



FIGURING OUT WHETHER (AND WHY AND HOW AND TO WHOM) INSTITUTIONS MATTER

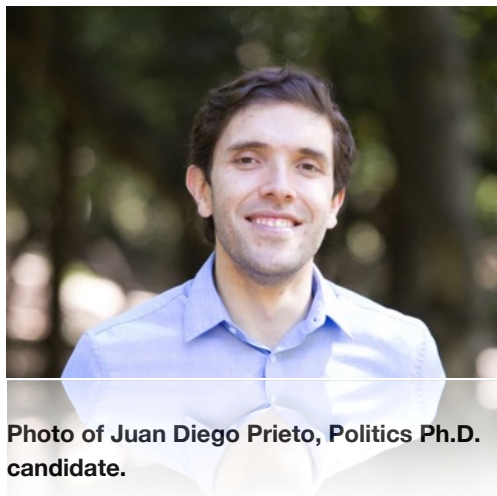


Photo of Juan Diego Prieto, Politics Ph.D. candidate.

By [Juan Diego Prieto](#), Ph.D. Candidate in Politics ~ UC Santa Cruz

The enduring popularity of Donald Trump in the United States, the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and the unwavering apologies for Nicolás Maduro and Daniel Ortega in Venezuela and Nicaragua are all, I believe, indicative of widespread mistrust and suspicion toward the status quo, including all things institutional. As a political scientist, I have always been taught that institutions matter, and I believe it. The concept of institutions commonly refers to the rules that structure political, economic, and social interactions, and it is usually associated with laws, governments, and the state. But why have social scientists—and political scientists in particular—done such an inadequate job at communicating the importance of institutions to the general public?

The appeal of “strongmen” who claim to represent the people’s will and who vow to dispense with the old ways of governance do so under the pretense of fixing all of their societies’ problems. These old ways include inept, captured, and corrupt legislatures but also democratic processes and checks and balances, as well as human rights and basic decency. This dangerous appeal is on the rise, and [it doesn’t seem to be just a passing fad](#).¹ Democratic political institutions are widely seen as having failed to deliver greater inclusion, welfare, and justice, and instead they are viewed as complicit in perpetuating (or even exacerbating) economic inequality and precarity, racial and gender injustice, and environmental degradation and so on.

The current heyday of authoritarianism and widespread skepticism toward institutions, and political scientists’ responsibility in connection to it, has raised the personal stakes of my dissertation research project, which deals with the multifaceted and constantly changing role of the Colombian state across territory. I ask what drives it to take on a more welfare-oriented role—as opposed to its much more common standoffish or repressive attitude—to areas that are usually seen by national elites as remote or peripheral. At first, I was inspired by a strong but somewhat nebulous fascination with ordinary people’s experiences of politics, government, and institutions, and saw this as a promising yet underexplored pathway to better

¹ Authoritarianism’s global expansion and its growing appeal are well documented. See Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Signs of Deconsolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 5-16.

understand and theorize about the place of the state in contemporary society. But as I took my research from the realm of intellectual curiosity to archives in Bogotá and to rice fields in Huila, union offices and street curbs in Barrancabermeja, and neighborhood bakeries across Eastern Antioquia (i.e., my interview sites), many things changed. The focus of my research evolved. My research questions changed from a broad consideration of the role of the state in certain regions to a more targeted focus on the determinants of social provision. My methodological approach to these queries also changed by now combining archival and library work with interviews of first-hand participants and witnesses, resulting in better answers.

In my research, figuring out why the Colombian state has sometimes invested in expanding access to clean water or electricity, protecting the environment, or distributing land to *campesinos* in “remote” localities directed my attention to local power struggles between different sectors of society for the ability to steer and use the state. I have found that the state’s endeavors in these localities are to a large extent a function of these struggles—and, as I explain below, this has helped me to develop a clearer understanding of what’s at stake in current tensions and questions around institutions.

Even though the odds have usually been stacked against popular sectors, campaigns to pressure the state to deliver services and pay attention to communities’ needs have not always been doomed to failure. Much to the contrary, through a combination of demonstrations, strikes, and other contentious tactics with strategic alliances with politicians and bureaucrats, popular movements in Barrancabermeja, Eastern Antioquia, and Huila (my dissertation research sites) have achieved tangible improvements to local living conditions.

“...I have long been allergic to that academic tradition of thinking we know what is best for the people whose lives we study and theorize about”

~JUAN DIEGO PRIETO



Photo of the Guatapé reservoir, in Eastern Antioquia. The construction of a hydroelectric dam flooded the old town of El Peñol and the cross marks the spot where the old church used to be located. The population of El Peñol mobilized and forced the energy company to build a new town and relocate the population.



Photo of the oil refinery of Barrancabermeja and the Cristo Petrolero statue in the Miramar marsh next to it

activism and mobilization—an arena they sought to make their own just as they did the oil refinery, or the highway, or rice estates.

Of course, in the context of the power struggle for influence over the state, elites often fought back, and they themselves used the state as a weapon—too often a lethal one—against those who threatened their privileges. Unsurprisingly, this led many activists to abandon all hope of engaging with the state apparatus. A few even looked to guerrilla groups, which sought to topple the government by force and take over the state, as a viable alternative (though, at least in the Colombian context, this

particular avenue proved to be just as hopeless and deadly as the institutional route). But others continued to use the state strategically to fight back, now through human rights and transitional justice frameworks. Focusing on the oil city of Barrancabermeja, Luis Van Isschot documents how the powerful human rights movement in Colombia partly owes its origins to decades-old labor and civic movements.² As Ramón Rangel, a union leader turned human rights defender from Barranca, explained to me, activists were forced to adopt a more defensive stance, less focused on service provision and more on the right to life and the rights of victims, but they did not stop engaging with and issuing demands to the political system.

Now, it's worth emphasizing that I have long been allergic to that academic tradition of thinking we know what is best for the people whose lives we study and theorize about. Resisting, avoiding, and even ignoring the state can be legitimate and effective organizing strategies. But, from a more macro-level perspective, seeing the state as an arena for conflict over social power, I am convinced that progressive citizens and thinkers can't simply relinquish all claims to existing state structures and institutions. Because just as activists, academics, and many ordinary people are increasingly skeptical of the value of engaging with institutions, authoritarians and reactionaries are deeply aware of their importance for advancing their agendas. They are well aware of the need to not only dismantle institutions that might get in their way but also of building new institutional bulwarks to support their political agendas for the long haul. Hence, for example, the U.S. Republican Party's emphasis on judicial appointments today: demographic trends and changing political attitudes may not favor its current platform, but if they manage now to pack the courts

² See Luis Van Isschot, *The Social Origins of Human Rights: Protest and Political Violence in Colombia's Oil Capital, 1919–2010* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).

with judges who will defend regressive policies and block progressive reforms in the future, their preferences will live on far longer than their electoral dominance.

Nearly everyone working on a dissertation knows that it's a long, tiring, often dispiriting process. It is easy—and extremely common—to lose interest and even to start hating the project. So renewing and reshaping your motivations constantly can be crucial to move beyond a very narrow understanding of why the research matters. To consider more broadly how the research helps grapple with and perhaps understand a little bit better the bleak and puzzling state of world politics today can occur once deeply immersed in the research process. I have now gained a new understanding of the implications of my research and a newfound appreciation for my own work. In addition to contributing to a variety of scholarly literatures and informing policy discussions I care about, I also believe it has potential for addressing the discipline's shortcoming in making a strong, compelling case for why institutions matter. This discovery has become an important motivation for seeing my dissertation through to the end.



The rice field in Campoalegre (Huila department) where Juan did one of the best interviews standing there next to that rice field.

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