

Rebel party stigmatization: measuring the political price of a rebel past

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Abstract

The long-term electoral viability of rebel parties depends, in part, on acceptance of them as legitimate political actors. Yet civilians often punish perpetrators of past violence at the ballot box and conflict generates long-term antipathies that can impede democratic integration of former rebels. This paper offers a theoretical conceptualization of rebel party stigmatization and uses an experimental approach in Colombia, informed by interviews on the ground, to clarify the conditions under which stigmatization can be a relevant barrier for rebel parties. First, in semi-structured interviews, rebel party leaders and members uniformly claim that civilian stigmatization of the party is pervasive. Second, we design an endorsement experiment to measure rebel party stigmatization, whether the penalty is distinct from assessments based on ideology or platform, and for whom stigma is strongest. Civilians penalize policies and statements endorsed by the rebel party even when compared to endorsement by ideologically similar parties, indicative of stigmatization. Such rebel party stigmatization is especially strong among two types of citizens. First, citizens who otherwise share a similar ideology with the rebel party but rejected violence are the most stigmatizing, due to a political victimization effect. Second, citizens who did not live in communities with substantial FARC governance and presence are more stigmatizing—those who lived in rebelocracies do not penalize rebel parties but also do not support them strongly.

Keywords rebel party, stigma, political reintegration, political victimization, postconflict

The political inclusion of former insurgent organizations has become a crucial aspect of peace processes (Jarstad & Sisk, 2008; Manning et al., 2023; Marshall & Ishiyama, 2016; Söderberg Kovacs, 2008). Democratic political participation of former insurgent parties provides ex-combatants with a peaceful channel to address their political grievances (De Zeeuw, 2007). Yet whether rebel parties can viably become long-term political contenders partly depends on civilian acceptance of them as legitimate political actors, just as rebels depend on their legitimacy among the population during wartime (Mao, 2000; McWeeney et al., 2025; Stewart, 2018).

Some rebel parties have garnered substantial electoral support, suggesting that civilians can sometimes legitimize rebel parties despite their violent past. However, in contexts where rebel parties struggle to attract votes, conventional narratives often point to their violent past as an insurmountable political liability. The violent atrocities and illegal activities committed by rebel groups during war, media coverage of rebel violence, and government counterinsurgency strategies are all bound to shape public perceptions of rebel parties and their future legitimacy as political actors.

Drawing on stigma theory from social psychology and the concept of political stigma in political science, we theorize that rebel parties can face systematic rejection beyond normal political competition due to their “spoiled identity” from violent origins. Rebel party stigmatization, which we define as the attribution of a tainted political identity based on rebels’ violent past, leading civilians to consider them inherently illegitimate political actors, is an important source of rejection to understand. Since stigma is defined by something rebel parties cannot change—their violent histories—stigmatization can limit the extent to which rebel parties can plausibly shape civilian preferences towards them and obtain sufficient support to be electorally viable.

In practice, it is challenging to empirically distinguish the extent to which civilians’ rejection of a rebel party relates to its violent past as opposed to its ideology or platform. Building a strong evidence base to theorize civilian acceptance or rejection of rebel parties requires teasing out conflict-related stigmatization from rejection of policies or ideologies.

We take up these questions in Colombia, focusing on the democratic integration of the rebel group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and their successor political party, now known

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as Comunes. The political transition of FARC is a major, recent episode of postconflict democratic transition and an opportunity to explore how to strengthen transitions toward peace more generally. We use qualitative interviews and a survey-based endorsement experiment to investigate whether citizens' rejection of the Comunes party is partly due to "stigmatization" produced by the party's rebel past, independent of the party's ideology or platform.

Semi-structured interviews with former combatants and party members revealed that party insiders blame "stigmatization" for their broad rejection. These interviews informed the design of our survey-based endorsement experiment, implemented both in the field and online, and across localities that vary in terms of rurality and conflict experience.

From the experiment we find that, on average, respondents penalize policies endorsed by the Comunes party even after experimentally controlling for policy content and endorsement by other ideologically similar (leftist) parties. This suggests that participants' penalization of Comunes is driven by stigmatization that is distinct from differences in policy preferences. Moreover, stigmatization of Comunes is related to two important types of proximity to FARC: wartime proximity and ideological proximity. First, those who did not experience rebel group governance, but only violence or violent-portrayals of FARC are more likely to stigmatize the Comunes party. Second, while those who are ideologically distant from Comunes reject Comunes-endorsed positions in a manner that is similar to their rejection of other leftist parties' endorsement, the strongest repudiation of Comunes endorsements per se comes from civilians who are most ideologically aligned with the rebel party. We interpret this as a "political victimization" effect: those who rejected violence but shared leftist ideology had long been treated as guilty by ideological association.

The conflict-related penalty that rebel parties face, particularly from ideologically like-minded citizens, is an understudied but potentially important barrier to the democratic inclusion of former insurgent organizations. Despite the broad emphasis on the legacies of conflict in terms of victims of violence, our findings suggest that there are other types of barriers beyond direct exposure to violence for which people may penalize these new groups.

Acceptance and rejection of rebel parties

Existing scholarship on support for rebel parties has focused on explaining why some populations choose to vote for them despite their violent past. Scholars have identified sources of rebel party success that relate to their capacity to perform party functions and voter perceptions of their strengths and policy positions (Daly, 2022; Ishiyama & Batta, 2011; Ishiyama & Widmeier, 2020; Sindre, 2016; Zaks, 2025). This work on understanding when civilians are willing to cast votes for rebel parties is important, seeing as voting is crucial for rebel party viability. However, voting patterns cannot capture a more fundamental tolerance of rebel parties as political contenders, or the conditions under which voters penalize rebel parties because of their past.

Cross-nationally, at least one out of every three rebel parties receives low electoral support despite actively campaigning and participating in elections (Curiel, 2023). Lack of electoral support, however, is a poor measure of a potential conflict-related penalty, or stigma, because it is difficult to distinguish whether

citizens reject rebel parties' platforms, their past, both, or make some other political calculations altogether. No work has, to our knowledge, attempted to theorize or measure the magnitude and conditionality of said stigmatization. Thus we currently do not know the extent to which voter rejection of rebel parties' legitimacy is a relevant barrier, or the types of voters most prone to such stigmatization.

Political inclusion as a path for peace has been widespread, in part due to international organizations promoting this approach as effective and normatively desirable (Matanock, 2017). Yet if structural barriers to inclusion exist, like widespread stigmatization, this mechanism to generate peace becomes more tenuous. Rebel parties cannot change their past as rebel groups, and their entrance into politics is not typically contingent on their legitimacy or popularity. Rather, negotiated rebel party inclusion is a function of rebel group capacity, influence of international policy-makers, and expectations of support—not actual support among voters nor acceptance of their inclusion into the political process (Acosta, 2014; Matanock & Staniland, 2018; Söderberg Kovacs & Hatz, 2016).¹

Rebel party stigmatization

The idea that unpopular rebel parties are stigmatized due to their past is a common narrative in political commentary on rebel parties. In Ireland, Sinn Féin was long considered a "pariah party" due to its origin in the IRA (Boyce, 2024). In Spain, parties linked to the Basque separatists ETA have been formally banned and ostracized and more recent off-shoots continue to be described as "terrorist-linked" (The Economist, 2024). In Colombia, former FARC members claim stigmatization is a major barrier to their political participation, as we illustrate below. These interpretations coincide with a body of research showing that the political consequences of violent victimization are substantial and can persist across generations (Balcells, 2012; Lupu & Peisakhin, 2017; Rozenas et al., 2017; Wang, 2021).

Stigmatization is particular because it is a source of rejection that is distinct from differences in terms of policy positions, purely ideological discrepancies, or other types of politically rational cost-benefit calculations. Goffman (1963)'s foundational work in social psychology defines stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" that produces a "spoiled identity", leading to social exclusion and discrimination. In political science, stigma studies have focused on radical right parties in Europe, showing how stigma leads citizens to refrain from supporting them due to social norms, fear of reputational costs, and media portrayals (Alvarez-Benjumea & Valentim, 2024; Ammassari, 2025; Hartevelde et al., 2019b; Valentim, 2024; Van Spanje & Azrout, 2019). The stigmatization of radical right parties stems from their historical affiliations with fascism, while rebel party stigmatization similarly stems from the violent organizations that preceded them.

The histories of rebel parties are bound to shape public perceptions and norms of rejection that constrain their future legitimacy as political actors. During wartime, rebel groups frequently

¹ The Colombian case illustrates this well: the government submitted the 2016 FARC peace agreement to a referendum in an effort to secure public legitimacy. Voters rejected it, in part due to objections to allowing ex-combatants and especially former commanders to participate in politics, but the agreement was still implemented (Dávalos et al., 2018).

use violence to control territory, repel competition, assert governance, and carry out illegal activities to fuel their operations. Civilians living in rebel-free areas are often exposed to rebel violence through extensive media coverage of the harm inflicted by rebels elsewhere in the country. Governments fighting insurgents try to convince citizens of rebels' illegitimacy by defining them as terrorists and portraying their brutality.

Scholarship across postconflict contexts shows that indeed civilians stigmatize individual ex-combatants, associating them with violence, criminality, danger, and radicalism. This stigmatization negatively impacts ex-combatants' social and economic reintegration (Blattman, 2009; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007; McMullin, 2013; Unfried et al., 2022). Fears of ex-combatants as inherently dangerous and concerns about social standing lead people to avoid associating with them. We posit that these same associations identified in the realm of individual-level socioeconomic reintegration are likely to extend to the realm of organization-level political integration.

We define rebel party stigmatization as the attribution of a tainted political identity based on an organization's violent past that marks them as inherently illegitimate political actors. Unlike changes that rebel parties can make in their manifestos, branding, or governance decisions, stigmatization is closely tied to rebel party histories and the subsequent creation of social norms rejecting said histories. Stigma limits the extent to which parties can plausibly shape citizens' preferences towards them, and it can present a substantial barrier to their inclusion in politics if it is widespread enough.

Although in some applications the concept of stigma carries a connotation of being an unjustified attribution resulting in an unfair penalty, our definition does not have these normative implications. Following Valentim (2024)'s definition of political stigma, rebel party stigmatization does not imply that civilian stigma is unjustified, simply that it is the basis of a social norm that limits rebel party acceptance.

The existence of stigmatization in postconflict settings means that some voters' assessments of rebel party proposals, participation in politics, and quality of governance will be tainted by their association of the rebel party with the rebel group. Stigmatization leads voters to penalize rebel party actions and proposals in a way that is separate from the ideological orientation or policy content of these proposals. This makes voters hesitant towards proposals issued by a rebel party even if they might support such proposals when voiced by others.

However, the production, social enforcement, and resulting individual expression of stigma is not necessarily uniform within a population. Communities' experiences with the potential subject of stigma shape the presence and intensity of stigma (Ammassari, 2023; Hartevelde et al., 2019a; Valentim, 2024). Because citizens in the same country can have vastly different experiences of the war, rebel party stigmatization is likely to vary across citizens. Thus, differences in the proximity communities had to rebel groups will lead to different norms of tolerance of former rebels and their postconflict political organization.²

We consider two main types of proximity as central to producing rebel party stigmatization: wartime proximity and ideological proximity.

Wartime proximity

Civilians' wartime proximity to rebel groups is key to how they relate to rebels during war, and thus we should expect it to shape how they relate to ex-rebels after war as well. A vast literature on rebel governance documents a variety of strategies employed by different rebel groups and even finds differences in strategy within factions of the same groups (Balcells, 2017; Kalyvas, 2006; Loyle et al., 2023). In addition to using violence, rebel groups commonly provide public goods, services, and justice to civilian constituents (Stewart, 2018; Weinstein, 2006). Yet many civilians, often the majority of the country, do not live under rebel control and do not have direct contact with rebels at all.

During wartime, some civilians live in what Arjona (2016) terms a rebelocracy wartime order, where rebel groups operate as quasi-states and serve as the main provider of public goods and order. These communities with extensive rebel group governance experience a constant threat of violence from rebels, but they also experience the benefits of certain goods and services. Rebelocracies are not by definition places where civilians are necessarily ideologically minded supporters of rebel groups, although they may be.³

Civilians who lived in rebelocracies may be less likely to stigmatize former rebels and their postconflict political organizations. The communities that experienced rebel governance firsthand are more likely to have a nuanced understanding of former rebels compared to others who only knew the group for its violence. Having personally known rebels or benefited from their governance suggests that they should be less likely to stigmatize them. This intuition aligns with a separate but related literature on the contact hypothesis, which shows how direct interaction with adversaries can diminish prejudice (Allport, 1954; Majumdar, 2026; Paluck et al., 2019). Citizens in rebelocracies may also develop a long-term sense of loyalty to the rebel group or may expect continued material benefits from the rebel party, consistent with findings showing that victorious rebels who govern can continue to draw on wartime loyalties, and that rebel strongholds in some cases expect to be rewarded by postwar rebel parties (Haass & Ottmann, 2022; Liu, 2024a).

However, this does not mean that communities that lived under rebelocracy necessarily support rebel parties ideologically (Kaplan, 2017). Moreover, civilians from former strongholds may resent rebel parties in the postwar period if these parties can no longer deliver the material benefits or authority they once did during wartime. This disappointment may lead to rejection, but it is a type of rejection that is qualitatively distinct from stigma.

In contrast, some civilians experience a much more violent wartime order, marked exclusively by rebel violence, coercion, and predation, where involvement was primarily armed control without the order and provisions of rebelocracy. This population may be more likely to develop purely antagonistic views of rebel groups. Any future party linked to this group is likely associated by

² We should also expect variation in the overall levels of rebel party stigmatization across postconflict contexts and groups. We discuss these theoretical implications further below although cross-national comparisons are beyond the scope of this particular study.

³ It is an open question how much real support for FARC was generated in these communities governed by FARC, and how much the perception of wartime support for FARC in these areas was the result of preference falsification per Matanock and Garcia-Sanchez (2018).

these communities with their violent and predatory experience of the war. As a result, these citizens may be more likely to stigmatize rebel parties, viewing them and any of their future projects as potentially dangerous for them individually, for their community, and for the country, regardless of any agenda or proposal. This intuition aligns with [Balcells \(2012\)](#) and [Lyll et al. \(2013\)](#), who show that civilians in areas of intense rebel violence are less supportive of insurgent-linked actors.

Finally, there are civilians who did not interact directly with the rebel group during the war. These civilians are more likely to form their views of ex-combatants through media coverage, which often focuses on atrocities committed by rebel groups. Similarly, wartime governments must emphasize the threats posed by rebels to ensure that populations not in direct contact understand the gravity of the conflict, remain willing to finance the war effort and provide rebel-fighting incumbents with electoral support. These civilians' lives are also negatively affected by uncertainties created by rebel activity. Although there is limited rebel presence in these areas with respect to the rest of the country, one attack, or fear of an attack, is enough to have lasting effects on these communities.

Ideological proximity

People's political affiliations and communities also differentially shape their wartime experience and should thus differentially influence their postconflict evaluations of rebel parties. Citizens who are ideologically distant from rebel parties are likely to reject any rebel party proposals, regardless of their origin. For example, for very right-wing citizens, there may be little difference between a left-wing party and a left-wing party with rebel origins. Thus, rebel party stigmatization may be less tangible and effectively indistinguishable from lack of support for the substance of rebel party proposals.

On the other hand, citizens who are more ideologically proximate to rebel parties may be more likely to stigmatize rebel parties, leading them to reject proposals and actions by rebel parties that they otherwise support. During wars, there are often citizens who are ideologically proximate to rebel group ideologies and agendas but do not support rebel groups because they reject the use of violence. These differences hinge on normative and moral commitments that non-violent revolutionaries prioritize ([Dahlum et al., 2023](#)). Beyond a strategic disagreement, non-violent movements reject the maximalist positions of violent counterparts, instead prioritizing the values and approaches of effective democratic contestation ([Pinckney, 2020](#)). Such differences create schisms between the violent and non-violent proponents of the cause and tense relationships between these groups.

Beyond this fundamental difference in beliefs about the use of violence, ideologically proximate citizens who do not endorse violence may be harmed by former rebels directly and indirectly. Agenda similarity with violent rebels can be read as being complicit or in coordination with rebel groups. For non-violent groups this can result in being targeted by counterinsurgency efforts regardless of their actual association with rebels. This also hurts non-violent parties' electoral prospects, with broader citizens unwilling to support them because of their ideological proximity to rebels, and rebel groups targeting them for delegitimizing their use of violence. This "political victimization" is likely to lead to

rebel stigmatization. If so, this presents a problem for rebel parties because citizens affiliated with ideologically proximate parties and organizations are a natural constituency for them.

Summary of hypotheses

This framework generates the expectation that stigmatization leads citizens to reject proposals issued by rebel parties, even if they support such proposals from other actors. However, citizens from rebelocracies should be less likely to stigmatize rebel parties due to direct experience with rebel governance, while those from areas of rebel violence or no rebel presence should be more likely to stigmatize them due to associations only with violence and predation. In addition, ideologically proximate citizens may be more likely to stigmatize rebel parties than ideologically distant citizens, as the former face wartime costs from association with violence while the latter already reject rebel parties on ideological grounds.

FARC and postconflict politics in Colombia

The peace process between the Colombian government and FARC presents an opportunity to examine the relevance of rebel party stigmatization. Following a bloody decades-long conflict, in 2016 the FARC guerrilla signed a peace agreement that emphasized a political solution to the conflict. This agreement prompted FARC to create a new political party, currently known as Comunes, to participate in the democratic process.

FARC performance and claims of stigmatization

The prospect of FARC's democratic integration was met with fierce opposition from right-wing parties and elements of the government establishment ([Lafuente, 2016](#)). Despite this opposition, FARC members held high expectations of support in certain localities, especially those that showed support for the peace agreement in the 2016 referendum. Yet, electoral support for its political party has been abysmal. The October 2019 elections were the first regional elections in which the FARC party participated and were considered the first true test of their political viability ([Dickinson, 2019](#)). Appendix Section A presents a closer look at the results of these local elections. As Table A1 shows, the rebel party did not manage to exceed 11% of the total vote share, and in 75% of the municipalities in which they competed, they did not exceed 5% of the vote share.

Although several factors are potential sources of rejection, including their radical Marxist platform, former FARC leaders and party members point to stigmatization as a major factor. Former FARC leader turned Comunes legislator, Senator Julián Gallo (alias Carlos Antonio Lozada), noted the following when asked about Comunes: "The most difficult part has been the stigmatization and accusations from the Government. That has placed us in the eyes of the public in a position contrary to the spirit of the agreement" ([García Altamar, 2022](#)).⁴

⁴ A similar reference to the challenges of stigma was mentioned by ex-FARC Senator Victoria Sandino in a 2022 interview with *El Espectador* ([Lombo, 2022](#)).

These types of declarations and the notion of “stigmatization” are commonly referenced by Comunes members. We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with FARC party insiders prior to the design and implementation of the survey experiment, and 16 of our interviewees referred to the “stigmatization” of the party as the main explanation for their rejection.⁵ One high-level party official noted,

Campaigning is difficult for all parties, but for us, it is especially difficult because of the stigma. People cannot trust us and always want to associate us with the violence from the conflict.⁶

Interviewees discussed how the anti-Comunes stigma was related to the portrayals that traditional media, the government, and opposing parties deployed against the FARC during the war. “It’s been impossible to escape the constant media campaign since during the war,” a party member noted. Another relayed a similar sentiment, “This is the result of a targeted media campaign ... people say they cannot believe people who kidnapped, murdered, used a *collar bomba*.”⁷ Such stigma was described as an obstacle difficult to overcome: “No matter what we do the symbolism and stigma are horrible.”⁸ “Those images stay with people. That doesn’t change easily.”⁹

Indeed, this experience of stigma conveyed by Comunes members is reflected in commentary and public discussion about the rebel party. The prospect of FARC’s political participation was met with skepticism even among supporters of the peace process such as Claudia López, former mayor of Bogotá, who noted that “allowing them to do politics is what stings the most” (Rendon Marulanda, 2016). Other political commentators similarly highlighted the party’s absence of legitimacy and popular trust: “Society does not trust them; they have outstanding debts” (Semana, 2022). While supporting their political incorporation in principle, peace agreement supporters, and even leftists, expressed hesitation about granting FARC legitimacy given their violent past. This is captured well in a reflection by Rodolfo Arango, former militant of the leftist Polo party: “My explicit position is that moral and political responsibility precedes electoral calculations” (Orozco Tascon, 2016).

More conservative public figures and opinion writers have been far less diplomatic about their rejection of ex-FARC’s political incorporation due to their history of violence. “The generosity extended during the signing of the Peace Accord ... allowed those guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity to take seats in the Congress of the Republic” (Henaó Jaramillo, 2021). Responding to a Colombian university’s invitation of a Comunes leader, another media personality noted: “At what point did this country decide that questioning the past of certain figures is more serious than that very past itself? ... I believe in debate. I believe in the clash of ideas. But it is one thing to debate with someone

who thinks differently, and quite another to legitimize a murderer, a kidnapper. ... I refuse to legitimize criminals” (Naranjo, 2026).

These accounts reflect that Comunes continues to carry the symbolic burden of its violent past. This burden appears to be a structural obstacle to their legitimacy and integration into the political landscape.

This pattern is consistent with scholarly work by Fajardo et al. (2019) and Nussio (2018) documenting that FARC ex-combatants specifically report feeling stigmatized. Similarly, Hernández Salazar et al. (2025) find that a sample of Colombian citizens associate FARC ex-combatants with negative words such as “corrupt, vindictive and irresponsible” using implicit association tests. Unfried et al. (2022) quantitatively document feelings of prejudice and fear among Colombian university students, inhibiting their willingness to interact with ex-combatants. Journalistic accounts examining economic and social interactions find comparable patterns of discrimination against former FARC, highlighting that civilian stigmatization poses challenges for reintegration across multiple domains (Romero, 2017).

Wartime orders during the war with FARC

During the war, FARC held a widespread presence across the Colombian territory, imposing different types of wartime order, as documented by Arjona’s (2016) seminal work. This variation in wartime order created markedly different experiences with FARC.

Some Colombians lived in rebelocracies. Here FARC operated as a quasi-state, administering justice, regulating economic activity, providing basic services, and maintaining order through established rules as opposed to arbitrary violence. In these communities, civilians experienced FARC primarily as a governing authority rather than a purely military force. In other areas, FARC operated more as an armed group seeking to obtain and maintain control of territory beyond any semblance of governance. In these places, civilians primarily experienced violence by FARC—extortion, kidnapping, forced recruitment, and other forms of predatory behavior.

The remainder of Colombians, the majority of the population, lived in areas without direct FARC contact. This did not mean, however, that FARC did not profoundly shape their lives. High-profile attacks on cities, assassinations of politicians and public figures, kidnappings, and bombing campaigns created a climate of fear and insecurity, even though these were relatively rare occurrences in most of these communities. Civilians in these areas formed their understanding of FARC from these experiences, and from media coverage of violent incidents, government counterinsurgency campaigns, and political discourse that emphasized evidence of FARC’s criminal and terrorist activities.

These varieties of conflict exposure have been shown to account for variation in postwar attitudes in Colombia (García-Sánchez & Plata-Caviedes, 2020; Nussio et al., 2015). Most relevant to this study, Tellez (2019) shows evidence from 2016 peace referendum patterns consistent with the strongest repudiation to FARC’s political inclusion coming from regions that never experienced direct FARC governance.

⁵ These interviews were conducted between December 2021 and February 2022 with people affiliated with FARC and Comunes from across regions. See Appendix Section B for descriptions of recruitment, interview structure, and analytical approach.

⁶ I2, Comunes party leader.

⁷ I5, Ex-combatant reintegration expert, Comunes sympathizer.

⁸ I10, Comunes party cadre.

⁹ I20, Peace negotiation participant on behalf of Colombian government.

The dynamic with the left

As a leftist insurgency, and subsequently a rebel party, there has always been a dynamic between FARC and the non-violent left in Colombia. The left was shaped by the guerrilla during wartime, and the rebel party was then shaped by the left postwar.

Contemporary Colombian guerrillas emerged from a context of decades-long political violence and the eventual duopolization of Colombian politics which effectively excluded the far left (Sierra, 2023). Guerrilla movements, including FARC and several groups such as ELN, EPL, PRT, M-19, and MAQL, believed the use of violence was justified and necessary. Others, however, opted for non-violent means to political change, including investing in labor unions and student movements, and later in electoral participation, ultimately opening up the political system for leftist participation.¹⁰

Throughout this long and complex history, there were non-violent leftists who took the route of party politics and other types of non-violent involvement, and operated independently from armed insurgents. At the time of FARC's demobilization and disarmament in 2016 and the formation of their political party, these schisms remained, with the caveat that there were now a handful of formal leftist politicians and parties that had been competing in politics for a decade.

Prior to FARC's 2016 demobilization, sharing elements of FARC's ideology or platform could mean being deemed a FARC sympathizer or contributor. There were tangible consequences to this. Steele (2017), shows how local elections revealed leftist preferences among certain populations and were used by paramilitaries and counterinsurgency operations to target people perceived as loyal to insurgents. This relates to findings in Fergusson et al. (2020) showing how the inclusion of non-violent leftist parties in local politics was met with violence.

Ideological proximity to FARC also led to a general distancing of voters from the left. The violence of leftist guerrillas generated stigma; leftists were associated with the violence and atrocities committed by groups that claimed similar views. Furthermore, throughout much of the war, FARC denounced participants in certain electoral processes as betraying revolutionary principles, including those on the left and center-left. They interfered in elections and targeted politicians across the political spectrum (Uribe, 2023).

After 2016, it was clear the incumbent left wanted nothing to do with the FARC party. When it came time for the politics of alliances and coalitions, the ex-FARC encountered unanticipated rejection. One party member we interviewed noted, "The party did not anticipate this rejection from the Left. It has always been difficult to get the Left to cooperate, but we didn't anticipate this level of rejection."¹¹ Even when there are programmatic or ideological similarities, other left-wing parties have preferred to distance themselves from Comunes (Espinosa Macías, 2023; Méndez & Suárez, 2023).

A remarkable instance of this was when Comunes announced that it wanted to join the left-wing coalition that supported Gustavo Petro's presidential candidacy, the Historical Pact. Members of the coalition believed accepting the FARC successor party's support would be electorally costly. In the words of a member of the leftist coalition party: "Comunes themselves win more if they stand aside. If we appear in a photo with them, we lose the election" (Florez Arias, 2021).¹² More recently, Ivan Cepeda, a leftist front-runner in the 2026 presidential race, threatened to sue for defamation for being associated with FARC (Bernal, 2025).

Survey experiment design

We designed and implemented a preregistered experiment to investigate the extent to which stigma affects citizens' evaluations of the rebel party Comunes.¹³ Although the patterns of low electoral support and limited ability to recruit a broad political organization are consistent with stigmatization, it is hard to disentangle the extent to which this rejection relates to an intrinsic distaste for the party related to their origin, or to something else.

We conducted an endorsement experiment as part of a survey in March 2022, in advance of national elections in Colombia, to assess the magnitude of rebel party stigmatization among civilian evaluations of the Comunes party, and to understand the types of voters most prone to stigmatization. We relied on this design rather than only on direct measures of support for two reasons.

First, although we use conventional measures of support towards Comunes and other parties, such as direct questions on attitudes (e.g., Do you support the Comunes party? Why or why not?) and behaviors (e.g., voting or campaigning for the party), we cannot use such expressed preferences to disentangle the effects of the party's ideological platform versus stigma. Second, direct questions may not elicit true preferences in this context (Lyll et al., 2013). Matanock and Garcia-Sanchez (2018) capture the issue of preference falsification in a study measuring support for the Colombian military. Although these FARC ex-combatants are demobilized and do not present as much of an active threat to the population in the way Matanock and Garcia-Sanchez (2018) suggest the military might, security threats were not altogether absent and may thus affect expressed support for the party.

The endorsement experiment uses a subtle approach to address these concerns. We asked respondents simply to rate their support for a policy. However, respondents randomly assigned to the treatment group were given contextualizing information that the Comunes party (clarified to be the successor party of the FARC rebel group) endorsed the policy, while those randomly assigned to one of the control conditions did not receive such contextualizing information.

The design allows us to control for features of the policy, by also varying its content, and also to control for different aspects of Comunes by randomly assigning respondents to endorsements by parties similar to Comunes in certain ways. If respondents' attitudes towards the policy differ when endorsed by Comunes, the difference in support can be attributed to concerns related

¹⁰ This history contains important intricacies: for example, FARC originated from the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) and attempted peaceful participation through the Union Patriótica (UP) in the 1980s, but was met with systematic assassination and displacement. Other groups such as M-19 and EPL transitioned from violence to politics after the UP. It is also true that some non-violent leftists have faced credible accusations of entanglement with armed groups and illicit enterprises, as in the case of Piedad Córdoba, further blurring the lines between the violent and non-violent left.

¹¹ I6, Comunes party member.

¹² Despite ultimately including them into the coalition, this was done after the elections to incorporate their guaranteed congressional seats into the coalition.

¹³ The survey experiment is approved under NYU IRB protocol IRB-FY2021-5753 and the interviews are approved under NYU IRB IRB-FY2022-6153. Study preregistered at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/HXS69>.

to Comunes rather than the policy itself. Our approach follows existing scholarship that uses endorsement experiments to gauge political support in sensitive and conflict-affected contexts (Anjum et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2011; Haas & Khadka, 2020).

Finally, the endorsement experiment allows us to evaluate preferences in a way that is not confounded by considerations of parties' competence. The policies under consideration are ones for which it is unlikely that Comunes on its own would be responsible to implement; rather endorsements signal being part of a coalition supporting policies that would be implemented by the broader government. This is one reason that for our investigation, we prefer the endorsement design to alternatives such as conjoint experiments that ask for direct comparisons between parties or candidates.

This design relies on the presumption, which is based on our knowledge of postconflict politics in Colombia, that a particular disavowal of Comunes reveals stigma when controlling for policy positions. This approach, although it does not manipulate stigma directly, has the advantage of closely resembling how citizens encounter information about Comunes in the real world as opposed to a hypothetical approach or an effort to artificially generate stigma. However, we appreciate that familiarity with the party is an alternative interpretation of the residual effect that must be assessed to verify the stigma interpretation. After we present the main results, we examine this alternative interpretation and assess the role of familiarity and present pretreatment attitudes towards Comunes and other parties for reference.

Survey modules

In the first part of the survey, respondents were asked a series of demographic questions, questions relating to their quality of life, political engagement, and knowledge, including their knowledge of the Comunes party. Next respondents were presented with a brief prompt, explaining that they were going to be asked questions about several political parties, including the "Comunes party (formerly known as the Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común)."¹⁴ This section asked about presidential candidate preferences, ideology, attitudes towards six different parties, and exposure to party campaigns and knowledge of party platforms. It should be noted that when respondents were asked about their explicit attitudes towards different parties, including Comunes, respondents had not yet been reminded of the connection between FARC and Comunes. This allowed us to gauge familiarity with Comunes separately from the FARC, which is widely known.

The following section included a set of three endorsement experiments. Respondents were asked to rate their support for three statements regarding specific ideological and policy platforms on a scale from 1 (no support) to 5 (strong support). The statements addressed anticapitalism (proposing to restructure Colombia's economy toward a system prioritizing social justice and redistribution), healthcare criticism (denouncing Colombia's healthcare model as a crisis-ridden business failing rural areas), and antifracking legislation (supporting limits on fracking to reduce environmental impacts and fossil fuel dependence). These

statements were selected because they reflected positions advocated by Comunes and other leftist parties in Colombia, ensuring they were grounded in real political discourse rather than hypothetical scenarios. Even if respondents had not heard these specific statements before, these were positions they might plausibly encounter from these political actors.

The statements also represented a relatively broad range of left-leaning concerns, with the anticapitalist statement being the farthest left and the antifracking stance the most centrist. We made this design choice to avoid only including radical statements that might elicit extreme responses based on content alone, irrespective of the endorser, leaving little room for stigma detection. Each statement was endorsed by either the Comunes party, leftist parties, or unspecified politicians (the "ambiguous" condition). We randomly assigned the endorsement such that statements were identical except for information on the identity of the endorser. The full statements and treatment conditions are shown in Appendix Section C.5.

Data

The sample includes 806 respondents.¹⁵ Respondents are relatively young with a median age of 35 years, more female (58% women), and more educated than the general Colombian population (median respondent attended high school). Importantly, our sample reflects varied conflict experience: 48% of respondents lived in FARC-controlled territory during the conflict, following the territorial coding by Arjona (2016). Table A3 summarizes the characteristics of the sample, as well as covariate balance across the three endorsement conditions (Comunes, leftist, or unspecified party endorsement). Table A4 shows the distribution of endorsement conditions for each statement and in the pooled sample. The assignment across endorsement conditions is balanced so that in each experiment, about one-third of the policy statements were assigned to the Comunes condition, one-third to the leftist condition, and the rest to the control condition. There is almost no missingness in responses to the anticapitalism or the fracking statements, but there is some missingness in the healthcare conditions due to an error in the first wave of online surveys, where 103 respondents were mistakenly not shown the healthcare-related statement. This missingness does not meaningfully differ across treatment conditions.

Data analysis

Our quantity of interest is the sample average treatment effect of being assigned one of the endorsement conditions, estimated via the following regression in the pooled analysis,

$$Y_{ie} = \alpha + \beta_1 D_{1ie} + \beta_2 D_{2ie} + \gamma \mathbf{X}'_i + \epsilon_{ie}$$

where Y_{ie} represents the support of each individual i for statement e rated on a five-point scale. D_{1ie} is an indicator for random assignment to the Comunes condition, D_{2ie} is an indicator for random assignment to the leftist condition, $\mathbf{X}_i$ is a vector of demographic characteristics (race, gender, education), an index of survey response quality (computed on the basis of response to the

¹⁴ The party changed its name from Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (FARC) to Comunes in 2021, so it was important to clarify this in case some respondents were not yet aware. This clarification was made before the endorsement experiment.

¹⁵ Additional details on the sample and recruitment are provided in Appendix Section C.

Table 1 Comunes endorsement effect on policy support.

	Support for policy statement		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Comunes endorsement	−0.17** (0.06)	−0.21** (0.07)	−0.12 [†] (0.07)
Left endorsement		−0.09 (0.07)	
Ambiguous endorsement (Control)			0.09 (0.07)
Constant	2.99*** (0.16)	3.04*** (0.16)	2.95*** (0.16)
Observations	2,235	2,235	2,235
Baseline mean	3.08	3.13	3.03
Baseline standard deviation	1.32	1.30	1.33
R ²	0.03	0.03	0.03

Note: Recall the outcome is a scale from 1 (no support) to 5 (strong support). Specifications include controls for race, gender, education, employment and quality. HCSE in parentheses. [†] $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

attention check, time and a Qualtrics response quality measure), and measures of employment status and agricultural or ranching-related employment, in order to increase efficiency and address a small imbalance in employment, and ε_{ie} is the error term. All specifications include controls unless indicated otherwise. Hypotheses and a description of statistical tests were preregistered prior to analyzing the data, and deviations are described in Appendix Section C.1.

Main findings

Table 1 and Figure A5 show that Comunes endorsements reduce support for the policy statements relative to different reference groups.¹⁶ In column (1) the estimate of the Comunes endorsement is the effect of Comunes compared to both the control and leftist endorsement. Column (2) shows the Comunes endorsement effect and the leftist endorsement effect relative to the control condition in which statements were endorsed by a politician or movement that had no clear ideological affiliation. These results indicate that agendas associated with the Comunes rebel party indeed receive less political support. In both comparisons the Comunes endorsement reduces support, and in column (2) (also shown in more detail in Table A7) the left endorsement also reduced support, although not as much as Comunes and not in a manner that is significant at the 90% level.

Column (3) shows the Comunes endorsement effect relative to a control condition of left endorsement, and indicates that the Comunes penalty remains even when compared to the endorsement by unspecified leftists. The magnitude of this stigma effect is 0.12 on a one- to five-point scale, equivalent to a decrease of 0.09 of a baseline standard deviation (that is, the standard deviation under the “ambiguous” endorsement condition). Appendix Tables A5 and A6 show that the negative Comunes endorsement effect holds across all three policy statements. Thus, negative reactions

towards Comunes endorsement cannot be entirely attributed to leftist affiliation, consistent with the notion of rebel party stigmatization.

These results provide evidence for the phenomenon of stigmatization. The Comunes endorsement effect, even if small in terms of standardized effect sizes, is substantial compared to the endorsement of other leftists. If we take into account that (i) the Comunes party is a leftist organization, (ii) the policies and statements are all leftist in the Colombian context, and (iii) the places where we conducted the survey are places where Comunes has had an organized presence, the differences in support reflect a meaningful rejection of this rebel party.

The following sections investigate heterogeneity in the Comunes endorsement effect to better understand which types of citizens are more prone to this negative association with Comunes, and the extent to which this comports with expectations of wartime and ideological proximity.

Wartime proximity to ex-rebels

To examine how civilian proximity to FARC during the conflict shapes how our interviewees respond to Comunes-endorsed statements, we ensured our sample included variation in respondents’ conflict experiences. Following Arjona (2016)’s approach to measuring wartime order, we asked respondents (prior to the policy statements) to identify the extent to which their conflict experiences resembled two different scenarios, one in which FARC presence and control was extensive, and another in which FARC’s presence was more limited. We then constructed an ordinal variable where a value of 2 indicates the most extensive type of FARC presence and governance, 1 indicates FARC military presence with limited governance, and 0 indicates no FARC presence.

Using this measure of wartime proximity and the nature of FARC’s rebel governance, we estimate heterogeneous Comunes endorsement effects presented in Figure 1 and Table 2.¹⁷ The Comunes endorsement generates a negative reaction from participants who did not experience any kind of FARC presence during the conflict. Among those who did experience a limited and primarily violent form of FARC presence during the conflict, the Comunes endorsement also had a negative effect on their support for the presented policy statements, but relatively smaller than participants who lived in communities free from FARC. Finally, this evidence suggests that among those who experienced the most extensive FARC governance during the conflict (i.e., rebelocracy), a Comunes endorsement had no effect on support for statements. Comunes carries the largest negative connotation among people who did not live in contact with the FARC. Those who did experienced FARC’s most extensive governance and goods provision, in addition to violent coercion, do not exhibit behavior consistent with Comunes stigmatization.

Additional analysis of participants’ current levels of security are consistent with these patterns of stigmatization heterogeneity by wartime proximity. The postwar period in Colombia has been marred with violence, especially in places where FARC had been present prior to signing the peace agreement. Other guerrillas and FARC splinter factions have pursued the power vacuums left behind and have targeted ex-combatants and Comunes party

¹⁶ Recall each observation is at the respondent-experiment level and the outcome measures respondent support for either of the three policy statements, resulting in three observations per respondent.

¹⁷ Results are consistent with separate binary coding of wartime proximity as shown in Table A9.

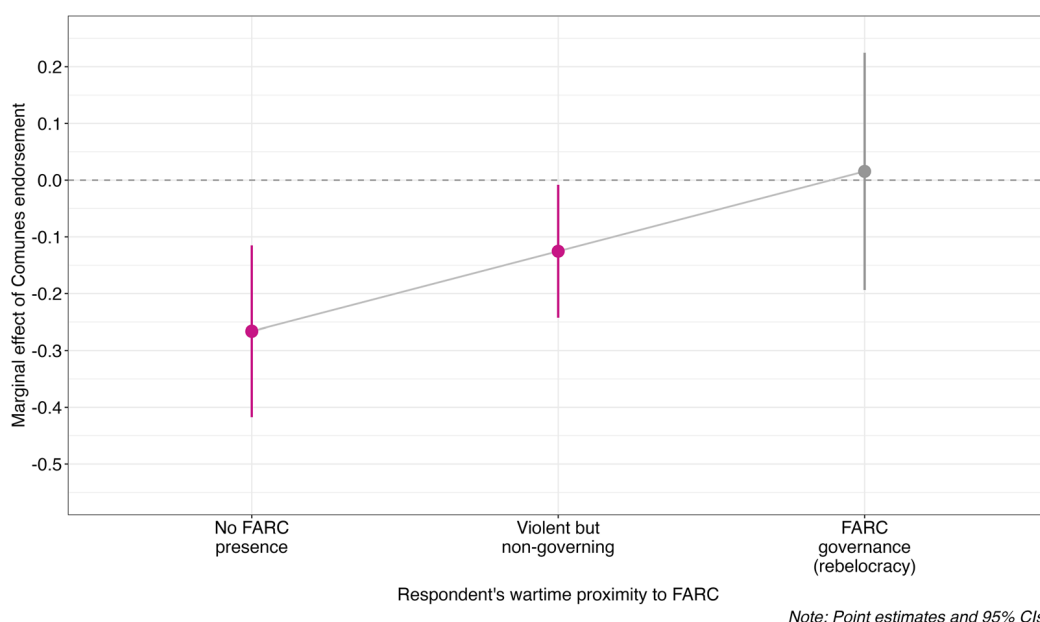


Figure 1 Marginal effect of Comunes endorsement by ordinal wartime proximity.

Table 2 Heterogeneous effect of Comunes endorsement by ordinal wartime proximity measure.

	Support for policy statement		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Comunes endorsement	-0.27*** (0.08)	-0.27*** (0.08)	-0.22*** (0.08)
Wartime proximity	0.04 (0.04)	0.07 [†] (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)
Ambiguous endorsement (control)			0.09 (0.07)
Comunes × wartime proximity	0.14* (0.07)	0.14* (0.07)	0.14* (0.07)
Constant	3.05*** (0.05)	2.88*** (0.17)	2.84*** (0.17)
Observations	2,235	2,235	2,235
Controls	No	Yes	Yes

Note: The wartime proximity measure ranges from 0 to 2, with 0 indicating no presence, 1 indicating violent but non-governing presence, and 2 indicating rebelocracy. Specifications include controls for race, gender, education, employment and quality. HCSE in parentheses. The outcome is a scale from 1 (no support) to 5 (strong support). [†] $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

members (Prem et al., 2022). In light of this postwar dynamic, we ask participants about their *current* level of personal (in)security and about their security concerns in upcoming elections. We find that the stigma effects are strongest among participants who reported never feeling in danger and who were not concerned about election security, shown in Appendix Table A17.¹⁸ The currently safest respondents are the most punishing of Comunes-endorsed statements, consistent with the finding that participants

with no past wartime exposure to FARC are the most stigmatizing. Respondents who feel unsafe do not penalize Comunes-endorsed policy statements.

Taken together, these findings corroborate the intuition that stigmatization is produced and enforced by civilians who knew of the rebel groups' brutal violence and illicit activities from afar, and secondly from those who were victimized but did not experience long-standing rule by the rebel group in their communities. Stigmatization is largely absent among civilians who experienced thorough rebel governance, potentially due to positive contact related to rebels' provision of public goods and services, consistent with Tellez (2019)'s findings.

Ideological proximity

To assess the role of ideology, we use a self-reported measure of ideology ranging from 0 to 10. For simplicity of interpretation we subset respondents into five categories: far left, center left, center, center right, and far right. We also collected information on respondents' favorite candidates running in upcoming presidential primaries and also asked how represented they felt by their elected officials. Figure 2 and Table 3 show the Comunes endorsement effect by left-leaning respondents who are the ones most ideologically proximate to the Comunes party.

Across measures, left-leaning respondents are generally more supportive of the policy statements we presented. This is expected given we selected relatively left-leaning policy statements by design. However, people who identify as left-wing substantially decrease their support for the policy statements when they are endorsed by Comunes. Leftist respondents penalize statements by more than a third of a point on a 1–5 scale. This effect seems to be particularly driven by the most leftist respondents, those ostensibly closest to Comunes, illustrated in the comparison between Table 3, columns (2) and (3). We find less substantial effect heterogeneity for Comunes endorsement on the basis of right-wing affiliation, as Table A8 shows.

This heterogeneity is consistent with the most left-leaning respondents viewing the Comunes party with disdain because of

¹⁸ When interpreting these results, note that participants were informed that the survey was anonymous and responded privately, either on their own devices or with enumerator tablets given to them.

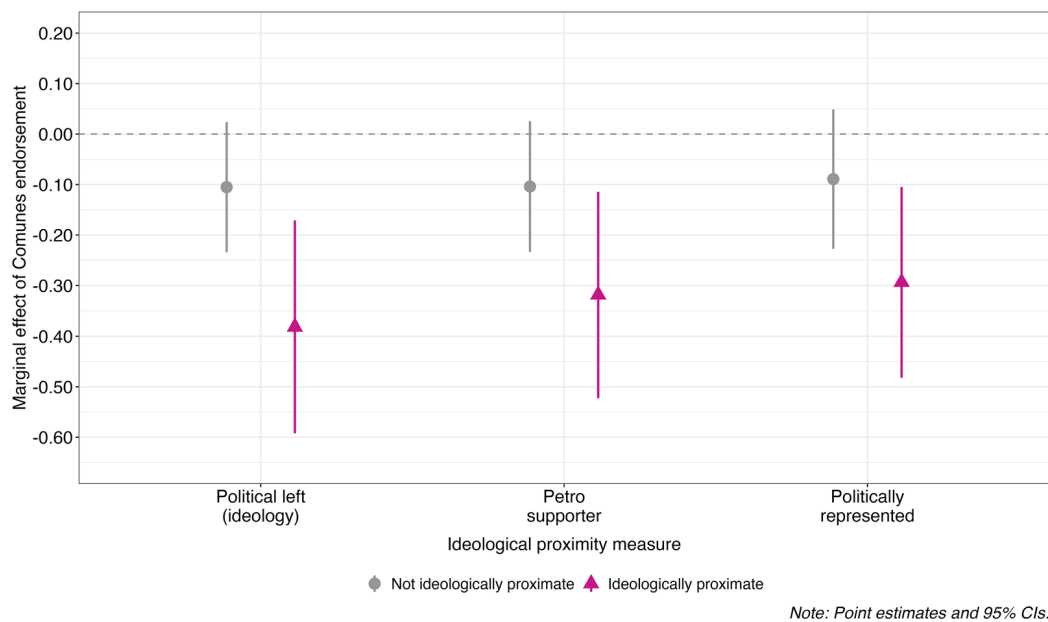


Figure 2 Marginal effect of Comunes endorsement by ideological proximity to Comunes (leftist ideology).

Table 3 Heterogeneity by respondent ideological proximity to Comunes (leftist ideology).

	Support for policy statement				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Comunes endorsement	−0.11 (0.07)	−0.13* (0.06)	−0.15* (0.06)	−0.10 (0.07)	−0.09 (0.07)
Left (far + center)	0.69*** (0.09)				
Far left		0.76*** (0.11)			
Center left			0.43*** (0.11)		
Petro favorite				0.73*** (0.08)	
Feels represented					0.28*** (0.09)
Comunes × left (far + center)	−0.28* (0.13)				
Comunes × far left		−0.28† (0.17)			
Comunes × center left			−0.19 (0.16)		
Comunes × Petro favorite				−0.21† (0.12)	
Comunes × represented					−0.20* (0.12)
Constant	2.75*** (0.16)	2.86*** (0.16)	2.91*** (0.16)	2.73*** (0.16)	2.95*** (0.16)
Observations	2,235	2,235	2,235	2,235	2,235

Note: These five categories are bins of the ideology scale; respondents coded as far left identified as a 0–2 on the scale, center left identified as 3–5, center right as 6–7, and far right as 8–10. The Petro favorite measure is a dummy that equals 1 if Petro is their most preferred candidate and Feels represented is a dummy indicating 1 if respondent feels represented. HCSE standard errors in parenthesis. †*p* < .1; **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

the political costs they endured during the conflict. Being associated with FARC implied significant costs for leftist individuals who did not endorse the guerrilla, and even translated to persecution by the Colombian state in a form of “guilt by ideological association”.

The firmest evidence of stigma comes from those who would be the Comunes party’s natural ideological allies and constituents. This is especially detrimental for the Comunes party given the current context in Colombia, where parties with leftist platforms have considerable popular support and more power than ever in modern history. This is not a context in which political competition from Comunes necessarily poses a serious threat to other leftist parties, yet the potential for Comunes to establish itself electorally is still limited by stigmatization from fellow leftists.

Alternative interpretation: familiarity with Comunes

As discussed above, this endorsement experiment controls for policy content and interprets remaining antipathy as stigma. Here we examine whether this residual instead relates to lack of prior familiarity with Comunes, and do not find evidence to support this alternative interpretation.

We gauged respondents’ familiarity with, and perceptions of, Comunes and other parties before they were treated (and before they were reminded that Comunes is FARC’s successor party) in several ways. First, we asked respondents to directly rate their attitudes towards a list of parties (Centro Democrático, Cambio Radical, Polo Democrático, Colombia Humana, Nuevo Liberalismo, and Comunes). We also asked them to match four party slogans to the correct parties and to rate their exposure to another set of party’s campaign activities. Finally, we directly asked whether they knew of the Comunes party which had been previously named *Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común*.

Respondents were indeed less familiar with Comunes than with other parties. Figure 3 shows that Comunes campaign exposure and slogan recall are substantially lower compared with those of other parties. Nearly half (45%) of respondents reported being unfamiliar with Comunes prior to the survey.

However, respondents who were unfamiliar with Comunes were not more likely to penalize Comunes-endorsed statements. Table A20 shows that respondents who indicated they were familiar with Comunes before the survey have stronger negative reactions to the Comunes endorsement compared with respondents who were not familiar. The Comunes endorsement effect is negative, albeit much smaller among respondents who did not know Comunes.

In addition, Figure 4 shows that attitudes towards Comunes are clearly worse among respondents with prior familiarity of Comunes. Nearly 23% of respondents familiar with Comunes expressed a very bad opinion of Comunes compared to 12% of all unfamiliar respondents.¹⁹ This is stark considering that survey respondents are located in municipalities where Comunes fielded candidates; presumably the places that are the most favorable to Comunes.

¹⁹ Also note that this high level of distaste is not unique to Comunes. The share of familiar respondents with very bad opinions of Comunes is comparable to distaste towards a right-wing party in Colombia, Centro Democrático, as shown in Figure A7.

Finally, it is worth noting that a high share of respondents expressed no opinion when asked about their attitudes towards Comunes. As expected, the share of respondents who offer no opinion is much higher among unfamiliar versus familiar respondents (31% versus 17%) given unfamiliar respondents may be less willing to express an opinion about a party they know little to nothing about. “Don’t know” responses among Comunes-familiar respondents (17% on average) are also relatively high compared with responses about other parties (13% on average).²⁰ This may be partially due to stigma. We find limited evidence suggesting that these respondents—who were familiar with Comunes before the survey and indicated no opinion of Comunes—were more likely to penalize Comunes-endorsed statements as shown in Table A19, although the heterogeneity is not significant at the 90% level. We present detailed discussion of reported attitudes towards Comunes and comparisons with other parties in Appendix Section F.

Scope conditions

Taken together, these findings show quantitative evidence of the political stigmatization of the Comunes rebel party. Results show that people’s tendency to stigmatize Comunes is conditional on citizens’ proximity to FARC, both physical and ideological, prior to the groups’ demobilization and entrance into politics. Where else can we expect these patterns of rebel party stigmatization to hold, and where is stigma more or less likely to emerge? Several factors suggest these patterns of stigma may be present in other post-conflict contexts, yet we expect variation in the overall levels of rebel party stigmatization across postconflict contexts depending on several key conditions.

First, the nature of rebel governance and violence during the war matters for whether rebel parties experience political stigmatization postwar. There is substantial variation in the degree to which groups engage in provision of public goods and stable rebel governance as well as in whether they inflict mass violence against civilians (Balcells, 2017; Kalyvas, 2006; Stewart, 2021; Wood, 2006). Although FARC varied regionally in their type of governance and violence, other groups may be more homogeneous and sit on the extremes. We expect widespread stigmatization when rebel groups are very small, occupy little to no territory, and only engage in deadly high-profile attacks, and where rebel groups occupy some territories but largely engage in violence and criminality absent governance. Conversely, postconflict stigmatization may be less pronounced in places where rebel groups governed civilians directly, providing order, dispute resolution, and public goods (Wood, 2003). The sustained experience of rebel governance can reshape civilian evaluations of rebels’ postwar political organization, such that their reputational baseline is fundamentally different than that of ex-rebels whose wartime presence was primarily violent or socially distant.

Second, the availability of non-violent alternatives during war is bound to shape postconflict stigmatization. In cases such as Colombia, ideologically proximate constituencies had the option, and made the choice, to pursue non-violent alternatives. This is true of many leftist revolutionary, separatist, ethnic minority

²⁰ Note the share of “don’t know” responses among respondents familiar with other parties is likely even lower. We did not ask about familiarity prior to the survey for other parties, so this is the best approximation.

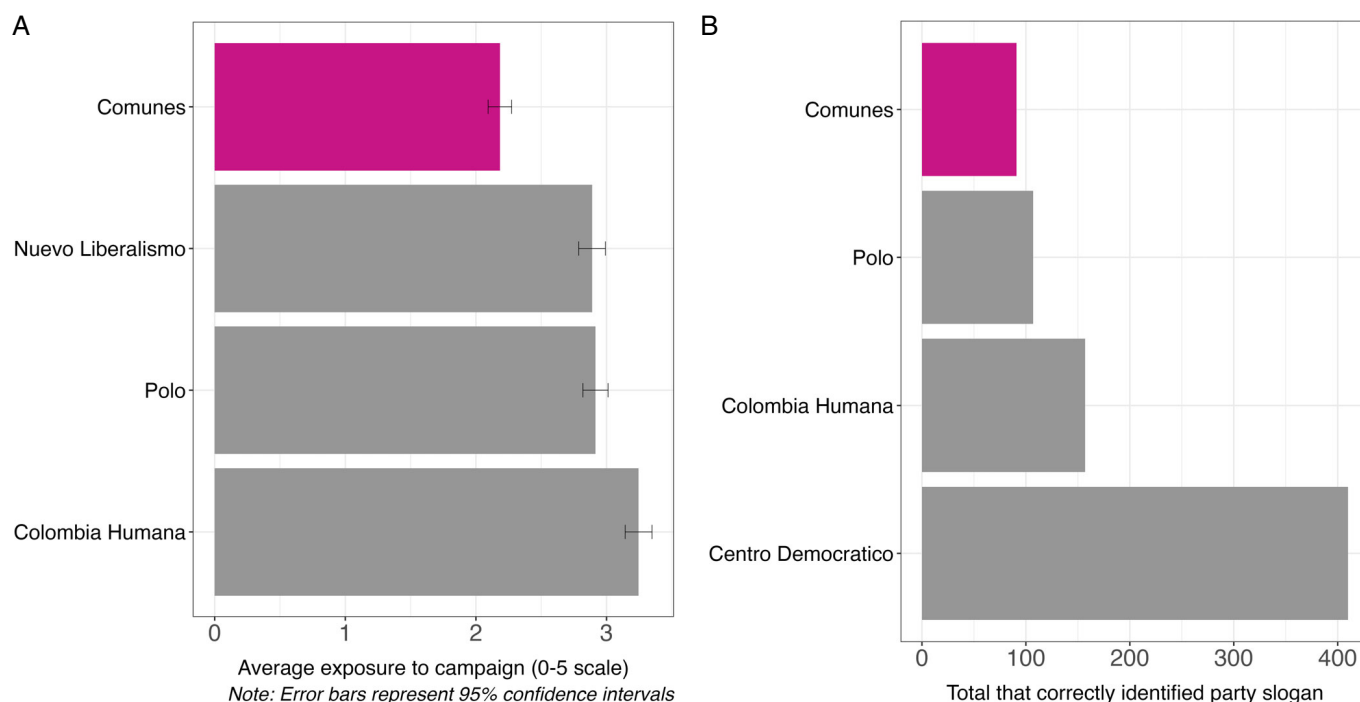


Figure 3 Comparison of party campaign reach. Panel (A) shows avg. exposure to party campaigns. Panel (B) shows frequency of correct party slogan identification.

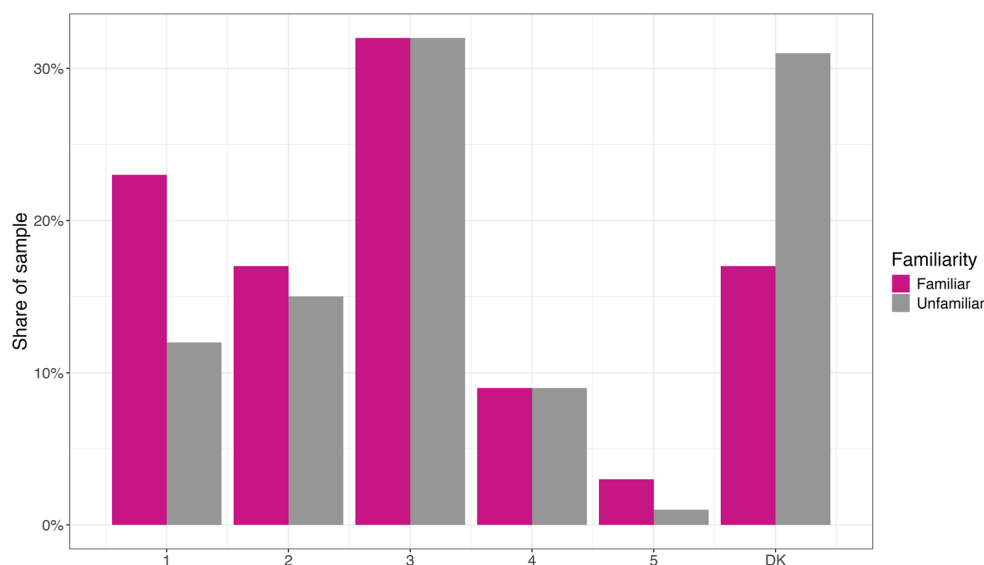


Figure 4 Attitudes towards Comunes measured with direct question by prior familiarity (1 = very bad, 5 = very good, DK = don't know).

movements where actors could choose between violent and non-violent means of pursuing similar political goals. In these cases, the institutionalization of non-violent alternatives creates the conditions for political victimization as a basis for future stigmatization. This is consistent with work on how political competition among leftist groups affected their entry into electoral politics versus armed militancy (Chandra & García-Ponce, 2019; Fergusson et al., 2020; Staniland, 2021). However, in cases where insurgent-aligned, non-violent politics is either entirely criminalized by the state, such as early on in the Colombian conflict or in the civil war in El Salvador, or simply do not exist, such differentiation may

be less salient. Thus in contexts where a distinction between violent and non-violent movements does not emerge, we posit that stigmatization is less likely to emerge.

Finally, stigmatization likely matters most for groups that negotiate their way into politics and less for groups that win their way in. Rebel winners often define electoral systems in their favor and eliminate their political rivals, unlike rebel parties entering established political systems (Levitsky & Way, 2013; Liu, 2024b). Furthermore, Daly (2022) argues that when rebel groups enter politics through military victory, their past violence can actually help them succeed politically because voters credit victors with peace and associate them with future stability and security provision.

Conclusion

Political concessions and the participation of rebel parties are often fundamental to signing peace agreements and preventing future conflicts. Despite the prevalence of negotiated transitions that accommodate rebels into democratic politics, there are important gaps in our understanding of how civilian attitudes shape these parties' electoral viability. This paper examines one potentially significant barrier: the stigmatization of rebel parties.

We offer evidence that stigma may inhibit support for rebel parties because of their violent origins, even by people who may support their cause. We find that policy positions endorsed by Comunes, the FARC successor party, tend to receive less support than when those same positions are endorsed by other leftist parties or politicians with unclear partisan affiliations.

Our experimental approach captures rebel party stigmatization at work. However, this design is not well equipped to assess the relative importance of stigma against other simultaneous sources of rejection. Our qualitative accounts from Comunes insiders point to stigma as the primary reason for their widespread rejection, but we do not make claims to this effect. Other factors such as organizational capacity, platform appeal, and competition are likely important contributors. As Goffman (1963, p. 20) notes, "The stigmatized individual is likely to use his stigma for 'secondary gains', as an excuse for ill success that has come his way for other reasons." Future work could employ factorial or conjoint analysis to better assess the relevance of stigma.

These findings speak to our understanding of the legacies of conflict. Scholars have focused intently on the electoral legacies of victimization and rebel governance, yet we find these have a nuanced relationship to postwar stigma. Wartime proximity to rebels matters for stigmatization but more proximity does not translate to more stigma. Instead, our findings indicate that the strongest stigma-related repudiation of Comunes was in areas that did not have any kind of FARC presence during the conflict. These are likely the areas where civilian perspectives of the guerrilla were primarily shaped by depictions of FARC violence, as opposed to more complex dynamics of governance and violence that citizens in rebelocracies experience.

Furthermore, the legacies of what we term political victimization, and being treated as guilty by ideological association, do appear to carry considerable weight. Leftists endured years of punishment for their ideological proximity to the FARC. As a result, it appears as though they engage in political retribution towards the FARC's successor party. We find the Comunes effect is strongest among individuals who identify as left-leaning, particularly far-left-leaning. An implication is that Comunes stigmatization seriously limits the extent to which Comunes can invest in a strategy of increasing familiarity and support among potential constituents. This explains in part why FARC's successor party has achieved so little through their campaigning to reach voters, much less to persuade them to view the party positively.

While our design helps isolate the effect of conflict-related stigma by holding constant policy content and competence, it does not rule out all possible sources of negative affect. However, the Colombian context strongly supports interpreting our findings as primarily driven by FARC's violent past. This interpretation is reinforced both qualitatively, through interviews with party elites who consistently cite stigmatization tied to their history of

violence, and quantitatively, by the fact that penalization is concentrated among left-leaning respondents and respondents who did not experience rebel provisions during the war. That ideologically aligned voters are the most averse to its endorsements suggests that the mechanism at work is not policy-based divergence but rather enduring stigma rooted in the party's origins in armed conflict.

More broadly, these findings suggest that the degree to which civilians legitimize a rebel party's entrance into democratic politics is shaped not only by how former rebels entered into politics—whether through negotiation or military victory—but by the nature of the civilian-rebel relationship forged during the war.

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Author contributions

María Ignacia Curiel, Cyrus Samii, and Mateo Vásquez-Cortés contributed to the conceptualization and methodological design of the study. Curiel and Vásquez-Cortés led the investigation and fieldwork, under Samii's supervision. Curiel led data curation, software, formal analysis, and visualization, with input from Samii and Vásquez-Cortés; Samii and Vásquez-Cortés checked and validated the results. Project administration was conducted jointly under Samii's sponsorship. Samii acquired funding for the project. Curiel and Vásquez-Cortés facilitated contacts and field networks, and all authors contributed to other study resources. Curiel and Vásquez-Cortés jointly wrote the original draft, and all authors contributed to writing, review, and editing.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare none.

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Data availability

The dataset, codebook, R script for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, are available in the journal repository <https://www.prio.org/journals/jpr/replicationdata>. All analyses were conducted using R v. 4.5.0. The Online Appendix

also includes additional information regarding the qualitative data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and interview documentation.

Declaration of AI usage

The authors used AI-assisted tools for grammar correction, editorial synthesis, formatting, and code cleaning.

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