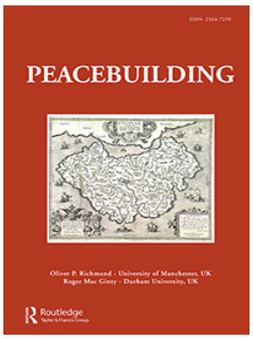

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Influential community members and the successful emergence of nonviolent resistance during violent conflict

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ABSTRACT

How do local communities develop the capacity to successfully engage in nonviolent resistance amidst war? Overall, I argue that nonviolent opposition by influential community members – first movers – to conflict-related violence strengthens their community's ability to successfully engage in future nonviolent resistance by changing local patterns of 'population sorting'. Thereafter, civilians that support nonviolent resistance are more likely to remain in or join the community. Unsupportive civilians may instead pursue alternative strategies, such as fleeing conflict, rather than remain where nonviolent resistance appears likely. Over time, a larger proportion of remaining community residents support and have the capacity to engage in nonviolent resistance. This article contributes to scholarship on civil resistance and agency in civil war by clarifying the characteristics of individuals capable of successfully developing community aptitude for nonviolent resistance, drawing on interviews, community archives, and historical accounts in the case of the Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos del Carare (ATCC).

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Non-violent non-violent resistance; civil resistance; local peacebuilding; mobilization; first movers

Introduction

In February 1987, village leaders form the Carare region in Colombia met to secretly discuss an ultimatum from multiple armed groups.[1] Their villages lay along a strategic corridor in the Colombian war, first occupied by guerrilla groups the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) in 1975, and later joined by paramilitary groups in 1983.[2] As many as 10 percent of the region's population had been killed in the years prior.[3] In 1987 – its bloodiest year – approximately 550 civilians were killed; 60 percent by paramilitaries and 40 percent by guerrillas.[4] This year leaders in the region were presented with a stark choice between forging an alliance with one of the armed actors, leaving the area or facing death.[5] The leaders identified a fourth option: mobilising their communities into nonviolent resistance. In May 1987 the Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos del Carare (ATCC) was born – which sought to opt out of the conflict.[6]

The ATCC opted for non-violence in response to local conflict-related threats and violence, and successfully developed the necessary capacity to do so. Yet, existing theories – the presence of existing NGO support that might boost community capacity or make repression costly to armed actors, weak state presence or limited options for civilians to leave resulting in civilians developing the capacity they need to

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The research was conducted at University College London and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), University of Edinburgh. Jennifer Hodge is now affiliated with PeaceRep, University of Stirling.

[1]Interview with Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos del Carare (ATCC) founder, August 18, 1989.

[2]Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación (CNRR), Sede Regional Nororiente, *Hechos del conflicto armado y la resistencia civil en el área de influencia de la ATCC* (Bucaramanga: CNRR, 2009), 131.

[3]Oliver Kaplan, *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 183–4.

[4]CNRR, 'Hechos del conflicto armado; Gloria Inés Restrepo, Dinámicas e interrelaciones en los procesos de resistencia civil' (BA thesis, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2005), 72.

[5]Interview with ATTC founders, December 22, 1988; and ATCC founder interview, August 18, 1989.

[6]ATTC founders interview, December 22, 1988.

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survive – at best only partially explain this outcome in the case.[7] This article thus asks: how do local communities attain the capacity they need to successfully wage civil (or non-violent) resistance amidst war?

Building theoretically on the social movements, civil resistance and social psychological literatures, the main argument of the paper is that when influential community members – first movers – visibly frame non-violent contention as the appropriate community response to conflict-related violence, their actions condition population flows into and out of their community, leading to a selection bias for non-violent resistance in the population that remain. Whilst population movements are common in conflict-affected contexts, the actions of first movers change their pattern, as the decision to remain or leave is influenced by the expectation that further non-violent resistance may be attempted again in the future. Non-violent first movers[8] nudge members of their community to consider how to respond to conflict conditions, and whether they are willing to engage in the non-violent resistance that they propose. Thereafter, conditional 'population sorting' sees those with a preference for non-violence more likely to remain or arrive in the community, whilst those that that are unsupportive of non-violent resistance are more likely to pursue alternatives: fleeing local conflict (if they can), joining armed actors, or initiating violent resistance instead. As a result, over time, a larger proportion of community residents support non-violent resistance. At the same time, key determinants of the capacity to collectively resist – organisational ability, social cohesion, and overlapping interpersonal networks of reciprocity and trust – must also be developed if the civilians that stay in conflict-affected contexts can hope to survive.[9] Thus, non-violent resistance by influential community members can strengthen their community's ability to successfully engage in future non-violent resistance over time, by changing local patterns of 'population sorting' and community organisation.

This article contributes to the scholarship on civil (or non-violent) resistance and agency in civil war by clarifying the crucial characteristics of individuals capable of sparking widespread non-violent mobilisation in their communities. Existing theorisation of the emergence of non-violent resistance focuses on the conditions under which communities actively engage in non-violent resistance.[10] Yet my explanation, while complementary, focuses on an earlier stage in the process and on the role of influential community members – first movers – in developing their community's aptitude to successfully engage in non-violent resistance through population sorting.

I use process tracing to evaluate the argument, as this methodology is well suited to testing mechanistic theories.[11] For the analysis, I draw on 28 semi-structured interviews, five historical interviews with founders of the ATCC in the year after it was formed, and 14 documents from the community archive.

The results indicate that each part of the mechanism was present and functioned as expected in the single case of the ATCC. By framing non-violent contention as the preferable response to threats of conflict-related violence first movers *conditioned* population flows into and out of their communities – with some civilians remaining, whilst others fled elsewhere, joined one armed actor or another, or evaded local violent groups. Those that stayed worked together to survive, with evidence to support an uptick in non-violent preferences among remaining residents, leading to an increased capacity for non-violent resistance in the community over time.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. I first outline the literature review, theory and empirical expectations. I then present the research design and evaluate the theory. Then the article concludes.

[7]Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Oliver Kaplan, 'Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 3 (2013): 351–67; and Kaplan, *Resisting War*; Juan Masullo, *The Power of Staying Put: Nonviolent Resistance Against Armed Groups in Colombia* (ICNC Monograph Series, 2015).

[8]First movers and first movers are used interchangeably.

[9]Adria Lawrence, 'Repression and Activism Among the Arab Spring's First Movers: Evidence from Morocco's February 20th Movement', *British Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (2017): 699–718; Ches Thurber, 'Social Ties and the Strategy of Civil Resistance', *International Studies Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2019): 974–86; and Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[10]e.g. Kaplan, *Resisting War*; Juan Masullo, 'Civilian Contention in Civil War: How Ideational Factors Shape Community Responses to Armed Groups', *Comparative Political Studies* (2021): 1–36; and Corinna Jentzsch and Juan Masullo, 'Violent or Non-Violent Action? Wartime Civilian Resistance in Colombia and Mozambique', *Political Geography* 99 (2022): 102761.

[11]Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

Previous research

This article builds upon a long tradition of research on non-violent action by examining one form of civil resistance[12] that arises amidst violent conflict.[13] In conflict-affected contexts, civil resistance refers to the collective opposition of civilians to the governance and violence of local armed actors through non-violent methods such as protesting.[14] A second body of literature examines civilian choice and agency during conflict, identifying how and whether civilians can affect the behaviour of belligerents – and protect themselves – with their actions.[15] In this reading, civilian choices during conflict should be taken seriously, as their actions are not simply derivative of conflict dynamics and can affect change.

Existing literature has advanced understanding of the conditions under which conflict-affected civilians engage in non-violent resistance.[16] Yet, further research is needed to understand how communities attain the necessary aptitudes to do so. This is important as a community's *capacity* for non-violent resistance – rather than observable *acts* of resistance by its members – can deter armed actors, whom tend to prefer occupying territories where civilians are less equipped to resist.[17] Indeed, research by Oliver Kaplan reveals that the organisational capacity and social cohesion of communities – such as those that engage in non-violent resistance – has an independent effect on wartime violence against civilians.[18] Local institutions and NGOs can also play a role in developing the organisational capacity of communities and limiting local levels of violence,[19] by reducing the costs and risks of mobilising, making repression costly to armed actors or supplanting a community's lack of knowledge or experience.[20] Yet the preference for non-violence is not clarified by these accounts.[21]

Some existing studies emphasise the important role of first movers in the onset of non-violent collective action.[22] Using within-case and cross-case comparisons during the Mozambican and Colombian civil wars, Jentzsch and Masullo find that when deciding whether to engage in violent or non-violent resistance, political entrepreneurs choose from a set of possibilities that are influenced by prior experiences of collective action and local norms. The argument that they test is similar to the first part of the theory in this paper, in that they emphasise the important role of first movers in the onset of non-violent collective action. However, in their account first movers are not the source of local norms regarding the permissibility of violence, instead they, 'activate available repertoires and adapt them to present struggles'.[23] Drawing on these insights, the article theorises how first movers can also be *the source* of norms of non-violence in their communities.

The argument: how first movers develop community capacity for non-violent resistance

Overall, I argue that first movers develop the capacity of their communities for non-violent resistance by (i) increasing the preference for non-violence within a community, thereby constraining the bounds of future community responses to non-violent forms, and (ii) increasing the mobilisational capacity of communities due to conditional population sorting.

When influential first movers frame non-violent action as the appropriate community response to conflict-related threats, their actions condition population flows into and out of their community, such that those that stay are primed for, and have the capacity to organise, non-violent resistance when new threats arise. Those

[12]The terms civil resistance and non-violent resistance are used interchangeably in the literature.
[13]e.g. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011); Kurt Schock, 'The Practice and Study of Civil Resistance', *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (2013): 277–90; and Gene Sharp, *Part Two: The Methods of Nonviolent Action: Political Jiu-Jitsu at Work* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973);
[14]Masullo, 'Civilian Contention'.
[15]e.g. Jana Krause, *Resilient Communities: Non-violence and Civilian Agency in Communal War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Jana Krause, Juan Masullo, Emily Paddon Rhoads, and Jennifer Welsh, *Civilian Protective Agency in Violent Settings: A Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
[16]Arjona, *Rebelocracy*; Kaplan, *Resisting War*; Masullo, 'Civilian Contention'.
[17]Kaplan, *Resisting War*.
[18]Ibid.
[19]Arjona, *Rebelocracy*; Kaplan, *Resisting War*; Oliver Kaplan, 'Protecting Civilians in Civil War: The Institution of the ATCC in Colombia', *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (2013): 351–67; and Masullo, *Power of Staying Put*.
[20]Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*; C. Moreno León, 'Migrate, Cooperate, or Resist: The Civilians' Dilemma in the Colombian Civil War, 1988–2010', *Latin American Research Review* 56, no. 2 (2021): 318–33; and Masullo, *Power of Staying Put*.
[21]C.f. Shanley Pinchotti and Philip Verwimp, *Social Capital and the Rwandan Genocide: A Micro-Level Analysis* (Households in Conflict Network, 2007), 30; c.f. Elisabeth J. Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[22]e.g. Jentzsch and Masullo, 'Violent or Non-Violent Action?'; and Masullo, 'Civilian Contention'.
[23]Jentzsch and Masullo, 'Violent or Non-violent Action?' 3.

that act first – and with influence – shape a community's preference for non-violent mobilisation, as the collective frames they initiate become reproduced over time. Scholars of social movements have long argued that, 'participants in public claim-making adopt scripts they have performed, or at least observed, before'.[24] Similarly, scholars of discursive framing processes have described how initiators of collective action draw on prior forms of contentious politics, thereby embedding collective frames in familiar or pretested actions.[25] The argument then is that the early decisions of first movers are key to longer term preferences and patterns of mobilisation that communities come to depend on over time as new threats present. In the absence of non-violent preferences civilians may seek to mobilise violently instead.[26] Thus, the capacity for non-violent resistance is comprised of both non-violent preferences and mobilisational capacity.

An assumption of the theory is that war-torn communities anticipate facing future threats by armed actors and engage in preventative safeguarding measures. Thus, after influential first movers frame non-violent contention as the preferred response, those that do not believe in non-violence are nudged to preventatively consider pursuing alternative actions, since the likelihood that the community together engages in non-violent resistance in the face of anticipated future threats is increased. First movers have particular influence over others' perceptions of group norms due to their social standing. As a result, individuals tend to generalise the behaviour of first movers to the group as a whole.[27] The intervention of non-violent first movers thus lead to a selection bias for non-violent resistance in the population that remain, with community members that have the preference and capacity for alternatives – such as fleeing to safer territories, joining armed actors, or initiating violent resistance – choosing to do so ahead of anticipated future threats. Others, whom would support further non-violent resistance in response to threats and violence, are more likely to remain in the community after influential first movers have demonstrated their preference for non-violent resistance. This has two key implications.

First, since the decision to flee or join a fighting side is taken by those who prioritise their security over that of the group, over time a larger proportion of remaining residents are on the other-regarding end of the spectrum.[28] Population flows after first movers act thus lead to a selection bias against such self-regarding preferences amongst those that remain. Moreover, residents must work together if they are to survive, increasing the social cohesion vital for effective mobilisation by civilians during war.[29] By framing non-violent contention as preferable, first movers *condition* the population sorting that follows in and out of their communities, ultimately strengthening the community's non-violent capacity (Figure 1).

Secondly, when influential first movers are non-violent, civilians that do not believe in the strategy of non-violent resistance are more likely to leave, whilst civilians with a preference for non-violent resistance are more likely to join. Thus, over time a larger proportion of residents are likely to prefer non-violence.

Indeed, patterns of population sorting would be different in communities where influential first movers express a preference for *violent* resistance. Here, community members that do not agree with violent resistance as a strategy might be more likely to leave the community, whilst those that support violent resistance would be more likely to stay. Conversely, such framing would be likely to increase community preferences for violent resistance in the future.

Alternative explanations

An alternative explanation for the emergence of community capacity for resistance is need: that in territories where the state is weak or where options to leave are limited, civilians may have no option but to develop skills, networks, knowledge and institutions to survive.[30] Secondly, in some communities, new ties with allies external to the community, such as NGOs, may boost mobilizational capacity, with external

[24]Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 138.
[25]Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, 'Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment', *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 611–39; and John A. Noakes and Hank Johnston, *Frames of Protest: A Road Map to a Perspective* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005).
[26]Jentzsch and Masullo, 'Violent or Non-Violent Action?'
[27]C.f. Jennifer Crocker, Susan T. Fiske, and Shelley E. Taylor, 'Schematic Bases of Belief Change', in *Attitudinal Judgment* (New York: Springer, 1984), 197–226.
[28]Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[29]Kaplan, *Resisting War*.
[30]Ibid.

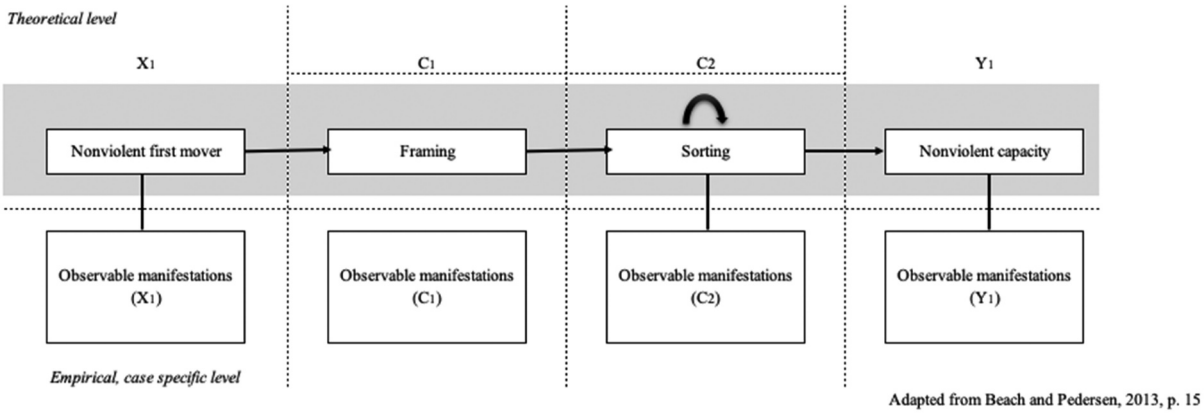

Figure 1. Nonviolent first movers and capacity for nonviolent resistance.

organisations filling crucial gaps in a community's aptitude to resist. However, mobilised communities may also seek out external actors *after a first mover* to boost publicity of their new strategy.

A further alternative explanation is that non-violent resistance emerges when most community residents lack any other option: when violent resistance, fleeing, loyalty or pledging allegiance to one or more armed actors is not possible or practical for the majority. For example, violent resistance is unlikely to be successful where most residents have little experience with weaponry, few resources and networks to buy them, and are outgunned. Fleeing threats is impractical when civilians in a community have few resources, little opportunities to use their skills elsewhere, or where communities are remote and badly connected. Loyalty, or otherwise pledging fresh allegiance, to armed actors may also be impossible in communities that have been victimised from all sides. I evaluate the evidence for these alternative explanations against the theory in the empirical analysis.

Defining non-violent first movers

There are four key theoretical dimensions of non-violent first movers that must be present for the argument to hold. These are the timing of first mover action, their social position, the visibility of their action and their expressing non-violent preferences.

Timing

First movers act before the outcomes of their actions are knowable, and before others are willing to do so. Across a range of literatures, first movers[31] have also been described as 'entrepreneurs',[32] 'early risers'[33] and 'early movers'[34] by scholars describing those leading shifts to the status quo. First movers seek to initiate, rather than follow, action.

Social position

First movers are thought to be well integrated in their communities prior to the onset of mobilisation and tend to already occupy leadership positions when communities mobilise amidst conflict.[35] Indeed, it is the standing and position of first movers within their community that is key to the plausibility of their activating conditional

[31]Lawrence, 'Repression and Activism'; Masullo, 'Civilian Contention'; and Kurt Weyland, 'The Arab Spring: Why the Surprising Similarities with the Revolutionary Wave of 1848?' *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 4 (2012): 917–34.

[32]e.g. Stefano Costalli and Andrea Ruggeri, 'Indignation, Ideologies, and Armed Mobilization: Civil War in Italy, 1943–45', *International Security* 40, no. 2 (2015): 119–57; and Samuel L. Popkin, 'Political Entrepreneurs and Peasant Movements in Vietnam', in *Rationality and Revolution*, ed. Michael Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9–62.

[33]e.g. Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydeman, 'Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers', *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (2012): 139–59.

[34]Marc Lynch, 'After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State', *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2 (2011): 301–10.

[35]Masullo, 'Civilian Contention'; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*; Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Anthony Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

population sorting, since individual decisions about participating in collective action are interdependent and community mobilisation is a social phenomenon.[36]

Visibility

The behaviour of other group members is a key source of information that individuals rely on when estimating community norms of behaviour, yet not all members of the community are equally influential on perceptions of group norms. Research in the field of psychology identifies certain individuals, known as social referents, as having particular influence over others' perceptions of group norms.[37] Social referents have a greater influence on individual perceptions of group norms compared to the average person in the group. These individuals tend to either be widely known across a group's social network or within a certain subset of the group.[38] The concept of social referents closely maps to theoretically relevant dimensions of first movers. By visibly opposing armed actor and offering an alternative vision based on non-violent resistance first movers can thus influence the norms of their group.

Nonviolent preferences

This article follows a tradition of social movement theories that highlight the importance of social cohesion and networks to mobilizational capacity and the likelihood that groups take action to resist collective threats.[39] When communities are issued with collective threats (such as displacement, violence or enforced alliance with armed actors), dense social ties make individual-level responses less likely and collectively decided responses more likely, as staying together as a community is highly valued by its members. Collective exit options, such as community displacement, are also less likely since people have more reason to stay where they live. However, dense social ties alone may instead facilitate the outbreak or renewal of violence if influential first movers argue that the community should protect themselves with arms. This is why first mover preference for non-violence is key to shaping community mobilisation towards peaceful forms.

Scope conditions

The argument is expected to apply to all conflict-affected communities where influential non-violent first movers are present, and where communities experience ongoing threats from armed actors that require action. The argument generalises to non-pacifist communities, in that the actions of the first movers bias local population flows towards a preference for non-violent resistance over time. However, first movers may mobilise non-violent resistance more quickly in communities that already have a culture of pacifism – be it due to the longstanding presence of Church or other religious or non-religious pacifist influences, such as Indigenous communities in Colombia. Such communities offer favourable contextual conditions for first mover success, as the actions of first movers are more likely to resonate with the local population compared to violent resistance or alternative strategies.

The argument is not expected to apply to territories where solely economically motivated armed actors are present. Consideration of civilian preferences tend not to be strategic objectives for such groups,[40] and thus non-violent resistance is less likely to be effective.

Empirical expectations of the argument

Building from the theoretical argument, I determine a qualitative threshold for the four dimensions that must be met to indicate the presence of first movers in a community: timing, social position, visibility and non-violent preferences (Table 1). If members of a community with significant social positions are not

[36]Karl-Dieter Opp and Christiane Gern, 'Dissident Groups, Personal Networks, and Spontaneous Cooperation: The East German Revolution of 1989', *American Sociological Review* (1993): 659–80.
[37]Elizabeth L. Paluck and Hana Shepherd, 'The Salience of Social Referents: A Field Experiment on Collective Norms and Harassment Behavior in a School Social Network', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 103, no. 6 (2012): 899.
[38]Ibid.
[39]e.g. Maurice Pinard, 'Mass Society and Political Movements: A New Formulation', *American Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 6 (1968): 682–90; Doug McAdam, 'Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer', *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 1 (1986): 64–90.
[40]Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, 'Handling and Manhandling Civilians in Civil War', *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 3 (2006): 429–47.

Table 1. Qualitative threshold for non-violent first mover.

Dimension	Definition	Qualitative threshold	Observable manifestations
Timing	Initiates or follows action	Acts before others	References in interview and archival data that first mover takes action before others in their community
Social position[42]	High or low position	Occupies prominent social position	References in interview and archival data that first mover is influential in community when they take action
Visibility	Public or covert action	Action taken publicly	Reference to action taken by first mover in public setting, such as community meeting, in interview data and community meeting minutes
Nonviolent preferences	Nonviolent or violent	Actions frame nonviolent resistance as preferable	References in interview and archival data that first mover engages in or promotes nonviolent resistance

Table 2. Observable manifestations of non-violent framing and alternative explanation.

Framing	
1	First mover actions demonstrate resolve to resist armed actors with nonviolent action
2	First mover frames peaceful repertoires of contention as preferable response to armed actor incursions
Nonviolent preferences	
1	Community speeches and meeting minutes reference greater commitment to nonviolence after first mover
2	Development of community rules requiring adherence to nonviolence after first mover
3	Community does not increase weaponry or weapons training after first mover
4	Connection between framing activities and emergence of nonviolent preferences in interview data
Alternative explanation	
1	Majority of civilians have little knowledge of weaponry or resources and networks to buy them
2	Most civilians have difficulty leaving territory due to lack of resources, geographic remoteness, or inaccessibility
3	Most civilians have skills that are not transferable to other locations nearby, to which they could flee
4	Community has been victimised by all local armed actors in the past

observed taking public action before others, and promoting non-violence, the theorised process (Figure 1) is not expected to unfold.

Given their high social position, local community, traditional and religious leaders, such as those identified in studies by Ana Arjona, Jana Krause and Juan Masullo,[41] may act as first movers that trigger the capacity of their communities for successful non-violent resistance in conflict-affected contexts. Other influential community members that might act as first movers include local activists or advocates, educators, volunteers and organisers. To meet the threshold, these individuals must publicly frame non-violent contention as the appropriate response to local conflict dynamics, and initiate such action before others in their community. Such individuals may be identified in any conflict-affected community.

Expected observable manifestations of the theory and alternative explanations are detailed in Tables 2 and 3, with an evaluation of their inferential quality in appendix 3.

Research design

I use process tracing to evaluate the argument. I conceptualise a mechanism that explains how first movers and the capacity for successful non-violent resistance are connected. Then I theorise potential observable manifestations of each component of the mechanism, and their inferential quality (appendix 2). I do both in the previous section.

Finally, I search the empirical record for each observable manifestation of the theory and its alternatives,[43] drawing on community archives, semi-structured interviews during 6 weeks of fieldwork in Colombia in 2019, historical interview data, and historical accounts of the community. I combine several independent sources to strengthen the objectivity and factual correctness of observations.[44] The results of this systematic analysis can be found below and in more detail in appendix 3.

[41]Arjona, *Rebelocracy*; Krause, *Resilient Communities*; and Masullo, 'Civilian Contention'.
[42]An individual in a community may also gain influence as a result of taking a stand for non-violent resistance. This is a potential additional prior step in the process, which might involve the individual making several public stands for non-violent resistance as their influence builds sufficiently to trigger the mechanism. These potential additional steps in the development of community aptitude for non-violent resistance could be the subject of further research.
[43]Beach and Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods*.
[44]Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardoff, and Ines Steinke, *A Companion to Qualitative Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2004).

Table 3. Observable manifestations of population sorting and alternative explanations.

Sorting	
1	Some civilians flee after first mover if they have resources and networks to do so
2	Some civilians join armed actors after the first mover
3	Some civilians remain after the first mover
4	Interview data confirms connection between first mover and selection bias for nonviolent resistance in population that remains
Community capacity for mobilization	
1	Increased frequency of meetings and community projects across distinct within-community groups
2	New economic ties emerge across within-community groups after first mover
3	Increased trust between within-community groups after first mover
4	Development of ties to NGOs after first mover
5	Interview data confirms connection between first mover and increased community capacity in population that remains
Alternative explanations	
1	Community supported by external allies such as NGOs
2	Community lacks resources and state presence

The ATCC in Colombia

A key purpose of this study is to evaluate a new explanation, centred on influential community members and population sorting, for how communities develop the capacity for successful non-violent resistance in conflict contexts. When the research objective of a study is to test new explanations for a dependent variable of interest selection of deviant cases on the independent variable is advised.[45] Deviant cases are selected to maximise the variance between the mean value for the independent variable of interest and the actual value for the independent variable in the selected case. The independent variable in the theory is the presence of a non-violent first mover in a community.

I purposively select the ATCC from a new cross-national dataset of all peace communities that emerged in 10 countries 1985–2022.[46] Peace communities comprise groups of civilians that seek to limit physical violence in the conflict-affected places they live using collective non-violent methods of civil resistance.[47] The dataset is compiled using systematic and reproducible search criteria and records a variable for the number of first movers identified in source materials for each of the 69 cases of organised non-violent resistance. The modal peace community in the dataset has one first mover, however the ATCC has at least three non-violent first movers identified. The ATCC is thus well suited to test the theory.

Evidence and data collection

To evaluate the theory, I draw on fieldwork interview data from six weeks in Colombia in 2019, historical interview data, the ATCC community archives, and secondary sources. The fieldwork interview data is based on 28 semi-structured interviews, 18 informal discussions and 3 informal group discussions (appendix 4). I complement the fieldwork interview data with historical interview data gathered by Centro de Estudios Sobre Desarrollo Económico (CEDE) between 1988 and 1990. These data comprise five transcripts of open-ended interviews held with founders of the ATCC shortly after its emergence in 1987. Fieldwork and historical interviews include local church representatives, NGOs, armed actors and members of the ATCC. A further source of data are 14 documents from the ATCC community archives (appendix 5). The final key source is *El Orden Desarmardo*; a highly rich and detailed history of the ATCC based on 34 interviews with residents by Grupo de Memoria Histórica.[48]

[45]Jason Seawright and John Gerring, 'Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options', *Political Research Quarterly* 61 (2008): 302.
[46]Jennifer Hodge, 'The Emergence and Fortunes of Peace Communities' (PhD diss., University College London, 2023); and Ibid., 'Peace Communities Dataset', https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/9YEWCR, (Harvard Dataverse, 2025), V1
[47]Cécile Mouly, 'Peace Communities', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Peace*, ed. Katerina Standish et al. (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 1169–88.
[48]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado: La Resistencia de la Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos de Carare* (Bogotá: CNRR, 2011).

Case study and results

Identifying non-violent first movers

A variety of individuals met the qualitive threshold for first movers, as mapped in Table 4, with further detail in appendix 6. When Josue Vargas resisted FARC plans to divide up local land in 1986 he met all four dimensions,[49] and then again when he advocated for collective non-violent resistance after the ultimatum was issued. When Church leaders advocated for non-violence throughout the 1980s, and then against armed resistance in the aftermath of the ultimatum, they also met all dimensions.[50] Yet it was when the other leaders of the Carare villages also met the threshold that the mobilizational capacity of the region crystalised. Their public agreement on the necessity of neutrality and non-violence combined with their broad social influence across the territory of the ATCC.[51] As noted by one ATCC leader,

> 'Each leader had knowledge about the region and power, credibility and leadership . . . each of the leaders had something to contribute. . . . each of leader's skills were put together. I think is very important'.[52]

Table 4. Observable manifestations of nonviolent first movers.

	Timing	Social position	Visibility	Nonviolent preferences
Josue Vargas, village leader in Carare	Josue acted alone in 1986	Highly influential due to leadership role	Josue actively resisted FARC plan to divide residents land	Josue resisted verbally, without resorting to violence[53]
Other Carare village leaders	Leaders met after ultimatum in May 1987	Highly influential due to leadership roles	Leaders demanded village neutrality from conflict	Leaders committed publicly to nonviolence
Church leaders	During the 1980s	Highly influential due to importance of religion	Leaders advocated for nonviolence	Armed resistance framed as against moral principles

Evaluating whether non-violent framing by first movers led to an increase in non-violent preferences

First mover framing

Review of the empirical record reveals that first mover Josue Vargas demonstrated his resolve to resist armed actors with non-violent action. When Josue Vargas stood up to the FARC plan in 1986, he did so verbally – without resorting to violence. His vocal opposition to the FARC plan led to his being summoned to a trial with many other residents present. At this meeting, Vidal, the FARC Leader, sought to pressure Josue to accept the plan or face death. Yet another village leader present, Salomón Blandón, said that if Vidal killed Josue he would also have to kill everyone else there. Vidal responded by both retracting the threat and the plan to divide up the land.[54] The actions of Josue Vargas tested the boundaries of public claim-making against armed actors and framed the contours around which future community resistance would arise.

Adventist Church leaders also framed peaceful repertoires of contention as the preferable response to the actions of armed actors. According to interview and secondary source data, Adventist Church leaders had been playing an important role in propagating norms of non-violence in the region during the 1980s.[55] The Church had sought to educate people about human rights and that they did not have to put up with torture and abuse.[56] Immediately prior to the emergence of the ATCC, Church leaders also advocated for non-violent resistance.[57]

[49]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*, 310–1; and 2.Interview with ATCC founder, February 17, 1989.
[50]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado.*
[51]Interview with community expert, Bogotá, December 3, 2019.
[52]ATCC leader, online, June 14, 2020.
[53]Years earlier Josue privately advocated for violent resistance amongst the local leadership. However, as this was not done publicly his actions did not meet the qualitative threshold.
[54]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*; ATCC founder interview, February 14, 1989.
[55]Masullo, 'Civilian Contention'.
[56]Interview with community expert, December 3, 2019.
[57]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado.*

Non-violent preferences

A key argument is that non-violent framing by first movers leads to an increase in the preference for non-violent resistance within a community. Supporting this, review of the empirical record indicates that after the actions of first mover Josue Vargas in 1986, the community developed rules requiring adherence to non-violence and rejected offers of increasing weaponry as well.[58] Evidence from historical interview data and the ATCC archives indicates that the preference for non-violent resistance was repeated in speeches and community meetings,[59] indicating an increase in non-violent preferences after the actions of first movers.

As one of the leaders disclosed, 'if we had an argument instead of fighting, we would discuss about it and dialogue'.[60] Once the ATCC was formed, new members signed a certificate committing themselves to their rules, which includes committing to, 'setting an example through my way of life, to demonstrate my unwavering commitment to peace and nonviolence'.[61] A leader noted that this, 'meant that whoever came to the organization had to abide by the same rules that we had internally. It was an internal agreement that we had to avoid others from damaging the region'.[62]

The community only started recording meeting minutes in the year the ATCC was formed. However, community speeches and meeting minutes from the organisation's formation clearly indicate a strong preference for non-violence. Indeed, in the first meeting with the FARC to negotiate the initiation of the ATCC, Josue stated, '[T]he revolutionary ethics is not to kill people. Is to make the changes that are needed to improve the living conditions of the people'.[63] Then, in a meeting with the FARC and residents of La India, again Josue emphasised to applause that the ATTC is a non-violent uprising, and 'has no intent to raise in arms to create more violence'.[64] At the first anniversary commemoration of the creation of the ATCC, 22 May 1988, Josue Vargas recalled in his speech the, 'decisive act of union, to achieve, by the own decision of the campesinos, to start the pacification of the region', in response to pressure from local armed groups.[65]

Review of the empirical record reveals that the community neither increased weaponry nor weapons training after the actions of the first mover. In fact, historical interview data indicates that during the initial negotiations with the army to create the ATCC, the armed actor offered residents weapons to organise armed defence.[66] The offer was rejected. Adventist religious leaders in the territory claimed that due to moral principles they could not defend the use of arms. The leaders also claimed that doing so would give local armed groups the right to target residents.[67] Although the Adventists understood the need for action its leaders stated, 'we are willing to collaborate with prayer, with any resource we can, but not with weapons'.[68] Amongst them was Father Luis Castaño, who revealed his influence on Josue Vargas – the ATCC's most influential leader, who had studied to be a Catholic priest.[69] Father Luis Castaño recollects that, I've said to Josue many times, that they should never retaliate against anyone but look forward; that this dialogue – as it has been said many times – is part of a process and should be looked at with positivity to accomplish the goals.[70]

Thus, village leaders of Carare, working with local Church leaders, opted for non-violence and decided to create the ATCC, 'for the defense of life, peace and work'.[71] Interview, archival, and secondary source data indicate that the stance of Church leaders was influential on community preferences for non-violent resistance, supporting the theory.

[58]Kaplan, *Resisting War*; Interview with ATCC founder, date unknown; and ATCC. 'Act of Individual Commitment to the Affiliate'. (ATCC Archives, 1990); ATCC leader, June 14, 2020.
[59]ATTC founders interview, December 22, 1988; and Josúe Vargas. 'Meeting of the Peasants in the Village La India with Bandits of the XI and XXIII Groups of the FARC'. (ATCC Archives, date unknown).
[60]ATCC leader, June 14, 2020.
[61]ATCC, 'Act of Individual Commitment'.
[62]ATCC leader, June 14, 2020.
[63]ATTC founders interview, December 22, 1988.
[64]Josúe Vargas, 'Meeting of the Peasants in the Village La India with Bandits of the XI and XXIII Groups of the FARC' (ATCC Archives, date unknown).
[65]Ibid.
[66]ATTC founder interview, n.d.
[67]Kaplan, *Resisting War*, 184.
[68]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*, 324.
[69]Masullo, 'Civilian Contention', 1868; and ATCC leader, June 14, 2020.
[70]ATTC, 'Memorias Gran Foro para la paz de Cimitarra' (ATCC Archives, January 15–16, 1990).
[71]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*, 322.

Alternative explanations

The key alternative explanation is that civilians develop non-violent preferences when other options are unavailable for the majority of community residents, rather than due to first mover framing. This may be due to a lack of knowledge or connection to weaponry, difficulties leaving the territory, a lack of transferable skills to territories nearby or due to prior armed actor victimisation. Supporting the alternative explanation is historical interview data which suggests that many residents had little experience of weaponry.[72] When offered weapons by the army during negotiations to create the ATCC, a leader recalls of the time that he thought, 'we are just villagers, old people dedicated to cultivating fields, how could we even think of it?'.[73] Years prior, the state military had also offered residents weapons and logistical support to form armed self-defence groups and fight the FARC. This offer was also rejected.[74] Though residents of the ATCC were offered the resources – and had the networks needed – to embark on violent self-defence its future members were unwilling to use armed methods, in part due to their lacking knowledge of armed defence.

Geographical barriers to exit also exist in the area. The ATCC has few roads, indicating that residents may have difficulty travelling elsewhere.[75] However, as some civilians left the region after the armed actor ultimatum,[76] exit options remained available.

Residents of the territory of the ATCC had also experienced severe victimisation from all local armed groups prior to its emergence. Significant violence against civilians had begun at the hands of the state. State military activity had increased in the 1970s when Coronel Néstor Espitia Sotelo arrived at the region. He implemented a counter-insurgent campaign called 'carnetización' which required residents to regularly check in with the military authorities. Residents were subjected to a range of abuses – such as torture and arbitrary detentions from the army – during these meetings.[77] In response, the FARC also started to use selective violence against local residents to punish army collaborators.[78] Over time, this led to a dispute between the FARC and the army, leading to further violence. As noted in the *Antecedents to the ATCC* in the community archive by one community member, 'they wouldn't hurt each other. They would only calm their fury against those who couldn't defend themselves'.[79] Later these issues lessened, and people had become used to coexisting with the army and the FARC; as one leader described, 'it was necessary to trick one or the other to live'.[80] An escalation of violence then ensued in 1983 when paramilitary groups entered the region. The same leader describes how, 'they came to murder people that for one reason or the other had links with the guerrilla. At the same time, the guerrilla started accusing a lot of people of helping the paramilitaries enter the territory . . . there was a point when you could no longer know who was killing more if the guerrilla or the paramilitaries'.[81] By the time the ATCC was initiated its residents had suffered at the hands of all local armed actors and so were unwilling to collaborate with any side, nor use the same (violent) methods.[82]

However, despite this, interview and secondary source data indicates that the majority of residents were farmers and boatsmen, with skills of use in many other nearby rural locations, thus indicating the availability of other options to community members.[83] According to the first development plan created by the ATCC in 1987, maize, cassava, banana and cocoa were the main crops planted by residents, half of whom worked as farmers. Residents also had experience with livestock, rice, fruit trees, sugar cane, timber, and searching for emeralds in the river. At that time forest covered 45% of zone of influence of the ATCC, and around 13% of the population had experience felling trees.[84] According to the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), 26% of the territory of the department Santander, where the ATTC is based, is agricultural, 43% is grazing land for livestock.[85] Santander is surrounded by five

[72]ATCC founder interview, n.d.
[73]Ibid.
[74]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*.
[75]Kaplan, *Resisting War*, 186.
[76]Esperanza Hernández Delgado, *Resistencia civil artesana de paz: experiencias indígenas, afrodescendientes y campesina* (Bogotá: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2004).
[77]Ibid.; CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*.
[78]Ibid.
[79]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*, 303.
[80]ATCC founder, interview, n.d; and ATCC leader, June 14, 2020.
[81]Ibid.
[82]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*.
[83]Ibid.
[84]Ibid.
[85]Departments are the highest administrative order in Colombia. There are 31 in Colombia.

departments: Boyacá, Norte de Santander, Antioquia, Bolivár and Cesar. In three of these departments (Norte de Santander, Boyacá and Antioquia) more than 20% of the territory is agricultural, whilst the remaining two (Cesar and Bolivár) report 13–18%. In addition, over 30% of the remaining territory of all five departments is pastureland.[86] Rural land accounts for over half of the territory of Colombia.[87] Thus, residents had a range of skills and experience that could be used across the vast – and nearby – rural territories of Colombia. The option to exit the territory in response to threats of violence remained when the community created the ATCC, strengthening confidence in the theory.

Overall, review of the empirical record revealed evidence of first mover framing of non-violent repertoires of contention in response to armed actors, and that non-violent preferences increased in the community afterwards. As community members had alternative options available to them, the alternative explanation is undermined. Detailed analysis and implications for validity are summarised in appendix 7.

Evaluating whether population sorting strengthened the community's capacity to mobilise

Population sorting

The second part of the argument is that non-violent first movers change how population sorting functions, leading to an increase in their community's capacity to mobilise. Review of the empirical record reveal population flows that took place in and out of the territory of the ATCC after the actions of non-violent first movers, confirming population sorting took place over this period. Some civilians fled, some civilians joined one armed actor or another, and some civilians remained.

In response to Josue Vargas public stance against the FARC, historical interview and secondary source data indicate that the guerrilla responded with conciliation.[88] The FARC abandoned the plan to divide up the residents' land and Vargas achieved a victory from his act of non-violent resistance. Yet soon after, conflict erupted again between the armed actors, with civilians experiencing the brunt of violence.[89]

One interviewee disclosed that, 'the least risky option is to displace. But that implies leaving everything behind and going somewhere else to start life again. Or the least risky option is to ally with an armed group. So, this one is a risky option, but it allows people to stay'.[90] In recounting a discussion with the army in the lead up to the ultimatum, a village leader recounted that, 'we have had many people leave . . . some others were only waiting to be killed'.[91] Another leader recalled that, 'a lot of people ran away from the land . . . sold their properties and got out of the region'.[92] In the period following the ultimatum, more population sorting occurred. Some residents reportedly joined one armed actor or another, and others still displaced.[93] Many more residents stayed.

Moreover, churches – present in the territory of the ATCC from the 1960s – had long advocated non-violence.[94] Thus population flows into and out of the ATCC in the period following the civil war known as *La Violencia* were also shaped by such norms. As one interviewee states, ' . . . people have been trying all sorts of things since the 1950s. They have been trying to displace, to stay, to use arms, to use non-violence'.[95] Further cycles of violence affected the territory between 1970 and 1982, as the army led a counterinsurgency effort involving mass arrests, curfews, and torture.[96] Then from 1983, violence surged with the arrival of the paramilitaries.[97] Many 'central' families in the territory – whom were the first to colonise the territory of the ATCC in the 1940s and 1950s, bringing with them relatives and friends – were reportedly displaced after the paramilitaries arrived, whilst many traditional leaders and male heads of households were also murdered.[98]

[86]DANE, 'Geovisor National Agricultural Census (CAN) 2014', https://geoportal.dane.gov.co/geovisores/economia/censo-nacional-agropecuario/, accessed 31 August 2022.
[87]World Bank, 'Rural Land Area Where Elevation Is Below 5 Meters (% of Total Land Area)', https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.EL5M.RU.ZS?end=2010andstart=2010andview=map (accessed August 31, 2022).
[88]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*; ATCC founder interview, February 17, 1989.
[89]Ibid.
[90]Community expert, December 3, 2019.
[91]ATTC, 'Compilation of Testimonies, Carare Farmers Association. Session IX: The Community and Peace. The Experience of the Carare Farmers Association' (ATTC Archives 1989).
[92]ATCC leader, June 14, 2020.
[93]Hernández Delgado, *Resistencia Civil Artesana.*
[94]Masullo, 'Civilian Contention'.
[95]Community expert, December 3, 2019.
[96]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*; and ATCC founder interview, February 17, 1989.
[97]ATTC founders interview, December 22, 1988.
[98]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*.

In 1984 around 700 people reportedly displaced following the torture of 9 residents by the FARC and paramilitaries.[99] With each phase of the conflict, some civilians stayed, some residents remained, others joined one armed group or another, and others still moved into the territory.

Community capacity for mobilisation

Review of the empirical record indicates an increase in the capacity of the community to mobilise. Community meetings increased across the territory after the actions of the first movers. Meetings between village leaders in the region had been frequent in the year prior to the emergence to the ATCC, though historical interview data suggests this was in large part due to the intensifying victimisation of residents from all conflict actors.[100] In the weeks after the ATCC was formed, regular community meetings were held to discuss mechanisms and coordinated strategies to implement when an armed actor arrived.[101]

The ATCC also developed new ties with NGOS after the actions of the first mover. External actors such as the International Red Cross, The Magdalena Peace and Development Program Medio and the United Nations Development Programme offered support from 1992, five years after the group had been set up[102] Interview data from secondary sources also confirms the connection between first movers and increased mobilizational capacity amongst those that remained. Influential leader Josue Vargas is considered an icon of resistance by residents. By not submitting to the will of the FARC regarding their plan to divide up land, he inspired others to do the same. As a farmer recollects,

> Well, they didn't take any land from me because I rebelled. And actually, they didn't take land from anyone because we all rebelled. That is when it all started . . . We had accepted deaths, we had accepted violations, we had accepted many things but when they messed with our pockets (money), with our land, we couldn't take it anymore.[103]

Alternative explanations

Two alternative explanations for the development of community capacity are that the community is supported by NGOs, who fill capacity that the community lacks, or that the community develops capacity due to a lack of resources and state presence. Review of the empirical record did not identify any external support to the community during initiation of the ATCC, though a number of NGOs did so soon after the ATCC was established.[104] However, there is evidence that the community lacked resources and state presence. Data from community archives and secondary sources identifies problems for residents obtaining basic state services and transportation out of the area.[105] More generally, the capacity of the state to provide protection and services is considered highly variable across Colombia.[106] Therefore, the needs-based alternative explanation is not disconfirmed. However, as this explanation is complementary rather than invalidating of the relationship between population sorting and the development of community capacity for mobilisation, this evidence alone does not undermine the second part of the argument.

Overall, review of the empirical record revealed evidence of population sorting following the actions of the first mover, and that the community's capacity mobilised increased afterwards. As state services were weak in the territory of the ATTC, this may also explain the development of the community's mobilizational capacity. Detailed analysis and implications for validity are summarised in appendix 7.

Conclusion

In this article I have theoretically built on the social movements, civil resistance and social psychological literatures to argue that when influential community figures – first movers – visibly frame non-violent contention

[99]Ibid.
[100]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*; Kaplan, *Resisting War*; and ATTC founder interview, n.d.
[101]Ibid.
[102]CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*.
[103]Ibid., 410.
[104]ATCC founder interview, n.d.; and ATCC leader, June 14, 2020.
[105]ATTC. 'Memorias Gran Foro'; and CNRR, *El Orden Desarmado*.
[106]Interview with Colombian conflict expert, Bogotá, December 11, 2019.

as the appropriate community response to conflict-related violence, their actions condition population flows into and out of their community, strengthening the community's aptitude to engage in non-violent resistance over time. Honing in on the processes that lead conflict-affected civilians to develop the capacity for non-violent resistance – rather than flee, align with one armed actor or another, evade violence, or violently resist – I evaluated the argument and alternative explanations in the case of the ATCC in Colombia. Drawing on archival, secondary source, historical and fieldwork interview data, review of the empirical record supports the theory. First movers increased non-violent preferences in the territory of the ATCC and their actions enhanced the community's capacity to resist over time, in part due to the conditional population sorting in and out of the community that followed from the actions of first movers.

The case study confirms that the argument holds in a case of successful non-violent resistance. However, purposive case comparison between conflict-affected communities with and without non-violent first movers present offers a fruitful next step to establish the generalisability of the argument beyond this case. To better specify the scope conditions for the argument, future research is also needed on cases of failed attempts at non-violent resistance by first movers.

How civilians respond to the threats that they face in wartime has long-term consequences for their own safety, as well as profoundly shaping the possibility for finding peaceful solutions amidst violent conditions, and global patterns of displacement. This article has offered some initial insights into processes underlying the collective decisions of civilians in war-torn territories, by highlighting the crucial role that influential first movers can play in shaping the capacity of communities to mobilise non-violently under severe conditions of conflict. Whilst the article has examined one possible collective response available to civilians in wartorn contexts, further research is needed to evaluate the implications of the theory for other forms of civilian non-cooperation.[107]

This article also has implications for scholars of social movements, civil wars, civil resistance, and contentious politics by identifying the key dimensions of first movers – timing, visibility, social position and non-violent preferences – that explain their capacity to spark non-violent mobilisation in particular. Further research is necessary to investigate the generalisation of the theory to other cases, as well as to other forms of mobilisation in wartime and peacetime settings.

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[107] Masullo, 'Civilian Contention'.