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Authoritarian Survival and Poverty Traps: Land Reform in Mexico

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Abstract:

This paper examines why governments in underdeveloped countries systematically pursue policies that prevent long-term economic growth. Focusing on the design and implementation of Mexico's massive land redistribution program, we argue that they do so to underpin political survival. The incumbent party (PRI) regime gave peasants communal property under a restrictive property rights regime that ultimately created dependence upon the regime for survival. We find empirical support for this hypothesis using data from a panel of Mexican states from 1917-1992. Land distribution was higher during election years and where rural pressure was greater, simultaneously serving the PRI's electoral interests and contributing to political stability. PRI support eroded more slowly in states receiving more reform. Furthermore, whereas economic growth and modernization eroded PRI support over the long term, land distribution generated a loyal political clientele. This policy carried steep costs: land reform substantially depressed long-term economic growth. These findings hold across various model specifications and instrumental variables estimation.

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