omega \Leftrightarrow \mu \geq (1/2)$. While the 50 per cent threshold of success is somewhat arbitrary, the broader point holds that as the political effectiveness of a military coup rises, introducing the military as a strategic actor shows that parties can deviate from pure voter-driven policy outcomes as long as both can coordinate on a compromise (and the threat of a military coup is sufficiently high). We term this equilibrium the "shadow of the military," as parties accommodate non-electoral considerations to ensure domestic security is not threatened.[22]

Comparative Statics

We introduce comparative statics on perceptions of democratic legitimacy as a function of relative material well-being. As noted earlier, we define material legitimacy, $\Lambda_i(\hat{\phi})$, as the difference in expected consumption utility as a result of elections, as opposed to military rule. As proven in the Online Appendix, given costs that can arise from the implementation of either farm-support

[21]This is equivalent to standard probabilistic voting models (Dixit and Londregan 1996; Persson and Tabellini 2002).
[22]In fractured and non-cooperative systems, it is unclear whether parties can actively commit to such compromises.

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pricing policies (choosing $\phi_M > 0$) or consumer subsidy programs (choosing $\phi_M < 0$), the military's optimal policy is generally to remove price supports for agricultural products ($\phi_M^* = 0$).[23]

Given this behavior, under Equilibrium 1, we find that the legitimacy of the democratic system for urban citizens is given by:

$$\Lambda_U(\hat{\phi} = \phi^*) = \mathbb{E}[v_U(\phi^*)] - \mathbb{E}[v_U(0)] \tag{7}$$

Recalling that $f_U^*(\phi^*) < \theta$ and therefore $\rho_U = 1$, after substitution, this reduces to $\Lambda_U = -v_U(0) - \omega < 0$. As this term is strictly negative, this implies that a singular focus by electoral agents on rural needs undermines the material legitimacy of democracy for urban citizens.[24]

Under Equilibrium 2, the legitimacy of the democratic system for urban citizens is given by:

$$\Lambda_U(\hat{\phi} = \tilde{\phi}) = \mathbb{E}\big[v_U(\tilde{\phi})\big] - \mathbb{E}[v_U(0)] \tag{8}$$

Recalling that $f_U^*(\tilde{\phi}) = \theta$, after substitution, this reduces to $\Lambda_U = -v_U(0) < 0$. As this is strictly negative, we again find that the material legitimacy of democracy is undermined even under a compromise policy that prevents unrest.[25] This finding suggests our two main testable hypotheses regarding attitudes toward democracy, which we make explicit in Propositions 1 and 2[26]:

Proposition 1: Urban (rural) citizens in democracies characterized by rural-biased (urban-biased) agricultural policies demonstrate reduced support for democracy as a legitimate form of rule.

Proposition 2: Urban (rural) citizens in democracies characterized by rural-biased (urban-biased) agricultural policies demonstrate increased support for military intervention in politics.

Illustrative Example

Our model indicates that urban–rural distributional conflict can reduce support for democracy, especially when budgets are tight, as governments provide the majority sector with targeted benefits. Citizens of the neglected minority sector can thus become disillusioned with their material well-being under electoral politics, potentially even increasing support for military intervention. We illustrate how the model plays out in a real-world case of rising urban discontent under a rural-biased democracy using the example of Thailand.

In this case, the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party won the 2001 election due to strong support in rural areas in northern and central Thailand (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014) and received comparatively little support from the urban middle class in southern Thailand (Phongpaichit and Baker 2004). The ruling TRT party's election platform emphasized policies geared toward

[23]If food prices are still high enough to generate urban unrest even when producer supports have been removed, the military sets $\tilde{\phi}_M < 0$ to avert urban protest. Since this case results in even greater benefits for urban citizens vis-à-vis their expected payout in democracy, we suppress discussion here and focus on the more straightforward case where unrest can be averted without subsidizing consumers.

[24]While we only consider a single-shot game, these consequences are accentuated in a repeated game in which urban voters do not expect electoral outcomes to vary significantly in the future. In addition, if biased agricultural government policy were to induce regional migration (Wallace 2013), this would likely intensify politicians' electoral incentives to pander to an influential and growing voting bloc.

[25]Comparing the legitimacy of the two equilibria makes clear that urban citizens are more likely to lose faith in democracy when electoral politics generates extreme bias in favor of rural voters, that is, $\Lambda_U(\bar{\phi}) < \Lambda_U(\tilde{\phi})$.

[26]The comparative statics for rural citizens are the inverse of those for urban citizens.

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rural voters because the population is comprised of mostly rural citizens, including plans for a village fund, a Medicare program, a farmers' debt moratorium, and a bank for the poor. The TRT consulted with rural activists and non-governmental organizations on their election program, and the TRT's election posters described the three policy pillars of agrarian debt relief, village funds, and cheap healthcare (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014). TRT campaign propaganda noted the party leader, Thaksin's, origins in village life, tying his life experience to his support for rural empowerment.

After becoming prime minister, Thaksin immediately began to exhibit severe rural bias in his economic policies, granting semi-subsistence peasants greater access to capital and markets (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014, 265). By the fall, most of the country's 75,000 rural villages had received funds, more than five million loans had been approved, and debt relief was available to more than two million agrarian debtors (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008, 66). Other policies targeting the rural sector included micro-credit finance programs like One Tambon One Product, which allowed local producers to receive grants, loans, and export assistance (Moore and Donaldson 2015, 11), as well as the People's Bank Program, the Village Development Fund, and the Bank for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises. Thaksin promoted his policies by saying that the government aimed to reduce the economic gap between rural and urban areas (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008, 9).

Thaksin also deployed a similar strategy of targeting rural voters in his 2005 reelection campaign, in contrast to the Democrat Party, which primarily touted the continuation of its unpopular economic policies, without offering clear benefits to rural voters (Ockey 2003).[27] Thaksin's strategy boosted the TRT to another election victory and suggested the possibility that future electoral contests would be similarly dominated by a seemingly hegemonic TRT (Phatharathananunth 2008, 106). As a result of this agrarian bias, the urban middle class feared subjugation at the hands of the rural masses (Phatharathananunth 2008, 78) and accused Thaksin of redistributing public funds toward expensive rural programs (*The Economist* 2006). Massive anti-government demonstrations began in September 2005, as thousands of mostly urban citizens in Bangkok protested Thaksin and the TRT. In response, counter-protesters from rural areas poured into Bangkok to express support for the government (Prasirtsuk 2007).

By the middle of 2006, some urban opposition groups were openly clamoring for the king to take over from Thaksin in a coup d'etat (Glassman 2010). On September 19, 2006, the military staged a coup while Thaksin was in New York, which received strong support from the urban population (Prasirtsuk 2007). In public statements, the junta blamed Thaksin for creating a divide between the urban middle class and the rural poor, and asserted that this rift necessitated military intervention (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008). The Assembly drafted a new constitution limiting the role of parliament and the executive, while boosting the power of the military and bureaucracy. With regards to policy, the military regime showed little support for rural development programs like One Tambon One Product (Moore and Donaldson 2015, 13).

Empirical Analysis

Having demonstrated historical support for our main claims that rural-biased agricultural policies significantly affected urban citizens' perceptions of democracy and increased their support for military intervention in politics, we now examine whether our theoretical predictions receive support more systematically. While there exist a number of cross-national surveys that query respondents over their views on democracy, our theoretical emphasis on urban–rural divides imposes several challenges. First, many surveys do not include geographic information that would allow

[27]The TRT's election promises to poor rural voters were even more extensive this time around: more village funds for every landholder, a series of new cheap loan programs, free cow distribution, reduced school fees, and a national irrigation scheme (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008).

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us to distinguish the views of citizens that live in urban as opposed to rural regions of the country. In addition, given the theoretical importance of military intervention in politics, we also require questions that tap into respondents' views over the appropriateness of a coup, but these are rarely asked. Finally, in order to substantiate our emphasis on the importance of rural- versus urban-biased policies, we require a comparable indicator of relative government attention to urban and rural policy preferences.

Latin America serves as an ideal setting in which information is available about all of these theoretically relevant pieces. Given the historical frequency of coups in the region, this serves as a location where popular views on the proper political role of the military are likely to be of heightened salience. Further, there are many instances in which biased agricultural policies led to unrest among urban citizens. For example, in Argentina, Perón and the Peronist movement favored urban interests over rural producers and exporters, creating discontent (O'Donnell 1978) and contributing to the eventual coup (O'Donnell 1975). Similar dynamics were present in 1973 in Chile.[28] While other factors were at play as well,[29] urban–rural conflict was often present in this setting.

Data and Estimation

To measure our first key independent variable, we use data from the Agrimonitor section of the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) on government intervention in agricultural markets, which provides a close parallel to our theoretical emphasis on food-price politics.[30] Agrimonitor has compiled data on government support for agricultural producers and domestic consumers of food products for seventeen countries in Latin America, beginning as early as 2004 for a subset of countries and continuing up to 2014.[31] We construct a measure of (relative) rural bias in agricultural policy based on average "total transfers to agricultural producers from taxpayers" (TPT, measured in constant USD), as well as average "total transfers to consumers from taxpayers" (TCT, also in USD), subtracting consumer benefits from producer benefits. Country-years that score 0 on this measure represent governments that provide equal per capita benefits to agricultural producers and consumers; we call these regimes "unbiased." This measure takes positive values for years in which the value of transfers to producers outweighs that to consumers, which we refer to as "rural bias." Conversely, years in which consumers are significantly favored over producers result in negative values, which we label "urban bias."

As reported in Figure 1, a plurality of countries are characterized by a relatively even distribution of transfers to producers and consumers; the median value of the distribution is at 0. However, there is substantial variation in terms of relative bias toward consumers or producers in the data, ranging from cases of "extra" per capita transfers to urban consumers of approximately USD730 to "extra" rural transfers of about USD440. We exploit this variation across countries to test our primary hypothesis that urban citizens are significantly less sanguine about democracy in regimes where rural producers are favored; conversely, they may be more supportive of democracy in systems where they receive more transfers.

Our other key independent variables are a measure of whether a respondent lived in an *urban* area, along with its interaction with our measure of rural transfer bias, which are used to assess our theoretical expectation that the effects of geographic location on democratic legitimacy are

[28]The great majority of navy and air force officers supported the coup against the government. Largely drawn from the urban middle class, many were willing to tolerate nationalist and agrarian changes but shifted to the right along with their civilian counterparts as the process deepened (Petras and Petras 1973, 169).

[29]For example, pressures for redistribution and the involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency often factored in heavily, as in 1954 in Guatemala and 1964 in Brazil (O'Donnell 1975).

[30]Data are available on the Agrimonitor website (http://agrimonitor.iadb.org/en).

[31]Coverage by countries across years ranges from as few as two country-years (for Nicaragua and El Salvador) to as many as eleven country-years (for Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico).

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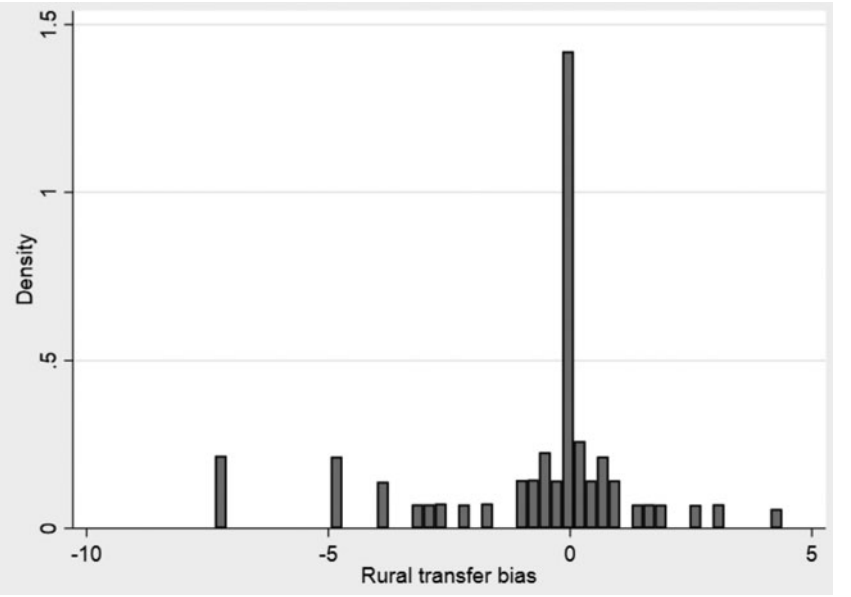

Figure 1. Rural transfer bias.
Note: Distribution from taxpayers of transfers to agricultural producers less transfers to consumers (in 100s USD), 16 Latin American countries.

conditioned by greater government support for one geographic group over another.[32] In some specifications, we add demographic control variables that might be linked to support for democratic legitimacy and perceptions of military rule. These include measures for whether a respondent identified as *Male*, the respondent's *Age* at the time of the survey, the number of *Years of Schooling* they reported, and a dummy for whether the respondent identified their ethnicity as *White*.[33]

We also introduce several country-level covariates that may be associated with levels of urbanization, while also affecting support for democracy, including measures of economic development (*Gross domestic product [GDP] per capita*), growth (*GDP growth*), and *Democracy*, from the Polity IV project. Similarly, we add a measure of the *Agricultural value added (% GDP)* to ensure that our results are not an artifact of more heavily agricultural economies in general. Given concerns that countries with larger *populations*, more *population density*, or larger *urban populations* could be more fractious in general (Alesina and Spolaore 2005), we also introduce controls for these demographic factors.[34]

Given the importance to our model of limited government fiscal ability (as with unlimited budgets, governments could subsidize all social groups without limit), we additionally introduce several measures to account for government spending capacity. First, we introduce a measure of *Tax revenue* to capture governments' ability to raise revenue via taxation. For many countries, additional financial resources may be provided by the sale of natural resources on international markets, so we control for a country's average *Oil rents*. Finally, recent research suggests that the fiscal feasibility of agricultural subsidies may be conditioned by a country's trade status (Ballard-Rosa 2016; Ballard-Rosa 2020), and so we control for the amount of *Trade* in which a country engages.[35]

[32]Urban population shares are reported in Table A-13 in the Online Appendix.
[33]We introduce several additional individual-level covariates in our robustness section.
[34]Data are from the World Bank's World Development Indicators.
[35]As standard, trade is measured as the sum of imports and exports. All three measures are scaled as a percentage of GDP; data are from the World Bank's World Development Indicators.

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We use two types of dependent variables. First, we report results from analyses of whether respondents *Preferred democracy* over all other forms of government. This is an indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if a respondent preferred democracy.[36] Our second type of dependent variable measures respondents' *Support for coups*, which is described subsequently. Summary statistics for all variables are provided in Table A-1 in the Online Appendix.

Given the binary nature of these variables, we follow standard practice in estimating our results using a probit model. Standard errors are clustered at the country level to deal with potential autocorrelation across units. To account for time-invariant country characteristics, we include country fixed effects in all reported specifications, and to address global secular trends in support for democracy, we include year fixed effects.[37]

Regression Results

Preference for Democracy

As reported in Column 1 of Table 1, when we include only our set of basic demographic characteristics, we find that citizens living in urban areas are significantly less likely to prefer democracy as a form of government.[38] Yet, once we introduce our measure of *Rural transfer bias* in Column 2, along with its interaction with *Urban*, we find that the consequences of rural bias for democratic legitimacy differ greatly depending on whether citizens are likely to benefit from this favoritism.[39] Among respondents in non-urban areas, the effect of rural bias is to significantly increase support for democratic rule; conversely, urban citizens in rural-biased systems exhibit significantly lower preferences for democracy. Interestingly, these results also suggest that urbanization itself need not intrinsically reduce support for democracy. If anything, in more urban-biased systems, urban citizens appear somewhat more favorable toward democracy than their rural compatriots.[40]

To capture the conditional effect of urban dwelling on preferences for democracy, we report in Figure 2 the marginal effect of living in an urban location, holding all covariates at their sample means. There is a clear downward trend in the effect of urban identity over the range of transfer bias. Whereas in urban-biased cases, urban citizens report a significant increase in their preference for democracy, in rural-biased countries, urban citizens report significantly lower preferences for democracy, an effect that is statistically significant at conventional levels.

While we follow common practice in reporting marginal effects in Figure 2 across the entire distributional range of the transfer bias measure, recent work on linear multiplicative interaction terms suggests reporting estimates at meaningful points of the distribution to avoid extrapolating linear terms to sparsely populated segments of the parameter space (Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019). We therefore also provide estimated marginal effects of urbanization at the median of each tercile of the distribution. These terciles correspond closely to our conceptualization of relative bias toward consumers or producers, so we characterize each as representing

[36]The specific survey question asks: "Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?"

[37]In the robustness section reported later, we show that our results are virtually identical if we instead estimate a multilevel model including nested country and year random effects. This represents an alternative means of accounting for shared covariance across individuals within the same country, as well as for respondents answering within the same year.

[38]This accords with similar findings among African respondents reported by Harding (2012).

[39]It should be noted that we lose many observations when we add the *Rural transfer bias* control variable, along with other country-level covariates, due to the more limited coverage in these datasets.

[40]The estimates in Table 1 imply that urban citizens show weaker support for democracy, which has implications for modernization theory, as this question is unresolved in the literature. While some mechanisms would imply that support for democracy is stronger in urban areas, many scholars (e.g., Glaeser and Steinberg 2017) point out that urban areas tend to have higher rates of crime and disease, which can have the opposite effect. We also note, however, the lack of work on this question from our particular sample (Glaeser and Steinberg 2017).

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Table 1. Preferences for democracy and rural bias

Variables	1 Preferences for democracy	2 Preferences for democracy
Urban	−0.053***	−0.047**
	(0.017)	(0.023)
Rural transfer bias		0.080***
		(0.017)
Urban × Rural transfer bias		−0.048***
		(0.010)
Individual controls	✓	✓
Country controls		✓
Observations	175,927	50,223
Countries	26	13

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. The table reports results of probit regressions of preference for democracy on demographic and country-level covariates. Country and year fixed effects are suppressed for presentation. Individual-level controls include gender, age, education, and race; country-level controls include levels of democracy, GDP per capita, GDP growth, total population, population density, urban population (percentage of total), tax revenue, trade, oil rents, and agriculture value added (all as a percentage of GDP). *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

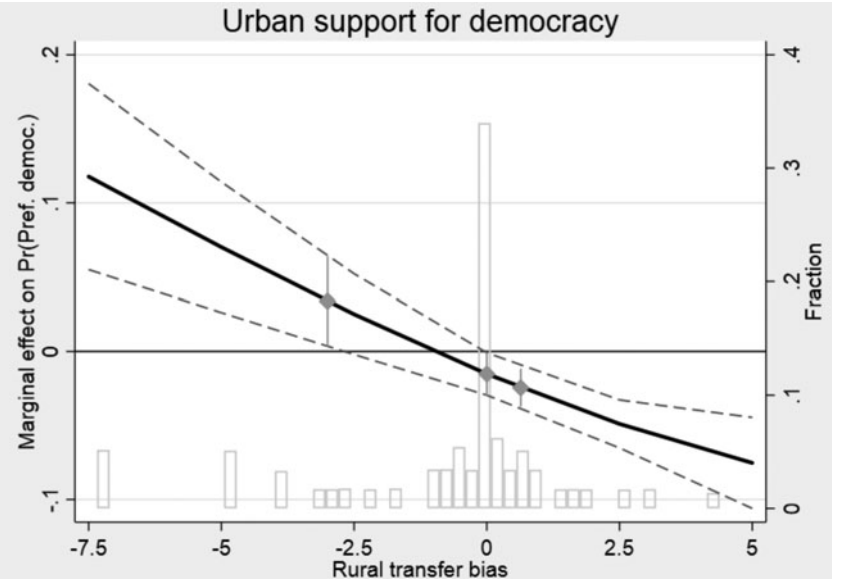

Figure 2. Marginal effect of urban dwelling on democratic support.
Notes: This figure reports the marginal effect (and 95 per cent confidence intervals) of living in an urban area on preference for democratic rule, conditional on rural transfer bias. Dark-gray diamonds correspond to marginal effects estimated at the median value of each tercile of the distribution. Light-gray bars indicate the empirical distribution of the transfer bias measure.

"urban-biased," "unbiased," and "rural-biased" cases.[41] The dark gray diamonds in Figure 2 correspond to each of these medians. Whereas urban citizens in the urban-biased tercile are approximately 3.3 percentage points more likely to say they prefer democracy ($p < 0.05$), urban citizens in the rural-biased tercile are approximately 2.4 percentage points *less* likely to favor democracy ($p < 0.000$). In terms of substantive magnitude, with 26 per cent of respondents saying they do not favor democracy overall, the six-percentage-point decrease from urban- to rural-biased

[41]More precisely, the median of the first tercile occurs in systems that provide an extra USD300 in transfers to consumers; the median of the second tercile occurs at USD0; and the median of the third tercile occurs in systems that provide an extra USD64 to producers.

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systems represents an important drop in such support. Interestingly, even in the middle tercile—corresponding to relatively unbiased cases—we continue to find evidence for some dissatisfaction among urban citizens, who are approximately 1.5 percentage points less likely to favor democracy ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that additional factors beyond rural-biased agricultural policy may drive urban disapproval of democratic government; we return to this point in more detail later.

Support for Military Intervention

We now examine whether urban citizens in rural-biased regimes show greater support for a military coup. Given the historical prevalence of coups in Latin America, our question is particularly important in this context. We construct our dependent variable for these tests using LAPOP data, as this survey asks respondents about their support for military intervention in several different forms over the course of the panel. We focus on the three most prevalent outcomes. Several waves of LAPOP ask respondents the following question: "In your opinion, would a military coup be justified under the following conditions?" Respondents are then asked whether they believe a military intervention in politics would be appropriate in cases where unemployment is high, when crime is high, and when corruption is high.

There exists significant variation in individual responses to each of these three questions. While support for a coup to deal with crime is most strongly correlated with one to deal with corruption (at approximately 0.70), support for a coup to address unemployment is correlated with the crime measure at about 0.44 and with the corruption measure at about 0.45.[42] Given the significant variability in the responses to each question, we construct binary outcomes representing respondent support for a coup under each of these three conditions and report results from regression of these binary measures of *Coup support* separately for each outcome after including our full battery of individual- and country-level covariates.

Since individuals exhibit clear variation in their responses to these different questions, each of the three motivations for a coup may represent different mechanisms by which citizen support for electoral politics may be undermined. We have argued that the effects of agricultural policy bias on citizen's support for military intervention manifest themselves through their consequences on the material legitimacy of democracy. The closest outcome to our theoretical emphasis comes from support for a coup to address poor economic performance; here, support for military intervention to address high levels of unemployment is most relevant. In addition, if consistent electoral bias leads to perceptions of corruption by segments of the public, support for coups to address corruption may similarly be influenced by the degree of transfer bias. However, we remain more agnostic about the theoretical relevance of our primary mechanism for driving support for a coup to address crime. Unless transfer biases also lead to a heightened experience of crime, which seems unlikely, this third mechanism is least relevant to our theoretical framework.

In Column 1 of Table 2, we report results taking support for a coup to address unemployment as our outcome. In support of our theoretical predictions, we find that urban citizens express greater support for military intervention in politics to deal with poor economic performance; however, this effect only arises in countries characterized by rural biases toward agricultural producers. We also find that rural citizens are significantly less likely to support military intervention to address unemployment as the transfer bias toward agricultural interests increases.

We plot the conditional marginal effect of urban dwelling on support for a coup to address unemployment in Figure 3. The figure reveals that urban citizens in unbiased systems demonstrate no systematic difference in their support for a coup, as compared to a statistically significant

[42]Approximately 20 per cent of respondents answer in the affirmative for the unemployment coup question, whereas approximately 45 per cent of our sample express support for a coup to address crime as well as to address corruption. While the fractions supporting the latter two forms are almost identical, the same respondents do not always answer the same way on these questions (as indicated by the pairwise correlation of 0.70).

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Table 2. Support for coups and rural bias

Variables	1 Coup support (unemployment)	2 Coup support (corruption)	3 Coup support (crime)
Urban	0.024	0.054***	0.064**
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.025)
Rural transfer bias	−0.105**	0.010	0.003
	(0.042)	(0.010)	(0.018)
Urban × Rural transfer bias	0.044***	0.025**	0.017
	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.010)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓
Country controls	✓	✓	✓
Observations	42,874	44,793	45,018
Countries	13	13	13

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. The table reports the results of probit regressions of support for a military coup (for varying reasons) on demographic and country-level covariates. Country and year fixed effects are suppressed for presentation. Individual-level controls include gender, age, education, and race; country-level controls include levels of democracy, GDP per capita, GDP growth, total population, population density, urban population (percentage of total), tax revenue, trade, oil rents, and agriculture value added (all as a percentage of GDP). *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

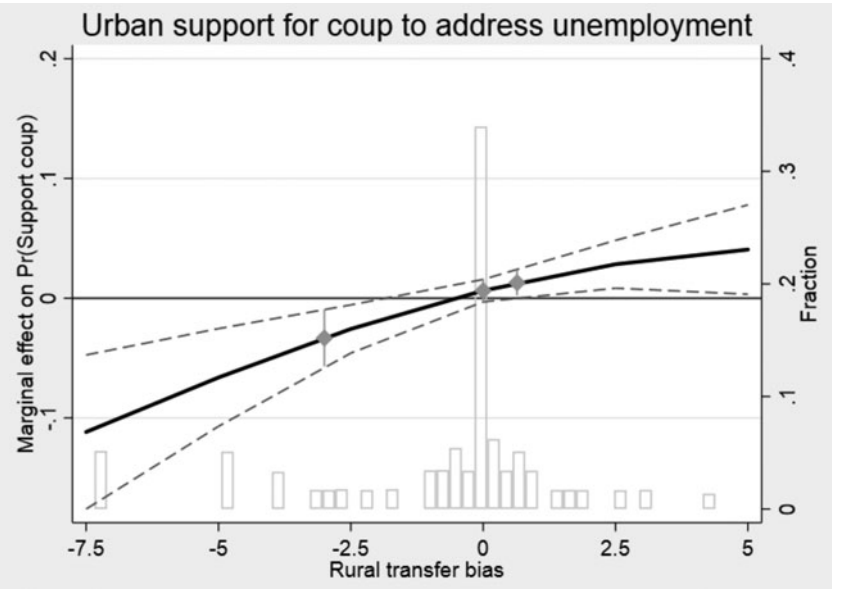

Figure 3. Marginal effect of urban dwelling on coup (unemployment) support.
Notes: The figure reports the marginal effect of living in an urban area on support for a coup (when unemployment is high), conditional on whether a country is characterized by rural bias. Dark-gray diamonds correspond to marginal effects estimated at the median value of each tercile of the distribution. Light-gray bars indicate the empirical distribution of the transfer bias measure.

increase in support for a coup among urban dwellers in rural-biased countries of approximately 1.3 percentage points. Conversely, urban citizens in urban-biased systems are approximately 3.3 percentage points less likely to favor a military intervention to address unemployment. Against an average level of support for such coups of 20 per cent, this 4.6-percentage-point swing is of sizable substantive magnitude. This provides additional support for our theoretical expectations that consistent electoral bias against particular groups is likely to lead not only to an overall reduction in their support for democratic rule, but also an increase in their likelihood of supporting a military intervention in politics when economic conditions deteriorate.

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In Column 2 of Table 2, we consider factors that affect public support for coups to address high levels of corruption. As with coups to address unemployment, we find that urban citizens in more rural-biased systems are more likely to indicate support for a coup (for a plot of marginal effects, see Figure A-1 in the Online Appendix). Finally, turning to Column 3, we do not find evidence that the positive effect of urbanization on support for coups to limit crime is conditioned by rural transfer bias. We cannot reject the null hypothesis that these estimated effects are equal to one another, as captured by the insignificant interaction term and the marginal effects plotted in Figure A-2 in the Online Appendix. This suggests that citizens' support for military intervention is conditioned by rural transfer bias in cases of poor economic performance and corruption. On the other hand, urban support for a coup to address crime appears largely unrelated to rural transfer bias.

Robustness

We subject these primary results to a host of additional robustness tests; for the sake of space, we present the results in the Online Appendix. While the results of our robustness checks support our theoretical propositions, we note that our analysis remains observational; thus, the potential for omitted variable bias, reverse causality, and other model misspecifications remains. We show a strong correlation between our key independent variables and our dependent variable; however, we cannot demonstrate causality with this design.

First, we confirm that individuals who were victimized by crime and who perceive their neighborhoods as insecure are more likely to support military coups under conditions of high crime (Pérez 2009; Visconti 2019), as shown in Table A-2 in the Online Appendix; however, the inclusion of measures of exposure to crime does not affect the significance of our primary factors of interest. Next, we verify that the addition of trust in the military, concern about the state of the economy, political ideology, and authoritarianism does not alter the substantive interpretation of our primary effects, as reported in Tables A-3, A-4, and A-9 in the Online Appendix; similarly, models that account for voter turnout or support for challenger parties likewise replicate our core findings (see Table A-10 in the Online Appendix). Moreover, our results are robust to the use of a multilevel model that includes nested country and year random effects, as shown in Table A-6 in the Online Appendix, as well as the use of bootstrapped standard errors (see Tables A-7 and A-8 in the Online Appendix).

We also explore an alternative measure of sectoral bias, drawing on Agrimonitor data to capture the total transfers to producers from consumers (TPC) (see Figure A-3 in the Online Appendix). Although our primary theoretical concern is with government transfers to different groups of citizens, as explored earlier, this alternate measurement may also be relevant if citizens internalize the extent to which agricultural producers benefit from material transfers from consumers. Further, we consider an alternative measure of democracy using data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset. We demonstrate in Tables A-5 and A-11 in the Online Appendix that our main findings remain robustly significant using these alternate codings.

Finally, while we have shown robust support for our expectation that urban preference for democracy and opposition to military intervention decline significantly in rural-biased systems, it is difficult to prove that such dissatisfaction is a direct result of urban perceptions of bias toward agricultural producers. Although we provide qualitative evidence in support of this mechanism, to further substantiate our interpretation of these primary empirical findings, we perform several placebo exercises. In our placebo tests, we investigate whether the effect of urbanization on support for democracy or coups is conditioned by alternative economic factors that are not consonant with our theoretical emphasis on urban/rural biases in agricultural support.

In our first exercise, we consider whether urban preference for democracy is affected by a different sort of government expenditure: *Military spending*. While it is possible that such expenditures could take on a geographic component in certain countries, we do not have any generalized

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expectation that they should do so. If we were to find that urban distaste for democracy was also higher in countries with more military expenditures, this might point to more general dissatisfaction among city dwellers for government expenditures toward any group. In a similar vein, while some work suggests that particular types of education expenditures might provide greater benefits to urban or rural citizens (Stasavage 2005), it is unclear that total education expenditure should have a similar geographic bias. We do not expect, therefore, that the effect of urban dwelling on support for democracy should be conditioned by government *Expenditure on education*.

Beyond general government spending, it is also possible that the effect we document of rising urban dissatisfaction as a function of rural transfer bias could be the by-product of some economic consequence of these policies. For instance, perhaps urban citizens are less able to turn to subsistence farming when times are bad and therefore fault governments for any perceived economic failure. To test this alternative explanation, we include a measure of the *Unemployment* level, as well as its interaction with urban dwelling. As reported in Columns 1 through 3 of Table A-12 in the Online Appendix, in none of these cases do we find that the relationship between urbanization and preference for democracy is conditional on these placebo measures, as indicated by the lack of statistical significance on the interaction term for all three factors. These null results help to buttress our interpretation of our main finding that urban dissatisfaction with electoral politics is strongly conditioned by policies with a clear urban–rural dimension.

Conclusion

We have shown that distributional conflict between urban and rural populations can lead citizens in the neglected sector not only to disfavor democratic government, but even to express support for military coups. If a leader favors agricultural development over urban food consumption to win over pivotal rural voters, urban citizens may revolt and potentially trigger military intervention in politics.[43] We formalized this argument, derived explicit propositions, and tested our claims, both qualitatively and quantitatively, finding strong support for the theory.

This study offers a novel theory of the erosion of democratic support that emphasizes the salience of urban–rural distributional conflict, going beyond previous accounts that focus on economic conditions or ethnic competition. In doing so, we contribute to several large academic literatures. In addition to those mentioned previously, we also provide nuance to modernization theory; in contrast to previous scholars,[44] we find that urbanization is not necessarily linked to increased popular demand for democracy, but can instead exacerbate declining support for democracy (Harding 2012). Moreover, we contribute to an emerging literature that connects perceptions of sectoral bias to crises of democratic legitimacy, not only in non-consolidated democracies, but also in nations like the United States (McQuarrie 2017).

We expect that our theory is highly generalizable. Indeed, our illustrative examples show that it holds across Latin America and in at least one prominent case outside the region. The theory should hold most readily when one segment of the population is overrepresented in the political system, which often occurs when the size of this population is greater than an alternative one, but can also happen as an artifact of the political system. It also pertains most to situations where agricultural policy is prevalent given the importance of the cost of food. This is often correlated with economic development because agricultural policy is typically less important for high-income countries.

Further, while our theoretical account focuses on cases in which democratic breakdown occurs through a coup, the argument that support for democracy falls among geographic populations when other voters are disproportionately represented in politics should apply to any regime in which this occurs. The specific prediction regarding democratic breakdown also pertains to the

[43]This is similar in spirit to cases of urban bias triggering rural unrest noted by Pierskalla (2011).

[44]For example, Glaeser and Steinberg (2017) link urbanization to democratization.

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more common cases of incumbent takeovers (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2016), though the model would need to be slightly adapted, in particular, support for democracy would decrease among groups that benefit from the current leadership (Svolik 2018). Finally, cases in which breakdown leads to a coup are most likely in societies with an interventionist military.

Moreover, our theory and findings have policy implications regarding the prevention of erosion of democratic support. Constitutional or legal limits on redistribution may be necessary to guard against severely biased distributive policies that are both electorally successful and threatening to democratic stability. Furthermore, abetting food scarcity through economic development may deter the food riots that sometimes trigger military intervention in politics.

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Data Availability Statement. Replication data for this article can be found in Harvard Dataverse at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UVDDBD

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