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#### *A Take on Property: Economic Exclusion, Political Beliefs, and Property Seizure in Latin America*

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# A Take on Property

Economic Exclusion, Political Beliefs, and Property Seizure in Latin America

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines how socioeconomic, political, and national characteristics relate to attitudes toward private property seizure using data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). Previous work on property rights focuses on government expropriation risk. Yet land invasions by the poor and societal support for property takings more frequently threaten private ownership in contemporary Latin America. The paper finds that approval of property seizure drops with income, education, and support for formal redistributive measures. Partisan identification is an insignificant predictor of property attitudes. Higher national-level income is associated with less support for property takings, while a subnational history of land invasions is linked with greater support for takings.

*“I don’t fear the government, I fear the poor. When land is invaded, the owner is the villain. Invaders say they need housing and land so they get the support of the politicians and the popular sectors. What about my rights to the land?”*

—Landowner in Puerto Maldonado, Peru, 2011 (Author interview, 2011)

In May 1995, hundreds of displaced people occupied private land in the south of Bogotá and constructed rudimentary homes. More than fifteen years later, the property owner still awaits the restitution of his property. With nowhere to move the squatters, the government has wavered and defended the invaders’ right to housing (Munoz, 2009). In July 2011, the Argentine government attempted to evict 400 families illegally occupying private land in Jujuy. Massive social protests ensued in support of the families. The legislature then repudiated “the use of violence to smother social problems” and compelled the transfer of the property to the families (Meyer, 2011). Similar scenes of land conflict pepper Latin America’s past and present. Inequality in the distribution of land, poorly defined property rights, and weak enforcement agencies have long encouraged the poor to claim property through extralegal means. Yet studies of property rights largely have papered over private threats to property rights and their social origins.

Little is known about cross-national perceptions of the inviolability of property. All societies recognize that private property rights can be curbed if doing so serves a greater public purpose. Many Latin American constitutions recognize the “social value” of property. It is the definition of what public values hold the trump that varies across societies and individuals. This paper tests the microfoundations of support for property seizure using public opinion data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project’s (LAPOP) AmericasBarometer from 2006, 2008, and 2010. The key result is that support for property seizure declines with income both at the individual and country level. The negative association between household income and disapproval of property seizure suggests an additional channel connecting economic growth and secure property rights. Education and political beliefs about the state’s redistributive role also shape attitudes toward property seizure, though traditional left-right political cleavages have no explanatory power. Areas that have experienced land takings in past decades, measured using a database of rural land occupations in Brazilian states, remain more supportive of property seizures. The research design does not allow for any claims about the direction of causality.

Understanding how Latin Americans view property takings is important for a pair of reasons. First, a growing literature emphasizes the importance of secure property rights for development. Secure rights are thought to ease capital investment, improve public investments, boost labor market allocations, and allow the poor entry into the formal economy (De Soto, 1989; Field, 2007; North, 1990; Knack and Keefer, 1995; Goldsmith, 1995). Popular support for property seizures may undermine real and perceived property security. It can indicate a greater proclivity to occupy private property and compromise government responses to extralegal occupations. Second, a deeper understanding of public opinion toward property illuminates the political dynamics of property seizure in Latin America. The classic explanation of weak enforcement of property rights

is that governments simply lack the resources to enforce the law. This paper suggests an additional complication of property rights enforcement in democratic societies: public sympathy for the redistributive claims of those who seize property.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. The first section argues that past studies neglect important aspects of property rights and explains how an analysis of attitudes toward property seizure adds to our understanding. It presents several theories of the determinants of attitudes toward property seizure. The second section presents the paper's empirical strategy. Section three presents the main empirical results at the individual level across Latin America. The fourth makes use of a rare subnational dataset of land invasions to examine how invasions relate to property attitudes across Brazilian states. The conclusion discusses the implications for understanding property rights more broadly.

## I. Theories of Property Rights and Property Seizures

Property rights are notoriously hard to define and measure. Empirical measures of property rights protection often correlate poorly, or only partially, with underlying ideas about property rights. Conceptually, the security of property rights depends on two components: the *threats* to property and the *protection* of property once challenged or appropriated. Social support for property seizure affects both aspects. First, it likely reflects a higher probability that an individual may seize or has seized property. Second, public support for property seizure may decrease the efficacy of political and judicial remedies once property is threatened, particularly in democracies. This section proposes that social support for property seizure captures threats to property neglected in traditional measures of property rights, although it is also an imperfect proxy. It then outlines the central hypotheses about determinants of attitudes toward property takings.

The most common measure of property rights comes from the International Country Risk Guide (ICRG) and has been used in numerous empirical studies of property rights (Knack and Keefer, 1995; Keefer and Knack, 2002; Svensson, 1998).<sup>1</sup> The ICRG produces five indicators for the predictability of property rights: expropriation risk, risk of repudiation of contracts by government, rule of law, quality of bureaucracy, and corruption in government. The first two measures capture the risk to property from *government* actions. The assumption is, as Knack and Keefer (1995) note, "If private actors cannot count on the government to respect the contract it has with them, they will also not be able to count on the government enforcing contracts between private parties." Government expropriation risk does not indicate the frequency of private trespass, although in many low and middle-income countries, threats to property often stem from land seizure by poor and marginalized citizens. The ideal measure of property rights threats would include the frequency of attempted property takings, regardless of the actor. In the absence of such a measure, support

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<sup>1</sup>The Index of Economic Freedom also provides a similar measure of property rights used by researchers. It scores the degree of legal protection of private property, the extent to which the government protects private property, and the expropriation risk (Claessens and Laeven, 2003; La Porta et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 1998).

of property seizure may provide a superior proxy for private threats to property on the assumption that it signals increased proclivity and tolerance of takings.

Studies that rely on ICRG data also include several general measures of government quality. The intuition is that rightsholders who perceive various institutions to be effective in preventing and redressing takings should view their property rights as secure. These variables, however, are lumpy concepts that correlate strongly with the economic wealth of a country. They also miss many of the political aspects of enforcement that have been considered central to property rights systems (Firmin-Sellers, 1995; Onoma, 2010; Joireman, 2007). As Joireman (2007) puts it, “Not only are the assumptions of [effective] enforcement false, they lead to misplaced policy initiatives that focus on lawmaking, while neglecting the problems of law enforcement or implementation.” While many democracies respect their contractual obligations, they may hesitate to defend private property rights when opposed by the public. This is particularly the case when land rights conflict with the claims of landless or impoverished groups. As a past mayor of Ciudad Bolívar, a locality in Bogotá that has experienced over 4000 land occupations in the past five years, puts it, “Imagine evicting these families, it becomes a problem of public order with immense social and political consequences that has to be balanced against the demands of landowners” (Author interview, August 23, 2011). While the quality of the judicial system and bureaucracy is an important component of property protection, it misses how popular actors intervene in property disputes.

Public support for property seizures may impact the government’s response to property violations in three ways. First, governments receive worse information when citizens support property seizures, particularly in weak institutional environments. As one bureaucrat in Lima notes, “Our ability to enforce the law depends on neighbors reporting when something happens. The biggest problem in poor communities is that the neighbors protect invaders or the “neighbors” lead invasions to get land for relatives and children” (Author interview, Puente Piedra, July 13, 2011). Second, public pressure can sway politicians to forbear, rather than forcibly remove invaders. Politicians may hesitate to risk the political costs of expelling those who seize property when the community favors those with the weaker claim of right. When there is no public consensus on appropriate property protections—or what Weingast (1997) identifies a focal solution to citizens’ coordination dilemma—political elites may be more willing to abrogate the rights of property owners in favor of a larger group of usurpers. Finally, when publicly pressured, courts may order the compensated transfer of property, rather than reinstate a property owner’s original land claim. Public support for property seizure thus can decrease the probability of restitution and the generosity of compensation in disputes with popular groups. Put most generally, widespread norms of reciprocal respect for property reduce the threats, transaction costs, and political risks of administering property rights.

This paper analyzes public support for property seizure as an imperfect indicator of threats to property rights and beliefs about redistribution. Rather than take property rights as an independent variable, this paper probes the microfoundations of property attitudes. Such an analysis provides a richer understanding of how property threats arise and how redistributive beliefs interact with

perceptions of property rights. Few quantitative studies (*c.f.* Duch and Palmer (2004); Frye (2004)) ask the prior question of how different societies weigh the importance of private property protection when in conflict with other social values.

Three primary theories of the bases of property attitudes merit attention. The first theory focuses on *material interests*. The hypothesis is that individuals on average support the amount of property protection that serves their economic interests. Support for property seizure thus depends on the extent of actual and expected property ownership. This parallels theories of property rights that stress the importance of the demand for rights in their creation and enforcement (Riker and Sened, 1991; Demsetz, 1964). On this material calculus, wealthy, male, and older individuals—all characteristics associated with a greater probability of property ownership—should be less supportive of property seizures. Dispossession and the perceived benefits from property seizure may lead the poor and women to take a more flexible approach to private property rights. Intuitively, those with less of a stake in the property system are more sympathetic to efforts to readjust it. Urban residents also may sympathize with property seizures, given that many benefited from widespread land occupations during Latin America’s massive mid-century urban migration.

Material interests may cut the opposite way. The poor could be more protective of the humble and poorly protected property that they possess, given more limited recourse to and facility with the judicial system. For instance, De Soto (1989, 2000) emphasizes that land rights are more precarious in poor areas. This leaves the poor vulnerable in the event of a property seizure and could translate into more fervent protection of property. Moreover, even if the poor once benefitted from lax norms toward property seizures (when urban invasions reached their apex in the 1960s and 1970s), past invaders have converted into small property owners. An embougeoisement theory thus holds that the poor, and particularly the urban poor, invest heavily in a rights system that secures their possessions.

A second theory focuses on *redistributive beliefs*. Property seizures can be viewed as informal means of redistributing resources. They are informal in the sense that redistribution does not occur through the formal tax and transfer system or state initiatives. As such, political beliefs about the need to redistribute resources and the government’s ability to do so through formal channels may shape attitudes toward property seizure. On the one hand, individuals who favor higher levels of redistribution should be more supportive of property seizures. Property seizures offer a way to rectify inequalities, while circumventing the often slow and politicized state apparatus. Citizens who identify with the political left and think that the government should implement policies to reduce inequality may be more sympathetic to property seizure to complement formal redistribution. On the other hand, individuals who support more state-led redistribution may oppose property seizure because it subverts formal measures. Extralegal redistributive claims may have no place if individuals believe that the state can, does, and should act to ameliorate inequalities.

Finally, *socialization* may shape attitudes toward private property. Most obviously, education—even when controlling for income—may teach citizens about the collective benefits of property

protection. Urban residents and those interested in politics similarly also may be more exposed to “modern” values of private property. Yet many Latin American cities have been settled through the seizure of land so urban residency may do little to inculcate opposition to property seizure. As one bureaucrat in Lima quips, “Try to teach people to follow urban laws when the entire city has been settled through illegal land invasions” (Author interview, Villa María del Triunfo, May 27, 2011). The next section presents the strategy used to operationalize support for property seizure and the variables of interest.

## II. Research Design

Operationalizing support for property seizure is not straightforward. Subnational work on the frequency of land invasions (*e.g.* Hidalgo et al. (2010); Dosh (2006); Garces (2002); Collier (1976)) and local property attitudes (Duch and Palmer, 2004; Frye, 2004) are hard to reproduce at the national or cross-national level. Widely administered surveys rarely ask directly about property rights or ownership. The AmericasBarometer core questionnaire, for instance, does not include a question that explicitly inquires about attitudes toward property. To address this issue, this paper uses an indirect method to measure attitudes toward property seizure and then probes for construct validity. The advantage of this approach is that individuals have few incentives to distort their opinions—as they may if asked point blank about their willingness to take property—and it enables a more powerful individual-level analysis than would otherwise be possible.

***Measuring Property Seizure Attitudes.*** The AmericasBarometer questionnaire asks respondents to score their approval or disapproval “of seizing private property or land to protest.” Responses to this question reflect three things. First, the question forms part of a question block where respondents score their approval of a series of contentious actions on a 10-point scale. Responses thus capture beliefs about the general appropriateness of behaviors that citizens use to achieve their objectives. Second, scores reflect the “response style” of an individual, meaning the tendency to give extreme or moderate answers. Third, the specific question asks respondents to evaluate the sanctity of property. Can private property rights be sacrificed to achieve other goals? This paper attempts to isolate this latter aspect. To do so, I use principal components analysis (PCA) to create an index of general attitudes toward protest and then use this index in a first-stage regression to separate the dependent variable of interest. PCA is a superior technique to the addition of controls in an OLS regression because it captures underlying attitudes toward protest behaviors and response styles, rather than opinions about any single type of contentious action.

In choosing how to construct an index of general protest attitudes, the goal is to capture the common determinants of protest approval. Therefore, I include three questions about attitudes toward disruptive or illegal protest: seizing property (AmericasBarometer question *e14*), blocking roads (*e15*), and organizing to overthrow the government (*e3*). I also include three questions on general approval of legal protests: past protest participation (*protest*),<sup>2</sup> legal protests (*e5*), and

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<sup>2</sup>The phrasing of the protest participation question has varied with the AmericasBarometer wave (*prot1*, *prot2*,



legal protests by groups that criticize the government (*d2*).

Applying the method of principal components, all variables load positively for the first component. This is consistent with the hypothesis that the primary driving factor behind opinions about all the protest variables is an overall stance toward contentious actions. I refer to this index as *protest approval*. This common first component explains roughly a third of the variation in opinions about various protest behaviors in the Latin America wide data. PCA analysis disaggregated by country and by year produces similar results. Table 1 presents the variable loadings.

**Table 1: Principal Components**

	(1)	(2)
	<i>Protest Approval</i>	<i>Legality of Protest</i>
Property seizure	0.5829	-0.2083
Government overthrow	0.5289	-0.2347
Blocking roads	0.5666	0.0369
Protest participation	0.1172	0.2618
Legal protests	0.1691	0.6549
Legal protests by critical groups	0.1311	0.6346
Observations	86133	86133
Proportion explained	0.3232	0.2296

Results shown for pooled unweighted AmericasBarometer 2006, 2008, 2010.

The second component loads negatively for illegal behaviors—seizing property and plotting to overthrow the government—and positively for less disruptive protest behaviors—including peaceful protests and protest participation. Blocking roads falls squarely in the middle with a loading near zero. The second component appears to capture an underlying attitude toward lawbreaking and violence. This is similar to the index of illegality of protest behaviors constructed by Opp (1990), which distinguishes between “norms of protest that refer to the felt obligation to contribute to the provision of a public good by legal means and norms of violence that refer to justification of illegal protest actions.” While the first component captures general approval of protest, the second—what I call *legality of protest*—seems to align with a stance toward illegal behaviors.

*prot3*). To create a comparable measure across waves, I created an indicator variable *protest* that codes those who have participated in a protest in the past twelve months as “1” (participants) and those who have not as “0” (nonparticipants). This coding is consistent with *prot3* from the 2010 wave. However, the 2006 and 2008 wave asked respondents if they participated in a protest “a few times,” “almost never” or “never” in the past twelve months. To create a consistent measure, I code respondents who said that they participated “a few times” in the past 12 months as participants and those who say that they “never” or “almost never” participate as nonparticipants. After comparing the proportions of participants in years when respondents were asked the binary question, I determined that respondents who state that they “almost never” participated in a protest in the past year most likely had not participated in the year in question. Nonetheless, the results are robust to an alternative coding where those who “almost never” participate in a protest are treated as participants.

To isolate attitudes toward property seizure, I take the residuals of a regression of *protest approval*, the first component, on approval of property seizure as protest (*e14*). The intuition is that the residuals capture the extent to which respondents differ from their individual baseline attitudes toward protest in their reactions to property seizure. This also accounts for any difference between individuals or subgroups in their response style. *Protest approval* explains 68 percent of the variation in property seizure attitudes, almost double that accounted for in the PCA. In other words, individuals' overall stance to protest accounts for most of the differences between respondents. The remaining variation represents how an individual's response differs when considering the seizure of private land or property. I use these residuals, a variable I call *property seizure*, as the dependent variable for the remaining analysis. I also create a dependent variable from the residuals of a regression that controls for *protest approval* and *legality of protest*. Yet the second component is only included as a robustness check and is not shown because it explains little of the overall variation in property attitudes (only 2 percent) and does not affect the findings. Table 2 shows the first-stage regression coefficients.

**Table 2: First Stage Results**

	(1)	(2)
	<i>Property seizure as protest</i>	<i>Property seizure as protest</i>
Protest approval	1.230** (441.68)	2.727** (108.68)
Legality of protest		-1.500** (-60.04)
Constant	2.312** (597.88)	2.305** (600.19)
Observations	88452	86133
Adjusted $R^2$	0.6880	0.7000

*t* statistics in parentheses, \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.001$

The main criticism of the dependent variable operationalization is that the AmericasBarometer question does not specify if land or property seizures involve the poor attempting to secure housing, agricultural land or other basic necessities. This paper hypothesizes that most Latin American respondents associate land and property seizures with actions by the poor and landless. In other words, property seizures involve a distributive claim. However, this is not explicitly stated in the survey question and issues of the contextual specificity of measurement validity arise. For instance, Argentine respondents may associate private property seizures with workers temporarily taking a factory. Brazilians may conjure up images of the Landless Peasants' Movement, while Venezuelans envision urban land grabs by Chávez's allies. These differences should be captured in the first-stage regression, however. Politically motivated actions, like a factory taking, should influence opinions of protest generally, rather than specific attitudes toward the taking of property. Even if survey

respondents do not specifically consider a particular class actor, the question and research design elicits the weight they place on the property seizure, rather than the appropriateness of the political action undertaken. Moreover, if national context muddles the analysis, its main effect should be to attenuate the estimated association between redistributive beliefs and property attitudes. Country fixed effects also partially capture contextual differences in property claims.

This paper uses several strategies to confirm the construct validity of the dependent variable. First, I conduct a regression analysis using *protest approval* as a dependent variable. If the principal component captures general opinions on contentious behavior, then several variables should increase support of protest, like left-right political identification and support of the government. These indeed are strong predictors of protest attitudes. Meanwhile, as illustrated below, these are not significant predictors of property seizure attitudes. A second test of construct validity comes in section four. If property seizure attitudes reflect threats to property, they should positively correlate with land invasions. Using available subnational dataset of land invasions, I confirm a strong positive correlation between land invasions and property seizure attitudes, controlling for other possible explanatory variables. As a further check, my ongoing research includes the same AmericasBarometer protest question block and adds a question that asks respondents to rank their approval “of seizing private property or land to secure housing” in a survey of 1000 residents in Bogotá, Colombia. Together, these checks increase my confidence in the validity of the PCA analysis and dependent variable construction.

***Explanatory Variables.*** The AmericasBarometer asks a battery of questions about socioeconomic status and political views that permit an examination of how material interests, redistributive beliefs, and socialization align with views on property seizure. Summary statistics and complete variable descriptions are included in the Appendix.

First, to test a theory of material interests, respondents directly report their monthly household income (*income*), measured in categories on roughly a logarithmic scale. The hypothesis is that wealthy respondents are more likely to own property and less likely to have seized property in informal settlements. The coefficient on property seizure should be negative, indicating weaker support for property seizures as household income rises. Similarly, women are less likely to own property so they may be more supportive of property seizures. A positive coefficient on *gender* indicates that women are more support of property seizure than men. Living in an urban area (*urban*) also may suggest greater support for property seizure due to the more frequent occurrence of land occupations. Finally, education is likely associated with less support for property seizure. Education may proxy for personal income, given imperfect self-reported income measures. Beyond a direct income effect, more educated respondents also have different socialization experiences and likely favor greater collective protection of property. I thus expect a negative coefficient on *education*, though the channel is unclear.

Several other socioeconomic factors may have weaker associations with property attitudes. For instance, older respondents (*age*) may be less supportive of property seizure, given their greater

probability of owning property and concerns with securing it for future generations. Respondents with more children may be more supportive of property seizures. Family size (*children*) proxies for income, as it indicates a lower per head income for the same household level.

Second, I use several measures of political attitudes. The AmericasBarometer asks respondents if they believe that the state, rather than the individual, is responsible for society’s welfare (*collectivism*) and if they believe that the government should implement firm policies to reduce inequality (*egalitarianism*). The hypothesis is that respondents who believe in a strong government role are less likely to support individual actions to claim property. Relatedly, respondents evaluate how much the government does to combat poverty (*poverty effort*) and how the economy fares (*consumer confidence*).<sup>3</sup> The intuition is that those who believe that the economy is in rough shape and that the government does not fight inequality should be inclined to support property seizures as a way to address societal injustice through other means.

Lastly, a respondent’s education, geographic location, and political interest provide rough measures of an individual’s socialization. *Education* and *urban* should have negative coefficients if they socialize individuals to respect reciprocal property protection. AmericasBarometer also asks respondents how interested they are in politics with higher scores marking greater apathy (*political apathy*). The prediction is that apathetic citizens are less fierce opponents of property takings.

### III. Individual Level Determinants of Property Attitudes

This section presents the results of an individual-level analysis modeling property seizure attitudes, socioeconomic characteristics, and political beliefs. Given the continuous nature of the dependent variable, I use a simple OLS regression with robust standard errors.<sup>4</sup> I include country and time fixed effects. The coefficient, say for income, thus represents how differing income within a given country-year affects attitudes toward property seizures. Table 3 presents the central results.

I hypothesized that some of the variation in property seizure attitudes could be explained by proxies for the material interests of a respondent. Household income and education are statistically significant predictors of weaker support for property seizures. In both cases, a one standard deviation increase (roughly one additional logarithmic income category or four years of additional education) decreases support for property seizures by roughly one point. These results are robust across country, despite different national baselines, as shown for a select group of countries in Figure 1.<sup>5</sup> The five lines represent mean support for property seizures for each of the ten income categories in a range of countries—Uruguay and Argentina (two rich countries with above the line support for property seizures), Bolivia (a country with a middle-income sample and well-predicted support

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<sup>3</sup>Note that for consistency’s sake, *consumer confidence* is recoded from the Americas Barometer question so that higher numbers indicate a more positive evaluation of the economy.

<sup>4</sup>The regression results presented used listwise deletion of data with missing entries. However, the results are similar regardless of whether data are deleted listwise or multiply imputed.

<sup>5</sup>A puzzling exception is Peru where there is a positive correlation between income and support for property seizures.

**Table 3: Property Seizure Attitudes**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	SES	Political	SES and Political	Interaction
Urban	0.0045 (0.52)		-0.0153 (-1.15)	-0.0156 (-1.17)
Education	-0.0119** (-11.09)		-0.0134** (-8.45)	-0.0135** (-8.52)
Income	-0.0133** (-6.25)		-0.0075* (-2.52)	-0.0076* (-2.56)
Age	0.0003 (1.04)		0.0001 (0.25)	0.001 (0.25)
Gender	0.0369** (4.39)		0.0294* (2.59)	0.0300* (2.64)
Children	0.0039* (2.20)		0.0043 (1.65)	0.0046 (1.74)
Collectivism		-0.0343** (-8.75)	-0.0357** (-8.57)	-0.0347** (-8.34)
Egalitarianism		-0.0324** (-8.16)	-0.0345** (-8.16)	-0.0407** (-9.14)
Right-wing		0.0027 (1.25)	0.0026 (1.13)	0.0025 (1.07)
Consumer confidence		0.0606** (9.53)	0.0668** (9.90)	0.0661** (7.14)
Political apathy		0.0515** (9.15)	0.0434** (7.17)	0.0432** (7.14)
Poverty effort		0.0459** (14.40)	0.0406** (12.05)	0.0235** (4.61)
Social deficit				0.0846** (4.43)
Observations	74053	43720	39327	39327
Adjusted $R^2$	0.0210	0.0356	0.0409	0.0406

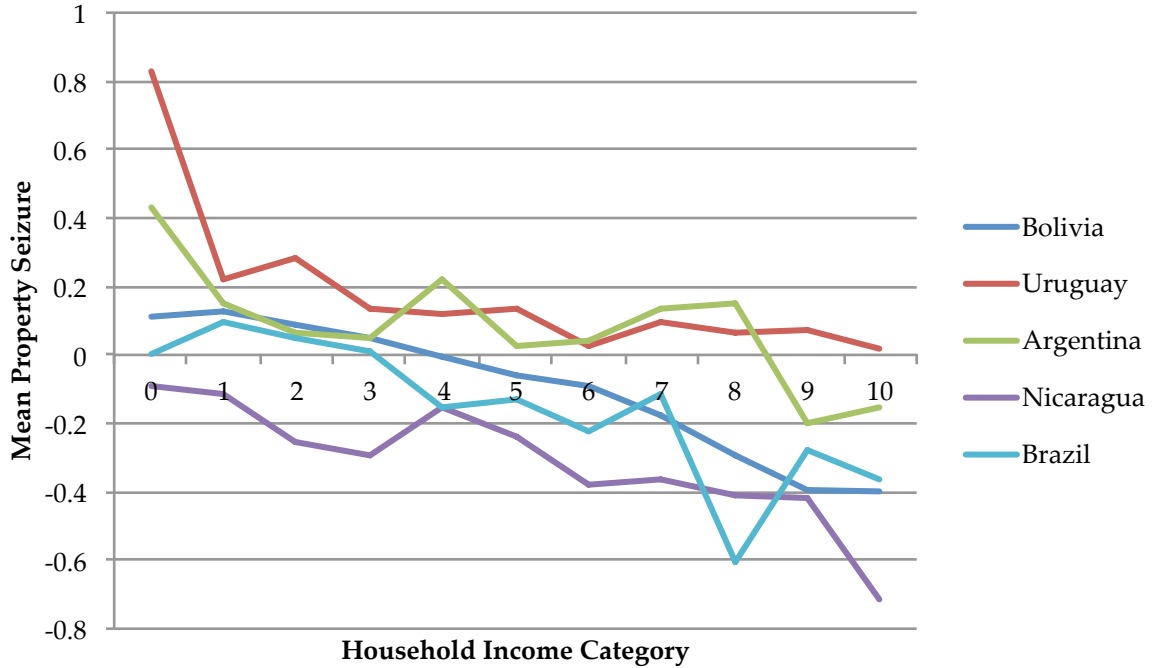
*t* statistics for robust standard errors in parentheses

All estimators include year and country dummies.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.001$

for property seizures), and Nicaragua and Brazil (two countries with relatively low-income sample populations and below average support for property seizures). Despite the divergent country profiles and baseline attitudes, Figure 1 underscores the estimated probability of supporting property seizures declines at a relatively consistent rate across income groups. Within reasonable confidence, the results allow us to reject the hypothesis that the poor are more protective of their property rights because a loss is more traumatic at low income levels or property is more vulnerable when seized.

**Figure 1: Property Seizure Attitudes by Household Income (Select Countries)**



Further evidence for the material interest theory comes from the coefficient on *gender*. Women on average are more supportive of property seizures. However, older and urban residents take no more averse positions on property seizures. One explanation is that age and urban residence has a contradictory effect: older and urban respondents both are more likely to 1) have participated in a land invasion (given more frequent urban invasions mid-century) and 2) to be property owners at present. These findings thus still largely support the hypothesis that respondents who are less likely to own, or own less, property on average take a more sympathetic stance to property seizures.

The results present a surprising picture of how political attitudes relate to support for property seizures. First, left-right identification is an insignificant predictor of attitudes toward property seizure. This may evidence the declining salience of unidimensional political identifications or the significant clustering at the center of the political spectrum in some countries (Dosek, 2011; Seligson, 2007). There are country exceptions to this regional finding. Disaggregated regressions

show that in countries with well-defined party systems, namely Chile and Uruguay, identification with the political left is associated with more support for property seizure. Second, political hopes for state intervention to guarantee citizen welfare and reduce inequality are associated with less support for property seizure. This aligns with a theory in which individuals who want to see a more formal system of redistribution are intolerant of informal means of achieving that system. Third, and most surprisingly, respondents with a rosy outlook of the economy and state poverty reduction efforts are *more* likely to support property seizures. This provides disconfirming evidence of the hypothesis that individuals support property seizures as a correction to a flagging economy and insufficient social policies.

A tentative resolution to these seemingly disjunctive political findings centers on the interaction of redistributive beliefs. A refined hypothesis is that individuals who both believe that the government should reduce inequality and that it does not should register greater support for property seizures, even if holding these beliefs independently has divergent effects. In other words, the key issue may be whether individuals perceive a *social deficit*—meaning a gap between their ideals and reality—that could be corrected through informal redistributive claims. To test this refinement, I create a dummy variable for individuals who have high levels of support for redistributive policies and believe the government does little to reduce poverty. Indeed, the coefficient is positive for individuals who perceive a disjuncture between their ideals and government social policy. As further confirmation, I test the interaction between *egalitarianism* and *poverty effort* and find a significant negative coefficient (not shown). In other words, individuals who think the government should and is reducing inequality are less supportive of property seizures. Those who think the government should and is not reducing inequality are more inclined to accept takings.

Finally, the findings indicate limited support for a theory of socialization. Remarkably, I do not find effects from living in an urban area. This may be explained by the fact that both rural and urban areas have experienced significant land invasions. Yet it goes against any theory of “modern” socialization of property attitudes. Education and interest in politics, even when controlling for income, do associate with reduced support for property seizures. Yet it is challenging to know exactly what these variables capture. Education and political interest may be acting as additional proxies for individual income, given that self-reported income is often inaccurate and income is reported at the household-level. Alternatively, education and political interest may inculcate (or attract people with) greater commitments to collective values like property protection.

The regression results can be challenged due to the small magnitude of the explained variance. A low  $R^2$  is a common problem in survey analysis and most likely reflects significant measurement error of the left-hand side variable. To place the model in context, socioeconomic variables are better predictors of property attitudes than many other variables more commonly explained by income, education or gender like church attendance, left-right political orientation, and authoritarian attitudes. Thus, the model seems to have significant explanatory power in light of noisy data and indirect measures of property seizure.

One question that arises is whether national-level income has a parallel relationship to individual-level income. In other words, are wealthier countries less tolerant of property takings? While hardly conclusive, there is a negative link between subjective support for property rights and average national income, as shown in Figure 2 in the Appendix (the correlation is -0.3767). Average income varies by country and thus contributes to a negative relationship between national income (here measured by the average income of survey respondents) and property seizure support. This is consistent with the idea that absolute income, rather than relative income comparisons, impact property beliefs. A natural extension of the argument is that as countries become wealthier—and therefore, individuals become wealthier—support for property seizure declines.

Despite the link between average income and property seizure, some puzzling trends stand out in the national-level data. The region’s richest countries, Chile and Uruguay, and the region’s poorest countries, Haiti and Guatemala, all have above-average support for property seizures. Likewise, some of the region’s poorest countries, Nicaragua and Paraguay, and one of the richest, Venezuela, have strongly negative mean attitudes toward property seizure. One explanation is that most of the variation in the property seizure variable comes within country, rather than across countries. Across countries, property seizure support only varies by 0.4 standard deviations. Across individuals, the range is almost ten standard deviations. This means that 60 percent of the variation in attitudes toward property seizure comes from within country attitudinal differences. Differences between countries are comparatively small. Nonetheless, national historical legacies likely play a key role in explaining national deviations and are poorly explained by standard controls like GDP per capita and inequality.

#### **IV. A Subnational Analysis: Land Invasions and Property Attitudes in Brazil**

This section analyzes the relationship between experiences of land invasions and attitudes toward property seizure. The hypothesis is that citizens who live in areas with frequent land invasions are more likely to sympathize with the taking of property. I expect a positive correlation between invasions and property seizure support if the dependent variable constructed through PCA analysis captures attitudes toward property takings. In addition, this section tests if land invasions polarize public attitudes. While the poor voice stronger support for property seizures due to the direct benefits they receive, wealthy landowners suffer. The beneficiaries of property seizures, as well as those who support the claims of the poor, likely form a larger portion of the population and thus evidence an increase in mean support for land seizures. But I predict more extreme positions by the poor and rich as land invasions pick up.

There are no comprehensive data on land invasions across Latin America. However, Hidalgo et al. (2010) have developed a municipal-level database of 5,299 rural land invasions from 1988 to 2004 in Brazil.<sup>6</sup> The frequency of land invasions varies significantly across space in Brazil, though the

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<sup>6</sup>Brazil’s Pastoral Land Commission, which collected the data on land invasions used by Hidalgo et al. (2010), defines land occupations as “collective actions by landless families that by, entering rural properties, claim lands that



vast majority of municipalities never register an invasion. This allows for a preliminary test of the hypothesis that residents who live in areas with a history of land invasions and greater exposure to the events are more likely to support property seizures. While Hidalgo et al. (2010) measure land invasions at the municipal level, I create a state-level variable that measures the average number of land invasions per municipality.<sup>7</sup> Few municipalities surveyed in the AmericasBarometer directly have experienced land invasions. Creating a municipal-level measure would allow a handful of municipalities to drive the results. Instead, by using a state-level variable, the intuition is that residents who live in states with frequent land invasions are more likely to be conscious of the distributive incidence and dynamics of land invasions.

The socioeconomic and political variables have the expected effects on attitudes toward property seizure in Brazil. Consistent with the regional results, education and income reduce support for property seizure and have coefficients of similar magnitude to the regional results. These effects coincide with Hidalgo et al. (2010)’s finding that income shocks, measured by changes in rainfall, cause the rural poor to invade and occupy large landholdings. If income shocks (or more generally, rural poverty) drive invasions, the poor should be more sympathetic to land occupations. Gender and urban residence do not reach statistical significance. Given the prominence of rural land invasions, I expected rural residents to be more supportive of property seizure. One possibility is that interconnected media markets negate any difference in opinions based on living in a rural area. Another possibility is that, as in the rest of the region, many urban areas grew through illegal settlement and therefore also may support property seizures. All the coefficients on political variables have the same signs, although the coefficients on *collectivism* and *political apathy* lose significance at the national level.

As expected, support for property seizure is associated with a higher frequency of land invasions in a state. Given the combination of state and individual level data, all model specifications include robust standard errors clustered by state, as well as time fixed effects.<sup>8</sup> A standard deviation increase in the number of land invasions—or roughly one additional land invasion per municipality—is associated with an increase in support for property seizure of 0.10 points. The causal arrow is ambiguous in this relationship. Support for property seizure may spur residents to seize land, while experiences of land seizures also may cause beneficiaries and similarly situated respondents to view property seizures more favorably. States with higher poverty incidence show more support of property seizure, though inequality does not have a statistically significant impact. Table 4 presents the regression results.

Beyond the average effects, I expect land invasions to polarize opinions toward property seizure. To test this hypothesis, I create a new dependent variable, *property seizure polarization*, which is

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do not fulfill the social function.” Critically, the data set does not include urban land occupations.

<sup>7</sup>As a robustness check, I also measure the number of land invasions per capita by state and find similar results.

<sup>8</sup>Methodologically, an alternative approach would be to develop a hierarchical linear model of property seizure attitudes. A future version of this paper may use an HLM model, as it provides more accurate parameter estimates at both levels.

**Table 4: Brazil Subnational Results**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	SES	SES and Political	SES and State	Full State
Urban	-0.0025 (-0.02)	-0.0169 (-0.12)	0.0319 (0.27)	0.0162 (0.11)
Education	-0.0354** (-5.71)	-0.0294** (-4.12)	-0.0341** (-5.65)	-0.0279** (-4.07)
Income	-0.0560** (-3.72)	-0.0617** (-4.41)	-0.0565** (-3.70)	-0.0622** (-4.35)
Gender	0.0144 (0.38)	0.0178 (0.44)	0.0131 (0.35)	0.0160 (0.39)
Age	-0.0009 (-0.99)	-0.0016 (-1.06)	-0.0011 (-1.04)	-0.0016 (-1.00)
Children	0.0017 (0.13)	0.0073 (0.50)	0.0042 (0.31)	0.0010 (0.62)
Collectivism		-0.0311 (-1.43)		-0.0317 (-1.44)
Egalitarianism		-0.0377* (-2.53)		-0.0342* (-2.31)
Right-wing		0.0133 (1.04)		0.0109 (0.82)
Political apathy		0.0240 (0.72)		0.0207 (0.64)
Poverty effort		0.0385 (1.76)		0.0361 (1.68)
Consumer confidence		0.0552 (1.68)		0.0573 (1.76)
State land occupations			0.0801** (5.29)	0.0857** (6.20)
State gini			1.1066 (1.40)	0.5490 (1.04)
State poverty incidence			-0.0063* (-2.82)	-0.0060* (-2.45)
Observations	3213	2990	3213	2990
Adjusted $R^2$	0.025	0.0358	0.0398	0.0387

$t$  statistics in parentheses, \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.001$

All results include state and year dummies with clustered robust standard errors; constant not shown.

the variance of attitudes toward property seizure at the state level. Indeed, states that have experienced more invasions also have more polarized attitudes toward property seizure. A one standard deviation increase in the number of land invasions increases the variance of attitudes by 5 percent.<sup>9</sup>

The results confirm that experiences of land invasions are associated with greater sympathy for property seizures and greater attitudinal polarization. One criticism of these findings is that they rely on the unique Brazilian context. The Landless Peasants' Movement (*Movimento Sem Terra*, MST) has publicized and politicized land seizures in Brazil to an extent largely unparalleled in recent Latin American history. Yet the magnitude of the estimated relationships are similar, if not more conservative, than the regional results. Another critique of the results comes from the fact that states with high rates of land invasions may differ in other important ways that independently impact property attitudes. While I attempt to account for these differences through the inclusion of state-and individual-level controls and state-clustered errors, the specification still may confound state characteristics that determine both property seizures and societal attitudes.

## V. Conclusion

Unequal land ownership has been a central feature of Latin American history and remains prevalent in many parts of the region today. The results presented in this paper suggest that poor and less educated respondents voice greater support for property seizure. This finding supports a theory in which property attitudes are shaped by material interests, given that the poor tend to benefit from land takings in Latin America. Attitudes toward redistribution and government performance have complex relations with views on property seizure. Individuals who perceive a social deficit in the government's social policies do incline to greater support for property seizures.

In sum, this paper makes two contributions to the literature on property rights. First, I stress the importance of disaggregating the types of threats to private property rights. The study of property rights has focused on government expropriation risk and glossed over the garden variety threat of property seizure by private parties. Yet individuals do not invest if the fruits of their investments are seized by others, be they private or state actors. Importantly, I am not claiming that support for property seizure is a perfect proxy for the threats to property in a given time or country. For example, Chile has the highest average rates of support for land seizure in the region, but more than likely has the lowest contemporary rates and ranks highly on measures of formal and effective property rights protection. The attitudinal divergence most likely reflects the country's history of land invasions in the 1960s—particularly given that age is a significant predictor of support—and not contemporary threats. As such, the paper's basic point is that private abridgments of property can be as important as state ones and merit independent analysis.

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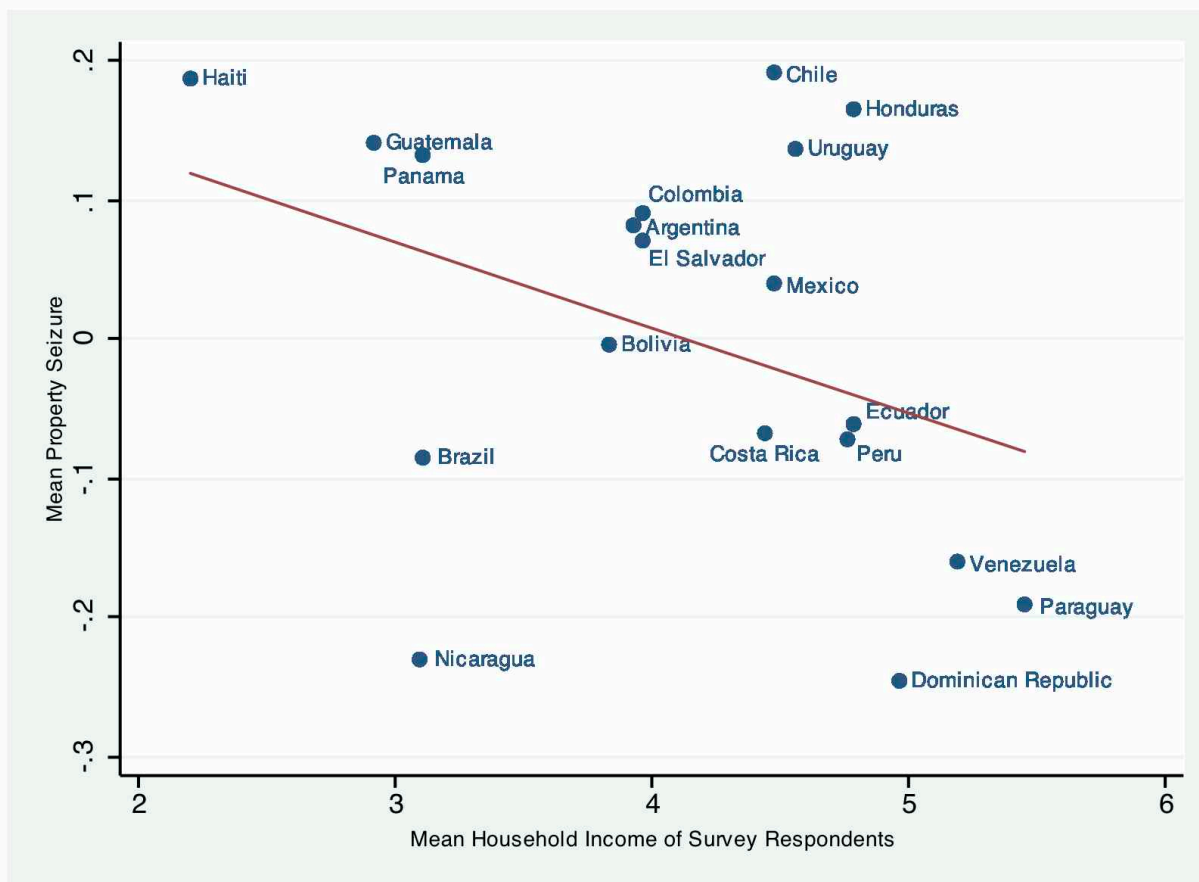
<sup>9</sup>Admittedly, I look at the overall variance, rather than the explained variance. It is possible that the variance of responses is elevated in states with higher poverty rates, which also tend to have more land invasions, because there may be more measurement error if the poor are less certain of their responses.

Second, numerous studies find an association between economic growth and property rights security. But few offer empirical evidence of how property rights improve growth or disentangle the relationship. The findings of this paper suggest a possible attitudinal channel for the relationship between growth and property rights security. As individual income increases, people tend to voice greater condemnation of affronts to private property. This is consistent with their demanding higher levels of protection for property rights as wealth increases. It is possible then that economic growth at least in part causes, rather than is caused by, secure property rights.

Third, while it is in many ways unsurprising that wealthy individuals are pro-property rights, this paper highlights that social class position alone does not exhaust the determinants of property attitudes. Beliefs about inequality and the social deficit that a society faces also play a role in how citizens view the claims involved in property seizures. A deeper understanding of popular support for the actions of land invaders—and how they relate to evaluations of distributive justice— helps clarify the political dynamics of property rights enforcement in Latin America. This paper suggests that popular opinion and the workings of the formal redistributive system may constrain property rights protection. My ongoing research probes how popular support for non-enforcement of laws affects enforcement choices. Much work remains in understanding how norms toward property rights develop, change, and impact economic growth prospects.

## Appendix

Figure 2: Property Seizure Attitudes by Country



Results shown for unweighted country means from AmericasBarometer 2006, 2008, 2010.

**Table 5: Variable Definitions**

	<i>Definition</i>	<i>LAPOP Code</i>
<b>Socioeconomic Variables</b>		
Urban	Recoded as a dummy that indicates if the person lives in an urban area (1) or a rural area (0).	ur
Education	Years of schooling completed.	ed
Income	Monthly household income measured by ten categories increasing on a logarithmic scale.	q10
Age	Years completed.	q2
Gender	Indicates a female (1) or male (0) respondent.	q1
Children	Number of children.	q12
<b>Political Variables</b>		
Collectivism	Belief that the state, rather than individuals, should guarantee well-being, coded on a 7-point scale where 7 indicates total agreement.	ros2
Egalitarianism	Belief that the state should implement firm policies to reduce inequality, coded on a 7-point scale where 7 indicates total agreement.	ros4
Right-wing	Self-identification on a political spectrum from the left to right, coded on a 10-point scale where 10 indicates the farthest right.	l1
Consumer confidence	Evaluation of the economic situation of the country, recoded on a 5-point scale where 5 indicates a very positive evaluation of the economy.	soct1
Political apathy	Interest in politics, coded on a 4-point scale where 4 indicates no interest in politics.	pol1
Poverty effort	Evaluation of the extent of effort the government uses to combat poverty, coded on a 7-point scale where 7 indicates a lot of effort.	n1
Rights protection	Evaluation of the extent to which the government protects citizens' basic rights, coded on a 7-point scale where 7 indicates a lot of effort.	b3
Social deficit	Dummy variable that codes for individuals who believe that the government should implement policies to reduce inequality ( $ros4 > 3$ ) and is not exerting significant effort ( $n1 < 4$ ).	
<b>Subnational Variables (Brazil)</b>		
Land invasions	From Hidalgo et al. (2010), average number of rural land occupations per municipality by state.	
Poverty incidence	From IBGE Pesquisa de OrDamentos Familiares 2003, percent of households below the poverty line.	
State gini	From IBGE Pesquisa de OrDamentos Familiares 2003.	
Property seizure variance	Variance of property seizure residuals.	

**Table 6: Summary Statistics**

	<i>Mean (unweighted)</i>	<i>1st Quartile</i>	<i>3rd Quartile</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Property seizure (residuals)	0.000	-5.398	6.346	1.150
Socioeconomic Variables				
Urban	1.348	0	1	0.533
Education	9.144	6	12	4.739
Income	4.123	2	6	4.123
Age	38.60	25	49	16.857
Gender	1.514	0	1	0.500
Children	2.357	0	3	2.817
Political Variables				
Collectivism	5.585	5	7	1.595
Egalitarianism	5.717	5	7	1.584
Right-wing	5.805	4	7	4.179
Consumer confidence	3.424	3	4	0.927
Political apathy	2.962	2	4	0.965
Poverty effort	3.685	2	5	1.891
Rights protection	3.738	3	5	2.874
Subnational Variables (Brazil)				
Land invasions	1.050	0.541	1.021	0.937
Poverty incidence	35.41	26.60	39.07	9.998
State gini	0.468	0.450	0.490	0.269
Property seizure variance	1.590	1.318	1.918	0.4329

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