The Democracy Development Machine
Copeland, Nicholas

Published by Cornell University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/65028

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2287657
The past thirty years have witnessed a remarkable transformation in local politics in Guatemala’s rural highlands. Previously excluded from municipal authority, Mayas with various political affiliations now dominate the political scene, holding the top positions in most municipal governments. Elections feature about a dozen parties led mostly by indigenous candidates. At stake are development projects—infrastructure, valuable personal assistance, and even jobs—who gets what and when—and the prestige of those who broker them. When Mayan leaders in San Pedro won mayoral elections in 1993, projects began to flow to rural villages, breaking the previous monopoly of the mostly Ladino town center. Not long after, the peace accords brought a wave of national and international development institutions and NGOs whose assorted programs aimed to heal and rebuild Mayan communities, raise the standard of living, defend human rights, and preserve and restore Mayan culture.

Official public narratives and numerous NGO mission statements, which are repeated by most politicians, frame development as the route to Mayan
inclusion in a multicultural nation; it is both the goal of democracy and the pathway to it. Large infrastructure projects symbolize concrete proof of social and political advancement, as well as the reformed state’s commitment to protect and defend Mayan life, a departure from past discrimination. Development is the material manifestation of democracy’s existence and promise and the highly fetishized cornerstone of a new world of post-revolutionary politics. Local candidates—almost all of them men—compete to demonstrate their commitment and ability to deliver projects procured through party and NGO connections to their patronage networks.

As the primary form through which democracy is lived in rural villages, party-led, project-centered development is a crucial site where rural Mayas imagine and construct the state, formulate concrete political demands and identities, and produce community relations. Despite the effectiveness of party politics as a conveyor of material goods, most Mayas in San Pedro have expressed deep misgivings about it precisely because of the manner in which it accomplishes this feat: by abandoning villagers who back a losing candidate. Clientelist party politics, often called machine politics, is a process in which Mayas exercise sovereign violence against one another and blame one another for this violence.

Most scholars are optimistic about community development since the peace accords, seeing access to resources as the fruit of decades of struggle, which is undeniably true. These assessments coincide with favorable discussions of the “politics of distribution,” a political strategy focused on the incremental accrual of resource-based rights for marginalized populations. Similar sensibilities inform recent positive reevaluations of patronage networks that show how these perennial scapegoats for democratic dysfunction that are regularly targeted for dismantling by development institutions such as the World Bank can in fact coincide with local moral economies and forms of reciprocity, double as social-assistance networks, and even create conditions for collective action. But clientelist party politics in San Pedro violated local moral economies and further disrupted local social relations that had long been divided by class, religion, and party; had been severely damaged during the war; and had been only partially reconstituted by force under the civil patrols. Although clientelism delivered much-needed resources, the intermittent, insufficient, and competitive nature of the distribution undermined rights-based claims and fragmented local political agency.
This chapter examines how instituting party-led, clientelist, project-centered development in the context of extreme poverty, violence, and pessimism reconfigured political imaginaries, demands, and practices in ways that decimated capacities for collective action, thus achieving core counterinsurgency ends through democratic means. Projects refocused radical demands for collective redistribution on winner-take-all competition between party factions for insufficient projects, where personal interest demolished collective interest. Zero-sum competition and the intermittent delivery of projects multiplied the effects of state violence by exacerbating insecurity and powerlessness while also fomenting a bitter “war in the villages” that broke down bonds of trust. This process reinforced state assertions of scarcity and reframed poverty as a form of suffering that villagers inflicted upon one another and chalked up to individual greed and corrupt Mayan leadership.

Through electoral competition, Sampedranos came to participate in the maintenance of their neighbors’ “slow deaths,” defined by Lauren Berlant (2007) as “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (754). I call this turning of the responsibility for deciding who may live and who can be left to die the “democratization of sovereignty,” which is a central mechanism through which social exclusion is normalized in neoliberal democracies. In this way, Mayas played an active role in managing the potentially transformative inclusion of indigenous communities into a body politic founded on colonial violence. However, local criticisms of party politics revealed elements of an alternative democratic imaginary focused on reciprocity and collective well-being and that refused to normalize structural exclusion.

Embedded Understandings in Party Politics

A far cry from rights-bearing citizens in “civil society” engaging in free and consensual relations with the state, Sampedranos were a “governed population” grappling with economic and political coercion in “political society” (Chatterjee 2004). Beneath narratives of democracy, development, and indigenous rights existed local meanings and experiences of democracy produced through mundane practices: primarily the ways
that development projects and programs were pursued, administered, obtained, and contested by villagers. This section excavates the “tacit knowledge” (Elyachar 2012) surrounding the distribution of development projects, particularly infrastructure projects, in rural political society. This tacit knowledge, typical for the region, reflected the institutionalization of party politics under severely adverse conditions.

The first understanding is that development means projects. Project is an umbrella term for any kind of assistance—potable water, roads, scholarships, jobs, or medicine—precious commodities that most villagers could not otherwise afford. DIGESA programs, parties, and institutions trained Mayas to think of individual, familial, and collective development in terms of discrete projects and to create prioritized lists that include such items as mills, latrines, and stoves. Villagers were always on the lookout for projects. I once heard Mariano Díaz compare a project to a girl in a miniskirt, a sign of the extent to which they were desired and elusive. I was repeatedly asked if I could help get projects. Having no access and not wanting to take sides in interparty disputes, I always declined. With attention fixed tightly on the local distribution of development projects, national concerns became a distant issue.

Another characteristic assumption in formal as well as informal discourse about development was that most projects come from the “state.” Although a significant number of projects were available through NGOs and international institutions after the accords, the municipal government was the main source for the most valuable projects. Moreover, under democracy, political parties were the primary gateway to development projects through the municipality, and parties and politicians were thus, alongside the police, the primary manifestation of the state in everyday life and also of the economic power of national elites. NGOs were not entirely separate; they administered public services, such as health care, and individual NGO leaders often used their connections and resources to build a political following. Furthermore, in mundane interactions with politicians and institutions, Mayas were depicted and often depicted themselves as dependent on public resources in order to survive and thrive. The chronic lack of projects was frequently attributed to their having been distributed to other villagers or villages rather than the state’s refusal or inability to meet the needs of more than a fraction of rural citizens.
As it stood, projects were insufficient for community needs and arrived irregularly. Institutions and parties responded to village demands, or not, on their own timetables. It could take years for a project to go through institutional channels. The larger the project, the longer villagers must wait. Waiting is emotionally charged because the needs are real and false promises of aid are common. Waiting for uncertain benefits can be an enervating and demobilizing process in which villagers enact their subordination to an indifferent state. This is why Jennifer Burrell (2013) insists, conversely, that the “refusal to wait may be a powerful counter-hegemonic subjectivity relative to the state” (166–67). The most common excuse given by politicians to impatient villagers for reneging on a promise was scarce resources, widely assumed to be a nonnegotiable fact beyond the reach of politics.

All of these understandings were illustrated when I accompanied Mariano Díaz on a routine trip to a village whose leaders had requested an audience. They wanted to ask why the projects he had promised during his campaign had not yet arrived, more than a year later. They were livid and were unwilling to accept his councilor as a substitute. Díaz was ready. He first told them that “the municipal budget does not have enough for everyone. Imagine, there are fifty-six communities in San Pedro.” He said they could make a request: “But I can’t tell you right away today, but perhaps we can help you in some part. I can’t give projects like this, continuously, because other communities are also getting them and it depends on more urgent necessities in other communities.”

Díaz had promised twenty laminas (corrugated tin roofing) to everyone who voted for him, a ridiculously expensive promise given that each lamina costs about Q75 ($10). There are simply not enough laminas for every community, he explained; the budget is too small, and Guatemala is poor. He then explained that a recent landslide in another village had to take precedence, justifying their long wait. The generalized condition of desperation in which they waited was framed as background information rather than a problem that should be addressed directly. Underscoring his generosity, he told the assembly that he had made coffee for the displaced families in the early morning when they came to his house seeking help. He then criticized the assembly for being childish: “We can help you depending on your necessities, but we don’t want you to be necios [foolish] like a child, for example, that to fregar [cause harm] you get wet or
you give your shoe to a dog so that the dog eats it and then come running to Daddy to ask for help. That’s no good.” He proceeded to lecture them that “projects are not the solution for poverty.” For that, he counseled, everyone had to pray to God, work hard, and give their children a good education, saying in effect that they were on their own. This formulation meshed with the logic of capacidad that framed villagers as personally responsible for their welfare, independent of the state. The villagers then expressed their worries about crime and children stealers: several cases were rumored to have happened in the area, underscoring their vulnerability.8 For this, the alcalde suggested—because ordering this would be illegal—that they reorganize civil patrols to fight the delinquents just as, one of his councilors emphasized, they had defended themselves from the guerrillas before.

In addition to rehearsing counterinsurgency dogma, these more “realistic” admissions highlight a fundamental ambivalence in development discourse within neoliberal democracy. Most promises of development are false; the major political complaint is that politicians promise everything but never deliver. In these moments the state, in the form of the municipal government, is depicted as weak, too poor to promote development, while the distant state is indifferent to villager concerns. Guatemala is full of poor people, each with their needs; the state won’t fix this, and the alcalde certainly can’t. Moreover, despite being heralded as the route to multicultural inclusion, projects are not a solution to poverty. Villagers’ woes are part of a larger, intractable problem that democratic politics can ameliorate but cannot change.

After the meeting, which started and ended late, we bounced down the hill in the darkness, the slippery, steep trail illuminated by my flashlight. When we were out of earshot, the alcalde let his emotions fly: “Did we convince them, or did we convince them?” he exclaimed. One of his councilors, a young, high-school-educated Mayan man, exclaimed, “Yes, because we came with strategies!” These villagers were still waiting for their laminas three years later. A truism about elections holds that “he who lies most, wins,” but it is really a matter of whose lies are the most believable. Although alcaldes get most of the blame when projects do not materialize, they are not solely responsible for false promises; they are all but required to make them in order to get elected and are structurally unable to fulfill them.
Such discussions were all predicated on the fact, as every village child knew, that development projects were exchanged for political support; villagers must affiliate. Francisco was a Ladino who owned a small hotel in the town center and was the local representative, or coordinator, for a prominent political party. One day I encountered him at Pollolandia, a popular roasted-chicken restaurant, in Huehuetenango, the department capital. Roast chicken was a luxury, unavailable in San Pedro at the time. Over a salty leg quarter, he told me that his party had planned projects in five villages. They would start by extending roads to each and then give the villagers laminas. With so many parties, he explained, each only needed solid support in several villages, so they focused on a small fraction. The FRG won with a little over 2,200 votes in 2003, less than one fifth of the total voters, roughly a tenth of the voting-eligible population. Providing for every village was never part of the equation.

Francisco preferred to recruit followers in remote villages “because the villagers who live close, lie. They promise you their vote, but at the last minute, they take it back. They take advantage. The people who live in distant villages, where there is more poverty, are more honest.” Poorer villagers had better “character,” meaning that they were more pliable, or so he hoped. His formulation framed docility and obedience, albeit rooted in economic vulnerability, as an ideal quality of a democratic citizen, in perfect harmony with counterinsurgency logic. When I asked if the parties were taking advantage of poverty by lying to get votes, Francisco looked a bit deflated. Then, chuckling with a sheepish look, agreed that they were.

There are several ways to direct projects. “Big” projects, such as a new municipal building or a major road, affect the entire town or large regions. One of the first megaprojects undertaken by Mariano Díaz was a retaining wall on the steep road from town to the Pan-American Highway. More typically, alcaldes promise projects to villages, village subsectors, and individuals. Common examples of the latter include good-paying jobs on a municipal infrastructure project or as a schoolteacher, potable water, or food assistance. Infrastructure projects were not simply given to villages; villagers were expected to provide mano de obra: a contribution of manual labor. For a school project, for example, village men would gather rocks and sand, excavate the foundation, mix cement, and lay cinder blocks, and women would prepare them food. Mano de obra builds community along with projects, but not everyone participates.
In addition to initiatives promoting Mayan culture, many projects specifically target Mayan women. After the peace accords, women’s position in Mayan communities became a salient concern for a number of state institutions and national and international NGOs. Funders often require women’s participation, but often only perfunctorily. It is now common for women to participate on development committees and oversee projects directed toward women, and the 2002 law of Community Development Councils (COCODES) required two women and two men on village councils. However, in San Pedro between 2004 and 2014, all village representatives to the municipal council were men, and women who addressed these assemblies, however competent and well spoken, were not taken seriously, especially if they spoke about women’s issues. Typical “women’s” projects include stoves, mills, and food relief, reinforcing dominant gender roles. A few NGOs talked about women’s rights, and even fewer programs seriously assisted women as economic actors or encouraged them to form organizations. Some women’s programs framed traditional indigenous “culture” as sexist and in need of reform, a discourse common among Ladinos. Asociación Ceiba was an exception in all regards. It trained participants in women’s rights alongside human and indigenous rights, denounced sexism and domestic violence in Mayan and Ladino communities, and promoted economic initiatives, skills development, and leadership formation for women. Although only a tiny number of Mayan women in San Pedro identify as feminists, a growing number believe in and advocate for women’s rights.

Seeking Office: Amassing Projects and People

Long before Election Day in Guatemala, local electoral campaigns are at their heart a competition between candidates (always men) to prove that they have “more people.” Nowhere is this obsession with crowd size more on display than in the spectacle of party caravans: public shows of strength in numbers. During the electoral season, party affiliates with pickup trucks volunteer to drive in a train formation through town on a market day, their beds brimming with party supporters dressed in party colors. Making villagers display their party affiliation in public is a check
against the double-crossing of parties by villagers, who would otherwise have greater leeway in making multiple promises, and it is also a way for parties to gain new affiliates by demonstrating the probability that their party will win, which is the most common argument for joining a party in the first place. Parties strongly encourage anyone to whom they have promised something to attend these and other public party events and to paint their houses in party colors with candidates’ names. In 2015 I accompanied the caravan of the Líder Party to a village that was a strong base of support for their local candidate, Julio Ambrocio. On the trip, the central topic of conversation was size: how many trucks, how many people? We hit a snag on a harrowing passage over a cable suspension bridge, which not all of the loaded trucks could cross. After walking the rest of the way, party affiliates watched fútbol and listened to a musical performance, while the party provided pepián de pollo (chicken pepián) and soda, and vendors sold beer and ceviche. Dozens of Mayan women sat on plastic chairs in the shade of a building overlooking the fútbol field, completely uninterested in the game, while men ate ceviche and drank beer on the back patio in the scorching sun. In demonstrating numbers, caravans showcased the candidate and party’s wealth and generosity, a taste of things to come, or so it was hoped.10

Most politicians start off in their villages, working with committees, learning how to navigate institutions and NGOs, and developing relationships with parties. Men with political aspirations first build connections in the state and in development institutions and start sharing the benefits with other villagers. Parties select and sometimes groom men they think would make strong candidates. Effective leaders become local legends. At least one thousand people attended Antulio Morales’ funeral in 2004, crowded among the colorfully painted raised cement graves. One of the eulogy speakers, a lifelong friend and ally, spoke of his generosity and service, proclaiming that “every community in San Pedro has a recuerdo [souvenir] from Chepe.”

Mariano Díaz established himself as a development rainmaker before holding office, working on the board of the Community Development for Peace Program (DECOPAZ) in its second cycle of projects, when the World Bank–funded institution in charge of implementing large infrastructure projects, originally administered by the UN, was turned over
to the FRG administration (1999–2003) and subsequently politicized. In a speech before the Municipal Development Council (COMUDE), composed of representatives from the COCODES, Díaz claimed to have personally spoken with Óscar Berger, the newly elected president, who had promised to pay for paving the dangerously switchbacked and dusty road into town. Although some did not believe that he had met Berger, many thought the project was possible. After all, Díaz had already procured roads, potable water projects, and schools for several villages. Although the law strictly prohibited development institution board members from holding office, it was this conflict of interest more than anything else that made Díaz a viable candidate. Not surprisingly, attacks from political opponents focused on candidates’ weakness and inability to bring projects: how they procured them was irrelevant. Villagers held parties to celebrate the completion of major projects and commemorated them with placards posted near the project site, painted in party colors, often listing the names of the alcalde and his advisors, and the total project cost, broken down into government contribution and the value of mano de obra. These ubiquitous signs and painted houses last long after elections, creating a feel of constant and omnipresent campaigning, as well as a reminder of the public and private debts of individuals and their location in the web of local alliances and divisions. However, it would be a mistake to confuse a family’s political convictions with those of the politicians whose names and colors adorn their house.

Legitimate and Illegitimate Corruption

Becoming an alcalde almost immediately (although not permanently) catapulted the candidate and his close advisors into “superado” status. If they were not already rich, they would soon have access to money, legal and otherwise. Antulio Morales got rich in office, investing in cattle, houses, and other businesses. Mariano Díaz’s new, four-story house towered over his neighbors’ rooftops and was filled with nice furniture. His clothes were new and stylish, and he wore silver chains and a fancy watch. Mayan leaders appropriated official discourses of multicultural progress, materialized through development, in pursuit of personal wealth and power. In the
early years of indigenous control of the alcaldía, individual gain and collective advancement through electoral politics and development seemed compatible, but they soon came into conflict.

Residents were disgusted by signs of wealth and luxurious consumption among politicians, which they saw as fruits of corruption. Díaz’s large house and shiny new red truck were taken as proof that he was dipping into the till. These accusations were standard fare in the boletín (bulletin), an incisive, crass, and usually sexist gossip sheet filled with juicy details about town residents (mostly Ladinos) and politicians that was distributed anonymously twice a year. Corruption rumors about Morales focused on his numerous homes: in his village (with a terrace!), in the town center (two stories!), and in Huehuetenango, where he spent most of his second term (just like a Ladino!). People also pointed to his potbelly, a rarity among indigenous residents, as evidence of his greed but also his power. Corruption was a huge temptation for the mayor and his cronies, who deftly bypassed new legal regulations. It was the main reason many individuals ran for office. Some said there were so many political parties because so many leaders wanted a cut, far more than the alcalde’s monthly salary—Q7,000 ($900) in 2004—already nearly three times a teacher’s pay.

Corruption was inescapable; even politicians who never sought it out felt compelled to participate; it was how business was done. Insiders told me that it was hard for politicians and their teams to avoid bribes and “commission payments” from construction agencies. A former municipal secretary told me that there was no control of funds whatsoever, and when he opened his wallet to hand me his card, I saw a stack of cards emblazoned with construction-company insignias. Not long after, the departmental controlador was murdered, prompting great speculation about what he must have been wrapped up in. Rather than the aberration implied in the term itself, corruption was a direct product of the way that electoral democracy and party politics were institutionalized in rural towns. Denunciations of individual corruption obscured its near unavoidability as well as the finer-grained ethical distinctions that villagers drew between kinds of corruption.

Alejandro was a micro-regional representative to DECOPAZ, a position he had obtained through the FRG, not a community vote, which was the official requirement. One day after a monthly meeting with the
program representative in a small office in the central square, he told me he was angry with another board member:

**Alejandro:** But [the representative] is not good in politics either. He likes to get money from the diputados [congressmen] and the construction companies, to get his “tip.” If a person works, the people are going to see it. This is possible but between everyone.

**NC:** You can take some of the money?

**Alejandro:** That’s what I’m saying, but if it is between everyone, between all of the directors. He’s not the only one there; there are five people legally authorized. One dialogue between everyone. But he does it alone. If there is a project, he likes to look for the contractors himself, alone. Why? So that in the very hour we make the decision to go with that contractor. But that is not right. It’s better, if he wants to do it that way, that he does it between everyone. A certain contractor can do the job, but between everyone, not just one. Not only one person is hungry. Not only one person is thirsty. And we sign together.

Similar to Mbembe’s (2000) description of postcolonial Africa, Sampe-dranos used the idiom of food and hunger and full bellies to talk about power and to critique the unequal distribution of wealth between individuals and groups. The eating metaphor informed Alejandro’s explanation of a “moral economy of corruption” (de Sardan 1999): socially configured rules about moral and immoral forms of illegality. Alejandro felt that accepting money from powerful individuals like diputados and party leaders was ethical, as long as everyone on the bottom got an equal share. Rather than “socially ruinous” (Smith 2008: 5), he saw it as a way of maintaining social bonds, rooted in a redistributive principle in response to the hunger and thirst of the recipients. The emphasis on deprivation explained why corruption by wealthy individuals for personal gain and excessive consumption was seen as immoral, as did the fact that most villagers viewed the Guatemalan state itself as immoral and corrupt. Although much of the anthropological analysis assumes that people follow these moral codes,12 in San Pedro, while widely shared, this moral rule was difficult to follow. Conditions strongly encouraged Sampedranos to engage in self-interested corruption, but it was still seen as harmful. Rather than see this reaction as part of a timeless Mayan ethic of reciprocity, this attitude emerged out of experiences with neoliberal democracy
in which some individuals “ate well . . . but failed to feed others” (West 2008, 118).

Political life was defined by accusations of illegitimate corruption involving individuals who were already “full” capturing resources that “less fortunate” villagers “truly” needed. As the prime distributors of resources, *alcaldes* were at the center of these disputes. For example, tempers flared when hundreds of bags of government fertilizer turned up in the private storage houses of Mariano Díaz’s allies. Fertilizer is not only expensive; it is also necessary for growing crops in the poor soils farmed by most villagers, a fact cementing its association with food, money, and life itself and explaining its high profile in public displays of patronage. Confronted at a COMUDE (municipal development council) meeting, Díaz blamed the local representative from the Ministry of Agriculture, Cattle, and Food (MAGA), who immediately replied, “Mr. Mayor, please do not involve me in your *sinvergonzadas* [shameless antics],” although it is possible that they had worked together. Trapped, Díaz quoted the Bible and called the angry crowd “devils” and said that they were chasing him. Although the person who recounted this event to me was laughing, this was serious business; many *alcaldes* have been killed or assaulted for stealing and for breaking promises to villagers. José Antulio Morales was once ambushed and beaten nearly to death. Despite a shared distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms, there was no consensus about which acts fell within the local moral economy of corruption: individuals on the receiving end of patronage classified what they received as legitimate in the face of accusations to the contrary, even as they would criticize others for taking unfair advantage.

Preoccupied with consolidating patronage networks and getting reelected, *alcaldes* attempted to outmaneuver recent attempts to regulate their power through the COCODE/COMUDE system. The Law on Development Councils requires that each village elect their own representative committee, a COCODE (community council), which then sends a representative to the COMUDE.13 The COMUDE, not the *alcaldes*, sets development priorities for the town, such as which projects are the most needed, in what villages, following which design, using which construction company. This law, founded by the Law of Development Councils as part of state decentralization policies,14 intended to substantially decrease the *alcaldes*’s power to run patronage networks
and to profit from projects, but it did not address the underlying motive or provide an enforcement mechanism.

In 2000 the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) completed a study of San Pedro, listing priorities and goals for development that had been collectively determined in workshops. José Antulio Morales ignored this document, preferring to decide alone, most likely at the insistence of the party leadership, but also because of his own will to survive. He knew that to get reelected he had no choice but to leverage promises of projects for votes: others would if he did not. Both he and Mariano Díaz, with the help of the nonfunctioning controlaría, evaded the new COCODE/COMUDE system. Because Díaz inherited the institution intact, he simply appointed his followers to the village COCODES, making the COMUDE a rubber stamp. Communities usually consented because they did not want to lose out on projects from the acting mayor. When Díaz faced criticism (which was at every session I attended), he would simply call for a “yea” or “nay” vote to close debate. Angry members of other parties also began to circumvent the COMUDE, blaming Díaz.

As a result, the COMUDES were a space for debate and oversight, constantly emphasizing that, legally speaking, projects “belonged to the people” and that alcaldes were public servants, not kings or project gatekeepers. All of these are important elements of municipal politics and critical democratic imaginaries. In many towns, COCODES and COMUDES have fostered critical dialogue and collective resistance. But calls for rules enforcement had no teeth, and criticisms typically faulted local political custom for their frustrations with the mayor’s actions rather than the institutionalization of party politics as the mechanism for the distribution of scarce resources, in other words, neoliberal democracy itself.

Remaking the State-Community Relationship

Development projects reinforced a narrative in which the state was no longer simply an external threat to villager lives but also a vital resource provider that was encountered in various guises in everyday life. From core infrastructure, such as potable water and housing, to basic grains, fertilizers, cooking oil, chickens, cereal, and jobs, state-provided projects were the basic ingredients of daily sustenance. Numerous villagers told
me about projects that had improved their lives, sometimes tremendously. Imagine the difference between having water at home versus gathering it in buckets and carrying it a great distance, or an electrical hookup versus candles. But these resources were woefully inadequate and, when acquired from political parties, had strings attached. Party-led, project-centered clientelist development reorganized Sampedranos’ affective perceptions and political behaviors in distinctive and consequential ways.

First, project-centered development established projects as the sole political objective and demand. Project procurement devoured the time and political energies of village governance, which was now organized around the development committee system rather than traditional authorities recognized in the peace accords. Village-level political discussion, committees, and organizing were almost completely dedicated to the pursuit of projects from the state and the occasional NGO.

Second, the simultaneous regularity and inadequacy of individual assistance programs transformed widespread economic insecurity into feelings of dependency on political parties for survival. When I asked rural farmers—and I asked many—what would happen if the state stopped subsidizing fertilizer, several said they would “just not eat.” Despite these grave concerns, there was no discussion of changing the political economic structures that consign entire communities to poverty and dependency. This was caused primarily by decades of state violence, but electoral contests in search of projects created an entire domain of politics that sidestepped foundational inequalities. Most conversations focused on what individuals, families, and villages themselves should do to ensure their own well-being rather than uniting together to demand higher levels of state investment. Common answers were to seek a party affiliation or migrate to the United States. This was a far cry from the 1970s, when demands for infrastructure were connected to projects for deeper social transformation.

Third, it reinforced disempowerment, most notably through villager rituals of supplication in front of party representatives. When villagers visited Francisco—the Ladino party representative—hoping to get his assurances about specific projects, they held their hats in their hands. They spoke softly, respectfully, in overly formal language, with their eyes turned to the floor, performing submissiveness and a using a rhetoric of humility and necessity. People who approached me looking for projects, even
some I had known for years, used the same impassioned tone. Petitioners evoked a sense of desperation. They were often proud village leaders but enacted uncommon deference because they were literally at his mercy. His tone in response expressed concern but remained noncommittal and aloof, conveying that he held all the cards in this relationship and was willing to turn his back. Francisco often subjected villagers to condescending lectures about following through on their end of the bargain.

The postwar state’s carefully cultivated identity as protector and provider of Mayan life did not displace its identity as cold and indifferent to indigenous life. Conditioning aid on party affiliation reminded villagers of the looming possibility that assistance could be withheld. During a campaign visit to a village in the northern sector in 2011, after the candidate spoke, an elderly man raised his voice:

If you win, are you going to come back? Are you going to help us? You speak so beautifully, but we don’t know if you are going to win or another. Julio came here, and he also spoke beautifully. Now his term is almost over, and he hasn’t come here, nor has he come near the people from here. We have called, and were told that he was not around, or that he was out. Who is against him, for the power that he has? And worse if this [candidate] is the same, when we look for him, he will never come here. Is this all right? An authority is like a father and should watch over all of his children. But if he has us in abandonment, I ask, “Is this acceptable?” Now you ask for our vote and then you do not make good on your commitment. Those are my three words to speak.

Abandonment epitomizes the sovereign power to “let die,” in addition to taking life (Foucault 1980). Sampedranos know how little their lives matter in state calculations, realize how dependent they are on state resources, and recognize the ever-present possibility of falling into abandonment. Participating in social movements rendered some groups abandonable. When the neighboring municipio of Colotenango elected a URNG mayor in 2000, opponents warned that state assistance would stop. But by far the most common way that communities become marked for abandonment was simply backing a losing candidate. And as the villager eloquently explained, backing the winner was not always enough. Insufficient funds ensured that the vast majority would not receive assistance.
One man, a URNG member, said, “I have it analyzed, about the projects. On the one hand, they’re good; on the other, they’re bad. Maybe I’m mistaken, but I think the people sell themselves out for a gift. I accept [projects], but I’m not going to vote for their party.” Guatemalan leftists criticize the exchange of projects for votes as an unethical and undemocratic. They see it as a problem of ignorance; villagers should be educated to cast a *voto consciente* (conscious vote), presumably for parties like the URNG that promise social transformation and on principle do not (typically) exchange projects for votes. Many villagers, not just URNG members, agreed that trading votes for projects was not correct. It is not that villagers do not know better but rather that these rules have been imposed on them by outside forces, and most see no other realistic method for acquiring resources.

Party-led, project-centered development is a coercive reminder of sovereign power. Rural Mayans measure the value or productivity of projects and electoral politics not in relation to other political alternatives—which were rendered unthinkable by violence—but to the threat of abandonment. Heightening this perception is the fact that the politics surrounding community development reproduce an image of the state, through political parties, as “vertically encompassing” Mayan communities, reinforcing its claims to dominate social force relations (Gupta and Ferguson 2002). These understandings were dramatized by the FRG’s promise to pay $500 to party affiliates who had served in state-mandated civil patrols. Names were collected on a laptop computer. The FRG candidate assured them that the computer would “know” how they voted, adding that God would too. This was a very effective vote-getting strategy, the basis of which is linking a promise for resources to a threat of punishment, the certainty of which is guaranteed by a high-tech fetish: a laptop, a mobile panopticon, especially for people who know little about computers. The uncertain gift of resources was an unsubtle, if often unremarked, reminder of the state’s indifference to indigenous life, knowledge that dampens the local sense of political agency. An FRG Party affiliate denied the computer ever went to the villages (although it had) but admitted that “*manipulación hubo*” (“there was manipulation”).

Development committee leaders render village desires far more legible to parties and state bureaucracies than ever before, enabling them to address more acute ones while ignoring others. This nonconfrontational
dialogue between rural indigenous communities and the state was similar to the vision of the planners of the Rural Cooperative Development Project in the 1970s. In that model, communication would enable a rational management of resource distribution: no community would be left out completely, and no community should receive so many projects as to incite jealousy, yet both of these outcomes were compelled by the exigencies of patronage and electoral competition. In the 1990s the Antulio Morales coalition kept resources within its patronage circles and mostly ignored other villages and the impoverished northern sector in particular, leading to considerable resentment.

Democratizing Sovereign Violence

In addition to reinforcing the effects of sovereign violence and altering conceptions of development, party-led, project-centered development weakened trust and political unity in the villages. The scarcity of state offerings guaranteed that personal and familial gains entailed relegating other community members to abandonment. This political harnessing of visceral desperation fueled a cutthroat politics of self-interest that divided villages, communities, and families into numerous party factions. In this context, the only solution to corruption was more corruption. By the time I arrived in Los Altenses, villagers habitually looked upon many of their neighbors as threats, competitors for access to basic resources that everyone needs and wants.

A young Mayan man, Sergio, a recent high school graduate, captured this situation succinctly: “They say that politicians lie. Those than win, win for lies. For that reason, maybe it’s better to just find a party for your own personal interests. Joining a party is how a person can find a job. If you don’t join a party, you are left out of work.” Several equated politics and sports, where you either win or lose with no in-between. This left little room for compromise. Local politicians follow the lead of party higher-ups, who encourage or even insist upon clientelist practices. However, the zero-sum perspective that guided these transactions relied on a questionable assumption of scarcity that conflated the amount of resources in the budget with the total amount of resources potentially available to communities.
Villagers divided into sometimes more than a dozen parties, fully aware that anything they gained would come at the expense of their neighbors. Parties increasingly courted village subsectors, rather than entire villages, further poisoning micro-relations between villagers. Divisions in San Pedro were never about ideology, which was widely shared. The tentative political unity that emerged in the late 1980s in Los Altenses fragmented when all groups were not included equally in the distribution of projects: a direct effect of electoral democracy. After Antulio Morales took power, and especially after the peace accords, close friends, family members, and the most dedicated supporters of his coalition received noticeably more and more valuable development projects than other villages. This unevenness was not a result of the failure of some residents to “constitute themselves as deserving political society” (Anand 2011, 546); its source was the basic insufficiency of development funds managed by alcaldes exacerbated by the structural imperative to distribute those funds unevenly. Groups who were passed over even after their candidates won held grudges and sought their own parties, becoming the opposition. This pattern built over several electoral cycles to produce pervasive conflict. The air of these antagonisms lingered in the village, in personal encounters and in community meetings, or in absences and avoidances, sometimes long after the original event. Divisions between extended families layered over internal divisions among families.

This cycle of division motivated many villagers to support the FRG. Candelaria Ruíz was in her mid-forties, married to a freelance carpenter, with two children. She was an evangelical who earned money praying for people and faith healing, for which she had a particular skill, but one that some Catholics saw as either phony or witchcraft. Many criticized her for not wearing indigenous dress, but her services were in high demand. Candelaria campaigned hard for Mariano Díaz in villages across San Pedro. She prayed publicly for God to bless his campaign and painted her house blue and white with the FRG insignia. She told me that she was the “number one” for Díaz and that he had offered her a position in the corporation, which she had refused in order to continue her ministry.

She denied voting for Díaz because he was evangelical, however, explaining that “We don’t make an exception for anyone. We treat everyone the same. I will support anyone as long as they are really Christian,” presumably including nonevangelicals. Díaz attended a different church,
but “it is the same word of God,” echoing a common sentiment. Although
Candelaria Ruiz loved Mariano Díaz, she disliked Ríos Montt, whom she
said was a murderer, although she never said that on the campaign trail.
She squinted when I asked why she joined the FRG, apparently annoyed
that I had not already heard about the problem she had railed against for
several years:

They say that we’re poor and don’t work, but they only give viviendas
[houses] to their family members and good friends. Only for them even
tough other people sign up for the projects. I signed up, I handed in my
form, and afterwards I was told that it was not valid. “Yours didn’t go
through,” even though it had a signature. They don’t advise about most
projects. Look at his friends’ houses. They all got new ones, and they al-
ready had viviendas! Some of us others are using plastic and ranchitos
(houses made of sticks). They signed up and didn’t get anything. [Viviendas]
should go to the most needy, everyone equally.

There are auxiliares who are supposed to advise us. One came today to
tell us that we would be doing work to maintain the road. But they don’t
advise about food, medicine, or vaccines for animals. When we don’t know
anything, their chickens are already vaccinated!

We call him Chepe chuch [Chepe the dog] because he grabs everything
for himself. His friends in our village are already taken care of. Ask where
[person’s name] got 300 cinder blocks! That is the village’s money; it was
what was left over on a village housing project! They grabbed it. That is why
there is division. There is a war between groups. We don’t go to reunions
anymore. It’s better to work with your own sweat. They don’t do anything
for us. It can be houses; it can be food assistance—all for them! With Na-
tanael, he would give a little bit to everyone. But Chepe only gives to his
supporters. We helped Antulio in the beginning, but he didn’t give us any
thanks. Not one cent. There were 150–200 houses [that were to be distrib-
uted] in the whole town. But they didn’t give them to the poor people. Poor
people are pushed to the side. Some people also don’t like Chepe because he
had caseras [mistresses]. But most were tired of the favoritism. El hace ex-
cepción de personas. [He discriminates.]
vulnerable. Most galling was that his favoritism ignored real needs among villagers, such as people living in houses made of sticks, children without clothing or shoes, and lack of access to running water. People who already had more continued to take more, furthering existing disparities. Development committee members placed party allegiances above their duties to their community. She even questioned their faith: “They only say that they’re Christians.” Her belief that projects should go to the neediest villagers resonated far beyond her religious sect and was voiced by most Sampedranos, even as they flagrantly violated this ethical principle.

In this world of party politics, resource distribution was sorted out by competition between village headmen who represented a particular faction of villagers and who enjoyed individual access to the fruits of corruption from projects implemented under their stewardship. Sometimes this competition, driven in large measure by economic hardship and ever more noticeable inequalities, turned violent. I heard several reports of physical fights that erupted among some village men months after the elections were over, so bitter were the disagreements. Affiliating with a party was one of the best ways to get a job, or material aid, but it was no guarantee.

Party politics was widely disparaged as a wicked domain, controlled by personal interest, corruption, and lies, something that many individuals avoided in order to protect their reputations. Talk of personal interest spoke to a deep loss of faith in one another or in a better possible world. No one trusted politicians, and they barely trusted their neighbors. When projects did not arrive, or politicians acquired new luxury items, such as trucks, clothing, or houses, they were assumed to be thieves. When the second, postelection payment for the patrollers did not arrive, villagers were furious with Mariano Díaz. Many individuals privately admitted their own self-interested motives, even as they accused their neighbors of interés. McAllister (2003) argues that Chupolenses’ perception of the Guatemalan state as fundamentally illegitimate did not impede their willingness to accept state resources. Sampedranos likewise welcomed state resources, needed them desperately, and deserved far more than they received, but they strongly objected to the way they were distributed.

This description of how Sampedranos relate to projects and parties runs counter the nostrum, common on the left, that ignorant rural villagers have been tricked by populist rhetoric or that greedy villagers sold their votes and collective futures for regalitos (little gifts). Earlier in his
career, Antulio Morales likely viewed the pursuit of personal interest as consistent with the struggle for community rights on the new political terrain, although by the end of his tenure the local movement was deeply fractured. Most “sold out” because they saw individual benefits as the only thing politics could bring. In both cases, self-interested politics became thinkable relative to the absence of faith in meaningful alternatives, not ignorance or greed. Perversely, state and para-state policies that connected hopes for collective advancement to practices of political self-interest created division and disillusionment and further undermined their ability to imagine or build a collective future. Rather than a reflection of “true” human nature or “Indian backwardness,” the politics of personal interest in San Pedro was a lamentable but in many ways predictable response to the perverse incentives created by the installation of a competitive, resource-driven form of electoral politics in a context of general abandonment and violence.

Widespread self-interest undermined the credibility of Mayan political leaders, who were almost universally seen as corrupt. José Antulio Morales’ rapid economic advancement fueled rumors of malfeasance and even frustrated his supporters. Many of his family members abandoned his coalition to join the FRG. When I asked Petróna Lázaro, a teacher and the only indigenous woman to participate in the municipal corporation (with José Antulio Morales), if she would consider running for alcalde, she quipped, “Why, so people can call me ‘Ladróna?’” This is a play on the Spanish word ladrón (thief) and Petróna. The possibilities for corruption multiplied alongside Mayan political ascendance, as did its inevitability. Delivering development allowed Mayan politicians to be taken seriously as political leaders in the first place, but corruption surrounding development projects called Mayan leadership into question.

It was disheartening that soon after Mayas won spaces of political power, they were discredited, even though corruption existed and racism flourished under Ladino alcaldes. An older man, one of the first indigenous catechists in the town and an early member of the Morales coalition, summarized the dilemma:

The struggle now is that a Maya should govern. For years only Ladinos were in the government. Now there are indigenous, but perhaps it is the same as before, or even worse. We have an example with the alcaldes here in San
Pedro. The problem now is embezzlement of money. They just come to steal. Before there were only three candidates, and one would win. Now there are fourteen because everyone wants to get some money. That is why Guatemala is fucked. We don’t know what to do to resolve this.

Corrupt, divisive politics have also emboldened critics of indigenous political ascendance, satisfied in the belief that this population was ill prepared for citizenship and governmental authority. Such critics undoubtedly include the leadership of political parties that snag millions of indigenous votes every four years. Their political success, and the negative local outcomes, circulate in diverse publics the false notion that Mayas lack the innate intelligence to self-govern, reinforcing the naturalness of their marginalization. But such dismissals mistakenly equate compromised democratic engagements in contexts of extreme violence and exclusion with innate proclivities.

Development shortfalls, poverty, and corruption persist not because individual politicians fail, which certainly happens; they are features of a political economic system founded on indigenous subjugation that is recognized as legal and defended through violence. Inadequate resources, loose regulations, and divisive party strategies make corruption and favoritism almost compulsory. Many individuals opt not to participate, but most feel compelled by necessity. The major limitation of common critiques of indigenous candidates and elected officials is that they obscure the fact that even if alcaldes were not corrupt, there would still not be enough for everyone under the current conditions. Mayas need guaranteed access to basic resources and should not be coerced to relinquish their right to organize politically and express their political beliefs in order to compete for them in what amounts to a lottery system. To demand that they do so is to violate their most basic human rights, recognized in Guatemala’s constitution but rarely put into practice.

Foucault describes a shift in the exercise of sovereign power from classical society, in which sovereignty centered on the decision “to kill or let live,” to modern biopolitics, where sovereignty involves interventions “to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die” (2003, 241). Certain forms of life are invested and protected; others are allowed to die off. Unlike spectacles of sovereign power, which persist, Foucault suggests that these permitted deaths appear to simply occur but are in fact made to happen, done purposefully. In the
cutthroat, competition for projects through political parties, the Guatemalan state’s role as enforcer of an unequal system of property recedes, but structural violence does not remain faceless. Rather than directly attributing abandonment and *engaño* (deception) to the institutionalization of democratic competition in an exclusionary sociopolitical order, villagers blame their suffering on the greedy, corrupt, and undemocratic decisions of candidates and other villagers. These recriminations frame the sovereign power to “let die” not as something primarily exercised by the state or national elites, but by Mayas themselves. This democratization of sovereignty incites communities marked as disposable to use elections to determine who lives and who is allowed to die. This is not a robust conception of sovereignty, understood as self-determination and the development of self-governing capacity; it actively erodes those dimensions and grants Mayas only the power to administer the distribution of structural violence among themselves. Democracy furnishes local accomplices that, unlike the state, can be confronted directly. Inciting complicity with foundational violence among subordinated populations is a defining feature of democratic development politics in neoliberal San Pedro.

Sampedranos felt compelled to participate in party politics to obtain vital resources but had little influence over the terms of engagement. Electoral politics renders villagers complicit in violence against their neighbors, whose abandonment they lament, but feel compelled to condone as it is connected to their own well-being and suffering. If the aim of empowering Sampedranos to take municipal power and manage development after the violence was to create nationalist, state-identified Mayas, this failed. However, opening a limited space for the inclusion of a sanctioned route for Mayas to access to resources through elections extended the counterinsurgency by reorganizing village-level demands and fragmenting village solidarity. Villagers trusted each other even less than they had under the civil patrol system. Instead of united in a political movement to transform Guatemala’s colonial political economy, or even to protect one another, Sampedranos competed for access to limited state and nonstate resources while their marginal status in apartheid-like Guatemalan society remained unchanged or grew worse. Sampedrano leaders’ strategic decision to join big political parties to pursue collective advancement through development backfired in ways they could have scarcely anticipated and that few have publicly acknowledged.
Distribution of limited yet vital resources through electoral competition in conditions of extreme poverty and exclusion transformed politically active Mayas into agents of sovereign violence. Political parties, with Mayan personnel, harvest structural violence, offering temporary relief for poverty, exclusion, and abandonment while welding the victims into complicity with the very forces that cause them. As a result, despite sharing broad aspects of a decidedly antagonistic and oppositional subaltern political cosmology, Sampedranos found it increasingly difficult to trust one another and to speak with one political voice. This runs counter to the recent tendency among social scientists to view patron-client relations as consistent with grassroots conceptions of reciprocity and political agency. Fragmentation and resentment placed Sampedranos as a collective in a much weaker position vis-à-vis other sovereigns, such as parties, state agencies, development institutions, mining companies, and market forces, and in a weaker position to ally with social movements with which they share overlapping objectives. Mayan Sampedrano support for the FRG in 2003, even among evangelicals, was not primarily based on faith in the party or the national candidate; it was a tragic form of resistance to a violent system of competitive electoral politics that made villagers complicit in their own exclusion and consecrated this outcome as the will of the people, even as they fought to overcome it.

Almost everyone, including those who benefited, was critical of false promises, favoritism, self-interest, and division, and recognized the inability of projects to solve poverty. Many advocated prioritizing projects for the most needy. But the logic of party politics demands the former and does not allow the latter. Several towns have formed civic committees or joined parties such as the URNG that refuse to promise projects for votes, but these parties almost always lose, so strong is the pull of resources. Some Sampedranos have criticized party politics as an intentional strategy of divide and conquer, a new mechanism for thwarting Mayan political power.

This outcome should not be mistaken as Mayan backwardness or false consciousness, or blamed on individual moral failings, but seen as an effect of installing democratic procedures in conditions of structural and political violence. Most villagers I spoke with, from various parties, were quite concerned with the negative outcomes of party politics, but they also had very real needs, which were pressing enough to justify participating in
politics, as ugly as it was. Although these spaces were hard-fought concessions to long-standing grassroots struggles, the forms of resistance they enabled were deeply contradictory and had become an obstacle to coalition building.

Through their disappointing experiences with electoral politics, Sampedranos have come to imagine an alternative form of democracy, one not based on trade-offs between personal and collective interest, but instead based on reciprocity, respect, and shared humanity, where the needs of the most vulnerable are paramount. This “vision of a right order” (Ekern 2011) is not intrinsic to a timeless Mayan culture but is a dialectical inversion of actually existing democracy. Their alternative democracy can exist only when its subjects have their basic needs met and can participate as equals. Sampedranos are hungry for such an alternative, literally and figuratively, but doubtful that one will emerge and remain entangled in webs of power in ways that make it hard to organize.

A key question is whether democracy has established development as more than an expectation in rural communities but as a right, a durable claim on resources. It was a positive sign that most political parties competed to offer projects to rural villages and endorsed conditional cash-transfer programs. But this redistributive mechanism was also heavily criticized. Neoliberals and many leftists fault them for reproducing dependency, corruption, and clientelism. Some warn of the deployment of piecemeal reforms to palliate and normalize austerity and privatization, and forestall broader claims to resources. Some may read the persistence of development and the arrival of cash transfer as the successful end of a long struggle for resources, an effort that Ferguson (2015) calls “distributive labor” and that is typically not counted. But development funds tapered off after the post-accords boom and have always come with strings attached. With cash-transfer programs, as with previous projects, many Mayas point to contradictions between state promises to deliver the basic necessities and the inadequacy of projects to meet their most basic needs. One wonders how long the state can provide resources only for villagers fortunate enough to be included in patronage before enough abandon parties in favor of less corrosive, if riskier, paths to deeper redistribution.

Building self-governance requires seeking ways to distribute scarce resources without promoting division. The existence of structural inequality and dire need does not persuade everyone to give in to self-interest. Community leaders throughout the highlands have identified and attempted
various strategies to amend these problems by reforming the electoral system. The COMUDES offer one avenue for communities to devise “rules of engagement” with parties, specifying criteria for the distribution of projects; civic committees are another attempt to bypass the party system. Strengthening indigenous authority structures offers another potential hedge against atomization (Ekern 2011, Sieder 2011a). These strategies often presume the existence of a form of agency that is not disfigured first by counterinsurgency, then by neoliberal democracy and development, but can nonetheless be part of weaving alternative democracy from below.
Figure 4. UNE Party operatives distribute *laminas* to affiliates, 2011. Photo by author.

Figure 5. Líder political party caravan, 2014. Photo by author.
Figure 6. Julio Ambrocio on the campaign trail speaking with a group of village women, 2011. Photo by author.

Figure 7. Village men listening to a candidate respond to criticisms of false promises and abandonment lodged by village elder (right), 2011. Photo by author.