

**Subnational Units, the Locus of Choice, and Theory Building:  
The Case of Civilian Agency in Civil War**

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## Introduction

Many of the theories we develop in the social sciences aim to explain the decisions of individuals.<sup>1</sup> Theories of phenomena such as consumer behavior, voting, corruption, or war making often consist of propositions about why consumers, voters, rulers, soldiers or other actors make one choice over another. One of the main tasks when building theories to explain why a person acts in a certain way is identifying the contextual factors that influence his or her decision-making. In the phenomena that we study in comparative politics, actors are likely to be influenced by the social, economic, political, and physical environments in which they are embedded. Such environments are often defined by a spatial unit such as a region, district, town, neighborhood, or some other delimited geographical space.<sup>2</sup> This is why the attributes of spatial units are often among our explanatory factors. It is rather obvious, therefore, that the content of our explanations is driven to a great extent by the spatial context (or contexts) that we take into consideration.

What we seldom recognize, however, is that the spatial contexts we focus on also shape our concepts. Every decision-making takes place within multiple spatial contexts such as a neighborhood, city, province, country, and region. A person may even be simultaneously embedded in two neighborhoods or cities, or in two countries. However, whenever we conceptualize a person's decision to engage (or not to engage) in a behavior as a phenomenon of some kind, we situate that person within a particular spatial unit or units. We do not consider the actor's decision-making in a vacuum; and we also do not consider all the units in which he or she is embedded. Rather, we isolate the spatial contexts that we deem relevant for that particular decision.<sup>3</sup> I use the term "locus of choice" to refer to the spatial units that, either implicitly or explicitly, we consider to make up the relevant

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<sup>1</sup> The terms individual decision, choice, and behavior are often defined differently across fields, I use them to denote a person's decision to act in a specific way.

<sup>2</sup> Some geographers refer to such spatial units as places—a *place* denotes "a unit of space that has discrete boundaries, shared internal characteristics, and that changes over time and interacts with other similar units" (Gregory et al. 2009:539).

<sup>3</sup> Several works on concept formation in the social sciences have argued that concept formation does not take place in a vacuum but, rather, is to a great extent driven by context (e.g. Sartori 1970). Multiple studies of cognition also suggest that the mind forms concepts about objects or events while considering them within specific contexts. As Yee et al (2016) argue, "no one would deny that context influences conceptual processing." What is more, some researchers contend that in the mind "*the concepts themselves are inextricably linked to the contexts in which they appear*" (Ibid:1016; emphasis in original).

spatial context in which a given decision is made<sup>4</sup>. What we consider to be the locus of choice for a given action is a reference point, or a setting in which we situate the decision-maker and his or her action. The locus of choice works in the background of our minds during the conceptualization process, as we consider facts and engage in a process of abstraction. What we deem to be the locus of a given choice, therefore, impacts the content of our concepts.

I argue that the spatial unit or units that we identify as the locus of a given choice, and what we know about them, influence our conceptualization of that choice in three important ways. First, by influencing our views on the ontology of the phenomenon under study.<sup>5</sup> There are multiple ways to conceptualize a phenomenon, and our focus on a given locus of choice affects which aspects of the phenomenon we consider to be more salient. Second, by informing what we consider the phenomenon *not* to be—an essential task when defining a concept. And third, by influencing our classificatory systems. On one hand, the locus of choice we consider impacts which specific acts we recognize as belonging to the phenomenon under study, therefore impacting our conceptualization of it. On the other hand, the locus of choice also influences our identification of the menu of alternatives available to the decision-maker—a key step in building an explanation of a choice.

The content of our concepts is, in turn, quite consequential for the entire research process. As several authors have noted, they impact the questions we ask, the theories we build, the evidence we gather, and the results we obtain (e.g. Weber 2015; Sartori 1970; Gerring 1999; Goertz 2006). When researchers consider carefully which spatial contexts they should focus on, and strive to gain a better grasp of their attributes, the quality of their concepts improve. What is more, as a researcher knows more about the *different* spatial contexts that can be relevant for a given choice, his or her concepts are more likely to capture relevant attributes of the phenomena under study, making those concepts more useful. This often entails considering spatial units that we seldom pay attention to.

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<sup>4</sup> To be sure, in a literal sense every decision-making takes place in *all* the spatial units in which the decision-maker is physically located—such as the neighborhood, city, province, country, and region. Yet, when we consider a particular decision as an object of study, we do not consider all those places. We focus on one or a few of them because, either implicitly or explicitly, we consider them to be the relevant contexts in which decision-making takes place—we consider them to be the locus of choice.

<sup>5</sup> There are multiple definitions of the term “ontology.” I fuse the term to denote the essential characteristics of a phenomenon.

Sometimes, we need to “descend” from the national level to the regional or provincial level, and even all the way to the village or the neighborhood to discover important aspects of the phenomenon that would otherwise remain obscure. Likewise, sometimes it is necessary to zoom out and get a better sense of the macro-level—the larger spatial units in which the actor is embedded—in order to identify key aspects of the phenomenon that are not visible within the context of a small place. In both cases, a careful consideration of the spatial contexts in which a decision is made can improve the quality of our concept.

I illustrate this argument with a discussion of how our conceptualization of civilian support for rebel groups has changed as scholars started to consider the locality as the locus of civilian choice. The existing literature on peasant rebellion, civil war, and counterinsurgency has highlighted the consequential role of civilian support: whether or not the population supports insurgents or incumbents has been repeatedly invoked as a key determinant of war dynamics as well as war outcomes. Yet, for years the conceptualization of civilian support was very thin. The term was often poorly defined and its alternatives seldom identified. Additionally, the hypotheses about its causes focused solely on the attributes of a specific country, such as its level of poverty, ethnic fractionalization, relative deprivation, and inequality, or the specific characteristics of individuals which made them more or less prone to identify with rebels or have incentives to support them. It was only when scholars started to carefully consider the locality as civilians’ locus of choice during wartime that our concepts became less vague, and our explanations more compelling. By discussing how refining our understanding of the locality as the locus of choice for civilians in war zones has led to better concepts, I illustrate how a careful assessment of the spatial context in which decision-making takes place can further improve theory building.<sup>6</sup>

I proceed as follows. The first section argues that our views about the locus of a choice impact how we conceptualize the phenomenon under study. The second section introduces the phenomenon of civilian support for rebels. The third section explains the significance of the *locality* as the locus of choice for civilians in wartime, and illustrates how the study of civilian decision-making improved as scholars began to consider the

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<sup>6</sup> The discussion of how civilian support has been conceptualized in civil war studies builds on Arjona (2017), where I propose a typology of civilian cooperation and non-cooperation with non-state armed groups.

locality as the locus of choice. I then rely on both my previous and ongoing research to demonstrate how a more nuanced understanding of local conditions in conflict zones can further refine our conceptualization of civilian choice during wartime. I illustrate some of my arguments with original evidence on individuals and communities in conflict zones throughout Colombia. The final section concludes with some general thoughts about how a better conceptualization of the locus of choice can improve concept formation in comparative politics more generally.

### **The locus of choice and theory building**

The concepts we use shape our entire research process as well as its outcome: they drive the questions we ask, the content of the explanations we build, the empirical evidence we gather, and our analysis and conclusions. A study of democracy, for example, is likely to ask different questions depending on how democracy is conceptualized, and to develop different hypotheses, collect different data, and obtain different findings (Goertz 2006). This is why concepts have been called “the indispensable tools of science” (Weber 2015), “the building blocks of inferences” (Guerrig 1999), “data containers,” and “the elements of any theoretical system” (Sartori 1970).

Concept formation often involves an iterative process in which we refine our concepts based on our observation of facts, and adjust our observation based on our concepts. Sometimes the process starts with a concept. We look for facts that fit the concept, and in the process realize the need to refine that concept to better capture the facts, or create a new one. Sometimes we start by observing the facts and then look for a concept that captures their attributes; as we work on the concept, we may realize that we should go back to the facts and look at them differently, perhaps paying attention to traits we had previously ignored. In this process, the context in which we situate the facts matters: we seldom consider facts in purely abstract terms; rather, we approach them within a particular context or set of contexts.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to studying individual actions, the *spatial* context or contexts in which we consider the decision-making to take place can be particularly consequential. Spatial contexts are units of space with discrete boundaries, and

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<sup>7</sup> For a useful review of studies of cognition on how “context” shapes conceptual processing, see Yee et al. (2016).

they often involve distinct social, political, economic, and physical environments. Even though individuals make decisions while being embedded in multiple contexts, when we consider a specific action we usually do so while having a particular spatial context (or a few of them) in the background. As stated in the introduction, I use the term “locus of choice” to refer to the spatial units that, either implicitly or explicitly, we consider to make up the relevant spatial context in which a given decision is made. I argue that the locus of choice—which spatial units we focus on, and what we know about them—impacts our conceptualization of an individual action in three important ways.

First, the locus of choice impacts our views on what the ontology of the phenomenon is—that is, what its core or fundamental attributes are. As Weber noted, there are many ways of conceptualizing any given “slice of reality.” When we conceptualize a phenomenon, we have to pick an angle to study it, and select or accentuate some of its salient features (Weber 2015). What we deem relevant and salient about an act, what we think it is an instance of, is influenced by the spatial context in which we consider it—the locus of choice—and what we know about it.

The second way in which the locus of a choice impacts our conceptualization is by informing what we consider the phenomenon *not* to be. As several scholars have noted (Sartori 1970; Goertz 2006; Collier and Gerring 2009), specifying when the phenomenon does not occur or is not present is an essential task in concept formation. A good concept of democracy, for example, has to make clear what democracy is not. When we specify which acts fall outside the phenomenon under study, our decision is influenced by the spatial context in which we consider the decision-maker to act.

The third way in which the locus of choice drives our concepts is by impacting our classificatory systems. Conceptualizing a phenomenon involves, among other things, defining its *genus* (the overarching category, group or class the phenomenon belongs to), and identifying other *species* within that genus (the other elements that belong to the same category or class) (Sartori 1970). The locus of choice that we consider for a given act informs these decisions: by influencing our views on the ontology of the phenomenon, it drives our identification of its genus; by influencing which of its attributes we find to be salient, the locus of choice informs our selection of specific types. These classificatory systems, in turn, guide our entire research process: the dimensions of the phenomenon that

we focus on, the explanations we build, and the data we collect all depend on how we define the dependent variable and what its possible types or values are.

The locus of choice also impacts another type of classificatory task needed when building theories to explain individual decisions: that of identifying the menu of options available to the decision-maker. This entails listing and often classifying a set of actions that share some attribute with each other. Which attributes we focus on, and which options make it into the menu of choices, is informed not only by the ontology of the phenomenon but also by the locus of choice. As we look for the alternatives available to an actor, context is essential. What we know about the place (or places) in which the actor is embedded, and what we decide to focus on, impacts how we go about identifying the acts the actor considers. The menu of alternatives is quite consequential for our explanations because, as a rich literature in the behavioral sciences shows, it can shape decision-making in a variety of ways, such as constraining the actor's choices, shaping his desires or preferences, and influencing his beliefs (Elster 2007). Insofar as the alternatives available to an actor depend on the locus of choice, which spatial units we focus on can deeply influence the content of our explanation of that actor's decision-making.

Scholars are well aware that the unit of analysis matters. They are also cognizant of the fact that identifying relevant contextual explanatory factors is one of the main tasks in developing theories, and that multilevel theories often have greater explanatory power. Yet, scholars seldom discuss why they focus on one spatial unit over another when conceptualizing a phenomenon. What is more, they rarely specify which spatial unit or units—and what information about them—inform their conceptualizations. In the case of individual decisions, the unit of analysis is the individual, and his or her behavior can be determined by multiple factors at different levels of analysis. Yet, selecting carefully the spatial context in which we situate the decision-maker—the locus of choice—and stating our assumptions about it clearly, is likely not only to improve the quality of our concepts but also the collective construction of knowledge. As our academic communities can more easily identify the assumptions that drive our conceptualizations, we can more easily assess their value for specific research endeavors; improve on previous conceptualizations; and identify some of the reasons why concepts, theories, and findings that apparently address the same phenomenon differ from each other in important ways. In sum, devoting efforts to selecting the locus of choice for a given decision; stating clearly what the locus of choice

is and why we select a specific spatial unit or units; and communicating what our assumptions are about those spatial units is important to improve the quality of our theories and our transparency about the assumptions on which they are built.

I illustrate these ideas by discussing how the conceptualization of civilian support for insurgents has matured as scholars began to focus on the locality as the locus of civilian choice.

## **Previous conceptualizations of civilian support**

### ***The centrality of civilian support in civil war studies***

Different studies of civil war converge in viewing civilian support as one of the most important determinants of a conflict's conduct and eventual outcome.<sup>8</sup> The patterns of civilian support for a rebel group can, for example, impact the latter's use of violence (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007); its internal organization (Cohen 2013; Weinstein 2007); and both whether and how it governs civilians (Mampilly 2011; Arjona et al. 2015; Wickham-Crowley 1987; Arjona 2016). The extent of civilian support for insurgents or counterinsurgents can also determine the efficacy of specific military strategies (Beath et al. 2012; Lyall & Wilson 2009; Lyall 2009; Lyall 2010) as well as which sides wins the war (e.g. Galula 1964; Packwood 2009; Benhabib et al. 2007; Trinquier 2006). Not surprisingly, many books and articles on civil war rely on the assumption that civilian support impacts the conduct of war.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, the term "civilian support" is seldom defined. Scholars and policymakers often use the words collaboration, support, and participation to refer to civilians' backing of a warring side. However, what such backing entails tends to be vaguely if at all identified. Sometimes these terms imply the existence of positive attitudes towards an armed actor,

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<sup>8</sup> By "civilians" and "locals" I mean all persons in a conflict zone who do not participate in hostilities, and are not full-time members of any state or non-state armed organization, including regular civilians and public officials.

<sup>9</sup> As an illustration, a search in Google Scholar of the terms "civil war" and "popular support" combined, led to about 39,800 results in January of 2014. The pattern is far from changing, as the same search almost four years later, in October of 2017, produced about 64,900 results.

but other times they refer to specific acts.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there is little discussion about what support *is not*, and about the alternatives available to the civilian population. The common assumption seems to be that the alternative to supporting a rebel group is either doing nothing or actively supporting the opposing side. In reality, however, civilians are seldom confronted by these simple dichotomies (Barter 2014; Arjona 2016). Insofar as people make choices considering the alternatives available to them, identifying the range of those options is an essential step towards theory building.

Our conceptualization of civilian support for rebel groups improved substantially once scholars began to pay attention to the locality as the locus of civilian choice during wartime. As we gained a deeper understanding of the local context in which civilians live, our conceptualization of that phenomenon—and of civilians’ choices vis-à-vis armed actors more generally—improved. In order to develop this argument, in the next section I first explain why the locality is such an important spatial context for civilians’ decision-making. I then discuss how taking into account the salience of the locality has improved our conceptualization of civilian support.

### ***Conceptualizations of civilian support with the locality as the locus of choice***

The majority of civil wars are fought by irregular forces challenging the state (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). Such irregular groups do not attempt to confront the state in an open battlefield, but rather seek to exercise control over local territories. The larger the portion of the country under rebel control is, the greater the challenge to the state. Because controlling local territories is the central means towards achieving success, seizing and maintaining control of a locality is a key strategic goal that insurgents pursue (e.g. Kalyvas 2006:88, McColl 1969; Thompson 1983). The available evidence overwhelmingly

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that military historians and early studies of guerrilla warfare tended to be more precise. Johnson (1962), for example, provided several examples of French, British and American studies of military doctrine that clearly identified specific acts that were crucial for the success of guerrilla tactics: “[t]he providing of food, shelter, communications, stretcher bearers, labor for mine-laying, and the like by the civilian population all go to make up that ubiquitous word of guerrilla catechism: mobility.” Military historians also highlighted the importance of intelligence provided by civilians.

suggests that, indeed, countries enduring an irregular civil war see their territory divided into pockets either controlled by one of the warring sides, or under dispute.<sup>11</sup>

But which side has military control is not the only difference across localities. Scholars who have adopted a subnational approach have found many dynamics of war to vary substantially at the local level, including violence against noncombatants (e.g. Balcells 2010; Kalyvas 2006); displacement of civilians (e.g. Steele 2010; Ibáñez & Moya 2010); resistance against occupation (Petersen 2001); wartime institutions (Arjona 2016); the effects of counterinsurgency operations (e.g. Lyall & Wilson 2009; Lyall et al. 2013); and responses to peacekeeping (e.g. Dorussen and Gizelis 2013). These studies suggest that civilians experience war—and therefore decide how to act—within drastically different *local* realities. It should be no surprise that our conceptualization of civilian support (and civilian choice more generally) improved as scholars paid greater attention to the locality as the locus of choice.

The vague definitions of civilian support that have been repeatedly used in the civil war literature indeed contrast with the more compelling concepts provided by scholars who have considered the locality as the locus of civilian choice. In order to illustrate how concept formation changes when we consider different spatial units as the context of actors' decision making, I show how conceptualizations of civilian support—and civilian behavior towards armed actors more generally—have improved as our understanding of local dynamics in conflict zones has grown. I focus on the conceptualizations of civilian support offered by three seminal studies, and then turn to my own work on civilian cooperation and non-cooperation with armed actors.<sup>12</sup>

In his work on civilian participation in rebellion against foreign occupation, Petersen (2001) aims to explain individuals' decision to partake in resistance. Early on, he identifies the local community as the locus of civilian choice, and focuses his attention on the different social structures that exist across communities. Speaking about the Merkinė region in Lithuania, he

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<sup>11</sup> See Kalyvas (2006) for examples on multiple conflicts around the globe.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that other, recent conceptualizations of civilian choice have also made important contributions: Barter (2014) provides a typology of civilian options available to civilians, including flight, support, and voice. And Masullo (2017), building on Arjona's typology of cooperation and non-cooperation with non-state armed actors (Arjona 2017a, discussed below), proposes a nuanced typology of non-cooperation.

states the following (p. 10): “[R]elatively small differences in community structure can create different signals for potential rebels that, in turn, produce different rebellion dynamics.”

This emphasis on the community allows Petersen to question the simplistic view of civilian support according to which people either rebel or not. Instead, he notes that there are several roles that civilians can elect to play within their communities: “There are collaborators, neutrals, locally based rebels, mobile fighters, and gradations in between.” (p. 8). He therefore proposes a spectrum of roles that individuals can play in a rebellion ranging from -3 to +3, where 0 is complete neutrality; +1 is unarmed and unorganized opposition to the regime; +2 is direct support or participation in locally based, armed organizations; +3 is membership in a guerrilla unit or rebel army; and -3, -2, and -1 are the equivalent forms of support for the occupying regime.

In Petersen’s conceptualization, participating in rebellion is therefore about undertaking specific acts that either support or oppose a powerful regime. The ontology of the phenomenon is thus quite different from what is commonly implied in the literature on civil war: it is not about holding positive attitudes or preferences for a rebellion or a rebel group, but about performing certain activities that contribute in some way to the rebellion.

Petersen’s focus on local communities and their structure therefore influences his views about the ontology of the phenomenon; his definition of support—and of what support *is not*; and his classificatory systems. This conceptualization led to a different question about participation in rebellion: rather than asking why ‘a people’ rebel, or even why a given individual rebels, Petersen asks why an individual decides to play a specific role in rebellion, moving from one point on the spectrum to another, and why communities tend to develop their own “equilibriums” (p. 9,13). His conceptualization also sets the stage for different kind of theory—one that stresses the role of social networks in triggering mechanisms that impact individuals’ decision-making—and a different kind of data collection—one that focuses on multiple acts that help a rebellion within distinct community structures.

In her study of peasant support for the insurgency in El Salvador, Elisabeth Wood (2003) also considers the locality as the key locus of choice for civilians. Wood’s work focuses on a particular type of localities: those in contested areas, where the insurgents and state forces actively compete for control of the territory and its population. In those areas,

the risk of an individual supporting the rebels was much higher than elsewhere in the country, as “covert death squads and regular military forces carried out assassinations and disappearances with impunity” (p. 5). Identifying the locus of choice in this clear manner thus provides the grounds for Wood’s conceptualization of civilian support.

Like Petersen, Wood focuses on acts rather than preferences or attitudes, therefore defining the ontology of the phenomenon in a different way than the literature usually does. Abandoning the traditional dichotomous view of rebels and non-rebels, she differentiates between nonparticipants or noninsurgents, full-time members of the guerilla movement, and insurgent campesinos (civilian supporters of the insurgency), and focuses on the latter. Wood therefore defines support for the insurgency as “the provision to the insurgents of information and supplies beyond the contribution necessary to remain in contested areas, and the refusal to give information and supplies to government forces beyond the necessary contribution” (p. 17). She also clearly states what support *is not*: helping insurgents when doing so is necessary for staying in the territory is not support. Offering support requires taking risks. Although she does not say it explicitly, it seems like in her conceptualization neutrality is often not a possibility.

As with Petersen’s work, Wood’s research is deeply influenced by her consideration of the locality as the locus of civilian choice. Her views on the ontology of the phenomenon also moves away from vague ideas about preferences, attitudes, and action, and focuses on specific acts. She differentiates between types of support and—albeit implicitly—states what support is not. This conceptualization, in turn, impacts several aspects of her theory and her empirical analysis. To begin with, she asks a different question than the literature on peasant rebellion and civil war usually asks: ‘why do civilians become *insurgent campesinos*’, as opposed to the more general question ‘why do people rebel?’. Regarding her theory, her focus on risky behavior that helps rebels leads her to emphasize the role of moral principles and the pleasure of agency—important factors that had not been previously taken into account. Likewise, the empirical evidence she collected has the imprint of her definition: her work provides detailed accounts of the risks peasants took in order to provide help to the rebels, regardless their motivations.

Finally, although Kalyvas’s work (2006) aims to explain armed groups’ use of violence against non-combatants, he pays careful attention to civilian support for armed

actors. In his theory, obtaining local support is the primary goal armed groups pursue when killing civilians. Hence, while in Petersen's and Wood's work support is the main dependent variable, for Kalyvas the dependent variable is violence and civilian support is part of the causal mechanism. Kalyvas's approach is also based on a focus on the locality as the locus of choice for both civilians and combatants: because armed actors strive to control territories—and often succeed—the territory of a country undergoing civil war is usually fragmented. Since civilians make choices while living under the full control of one of the warring sides or some level of competition between them, Kalyvas selects the locality as the spatial context in which he situates civilians when conceptualizing their behavior.

Kalyvas also focuses on acts rather than “mental states” like attitudes, beliefs, and preferences,<sup>13</sup> and makes two crucial distinctions. First, he differentiates between attitudes and behavior and, as Wood and Petersen both do, focuses on the latter. He focuses on one form of support—the provision of information to an armed actor or denunciation—and clearly states what support is not: defection. In fact, rather than identifying different types of support, he proposes a classification of defection, identifying three types: noncompliance, informing, and switching sides. Noncompliance includes different forms of opposition, shirking, and fleeing; informing entails supplying information about one side to its rival; and switching sides consists of openly collaborating with the enemy.

As with the other studies, Kalyvas' conceptualization of support permeates his theory. His focus on civilian denunciations as support is essential to his argument, according to which armed groups' use of violence depends on their demand of information as well as on their expectations that civilians will supply it. His focus on denunciations also drives his quest for detailed evidence on civilian support, which centers on the ways in which private matters motivate civilians to denounce neighbors as collaborators of enemy forces.

In sum, these three studies improve previous conceptualizations of civilian support in two ways. First, they clearly define what support entails by focusing on acts rather than a preference, disposition or belief. In this way, the concept of civilian support becomes

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, he has a detailed discussion of the difference between the two (Kalyvas 2006:92).

clearer and more useful as we better delineate the ontology of the phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> Second, these authors provide a more nuanced typology of support that differentiates between opposition, neutrality, support, and enlistment, and identifies specific acts of collaboration. This is an important improvement: whereas almost every study of insurgency and counterinsurgency mentions civilian support as a crucial explanatory factor, very few explicitly state what the alternative to collaborating is. In reality, however, civilians are not confronted by the simple dichotomy of either offering support or not doing so. The conceptualizations offered by Petersen, Wood, and Kalyvas compel our theories to explain not only why civilians support the rebels but also why they support *them in one way rather than another*. This illustrates how our concepts impact not only the content of our explanations but also the very questions we ask.

### **Wartime social order, the locus of choice, and civilian behavior in war zones**

In the previous sections I argued that the spatial units we select as the locus of a choice impacts our conceptualization of that choice as a phenomenon of study. I illustrated this argument by discussing three seminal studies of civilian support for rebel groups. I showed how the conceptualization of the phenomenon improved when researchers approached the phenomenon based on an understanding of the locality as the locus of civilian choice. In this section, I build on my previous and ongoing work to argue that delving even deeper into the attributes of those localities can further improve our conceptualization of civilian support, and of civilian decision-making during wartime more generally. I illustrate some of my points with original data on civilians and communities in conflict zones throughout Colombia.

### ***Social order in conflict zones***

Understanding civilians' choices in conflict zones requires a deeper engagement with the many ways in which war transforms local life. Although the presence and behavior of armed groups often create disorder, they also create *new* forms of order, where

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<sup>14</sup> To be sure, a definition that focuses on preferences or beliefs would also be valid (despite the fact that observing "support" would be more difficult). The point is that concepts need to be clearly defined, and a careful consideration of the locus of decision-making can facilitate that task.

institutions—understood as the formal or informal rules that structure human interaction (North 1991)—regulate the behavior of both civilians and combatants (Arjona 2016). Given the powerful role of institutions to shape the economic, political, and social life of a society, the institutions that operate in war zones need to be incorporated in our analyses of wartime civilian choice (Arjona 2014).

The institutions that structure life in conflict zones can be established by rebels, state agents, civilians, or a combination of them. In previous work, I show that there is evidence of variation in the extent to which armed actors influence these institutional arrangements across localities within various conflicts, and provide original, systematic evidence on Colombia (Arjona 2014, 2016) and Kosovo (Arjona 2017b). The growing literatures on rebel and criminal governance also demonstrates that both rebel and criminal groups often take on different governance functions in the areas where they operate, influencing civilians' lives in a myriad of ways.<sup>15</sup> To illustrate how deeply war can transform local life (not only by bringing disorder and chaos but also by creating new forms of order), Figures 1 and 2 present some descriptive data on the Colombian conflict. The data was collected in 2012 in a random sample of localities where guerrillas or paramilitaries operated between 1970 and 2012. The evidence comes from memory workshops and individual surveys with local experts.<sup>16</sup> The unit of analysis is the community-armed group dyad per year, and describe the institutions that armed groups established (or failed to establish) in the communities where they operated, over time.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 1 shows variation in whether clear institutions existed—that is, whether there was order—or not. In the former case, civilians knew the rules that were in place and were able to form expectations in their daily lives; in the latter case, they faced high levels of uncertainty. As the data suggests, in about 60% of the cases clear rules did exist and uncertainty was low; however, localities also endured disorder, especially in situations where paramilitary groups were present. This difference is likely to be explained by the

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<sup>15</sup> On rebel governance, see for example Arjona et al. 2015; Mampilly 2011; Metelits 2010; Weinstein 2007; Kasfir 2004; Wickham-Crowley 1987. On criminal governance, see Gambetta 1993; Varese 2001; Skarbek 2011; Lilyblad 2014; Arias 2009; Wolff 2015; Arias 2006; Grillo 2012; Cockayne 2016; Davis 2009; Harbers et al. 2016.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed description of the sampling process and data gathering methods see Arjona (2014 and 2016).

<sup>17</sup> All figures include sampling weights.

fact that paramilitaries often expanded to territories where guerrillas operated, making paramilitary presence correlate with active competition between the two types of armed actors.

**Figure 1**

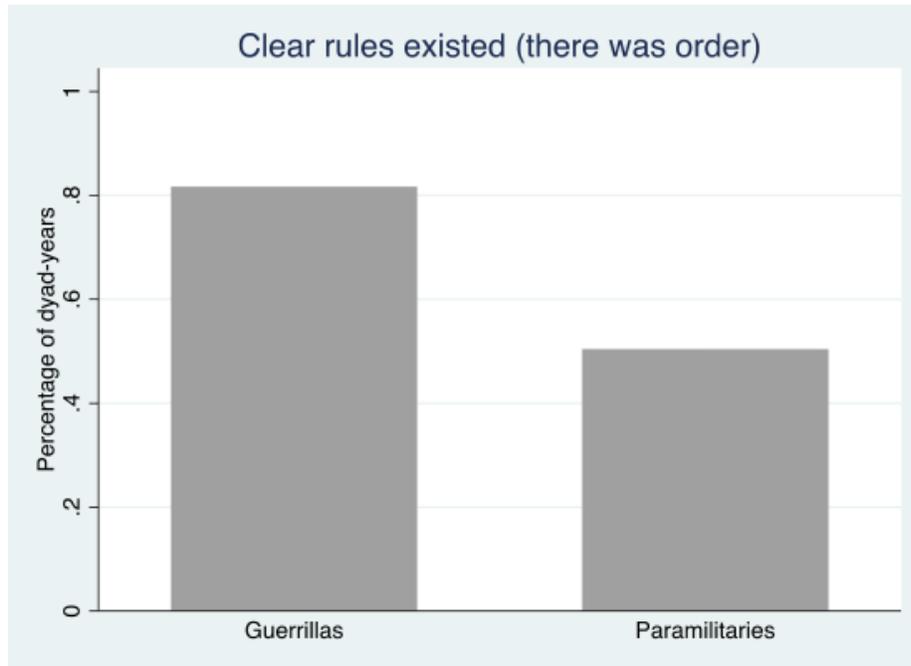
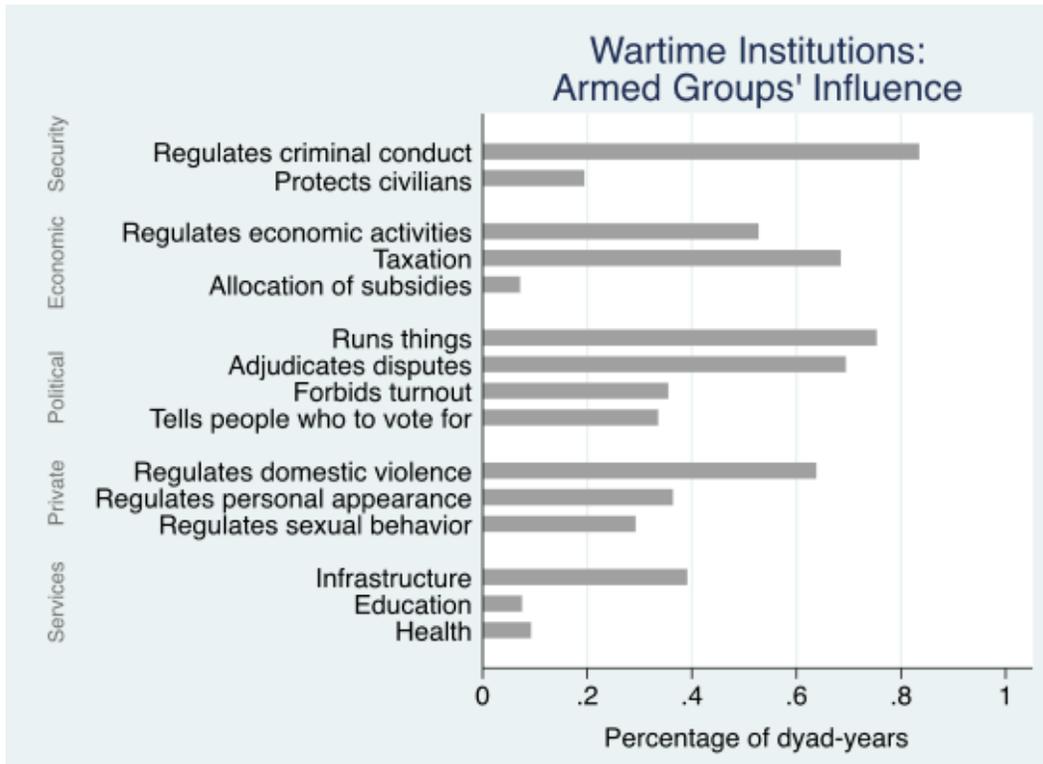


Figure 2



Turning to the kind of institutions that allow a new form of order to emerge<sup>18</sup>, Figure 2 shows how armed groups influenced several institutional arrangements that operated in conflict zones. Starting with public order, in most cases (79%) armed groups established a number of rules to maintain public order—that is, forbidding crimes like robbery and rape. In about 1 out of 5 cases, the group protected civilians from other armed actors.

Moreover, armed groups' influence also extended to the economic sphere: in 46% of all dyad-years, these organizations established rules to regulate a myriad of activities such as fishing, mining, and coca cultivation and transportation. In 66% of all observations, the groups collected “taxes” in either money or kind. Armed actors also intervened in the allocation of state subsidies in a few of the places where they operated (6% of cases).

<sup>18</sup> The data in Figure 2 include only observations where there was order (i.e. where there were clear rules of behavior).

Politically, armed actors became the most important actor in the locality in 76% of the cases. This is measured with answers provided to the question “Who used to run things (or be in charge) in the locality?”<sup>19</sup> Another unequivocal signal of their political power is the fact that people used to turn to them for dispute adjudication in 63% of the cases. As Arjona and Boucoyannis (2017) argue, this is a central instrument for consolidating political rule. Armed groups also directly intervened to regulate the political behavior of local residents in several ways. For example, in 31% of the cases they told people who to vote for in elections, and in 30% they banned voting altogether.

Furthermore, armed groups also established institutions to regulate private conduct. In 56% of the cases studied, they established rules against forms of domestic violence; in 34%, they established rules on personal appearance (such as banning short skirts in women and long hair in men); and in 26% of the cases, they regulated sexual conduct in some form, such as imposing rules on prostitution or homosexual relationships. Finally, these organizations intervened in the provision of public goods, either directly or by influencing (or coercing) public officials: in 37% of the cases, they did so to build or maintain infrastructure, including roads the group would benefit from; in a few cases (11%), they intervened in the provision of health services, and in a few less (6%) in the provision of education.

These figures capture variation in a single community over time, as well as across communities under the presence of the same armed actor. Institutions also vary within a single district or municipality at a given point in time. Clearly, civilians may live within very different wartime institutional arrangements; what is more, in many cases the relationship between armed actors and local residents is that between ruler and ruled.

It is in such realities that civilians in the midst of war live, interact with both rebels and insurgents, and make choices. Taking this fact into account has important implications for our conceptualization of civilian support and, more generally, of civilians’ choices in conflict zones.

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<sup>19</sup> The Spanish wording captures in rather clear way that this is about who is the de facto ruler: “Quién mandaba?”

### *Wartime order and the conceptualization of civilian choice in conflict zones*<sup>20</sup>

Recognizing the local transformation of institutions and the consolidation of different forms of order in conflict zones, I proposed in previous work a typology of civilian cooperation and non-cooperation with non-state armed actors (Arjona 2017a). This typology adopts a different view of the ontology of civilian support and identifies a different set of alternatives available to civilians. In what follows, I present this typology and discuss how it builds on different assumptions about how localities—the locus of civilian choice—function in conflict zones.

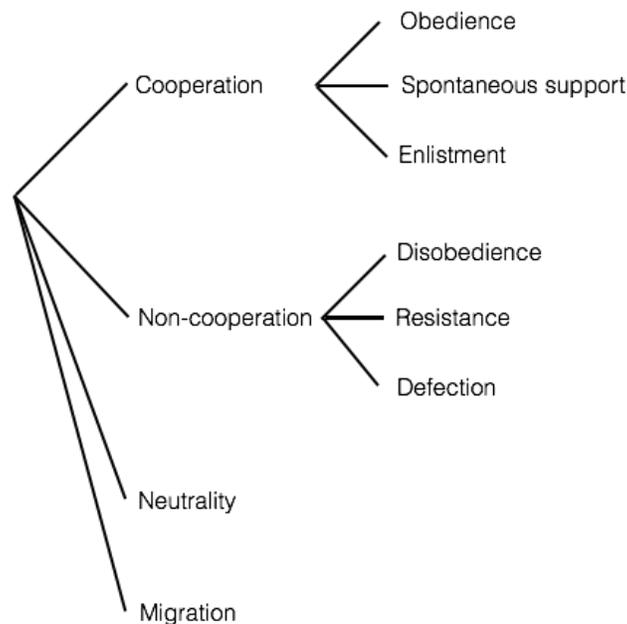
My approach starts by proposing to use the term *cooperation* rather than support, participation, or collaboration. Since “support” and “participation” are often used to denote positive attitudes or endorsement for a given group, it leaves out cases in which civilians reluctantly help armed actors. “Collaboration” is similarly confusing and can also suggest a moral condemnation because it is reminiscent of civilian involvement with the Nazis and the Axis powers during World War II. I therefore use the term cooperation instead, and define it as *an act performed by a civilian that directly benefits an armed group*.

Rather than viewing cooperation as a voluntary and spontaneous act, I consider it to be one of several options available to civilians regarding their behavior towards armed actors. These options are depicted in Figure 3.

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<sup>20</sup> Segments of this section were published in previous work (Arjona 2017a).

**Figure 3. A Typology of Cooperation and Non-Cooperation with Armed Groups<sup>21</sup>**



I identify several forms of cooperation depending on its level. *Enlistment* entails joining the armed organization as a full-time member without having received the order to do so. *Spontaneous support* entails volunteering to do specific tasks that favor the armed group short of joining, without the latter having given the civilian, either explicitly or implicitly, the order to do so. Examples include expressing endorsement, offering information, and volunteering to be a lookout.

Whereas previous conceptualizations have distinguished between support and full-time participation, I add a third alternative: *obedience*. I define obedience as any action by a civilian after an armed group ordered him or her to do so, either directly or by establishing a general rule. Providing food to a combatant after the latter has demanded it and obeying a curfew are both instances of what I consider obedience to an armed group.

The difference between obedience and support tends to be overlooked but it is quite important for two reasons. First, while rebels need only *some* active support to accomplish their objectives (Kalyvas 2008; Kalyvas 2006; Wood 2003), they need *massive* obedience to do so (Arjona 2016). Consider for example the situation of a rebel group in a given village under its own control. State forces are nearby, awaiting an opportunity to sabotage

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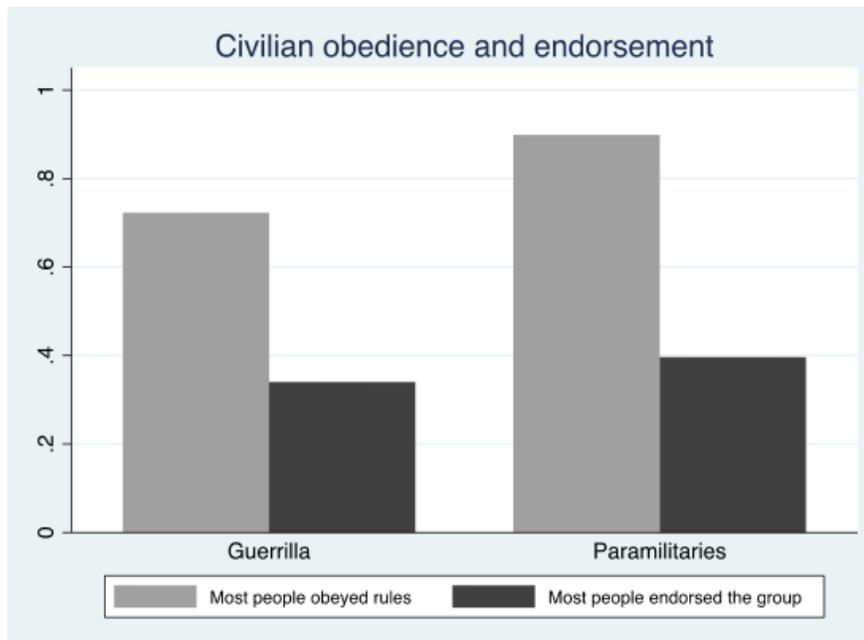
<sup>21</sup> This typology builds on the typology introduced in Arjona (2017a).

potential attacks, fight guerrilla members, and eventually take over the locality. It takes only a few—even one—informant to provide the right information to state forces for it to know when, where, and how to strike. Rebels, therefore, require that *all* locals obey certain rules (such as not providing information to the enemy). On the contrary, rebels do not need every local to volunteer information on the army when it is approaching: just one signal will let the rebels know it is time to hide. Differentiating obedience from support can therefore improve our theories of rebel behavior towards civilians.

The second reason why distinguishing obedience from support matters is that, for civilians, deciding to offer active support entails a different choice from deciding to offer “minimal support” or “passive collaboration”. These options can carry with them very different consequences, and civilians can consider them within different menus of alternatives. Separating the concept obedience from that of support thus helps us not only to bring clarity to the phenomenon under study but also to improve the quality of our explanations: even though it is obvious that obeying a rule entails a markedly different choice from volunteering to offer help, we cannot provide distinct explanations for these phenomena unless we differentiate them conceptually.

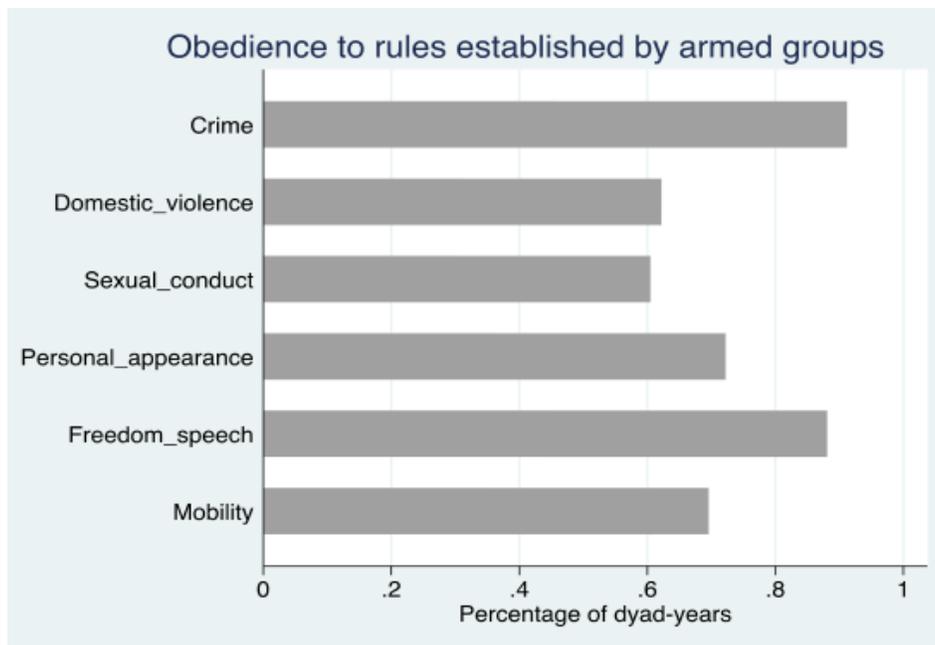
Moreover, detailed data on Colombian localities show that obedience to the rules established by an armed actor does not coincide with endorsement for it. Figure 4 shows the percentage of localities in which most people obeyed the rules that guerrillas or paramilitaries established, as well as the percentage of localities in which most people endorsed one of these groups.

**Figure 4**



The data also suggest that civilians' decision to obey depend on the rule in question. As Figure 5 shows, civilians were more likely to obey certain rules, like those forbidding crimes, than others, for example those on sexual conduct. Measuring civilian cooperation with an armed group and understanding it requires, therefore, disaggregation.

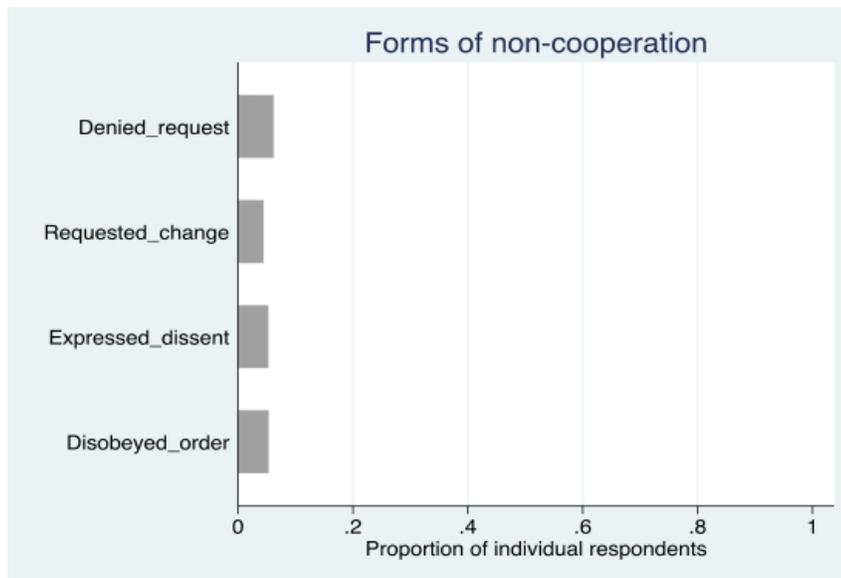
**Figure 5**



As discussed before, most accounts of civilian support usually either fail to identify what the alternative to that support is, or identify neutrality and defection as the only options. Taking into account the role that armed groups play as rulers reveals that civilians can also opt for many forms of non-cooperation—just as they would do with other types of rulers. I define *non-cooperation* as any act that directly harms the armed group, and identify three forms of it depending on its level. *Disobedience* entails failing to follow an order given by the group or a rule established by it. Examples include denying help to a wounded combatant who demands it, or violating a curfew. *Resistance* entails opposing or attacking the group in any way. And *defection* entails aiding the enemy, either by offering it spontaneous support or enlisting as a full-time member.

Figures 6 and 7 show data gathered with an individual-level survey conducted in 2016 in most of the localities sampled in 2012.<sup>22</sup> The evidence shows that resistance is indeed more common than is often assumed and can take many forms. Figure 6 shows that between 4% and 6% of all respondents reported having done each of the following while living under the presence of an armed actor: denying a request from the group; requesting combatants to change their behavior; expressing disagreement with the group; and disobeying an explicit order given by that organization.

**Figure 6**



<sup>22</sup> The survey was conducted in 53 of the 58 communities sampled in 2012.

**Figure 7**

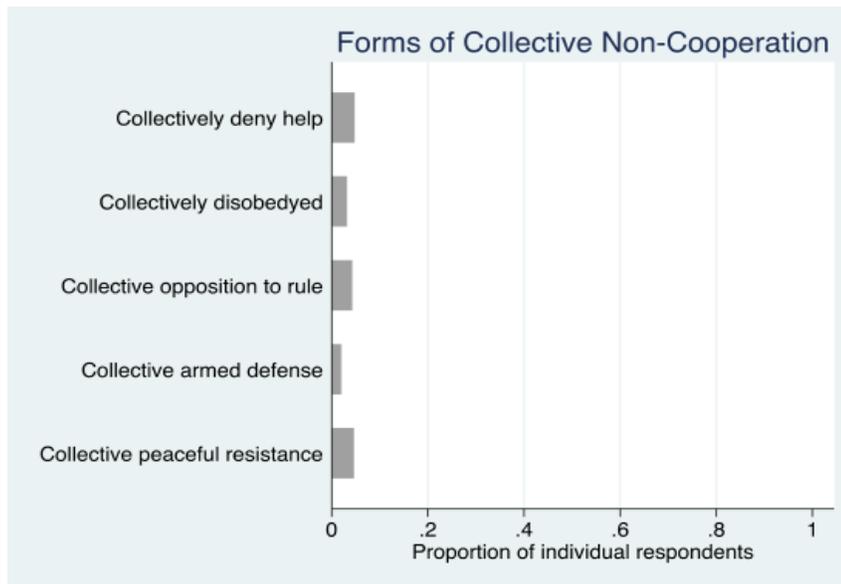


Figure 7 shows that between 2% and 5% of all respondents reported that their community engaged in various forms of *collective* non-cooperation: denying help to the armed group, disobeying its commands, opposing its rule, engaging in armed resistance, and peacefully opposing the presence of the armed actor in the territory.

Finally, can civilians remain neutral—that is, avoiding both cooperating and non-cooperating with an armed group in a conflict zone? While *neutrality* is an option whenever the armed actor does not make demands and does not establish any rules, it is impossible when it actually does so. In that case, civilians can only obey, disobey, or *migrate*.<sup>23</sup> Migrating (or fleeing) the territory is indeed the only option for many civilians who do not wish to engage in any form of cooperation *and* non-cooperation with armed groups. To be sure, sometimes civilians are forced to flee, which means that migrating is not always a choice. However, civilians in conflict zones often consider migrating even without being ordered to do so; while some decide to flee, others decide to stay. In the sampled localities, 26% of all respondents reported leaving their hometown at some point; among them, 68%

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<sup>23</sup> For this reason, in Arjona (2017a) the typology does not include neutrality. The typology was meant to apply to situations of order—that is, those in which there was a social contract (usually implicit rather than explicit) between the armed actor and the civilian population. Such contract implies that there are some rules that civilians have to follow, and, therefore, locals can either obey or disobey—there is no room for neutrality. However, in a contested zone or a place where the armed actor has not established regulations, neutrality is indeed possible. This is why it is included here as an option in the typology.

reported *not* being forcedly displaced.

To be sure, this a typology of acts, not a typology of individuals. Civilians do not necessarily opt for only one form of cooperation or non-cooperation with armed actors. They may only obey most of the time, and engage in spontaneous support occasionally. They may obey some rules and disobey others. They may enlist and later on defect.

### ***Discussion***

What do we gain by relying on a more nuanced conceptualization of civilian cooperation? To start with, our questions about civilian choice have to somehow incorporate the menu of alternatives available to those interacting with armed organizations. Explaining why civilians support a rebel group necessarily requires a more nuanced discussion of obedience, voluntary cooperation, and enlistment. Furthermore, insofar as distinct types of civilian cooperation follow from distinct causal paths, identifying those types is a necessary step towards building a theory of civilian choice. Consider, for example, obedience and spontaneous support: these are evidently different choices, and understanding them most likely requires different explanations. Yet, building such explanations would be impossible without first distinguishing between the two alternatives.

A more nuanced conceptualization of civilian choice can also contribute to our understanding of several phenomena. As discussed earlier in the chapter, civilian behavior during wartime is likely to shape several dynamics at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Consider, for example, how civilian cooperation is assumed to be crucial for both rebel and counterinsurgent success. A better conceptualization and theorization of civilian cooperation can illuminate our understanding of rebel behavior and counterinsurgency. Violence, indoctrination, the provision of public goods and other aspects of rebel behavior could be better understood if we relied on improved models of wartime civilian choice. For example, taking resistance into account is important not only because it can, if successful, affect rebels' fate, but also because rebels are likely to incorporate their expectation of such resistance when electing their strategies to conquer, rule, and victimize civilians (Arjona 2016). In addition, whether or not civilians resist armed actors can also shape subnational patterns of rebel and counterinsurgent success. Furthermore, insofar as civilian choice

shapes rebel and counterinsurgent success at the local level, a better understanding of its determinants can also shed light onto national-level outcomes such as the duration and termination of war.

Civilian choice is also likely to shape local communities after war has ended. Whether people obeyed, joined, supported or resisted armed groups may impact the social fabric of the community, its capacity to engage in collective action, its members' interests in politics, and their overall perception of the state. Internally displaced persons, too, can transform the political, economic, and social realities of the places where they go, even in the post-conflict period (Steele 2010).

Finally, a better understanding of civilian choice vis-à-vis armed groups in contexts of civil war can illuminate our understanding of phenomena in other contexts. For example, despite the differences between rebels and criminals, several organized criminal groups control territory and engage in similar behaviors in their interaction with local communities (Arjona 2017a). Improvements in our theories of civilian agency vis-à-vis political armed actors can shed light onto questions about how civilians respond to the presence of drug trafficking organizations, gangs, and other similar groups at the local level.

## **Conclusion**

Although it is widely acknowledged that our quest for explanations requires a careful consideration of contextual factors, the fact that such considerations also shape our conceptualization of the phenomena we study is seldom recognized. When researching a phenomenon that results from the choice of an individual, we often identify, either implicitly or explicitly, a spatial context as the locus of that choice—that is, the place in which the decision-maker is embedded, and which we consider to be the most salient context where the decision-making takes place. In this chapter, I argued that our consideration of what the locus of a choice is, and what we know about it, have critical implications on theory building because they guide our views on the ontology of the phenomenon, our definition of its contours—which acts are part of the phenomenon and which are not—and the menu of options available to the decision-maker.

I illustrated my argument by discussing how the conceptualization of civilian support—a key phenomenon in the study of civil war—improved as scholars identified the

locality as the locus of civilian choice. As our understanding of local realities in conflict zones improved, so too did our approach to the ontology of civilian support and our conceptualization of civilian choice during wartime more generally.

Analyzing what the locus of choice is for other phenomena in comparative politics can catalyze similar improvements in concept formation and theory building more broadly. As research on subnational politics shows, there is great subnational, spatial variation in the intensity and quality of state presence (O'Donnell 1993; Soifer, this volume), democracy (Gibson 2005), public goods provision (Otero 2016), and nationalism (Singh 2015), among other important factors. Considering which subnational units make up the relevant context for key decisions can improve our conceptualization of different phenomena, and our explanations may become more powerful. Just as we have come to realize the shortcomings of explaining subnational politics by relying on theories crafted to explain macro-level phenomena (Introduction, this volume), so too may we find that the concepts we use need to be refined as we anchor our concepts in one spatial unit or another.

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