

Demobilization Through Inaction: Bureaucratic Delay, Ambiguity, and Frustrated Collective Action

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Abstract

I present a theory of how bureaucratic inaction can be used to defuse citizen mobilization. By holding open the possibility that a demanded reform will eventually be provided through institutional channels, authorities can create uncertainty about whether more radical actions are necessary. This reduces the incentives for contentious collective action and enables authorities to avoid having to resolve difficult distributive conflicts. I explore the predictions of the model using original archival data on the processing and outcome of over 4,000 community petitions for land redistribution in 20th-century Mexico (1915–1991). I show that bureaucratic delay often succeeded in defusing agrarian conflicts, that villages with a longer history of contentious collective action were better able to secure policy concessions quickly, and that backlash was more common where citizens were given. The data highlight the importance of local bureaucrats in determining the political outcome of the Revolution and illustrate how bureaucratic delay played a role in sustaining one-party rule alongside repression and redistribution.

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*They don't treat one badly, true, but
it's just 'Come back tomorrow,' and
time passes and nothing is fixed.*

Old-guard *agrarista* in Jalisco
(Quoted in Craig 1983, p. 224–5)

1 Introduction

In 1910, the first great social revolution of the 20th century erupted in Mexico. Angered over recent increases in land inequality and landlessness, peasants across the country took to arms demanding the redistribution of property and the restitution of communal lands. Marching under the banner “Land and Liberty,” Emiliano Zapata and his followers marched into Mexico City and occupied the central square. In response to peasant mobilization, one of the first acts of the revolutionary government was to implement a radical land reform under which over a third of the country’s surface area was expropriated from large estates and transferred to peasant villages, transforming the country’s land tenure and rural political economy in ways that remain relevant today.

This is a compelling story, and it fits nicely with classic theories in political economy about political change in response to social pressure from below. It conforms with the standard narratives about the Mexican Revolution in popular culture and the symbolic position of Emiliano Zapata in political life. The only problem with this story is that this did not exactly happen. There was indeed a massive wave of peasant mobilization during the Revolution, both led by Zapata and by others. The government indeed announced a radical redistributive land reform in response to this mobilization, codifying it in Mexico’s revolutionary 1917 Constitution. What did not happen right away, however, was much actual land redistribution. More than a decade after the reform was announced, less than five percent of agricultural land in Mexico had been redistributed, concentrated a few targeted areas, and over 80 percent of farmland remained in properties of 1,000 hectares or more (Sanderson 1984; Markiewicz 1993, p. 188). Despite this inaction, many peasant communities demobi-

lized anyway, deciding to wait in line for a reform that did not seem to be coming.

In many standard political-economy theories, authorities facing organized pressure from below have two tools at their disposal to respond to the threat of unrest: they can offer concessions (e.g., redistribution) to those aggrieved or they can repress mobilization (e.g., Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Dunning 2008; Przeworski 2009). Authorities in Mexico deployed both of these tools, but a more common trajectory was inaction: communities applied to receive lands through the radical reform that had been announced, these demands were funneled through an ineffective and captured bureaucracy, and peasants waited for years or decades for an official response. Evidence suggests that peasants saw through the mismatch between the government’s revolutionary rhetoric and reality, and yet organized backlash was limited. Officials somehow defused the threat by promising reform without actually implementing it, allowing them to avoid paying the costs of either redistribution or repression.

How did this strategy work? As Finkel and Gehlbach (2020) describe, announcing a radical reform and not following through plausibly represents the riskiest path forward for a weak central government. Ambitious reform efforts raise social expectations. When a government is unwilling or unable to meet these expectations, this should exacerbate rather than ameliorate the threat of unrest (e.g., Passarelli and Tabellini 2017; Finkel and Gehlbach 2020). More generally, false promises of redistributive reform are difficult to sustain in a rationalist framework. The government’s inability to commit to making promised redistributive transfers is what powers revolutionary mobilization in Acemoglu and Robinson’s influential theory of democratization, for example (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). It is all the more surprising that sustained inaction could work in the context that I examine here. Mexico’s land reform occupied a central symbolic and material position in the consolidation and survival of single-party rule under an ostensibly “revolutionary” government (e.g., Magaloni 2006; McCormick 2016; Albertus 2015, 2021). Why did authorities continue to promise land, and how did they get away with not following through?

I develop a theory of demobilization through inaction to explain this puzzle. Bureaucratic inaction—neither saying yes nor saying no in response to bottom-up demands for redistribution—leaves open the possibility that redistribution might be achieved the “easy” way through institutional channels eventually. Though communities might be able to force authorities to respond sooner through contentious politics, such mobilization is risky. As long as there is a large enough possibility that the promised reform will eventually be carried out, peasants may be willing to wait. Because both redistribution and repression are costly, officials often have an incentive to take no action if they can get away with it. However, this strategy is only effective under certain conditions. Inaction has little benefit when there is little ambiguity about the future course of the reform as this makes it difficult for officials to promise a favorable response at some unknown future date. Similarly, if contentious collective action becomes easier or more attractive, commoners become less willing to wait in limbo and can force authorities to respond today with either redistribution or repression.

Using the model as a guide, I analyze historical evidence on the use of bureaucratic inaction in the motivating case for my argument: land reform in 20th-century Mexico. Drawing on an original dataset of 4,000 agrarian petitions submitted to state-level agrarian authorities between 1915 and 1991, I show that inaction became the modal response to demands for land redistribution but also that the speed and effectiveness with which authorities responded to claims differed widely across space and time for reasons that cannot be easily explained by natural or political constraints on government performance (e.g., underlying differences in state capacity or geography). Looking more closely at how, when, and where authorities used bureaucratic inaction in response to bottom-up pressure for redistribution, I show that this strategy was especially effective when and where two conditions were met: there was sufficient ambiguity about the future course of the reform to make waiting attractive and contentious collective action was sufficiently costly to deter more conflictive forms of social mobilization.

2 Demobilization through inaction

In the introduction to their recent book, historians Paul Gillingham and Benjamin Smith highlight two enduring puzzles about the political economy of 20th-century Mexico. The first they term “the paradox of revolution”: “[H]ow did millions of Mexicans who made anarchic popular revolution end up as apparently peaceable subjects in the world’s most successful authoritarian state?” A second and related puzzle is that of state capitalism. As they describe, “Mexico is extraordinary in that a revolutionary movement, which experimented with collectivist and even socialist modes of production, led to such a deeply inequitable capitalist regime” (Gillingham and Smith 2014, p. 2).

These authors are not alone in observing that authoritarian rule in Mexico was only really “revolutionary” in its name and branding. Within a generation after the Revolution, Mexico had in fact become one of the most unequal countries in the world, presided over by an authoritarian government that increasingly favored elite interests over those of peasants and rural workers (e.g., Bartra 2019, Ch. IV; Gillingham and Smith 2014, Ch. 1). What is interesting is that happened while many revolutionary political institutions—including the radical 1917 Constitution, the corporatist structures representing peasants and organized labor in national politics, and the bureaucracy charged with carrying out the land reform—all remained in place. The government continued to use the presence of these institutions to “cloak itself with revolutionary legitimacy” (Sanderson 1984, p. 9) while not actually carrying out many of the reforms that had been promised.

The mismatch between rhetoric and reality is especially evident when looking at the implementation of Mexico’s agrarian reform. Codified in the 1917 Constitution in response to revolutionary mobilization, the reform in principle provided for the large-scale expropriation and redistribution of large landholdings across the country. However, actual implementation of the reform was slow and incomplete. Rather than rush to redistribute land or repress agrarian mobilization, agrarian petitions were accepted but then funneled through a lengthy and bureaucratic process that was clearly captured by the local elite and often abused in

obvious ways. Peasants would wait for years and often decades as officials took no overt action one way or the other, allowing pending claims to wend their way through system with no clear resolution.

As noted in the introduction, classic political economy arguments about when and why political reform takes place typically consider two sets of strategies that might be used to counter the threat of social unrest, accommodation and repression, each of which is costly in different ways. In post-Revolution Mexico, however, a common strategy was to do neither. Workers and peasants mobilized to demand better services from the government, elites would often mobilize in response, and some reform or concession would be promised but never granted. By neither carrying out the reform (which risked alienating elites) nor rejecting claims (which risked alienating commoners), authorities were somehow able to have it both ways.

Governments often fail to live up to expectations, in Mexico and across the world, but this raises an interesting question: how did this strategy work? Evidence suggests that few were fooled. Detailed histories of agrarian activism reflect a general skepticism toward the land-reform bureaucracy and an awareness that elites and officials would subvert redistribution through a variety of means (e.g., Craig 1983; Cueva Ramírez 1994; Alarcón 2007; Gledhill 1991). For their part, landed elites in most of the country did not appear to take the “radical” reform very seriously. Though periodically concerned by revolutionary rhetoric, agricultural investment, production, and export continued to rise in the decade following the Revolution and the ratification of the 1917 Constitution, indicating that few feared an imminent expropriation of property (Figure 1 and Haber, Razo and Maurer 2003, Ch.8).

Despite this, it is remarkable how well this strategy worked to undermine resistance. Though many complained about the duplicitous treatment, backlash was surprisingly muted. While officials faced periodic waves of rural unrest, many communities waited patiently for years or decades as the institutional reform process inched ahead or stayed in place. That most of these communities from resorting to extra-institutional forms of resistance—such as

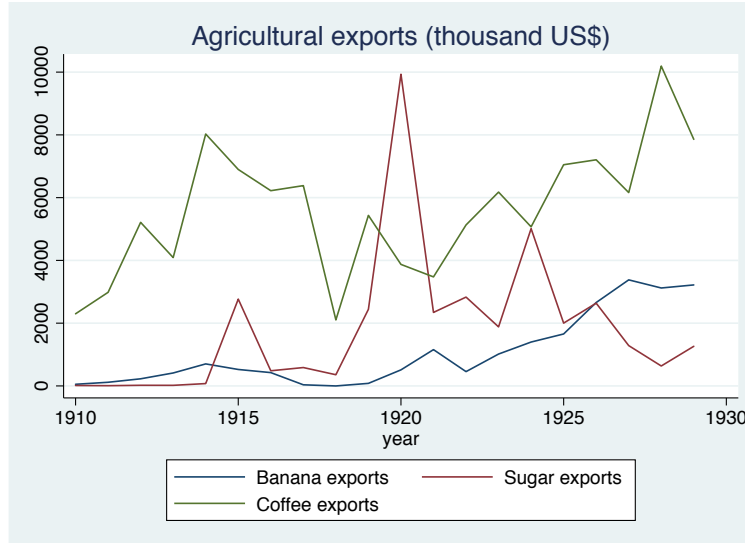


Figure 1: Mexican agricultural exports, 1910–1930

land invasions, guerrilla violence, or social protest—is all the more surprising given both the recent history of revolutionary political mobilization and the central role of collective action in the agrarian reform process itself. Agrarian concerns were central to the Revolution, and the fear of large-scale peasant unrest continued to be a threat to the government (e.g., Sanderson 1984; Bartra 1985). Land reform was the preeminent “carrot” used to respond to these threats, often alongside the “sticks” of overt repression and irregular violence (McCormick 2016; Gillingham 2021; Gillingham and Smith 2014).

Promising and publicizing a radical reform while refusing to follow through on it might have represented the worst possible strategy available to the federal government. As Finkel and Gehlbach (2020) describe, by opening the door to demanded reforms and then not implementing them fully, governments can exacerbate rather than ameliorate commoner grievances through generating unmet expectations. Partial or captured reforms can backfire, increasing rather than decreasing resistance. This context in fact sounds a lot like the problem of “reform in weak states” that Finkel and Gehlbach identify. The government that came to power following the Revolution promised to carry out a radical land reform, but, in a context where the political control of the central government remained weak, implementation of this reform was captured by local elites and bureaucrats who had an incentive to take no

action. In spite of all this, peasants largely demobilized anyway. Why?

In the next section, I develop a model to help answer this question. As I develop there, a partially implemented or incomplete reform can create ambiguity about the future course of policy. By leaving open the possibility that reform will eventually be carried out the “easy way” through bureaucratic channels, officials can create ambiguity about whether more radical steps are necessary. Rather than force the issue today, which might or might not yield results, peasants and officials alike may be willing to wait and see if conditions improve tomorrow by keeping the option for a future reform on the table.

2.1 Model set-up

To think about where, when, and why bureaucratic inaction could serve as a useful tool of demobilization, I present a stylized model of the interaction between local officials in charge of implementing the land reform (O) and a peasant community who petitioned for land (C). The timing of the game is as follows. There are up to two periods of play. At the beginning of each period, the cost of redistribution for the official θ_t is realized. This cost might represent retribution from aggrieved landlords or higher-level officials who oppose land expropriation as well as the quotidian effort cost required to carry out the land reform (e.g., surveying property, dispatching military officials to enforce rulings, accessing records from the capital, etc.). I assume that this cost is drawn independently each period from a uniform distribution on $[\bar{\theta} - \alpha, \bar{\theta} + \alpha]$.

Upon observing θ_t , the official has three options. He can say yes to the petition (Y), he can say no (N), or he can propose to wait and revisit the issue next period (W). If he says yes, the game ends. The official receives the rent from retaining office v and pays cost θ_t to redistribute land. The peasant community is granted the land that they had demanded and receives utility β .

If the official says no or decides to wait, the peasant community can either acquiesce (A) or resist (R). If peasants resist, the local official is immediately removed from office by a

higher-level authority or through violence. He receives a payoff standardized to 0. I assume that $\bar{\theta} - \alpha < v < \bar{\theta} + \alpha$ so that the official prefers redistribution to being removed from office only if the cost of redistribution is sufficiently low. If the community decides to resist, peasants must pay conflict or violence cost of κ . If the mobilization is successful, the peasant community receives the land through force (again at value β). I assume that $0 < \kappa < \beta$ so the community would prefer collective action to inaction if the probability of success were high enough. I represent this probability of success as q . If the action fails, the peasants receive nothing, yielding a payoff of $-\kappa$. In this first version of the model, I assume that these parameters are stable across the two periods. I further assume that $q\beta > \kappa$ so that there is a credible threat of peasant revolt.

If peasants acquiesce, nothing further happens this period. If the official has said no, the game ends with no redistribution. The community receives a payoff standardized to 0, and the official survives in office and receives v . If the official has decided to wait, peasants pay a patience cost of ω , and the game repeats next period. This patience cost might represent lost income from skipping a growing season, vulnerability to landowner threats or retribution while the situation remains unresolved, the psychic costs of ambiguity, or other factors. I assume that this cost is less than the total value of receiving land ($\omega < \beta$).

If play continues to the second period, a new cost of redistribution is realized (θ_2) and the game repeats as before, except that the official no longer has the option of waiting. If the official chooses to redistribute land, the peasant community receives β and he pays the cost of redistribution θ_2 and survives in office to receive v as a rent. If he declines the petition, the community again has the choice of whether to acquiesce or resist. If they acquiesce, the game ends with no redistribution and the official remains in power. If community resists, they pay a cost of κ and successfully obtain land with probability q .

A summary of the game is as follows:

1. Peasants attempt to solve their collective action problem. If they succeed, the first-period cost of collective action θ_1 is drawn and the official decides whether to agree to

redistribution (Y), reject the petition (N), or wait/take no action (W).

- a. *If the official chooses Y :* The game ends. The official pays a redistribution cost of θ_1 . Peasants receive land at value β .
 - b. *If the official chooses N :* The community faces the choice of whether to acquiesce or resist.
 - If peasants acquiesce, they receive a payoff of 0. The official remains in office to receive a rent of v .
 - If peasants resist, the official is removed from office and receives a payoff standardized to 0. Peasants pay a collective action cost κ and are successful with probability q . If they succeed, they receive a payoff of $\beta - \kappa$. If they fail, they receive a payoff of $-\kappa < 0$.
 - c. *If the official chooses W :* The community again faces the choice of whether to acquiesce (A) or resist (R).
 - d. If peasants acquiesce, they pay a patience cost of ω and the game repeats next period.
 - e. If peasants resist, payoffs are the same as in the case of resistance above.
2. *If the official has chosen W and peasants have chosen A :* The second-period cost of collective action θ_2 is drawn and the official decides whether to agree to redistribution (Y) or reject the petition (N). If he agrees to redistribution, he receives $v - \theta_2$ and peasants receive $\beta - \omega$ (due to the cost of patience). If he refuses, peasants will rebel (by the assumption that $q\beta - \kappa > 0$). If they succeed, they receive $\beta - \kappa - \omega$. If they fail, they receive $-\kappa - \omega$.

2.2 Analysis

I solve for the Subgame-Perfect Nash Equilibrium of this game by backward induction, starting from the second-period choice of the peasants to resist or acquiesce following the

official's refusal to redistribute land.

By assumption, peasants will choose to resist if their petition for redistribution is rejected (by $q\beta > \kappa$). The official's choice is therefore whether to redistribute land to remain in office (to receive $v - \theta_2$) or to reject the petition with the expectation of being removed (to receive 0). He will choose to redistribute if $\theta_2 \leq v$. Using the distribution of θ_t , this occurs with probability $\frac{v - \bar{\theta} + \alpha}{2\alpha}$.

Using this information to move back to the peasants' choice in the first period of play, the expected utility for a peasant community to acquiesce to waiting is thus:

$$\left(\frac{v - \bar{\theta} + \alpha}{2\alpha}\right)\beta + \left(1 - \frac{v - \bar{\theta} + \alpha}{2\alpha}\right)(q\beta - \kappa) - \omega$$

Where $\bar{\theta}$ is the expected cost of redistribution next period, ω represents the patience cost, β is the benefit of receiving land, κ is the cost of redistribution, and v is the officials' value of remaining in office. If the official chooses to wait, peasants will choose to acquiesce to waiting until the next period if this expected utility is at least as large as $q\beta - \kappa$, or if:

$$\omega \leq \left(\frac{v - \bar{\theta} + \alpha}{2\alpha}\right)(\kappa + (1 - q)\beta) \quad (1)$$

This is more likely to hold when the cost of patience ω is lower, when the cost of resistance κ is higher, when the probability of successful revolt q is smaller, when the officials' value of holding office v is higher, and the expected cost of redistribution next period $\bar{\theta}$ is lower.

Turning now to the official's problem in the first stage of the game. If expression 1 does not hold, a community will always choose resistance over waiting until next period. The official is thus indifferent between choosing inaction over refusal. In either case, he anticipates that he will be removed from office if he does not follow through with redistribution. In this case, the official will choose redistribution over either refusal or inaction if $\theta_1 \leq v$.

If expression 1 does hold, the peasant community will acquiesce to waiting. Looking ahead to the next period, the official knows that he will choose redistribution over refusal

in period 2 when $\theta_2 \leq v$, which occurs with probability $\frac{v-\bar{\theta}+\alpha}{2\alpha}$. Otherwise, the peasant community will revolt and he will be removed from office. Again using the distribution of θ_t , the expected utility of waiting until next period for the official is thus:

$$\left(\frac{v-\bar{\theta}+\alpha}{2\alpha}\right) \left(\frac{v-\bar{\theta}+\alpha}{2}\right) = \frac{(v-\bar{\theta}+\alpha)^2}{4\alpha} \quad (2)$$

which is greater than 0. An official who can count on peasants to remain patient until the next period is thus always better off waiting than overtly rejecting a petition and facing resistance today, even if the expected cost of redistribution next period remains high.

When peasants are willing to wait, an official will only act to redistribute wealth in the first period if $v - \theta_1 \geq \frac{(v-\bar{\theta}+\alpha)^2}{4\alpha}$. Because his reservation utility is higher, an official becomes less willing to pay a high cost of redistribution this period. He knows that there is some chance that redistribution will be easier tomorrow (regulations may change, landed elites may weaken or split, or the central government might provide additional resources or backing), and he knows that he can count on peasants to wait.

2.3 Summary and empirical predictions

The model illustrates how inaction might be an attractive strategy for officials. Rather than absorbing the cost of redistribution today, an official can wait to see if conditions improve next period. He will basically face the same choice tomorrow, but there is a possibility that he will be able to address claims more easily then.

Why are some peasant communities willing to wait? When the cost and risk of contentious collective action is high enough (κ is high and q is low), there is a benefit in waiting to see whether lands can be obtained the “easy” way via official channels, even if there is only a small probability that this will happen. In this model, peasants do not consent to waiting because they lose interest land, can’t solve their collective-action problem, or have been misled about the promise of reform or officials’ preferences. As long as the cost of waiting is

not too high, it is worthwhile to pay this cost to see if more drastic actions to obtain land can be avoided. Officials know this, and this allows them to take no action in the first period without penalty.

This presents one explanation for why backlash was muted when land reform was slow to come to Mexico. As I discuss below, the most common way in which officials in this context blocked or frustrated land redistribution was through delay or inaction rather than overt rejection. In allowing petitions to remain in the system, the possibility of land redistribution tomorrow remained at least somewhat active. During periods when the cost of redistribution declined or the threat of contentious mobilization by peasants increased, latent files could be easily revived to redistribute land quickly. This is in fact what happened in Mexico during the 1930s, when threat of peasant mobilization increased in much of the country alongside a trade shock that weakened elite landowners. To the extent that expectations about the reform had been unmet thus far, as emphasized in the model of Finkel and Gehlbach (2020), grievances were plausibly muted because the peasants still harbored some hope that the promise of reform would be delivered tomorrow.

This model also illustrates the limitations of bureaucratic inaction as a strategy of demobilization. When peasants are impatient or when the cost and risk of contentious collective action are low, they will not be inclined to wait until next period. They will force the issue today, and elites will have no choice but to respond. We should expect to see less bureaucratic inaction in times and places where the threat of contentious mobilization is high or patience is low. To assess this prediction, I examine the local-level implementation of land reform in the Mexican state of Jalisco.

3 Bureaucratic Inaction in Mexico's Agrarian Reform

Mexico's land reform was explicitly designed in response to revolutionary mobilization in the countryside during the Revolution. The first wave of land redistribution occurred under

military occupation during the war. Under pressure from radical revolutionary factions like the Zapatistas, land reform became an important tool for the new federal government to demobilize peasant militias and reconsolidate power in Mexico City. Mexico's land reform was eventually formalized in the radical Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, which in principle opened the door for large-scale land redistribution from large estates to peasant villages.

It would be hard to overstate the symbolic importance of the land reform for the “revolutionary” government that took power after the war. In practice, however, the implementation of the land reform was slow, stilted, contradictory, and confusing from the beginning. Peasant communities who demanded land had to navigate a confusing system of continuously changing legal and bureaucratic requirements in a context where few were literate. These procedures were set out in a series of federal laws governing who was allowed to petition for land and which lands could be expropriated.¹ The implementation of these laws was decentralized. State-level agrarian officials were tasked with receiving and processing petitions. These officials and the local authorities that they worked with—members of the state agrarian commission, the technical engineers dispatched to communities, the municipal governments tasked with reporting on the status of villages, and agrarian representatives in the governor's office—played an important role in determining how easy or difficult it was to obtain land in practice, often ignoring or subverting the written law and the priorities of federal officials in the process.

This subtle weakening of the land reform was facilitated by the highly bureaucratic process through which land was expropriated and redistributed. Under prevailing laws, a village had to jointly file a petition to the state governor outlining their demand for land redistribution. The state-level agrarian office² would then initiate a series of studies to determine whether the community was eligible to receive land and whether there were nearby properties that could be expropriated under law. The criteria that officials used to evaluate

¹For excellent summaries of these various laws and the agrarian reform procedure, see Sanderson (1984) and Craig (1983), Appendix A.

²This was named the *Comisión Local Agraria* (CLA) during the early years of the reform and the *Comisión Agraria Mixta* (CAM) following the revision to agrarian reform laws in 1933.

petitions evolved over time, but generally communities had to show that they had been in existence for at least six months and had a sufficiently high population of “interested and eligible” agricultural workers without access to land. Any large private properties within 7 km. of the town that exceeded some threshold size given land type and land use were identified as being vulnerable to expropriation.

After completing these censuses and technical studies, the state-level agrarian office would issue a ruling to the governor who could either reject the petition for a stated reason, grant the land provisionally, or (as was especially common in later years) take no action, which was considered to be a tacit negative ruling. If granted land by the governor, villages could usually take provisional possession of land within a few weeks or months. However, to obtain a definitive resolution, the file had to be passed on to federal officials in Mexico City. Federal agrarian authorities would conduct their own examination, often modifying or challenging elements of the governor’s ruling or applying new laws that had been passed in the interim. Grants could be expanded, contracted, eliminated, or modified at this stage. Villages whose petitions had been rejected at the state level could also appeal to federal authorities to overrule the provisional negative resolution of state-level officials. After this second-level of review, the grant would be finalized and signed by the president.

This process typically took several years (and often decades) to play out. At nearly every stage, landowners or other hostile observers could contest the eligibility of petitioners, demand new censuses or other documentation, or challenge the size and assessed value of land to be expropriated. Agrarian bureaucrats played a critical role in determining how quickly, efficiently, and fairly petitions were handled. As the first line of response to agrarian claims, the actions and recommendations of these bureaucrats were critical in determining whether land would be provisionally granted, whether applications would be passed to federal authorities for review, and which people and lands would be affected.

Much has been written about how extrajudicial violence by landowners’ “white guards” and threats of economic reprisal undermined efforts to agitate for land redistribution after

the Revolution (e.g., Craig 1983; González Navarro 2000). The bureaucratic hurdles that local, state, and federal agrarian officials imposed on communities seeking land played an equally or perhaps more important role in encouraging or deterring agrarian mobilization and redistribution. From within their office, bureaucrats manipulated the reform by “losing” petitions, refusing to complete eligibility studies in a reasonable amount of time, and forcing communities to meet additional requirements that were not specified by the reform laws (Montalvo Ortega 1988; Salamini 1990; Markiewicz 1993; Cueva Ramírez 1994). When they wanted to, they could push through redistribution quickly, bypassing or ignoring legal protections of landowners, as happened, for example, in strategically important areas during the Cristero conflict in the 1920s (e.g., Cueva Ramírez 1994; González Navarro 2000). More commonly, officials could drag their feet in following up for years at a time, leaving the ultimate resolution up in the air.

The land reform was carried out very unevenly across space and time as a result of these manipulations. Some agrarian petitions were fully processed in as little as a few months, while others were mislabeled or forgotten, literally for generations.³ Many petitions were given contradictory rulings at the state and federal levels, and different state officials themselves often undercut one another in evaluating agrarian claims. Shifts in laws and presidential priorities certainly shaped patterns of land redistribution (Sanderson 1984; Albertus 2015), but the actions and incentives of local-level intermediaries played an important role in determining how these laws and priorities were implemented.

Why were peasants willing to wait? This was a context of recent revolutionary mobilization. To even enter the dataset that I examine, communities had to have already solved some collective action problem in successfully submitting a joint petition to authorities, a process that often entailed considerable risk (e.g., Craig 1983; Cueva Ramírez 1994). The text of many petitions reflect the long effort of political organization and consciousness-building

³My dataset contains 19 cases where petitions were adjudicated for over 50 years. See, for example, the files of Los González, Tonaya (exp. 578); Los Reyes, San Sebastián (exp. 2494); or Cuautla, Cuautla (exp. 32/2024). Unless otherwise noted, citations refer to files in the Historical Agrarian Archive of Jalisco (AHAJ) in Guadalajara.

that went into simply filing a claim. In the town of Lagos de Moreno, for example, the first agrarian petition, filed in January 1925, describes the process through which villagers had organized a union and decided to ask for land “under prevailing laws,” ending with the substance of their claim:

[W]e are all workers of the field and currently we are harshly oppressed by the large landowners [*latifundistas*] of this region, who until now have not known how to appreciate our labor for its real worth...[which] is what made us to resolve to respectfully ask the State Executive, as we hereby do, to authorize us to form in this city an agrarian group to bear as its motto “LAND AND WORKER EMANCIPATION” (emphasis in original, qtd. in Craig 1983, p. 66)

Lagos de Moreno did eventually receive a land grant in response to this petition, but not for 10 years (May 1935, exp. 309). Local officials took little immediate action, yet the community’s response to this long period of inaction was mostly muted until a subsequent wave of mobilization in the 1930s (Craig 1983).

To understand how it was possible for authorities to simply decline to respond to this and many other similar petitions for so long, it is worth looking more closely at data on when, where, and why this inaction was deployed.

4 Data

The primary data source is the set of case files on all agrarian petitions submitted to the Jalisco state government between 1915 and 1991. I examine petitions for the three major types of actions through which lands could be demanded for redistribution: the restitution of lands previous held by a community (*restitución*), the outright grant of land for a new ejido (*dotación*), or the expansion of lands for an existing ejido (*ampliación*).⁴ These data were recorded from the archives of the state-level agrarian commission, known first as the Local

⁴In addition to these redistributive grants, there were numerous other actions processed through the reform, such as to establish a new agricultural community, to recognize and title lands held by a community, to grant water rights to villages, to divide or combine ejidos, or to adjudicate usage rights within ejidos. See Sanderson (1984) for a summary.

Agrarian Commission or CLA (1917–1933) and then the Mixed Agrarian Commission or CAM (1934–1991). The archives of this institution are maintained in the Historical Agrarian Archive of Jalisco (AHAJ), a sub-unit of the state’s Directorate of Agrarian Affairs.

Each file represents a collection of official documents tracing the origin and outcome of a particular petition for land redistribution. While there is naturally some variation in how carefully documents were preserved, nearly all files contain information on the initial petition submitted to authorities, the date and outcome of various eligibility studies and censuses, the date and outcome of provisional review at the state level, the date and outcome of federal-level review, and the date and outcome of the definitive resolution by the president. Many files contain quite a lot of additional information on legal challenges to expropriation, landowner complaints about the behavior of agrarian officials, disputes between technical officials at different levels, and even questions over the agrarian history of a particular town or towns.⁵

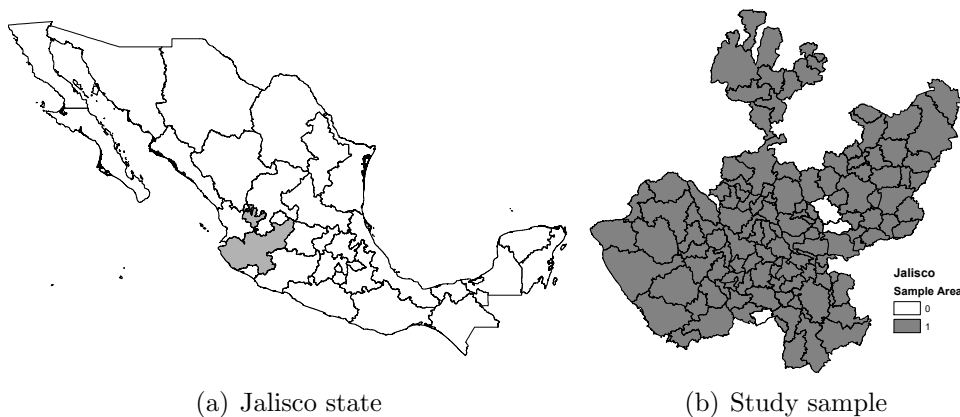
Using this information, I trace the history of when and how agrarian officials and politicians handled a particular land reform case and whether and when redistribution was eventually granted. It is important to recognize that there is a lot about the on-the-ground realities of the land reform that remains unobserved in this archive. For a case file to be opened, a community would need to have successfully filed a petition in a context where this was risky and explicitly required collective action. With rare exceptions, the documentation contained in each file comes from official correspondence, notarized letters, internal records, and other official papers written for official audiences. Local bureaucrats do not typically record and preserve their decision to subvert federal authority. However, through reading between the lines looking at official documents and dates, we can often infer important information about how seriously bureaucrats followed up on their responsibilities.⁶

⁵Petitions for restitution required showing documentation of both prior land ownership by a community and wrongful alienation. This documentation often came from colonial-era documents. These would be vetted by a series of experts, who often debated their authenticity. See, for example, files from Amatitán (exp. 3929), Soyatlán del Oro (exp. 2655), and Cuautla (exp. 32/2024).

⁶As an example, the town of Los Paredones (exp. 255) petitioned for land redistribution in June 1924. Records show that the Local Agrarian Commission received the petition and initiated the file later that year.

This draft includes data from 4,055 agrarian case files in 122 municipios. This partial list of municipios represents the first 121 municipios in Jalisco by the numerical code assigned by Mexico’s National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and one municipio, San Ignacio de Cerro Gordo, which was constituted in 2007 out of the municipio of Arandas.⁷ The geographic location of Jalisco in Mexico is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Study Area



I complement these data with information from Jalisco’s Directorate of Agrarian Affairs on the history and current status of ejidal landholdings in the state. I also use data from Mexico’s National Agrarian Registry (RAN) and Sanderson’s 1984 dataset of definitive presidential resolutions to trace the outcome of cases that had been passed back from Mexico without a clear resolution in the file. The data from RAN and the Jalisco government provide additional information on whether and how the grant was executed (i.e., whether and how much land was actually transferred). In some analysis, I aggregate data to the level of the municipio. Where an ejidal grant is split between more than one municipio (rare in the

There is no further documentation in the file until an official order by the governor rejecting the resolution in July 1979 on the grounds that the town no longer existed.

⁷Data are still being processed for the remaining municipios. The ordering of INEGI codes is roughly alphabetical. While these municipios are not missing at random, there is no correlation in the dataset between the INEGI codes and the time lag between the date of petition and the date of either the gubernatorial or the presidential ruling. It is also important to note that INEGI codes were created after the time period under study, and the municipios in the study area cut across all of the separate local offices through which land reform eligibility studies and censuses were processed. All reported results are the same when I include data on cases from these four municipios that reached the federal level and were thus recorded in the *Diario Oficial*.

data), I attribute that grant to the municipio of the original petitioning community.

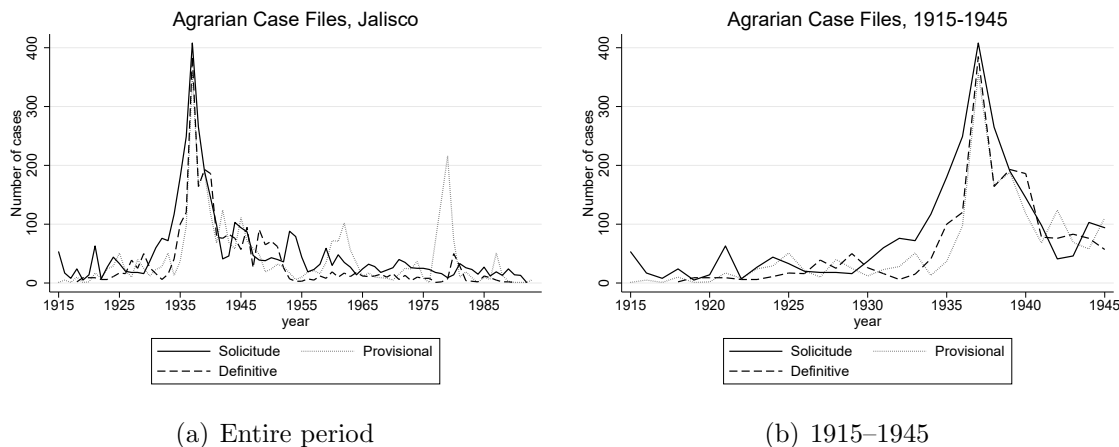
This draft focuses on general trends in how petitions were filed and processed in different decades. However, in the appendix, I examine systematic differences in how petitions were treated across the state, examining the correlation between reform patterns and municipio characteristics. For these regressions, data on pre-Revolution land tenure and agricultural patterns come from two sources: the Mexican Census of 1900 and Southworth's *Directory of Mines and Estates of Mexico* (1910). In some cases, I collapse the analysis to the level of the 1900 municipality (of which there are only 97 in this subsample due merging/splitting of municipios) to use these pre-Revolution data. I also use information from Mexico's National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI) on the average altitude, slope, and size of municipality and whether it contains territory in malarial zone. The maize productivity data come from the Food and Agriculture Organization's Global Agro-Ecological Zones (GAEZ) dataset. Distance to main railroad lines were calculated based on a digitized map of the Mexican Central Railway (1900). Finally, data on Bracero-era and early migration from Jalisco come from González Navarro (1974) and Arroyo Alejandro et al. (1991).

4.1 Trends in bureaucratic inaction

I begin by examining general trends in the process through which land reform was carried out. As noted earlier, the standard procedure had multiple steps: villages would file a petition, state-level authorities would review the case, the governor would rule, federal authorities would review the file, and then the president would issue a definitive resolution. In Figure 3, I plot the number of agrarian petitions, governors' rulings, and presidential resolutions in the sample by year throughout the study period. In the left panel, I plot the data for the entire period. The right panel focuses on the 1915–1945 period, when most of Jalisco's land reform took place. Though the land reform officially lasted until 1991, about half of petitions in Jalisco that were ever taken up by the president had been resolved by 1940. Though many petitions were filed after 1940, most did not receive any definitive ruling

from the president.

Figure 3: Jalisco Land Reform Petitions and Resolutions by Year, 1915–1992

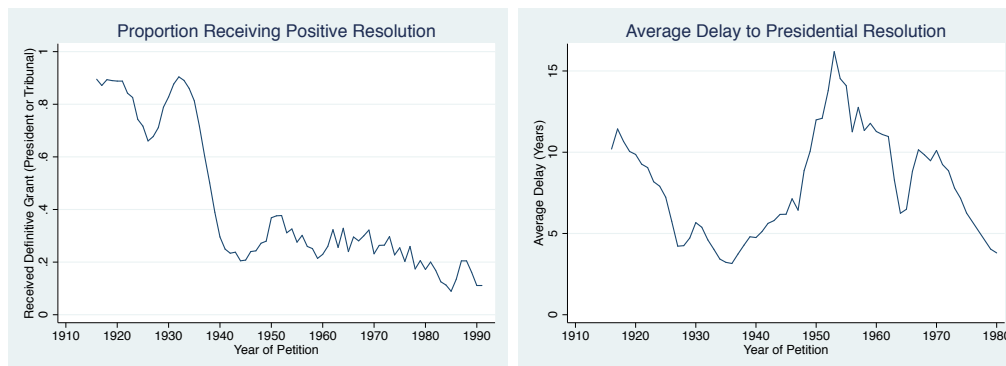


The number of reform petitions, governor’s rulings, and presidential resolutions all remain relatively low through in the early post-revolution period, accelerate in tandem in the 1930s (peaking in 1937), and then taper off. This general pattern was replicated in much of the country (e.g., Sanderson 1984). An important thing to note for the purposes of this paper, however, is that the correspondence between petitions and resolutions was imperfect. Beginning around 1930, there is an evident rise in petitions preceding the rise in redistribution by several years. In 1930, the number of petitions doubled over the previous year, increasing rapidly each subsequent year until 1937. An increase in provisional resolutions granting land is notable in 1932/1933, just prior to revision to the agrarian code and before the beginning of the Cárdenas administration. The increased attention to the agrarian reform appears not to be solely driven by the change in presidential priorities or top-down efforts but also to differences in demands and implementation at the local level.

In addition to trends in absolute numbers, it is helpful to examine how the processing of agrarian petitions varied over time. Figure 4 plots three metrics on how authorities responded to agrarian claims over time: the proportion of petitions filed in a given year that eventually received a positive definitive resolution (including cases decided positively by the agrarian

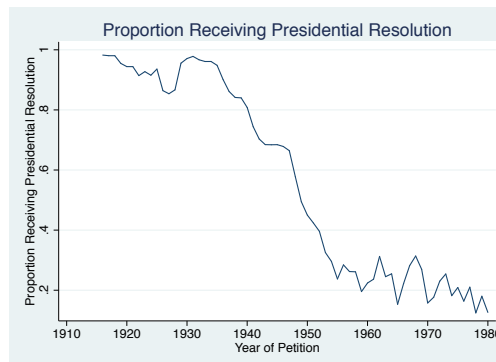
courts in the 1990s or 2000s), the average time lag from date of petition to the definitive resolution by the president for the subset of files that received a definitive resolution, and the proportion of petitions that ever received a definitive ruling from the president. As few petitions were filed in certain years, pictured are the three-year moving averages of each metric.

Figure 4: Handling of Agrarian Petitions by Year of Solicitation



(a) Proportion receiving land

(b) Time lag to presidential resolution



(c) Proportion receiving pres. resolution

Examining the first measure of response (panel a), we can see that the majority of petitions filed in the early years of the reform were eventually resolved positively by authorities.⁸ The peak era of responsiveness was in the early 1930s, when close to 90 percent of petitions eventually resulted in land redistribution of some kind. After this period, there is a sharp decline in responsiveness. By the 1950s, fewer than 40 percent of petitions were resolved pos-

⁸This does not include cases where the original petition was rejected but a subsequent one was resolved positively, which was relatively frequent for petitions initially filed in the 1920s.

itively. Equally notable are trends in how long the reform process took (panel b). Petitions submitted in the early years were often not taken up by federal authorities for a decade, though some received provisional grants of land in the interim. Petitions submitted in the 1930s, by contrast, would often be resolved in under 5 years. Time lags increased again during the Bracero period, reaching a peak in the early 1950s. Average wait times declined, but this is mostly an artifact of the transition away from resolving cases via presidential resolutions (panel c). Starting in the 1940s, petitions in Jalisco often did not progress beyond the state level (*primera instancia*). Inaction by either the governor or president was considered a tacit negative ruling by these authorities, and the denial of petitions often took this form rather than outright refusal. Many agrarian petitions in Jalisco were thus never officially resolved by the federal government. Over 1,000 petitions in the dataset were abandoned after an explicit (670 cases) or tacit (384 cases) negative ruling from the governor. Some of these cases were eventually taken up by agrarian courts following the official “end” of the agrarian reform in the 1990s, but most were not.

I now turn attention to examining the differences in how the land reform was implemented in Jalisco in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, three very different decades in terms of the political and economic context, especially with respect to the cost of redistribution and the threat of contentious agrarian mobilization.

5 Action and Inaction in Jalisco’s Land Reform

5.1 Bureaucratic inaction in the 1920s

In contrast to other parts of the country, conditions in Jalisco coming out of the Revolution seemed at least somewhat favorable for a radical land reform. Jalisco was one of a handful of states that initiated a formalized land reform prior to the Constitution of 1917. Driven from Guadalajara by *Villista* forces, the Constitutionalist governor of Jalisco, Manuel M. Diéguez, began to distribute lands around the seat of his government in Ciudad Guzmán

as a way of pacifying the peasantry during the war (Cueva Ramírez 1994). Unlike informal land seizures during the war in other places, Jalisco's state government processed these claims formally, more or less following the procedures set out by Carranza in 1915 and archiving official documents. This echoed actions of the federal government, who used targeted formal distribution of lands around Mexico City and in Zapatista strongholds to bring rural areas under control (Sanderson 1984).

Over 100 communities in Jalisco had petitioned for lands prior to 1920 when the land reform began in earnest in most of the rest of the country. Most of the towns filing these early petitions eventually received land in some fashion. However, this process was extremely slow. Nearly all communities were forced to wait several years for a resolution. Thirty percent of petitions filed before 1920 were not resolved until the 1930s or later. One petition, that of the town of Cuautla (exp. 2024), was finally resolved by agrarian courts in 1997, a full 81 years after the petition had been filed.

Though many governors of Jalisco continued to espouse pro-agrarista rhetoric, as they had during the war, actual land redistribution during the 1920s was limited. Following the first wave of petitions during the war and another in 1920–21 at the beginning of the Obregón administration, there was little activity until the middle of the decade when the governor again granted provisional lands to strategically important villages as a way of consolidating political control during the Cristero conflict (Craig 1983; Bartra 1985; González Navarro 2000). By the middle of the decade, few communities continued to petition for lands.

Why were there so few agrarian petitions in the 1920s, less than a decade removed from the Revolution? Historical evidence suggests that this is not because peasants had no interest in receiving land, but rather because they correctly perceived that it would be risky and difficult to obtain redistribution through the land reform (e.g., Craig 1983; Cueva Ramírez 1994). There were many obvious barriers to redistribution on the ground. A large literature has documented how petitioning communities were often threatened with violence and economic sanctions by landlords fearful of expropriation (Craig 1983; Cueva Ramírez 1994).

Given these dangers, it is perhaps not surprising that many communities chose not to even try to obtain lands. Many areas, including regions that saw high rates of land redistribution during the 1930s, did not file any petitions during the 1920s.

However, overt rejection by authorities was rare. Only about 15 percent of 1920s petitions were officially rejected during this decade. Many of these represented cases where communities were clearly ineligible under prevailing laws, leaving less room for bureaucratic discretion.⁹ As discussed earlier, the most common way in which land redistribution was frustrated was not through overt rejection by federal authorities, but rather through extra-official intimidation, purposeful delays, and bureaucratic inaction.

Why was inaction such an attractive strategy for officials, and why didn't peasants put up a stiffer resistance when the bureaucracy overtly dragged its feet in resolving claims? The model calls attention to a couple of reasons why local officials may have benefited from inaction during the 1920s. First, given ongoing low-level violence in the countryside, the cost of either redistribution or rejection was plausibly very high during this period. State-level agrarian officials were pinned between the desire to appease local landowners, upon whom they often depended for political survival, and peasant communities, who represented either a threat to political order or potential alternative base of political influence. They were also frequently under competing pressures from higher-level officials to either speed up or slow down land redistribution (e.g., Cueva Ramírez 1994). Given economic and political insecurity, inaction was arguably the safest option. In a few files, agrarian officials appear to have even presented their choice to take no action as beneficial for the petitioners rather than the landowners. For example, when the Local Agrarian Commission decided to archive the petitions of two communities in the municipality of Tamazula in the mid-1920s, the stated reason was that officials believed that federal agrarian laws were "capricious" and that "landowners and the government" would not allow redistribution to towns of their political

⁹For example, indentured peons on haciendas were ineligible to receive land until an overhaul of the national Agrarian Code in 1934.

category (rancho/hacienda).¹⁰ Both of these cases were reactivated after the revision to agrarian laws in 1934 and eventually resolved positively, though only after delays of over a decade.

This was not an uncommon trajectory. Most petitions that submitted prior to 1930 eventually received a positive resolution from federal officials (in fact, nearly 80 percent). This provides some insight into why many peasant communities may have been willing to wait. In a context of considerable political instability and ongoing violence, the costs and risk of contentious mobilization were plausibly very high. On the other hand, because uncertainty was so great—this decade saw numerous revisions and reversals in agrarian codes and procedures—the possibility that conditions might improve tomorrow remained. In some ways, the patience of communities during this decade paid off. Most petitioning communities received land by the end of the 1930s the “easy” way: through institutional channels.

However, there were obviously costs to agrarian inaction. On average (median), it took around 3 years for petitions filed in the 1920s to receive a ruling from the governor and 6.5 years to receive a definitive resolution from the president. Slightly over a quarter of petitions remained pending in the bureaucracy for a decade or more. By 1930, only about 200 communities in the state had received provisional possession of lands, out of the close to 400 petitions by that point. Lack of action on land reform forced villagers to use other strategies to address their economic needs. Stalled or delayed land reform was an important stated reason for emigration from Jalisco during this time period, for example (e.g., Taylor 1933; Craig 1983).

Some communities, however, did receive land in a timely fashion. Many of the communities that received land during the first wave of reform were indigenous communities dating back to the colonial era, a time when this designation conferred important political status. These communities thus had a long history of collective action, which plausibly made the threat of contentious resistance to bureaucratic inaction more credible. Alternatively, many

¹⁰See exp. 195 (El Veladero, Tamazula) and 258 (Peña Colorada, Tamazula).

indigenous communities that petitioned in the first wave of reform had only recently lost access to village lands during the Porfirian era just before the Revolution. As Saffon Sanín (2015) writes, the memory of rights and lands lost became an important motivator for contentious collective action aimed at reclaiming lands. The heightened grievances of these communities might have lowered the barriers to contentious collective action or increased the cost of patience. Either way, this would suggest that peasants in these communities should be less willing to wait to see if conditions improve, forcing authorities to respond more quickly. Authorities also proved themselves able to move more quickly on resolving claims and redistributing land when they used the promise of land reform to encourage peasants to take up arms in defense of the government during the Cristero conflict (Cueva Ramírez 1994).

On the other hand, there is evidence that immediate redistribution was limited where peasant collective action was plausibly less threatening to the government. As I discuss in other work (Sellars 2019), the possibility of emigration in parts of Jalisco and Mexico made it difficult for communities to organize given the costs and risks of collective action. Consistent with the model presented here, high-emigration areas were less likely to petition for lands (which itself required collective action, as described earlier), and petitions from these areas were less likely to receive a resolution from authorities during the 1920s (Appendix A).

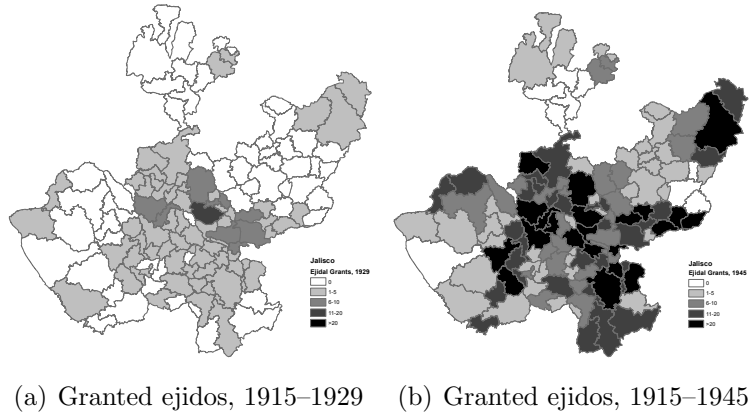
5.2 The limits of inaction in the 1930s

The 1930s saw a sharp increase in both agrarian mobilization and land reform across Mexico, as has been well documented. This has been attributed to many factors, including the erosion of the political and economic power of local landlords (e.g., Garfias 2018), the material effects of the Depression on peasant communities at subsistence level (e.g. Cueva Ramírez 1994), the role of urban unemployment and social mobilization (e.g., González Navarro 1970; Knight 1991), and the ideology of Lázaro Cárdenas (e.g., Sanderson 1984). I complement these accounts looking in more detail at how incentives shifted for local officials in charge of

implementing the reform.

As in much of the country, Jalisco saw a rapid increase in both agrarian petitions and land redistribution during the 1930s. The geographic expansion in the areas receiving land in the 1930s relative to the 1920s is illustrated in Figure 5. By the end of the decade, virtually every region of the state had been affected, the exceptions being the region of Tomatlán in the west (which saw an extended reform in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s), the far north region around Colotlán (which had few large estates in 1900), and parts of the Altos region of Jalisco (where a smallholder “rancho” economy predominated prior to the Revolution).

Figure 5: Ejidal Grants in Jalisco, 1915–1945



Examining the cases in more detail, the acceleration in reform appears to be attributable to both supply- and demand-side factors. There was a notable shift during the 1930s in how both federal and state officials responded to agrarian claims. The average delay from the time of petition to the time of governor’s resolution fell sharply, averaging less than two years for petitions filed during the 1930s. Almost half of petitions filed in 1937, the peak year of land reform in Jalisco, received a provisional ruling from the governor in less than one year. The revisions to agrarian reform laws in the mid-1930s facilitated faster redistribution by bypassing the judicial review of land expropriation (i.e., the recourse to *amparo*) and providing for closer coordination between state and federal reform authorities. A considerable number of petitions during the 1930s, including more than half of those

resolved by the president in 1935, were never fully reviewed by the governor or the state-level agrarian bureaucracy at all. Unlike in the 1920s, federal authorities were quick to intervene when local implementation of the reform lagged.

What accounts for this marked shift in officials' attitudes and actions? A clear watershed moment for the course of the land reform was the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression. This had two consequences that reduced the relative benefits of inaction for local officials. First, the economic crisis spurred a wave of labor strikes and agrarian agitation at the national level that was "unprecedented in terms of scale and organization" (Knight 1991, 1994, p. 91, 94–6; Knight 2014, p. 228–229). Following their lead, many agrarian communities began to organize contentious political actions at the local level as well (e.g., Craig 1983). As contentious political action became more attractive or possible for communities, the benefits of waiting for a more receptive bureaucracy plausibly decreased. Communities were thus more willing and able to force officials to address the issue today as illustrated by the model.

A complementary reason for the shift in attitudes is that the costs of redistribution for local officials declined considerably for several reasons. The trade shock of the Depression weakened the political power of local landlords, reducing the threat of retribution (Garfias 2018). Simultaneously, the fractions within the emerging ruling party (established in 1929) became concerned about growing peasant unrest, pushing federal land reform legislation in a markedly more progressive direction (e.g., Sanderson 1984; Betanzos Piñón and Montalvo Ortega 1988; Warman 2001). As a result of the same forces, Lázaro Cárdenas, the man now most associated with Mexico's land reform took office and ushered in a series of other political changes that decreased the costs and raised the benefits of agrarian redistribution for local officials. This again pushed in the direction of resolving petitions more quickly and resolving them today.

Following these changes, many older cases that had been stuck in the bureaucracy for years, in some cases prior to the formalization of the agrarian program in 1917, were revived

by state and federal authorities.¹¹ Of those resolved in the first year of the Cárdenas presidency, all had been initiated prior to his ascension to office and about a quarter had started prior to 1930. Among the 381 agrarian cases in this dataset that were resolved by the president in 1937, 28 percent had been initiated prior to the Cárdenas presidency, the earliest in 1915 (San Sebastián, Poncitlán), but about half of the cases had been initiated within a year of the ruling. The president granted land to two towns, Jayamitla and Quiexpan in the municipio of Ameca, fewer than 50 days after submitting their initial petitions and less than a month after the governor's ruling. The wave of land redistribution was thus a combination of officials clearing the backlog of old cases and rapidly processing new claims.

The increased responsiveness of authorities encouraged more villages to demand land, and many villages who had been denied land in earlier years decided to reapply. While examples of violent repression by hacendados continued through the 1930s (e.g., Cueva Ramírez 1994), the turn toward quicker and more sympathetic state-level and federal review lowered the costs and risks of agitating for reform, encouraging more to file petitions and follow up with authorities. However, this period of intense agrarian redistribution proved to be short-lived.

5.3 The return to inaction

By the early 1940s, even before the end of the Cárdenas presidency, the pace of land redistribution began to slow down (Knight 2014). There were several reasons for this, but an important one is that the costs of redistribution rose. Because so many communities were successful in receiving lands during the 1930s, many large properties in Jalisco had already been divided and dismantled. Federal law also shifted back in favor of protecting some types of private properties from expropriation, which made it all the more difficult for officials to find land that could be expropriated under current laws. Official agricultural policy at the federal level became increasingly oriented toward efforts to increase industrialization and urbanization at the expense of the countryside (Sanderson 1984; Warman 2001; Gillingham

¹¹Examples include the communities of Talpa de Allende (exp. 73), Ajijic (exp. 58), and Mezquitic (exp. 72).

and Smith 2014). The Agricultural Department's annual report in 1940–1 openly declared that the “redistributive phase” of the reform had been completed (qtd. in Markiewicz 1993, p. 122).

The land reform was in fact far from over in 1940. There was another important wave of redistribution in the 1960s and 1970s, and the reform itself would officially continue until 1991. However, there was a markedly conservative turn in agrarian politics during the 1940s and 1950s. This is not because peasants stopped demanding land redistribution. Large unmet demand remained after the 1930s. According to the calculations of Sanderson (1984), more communities across the country were eligible to receive land in 1940 than in 1930 due to rapid population growth (p. 46). In Jalisco, over 1,200 petitions for land redistribution were filed during the 1940s and 1950s, considerably more than had been filed during the 1920s.

However, most of these cases did not receive a timely resolution. Wait times climbed back up and eventually exceeded 1920s levels. For agrarian petitions filed in the 1940s that were eventually successful, it took an average of close to 7 years to receive a provisional land grant from the governor and an average of 13 years to receive a definitive resolution. However, only about a quarter of petitions in Jalisco made after 1940 were ever resolved positively. The majority of unsuccessful petitions never received a definitive ruling by state and federal officials. If state-level officials had neglected to act after several years, this would be considered a tacit negative ruling. Peasants could appeal this ruling to federal officials, but few chose to do so, and even fewer did so successfully. Of those that were eventually successful at reviving their cases, many of them only received land decades later after the official “end” of the reform in 1991.¹²

Using the model as a guide, one can imagine why inaction became more attractive for local officials as the costs of redistribution increased. By leaving the door open to future redistribution, officials could encourage peasants to hold off on pushing for more radical

¹²Examples include petitions from San Nicolás, Cocula (exp. 3039), Los Arcos, Cuquío (exp. 3237), and Galeras, Jilotlán de Dolores (exp. 3441).

solutions without having to absorb the costs of actually carrying out the reform. Despite the obvious conservative turn in agrarian politics, it is notable that neither the federal government nor local officials sought to prevent peasant collective action or officially end the reform. The regime in fact continued to rely on the land reform to “cloak itself with revolutionary legitimacy” (Sanderson 1984, p. 9). The corporatist National Confederation of Peasants (the CNC), founded in the state of Jalisco in 1938, had a seat at the table when it came to debates within the hegemonic party over the course of policy. The beneficiaries of the land reform (ejidatarios) became an important base of support for the hegemonic party, facilitating the stabilization of one-party rule (McCormick 2016; Gillingham and Smith 2014). However, the most common response to agrarian petitions in practice was indifference and neglect.

Why did peasants continue to petition the government, and why did they continue to wait? Perhaps the government did enough to keep the hope of land reform alive. Just as in the 1920s, some communities did receive land relatively quickly, especially in the southern regions of the state and toward the coast where there had been less redistribution to date.¹³ Some patient communities eventually received land after years or decades of waiting, though the majority did not. Unlike in the 1920s, there was no later shock that ever forced authorities to respond to pending claims in Jalisco, though there was an important phase of redistribution in the 1970s elsewhere in the country. An explicit goal of this later wave of reform was to encourage relocation of peasants to the sparsely settled frontier areas to reduce landlessness (and the threat of unrest) in denser central states like Jalisco (Sanderson 1984; Warman 2001; Albertus 2015). Most communities in Jalisco, however, waited for another wave of land reform that never came. In reality, many eventually gave up.

¹³For example, Tecolotlán (exp. 3603), Santa Cruz de Quelitán, Puerto Vallarta (exp. 3490), Girosto, Villa Purificación (exp. 3587).

6 Conclusion and next steps

This work illustrates the roles of bureaucratic delay and ambiguity in mitigating agrarian conflict in Mexico. Officials were generally not eager to undergo the costly process of expropriating private property in their districts. However, peasant mobilization often posed a threat to political control, and agrarian interests increasingly constituted a pillar of support for the ruling party. Inaction was often a preferred strategy to either redistribution or repression. Some towns continued to receive lands, lending some legitimacy to the program, but many others were forced to wait for decades before receiving any sort of resolution.

A lot of recent scholarly work on the reform in political science has emphasized the “top-down” use of land redistribution in the service of political goals for the ruling party, such as building state capacity (e.g., Garfias 2018; Larreguy, Riaño and Sánchez-Talanquer 2019) or creating patronage networks to sustain one-party rule (e.g., Larreguy 2012; Albertus et al. 2016; McCormick 2016; Albertus 2021). Federal shifts in reform laws and presidential politics certainly played a role in facilitating or hindering land redistribution, but there were also marked local-level differences in implementation which determined whether, how, and when land was expropriated and redistributed in different times and places. There is little doubt that the land reform played a meaningful role in establishing and solidifying one-party rule, but the actual implementation of the reform did not always match its symbolic importance. As others have noted, one of the things that made one-party rule in Mexico so durable is that authorities were somehow able to appease a mobilized and aggrieved peasantry while simultaneously keeping some landowning elites and agricultural interests in the ruling coalition (Magaloni 2006; Gillingham 2021; Gillingham and Smith 2014). This work illustrates why and how bureaucratic ambiguity was an important tool for walking this tightrope alongside the “carrots” and “sticks” of redistribution and repression.

This project is still in development. Here are some things that I am working on now:

- With María Paula Saffon Sanín, I am collecting data on petitions filed during the 1920s

for the rest of the country using federal-level implementation data. This would allow us to examine variation by e.g., regions that did and did not see active fighting in the Revolution, regions where the landholdings of indigenous communities had been lost much earlier than the 19th century, etc.

- I am working on matching petitioning communities with colonial political records to more directly examine some of the determinants of agrarian protest and patience.

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Appendix A Emigration and agrarian inaction during the 1920s

Data on municipal-level migration from Mexico to the United States is not widely available during the 1920s. However, we can use some imperfect proxies for areas which were likely to have had better access to exit opportunities during this time. The first comes from Arroyo Alejandro et al. (1991), who provide a coarse classification of migration patterns from the municipios of Jalisco, classifying them as either having a long history of high migration, a recent start to high migration, or low migration areas. Because municipalities of “long migration” are considered to be those where migration began in the early 20th century, I use this as the first proxy for migration exposure.

Table A1: 1920s Migration and Reform: Retrospective Measure

Dep. Variable:	Petitions	Petitions	Grants	Grants
migration?	-2.48*** (0.69)	-3.38*** (0.99)	-2.00*** (0.60)	-2.94*** (0.81)
Controls?	No	Yes	No	Yes
N	97	97	97	97
R^2	0.08	0.26	0.07	0.27

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Partial results. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Controls: log population, hacienda area, number of haciendas, inverse distance to railroad, percent employed in agriculture, mean maize productivity, elevation, malarial zone, slope, population density

Table A1 provides a first set of suggestive evidence that high-migration municipalities saw less reform than comparable areas without migration flows.¹⁴ The table presents coefficient estimates from simple OLS regressions of land reform petitions (columns 1 and 2) and successful resolutions (columns 3 and 4) on this first measure of migration dependence. Columns 1 and 3 present simple bivariate regressions. In columns 2 and 4, I add a series of control variables for important factors that may have influenced the supply of or demand for reform across municipios of different kinds. These include important geographic factors (elevation, slope, mean rainfed maize productivity, malarial area, inverse distance to railroad), demographic factors (log population in 1900, population density in 1900, percent of adult population employed in agriculture in 1900), and measures of pre-Revolution land tenure (number of large estates listed by Southworth, communities with the political category of “hacienda”). The Arroyo Alejandro et al. measure is negatively associated with both the number of petitions and the number of successful grants during the 1920s. The coefficient is statistically significant at conventional levels. The magnitudes suggest that high-emigration areas saw on average 2-3 fewer petitions and resolutions during the decade than comparable communities. This represents about a one standard deviation decline in successful grants and a half standard deviation decline in petitions.

¹⁴These and all other results are incomplete and only include the first 100 municipios of Jalisco, becoming only 78 units when aggregated to the 1900 municipio level.

One potential concern about this retrospective migration measure is that it may capture something about earlier frustrations with land reform. As noted above, frustration with the slow pace of reform was a commonly stated reason for leaving parts of Jalisco in the 1920s. It could be that the negative correlation in Table A1 is driven by the fact that people were forced to leave in greater numbers in areas where land reform was slow for other reasons. To address this possibility, I replicate the above analysis using another coarse proxy for the existence of outside options: the interaction between population density and 1900 railroad access. As noted by many scholars of Mexico-U.S. migration, early U.S. labor recruiters in Mexico traveled along the railroads to recruit in dense areas where there was “surplus labor” that could be easily lured to the U.S. labor market (e.g., Durand, Massey and Zenteno 2001; Massey, Durand and Malone 2002). Given that population density played an explicit role in the reform and railroad access was a determinant of land alienation in the 19th century (Coatsworth 1974), it is important to be cautious in interpreting these results. However, they provide a second piece of suggestive evidence that high-migration areas lagged others both in soliciting lands and in successfully obtaining concessions from the government.

Table A2: 1920s Migration and Reform: Railroad Measure

Dep. Variable:	Petitions	Petitions	Grants	Grants
Interaction	-0.06	-0.12**	-0.09**	-0.14**
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Inv. Log Distance to RR	2.84**	3.54**	3.24***	3.43***
	(1.24)	(1.42)	(1.03)	(1.24)
1900 Population Density	0.05	0.11*	0.09*	0.13**
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Controls?	No	Yes	No	Yes
N	97	97	97	97
R ²	0.05	0.19	0.08	0.21

*p<0.1; ** p< 0.05; *** p<0.01. Partial results. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Controls: log population, hacienda area, number of haciendas, inverse distance to railroad, percent employed in agriculture, mean maize productivity, elevation, malarial zone, slope, population density

These results are in Table A2. As before, the dependent variable in the first two columns is the number of petitions filed in the 1920s, while in the second two columns it is the number of successful grants. Columns 1 and 3 include only the three listed variables, while columns 2 and 4 include the full set of controls listed above. The results are more imprecisely estimated than in the prior regressions, but the coefficient estimate on the interaction is negative, indicating that areas where migration recruitment would plausibly have been higher submitted fewer petitions and received fewer land grants in the 1920s than other areas, conditional on their population density, proximity to railroad, and other covariates (when included).

Given that we do not have direct information on 1920s migration at the municipal-level, these results should be treated with caution. However, individual case files provide more direct evidence on why reform may have lagged in high-migration areas, as I discuss in other work.