The Political Legacies of Exile: How Inclusive Reception Policies Shape Refugee Long-Term Political Engagement

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Abstract

How do refugee experiences in receiving countries shape their long-term political behavior? This article argues that inclusive reception policies that grant refugees political and economic rights can foster civic engagement after return. Leveraging the exogenous assignment of Mayan indigenous Guatemalans to refugee settlements in 1980s Mexico, I find that inclusive hosting increased post-return participation in nonviolent protest by 25 percentage points. The analysis draws on archival sources, an original household survey of 379 returnees, and 48 semi-structured interviews conducted during ethnographic fieldwork in three Guatemalan return communities to probe four mechanisms plausibly driving this relationship: expectations of institutional responsiveness, increased political efficacy, strengthened organizational capacity, and peer learning. While most existing research focuses on the effects of refugees on host communities and determinants of return, this study examines how host reception policies influence refugee behavior

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after going home, with implications for post-conflict democratization and refugee policy worldwide.

1 Introduction

Refugee reception policies vary significantly across host states. Some governments restrict refugee livelihoods or delegate their care to international agencies with minimal domestic involvement (Abdelaaty, 2021; Norman, 2024), while others adopt inclusive approaches that grant refugees important economic and political rights (Blair et al., 2022b; Zhou et al., 2023). These policy choices have the potential to profoundly shape refugees' everyday lives and opportunities, as they constrain possibilities for organization (Hajj, 2017; Khoury, 2017) and define access to basic rights and services (Parkinson & Behrouzan, 2015). This article examines the effects of hosting policies on refugees' long-term political behavior after return, a currently underexplored aspect of refugees' experiences. It focuses in particular on refugee participation in non-violent protests after returning home. Indeed, as return often occurs during volatile post-conflict transitions where formal channels of participation are often inaccessible due to documentation barriers or political exclusion (Macdonald & Porter, 2021), participation in non-violent protest is often the only accessible form of participation, and a particularly important medium for refugees to achieve recognition of their claims and access full citizenship rights.

Inclusive reception policies grant refugees rights such as freedom of movement, access to services, the right to work, and access to political participation (Blair et al., 2022a, 2022b; Savun, 2022), seeking to embed them into local host communities (Zhou et al., 2023). Building on policy feedback and social movement theory, I argue that inclusive hosting policies can increase refugee engagement in non-violent protest after returning home, an important way for refugees to assert claims and access rights. Drawing on multiyear fieldwork in Mexico and Guatemala, I elicit four mechanisms plausibly underlying this relation. I propose that inclusive reception policies can raise refugee expectations of institutional responsiveness (*expectations of responsiveness*), heighten their sense of political competence (*political efficacy*), strengthen refugee autonomous organization (*organizational strengthening*), and that contacts with local politicized co-

ethnics can drive the internalization of norms of political mobilization (*peer-learning*). As refugees return home and face new grievances, norms and organizational structures forged in exile underlie renewed mobilization.

I examine the enduring effects of inclusive refugee hosting through an analysis of the experiences of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico in the 1980s. I leverage the fact that, by unilateral decision of the Mexican government, half of the Guatemalan refugees who had fled their country's armed conflict and had arrived in the state of Chiapas in the early 1980s were forcibly relocated in 1984 to the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo, in the Yucatán Peninsula. Refugee-receiving institutions in Chiapas differed significantly from the other two states in their refugee reception policy. In Chiapas, the refugee-receiving Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas adopted a particularly inclusive refugee reception strategy, granting the refugees extensive economic and political rights and installing them in settlements that were socially and economically embedded in local Mexican communities. In the Yucatán peninsula, by contrast, the refugees lived in camps secluded from the general population and enjoyed limited economic and political freedoms. Drawing on extensive archival data from the relocation period, I first demonstrate that the relocation of the refugees was unilateral and uncorrelated with specific refugee characteristics, and I reconstruct the policies adopted by refugee-receiving agencies in Chiapas and Yucatán. To examine the main outcome, post-return engagement in non-violent protest, I draw on an original household survey of returnees to three villages in Northern Guatemala. I further rely on qualitative observations from my fieldwork, interviews with former refugees, secondary sources, and archival data to analyze the mechanisms driving the relationship between inclusive hosting and refugee participation in non-violent protest.

The findings provide strong support for my theory. Refugees who experienced inclusive governance between 1981 and 1993 in Chiapas are 25 percentage points more likely to have engaged in non-violent protest since return than their counterparts of Yucatán. Channeling extensive archival research and semi-structured interviews with returned refugees and community leaders, I show that the experience of the refugees

in Chiapas led to heightened expectations about institutional responsiveness, greater political efficacy, and fostered organizational capacities, which served as mobilization frames and resources for post-return mobilization in Guatemala.

These results contribute to several strands of research. First, they speak to debates on the political effects of inclusive refugee hosting, shifting the focus away from the determinants host-state policies (Abdelaaty, 2021; Norman, 2024) and potential anti-refugee backlash among host populations (Alrababa'h et al., 2021; Gineste & Savun, 2019; Savun, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023) to their effect on refugee long-term political behavior (Bratsberg et al., 2021). By doing so, the article contributes to a growing body of work that views refugees as political actors with agency, expectations, and collective strategies (Hajj, 2017, 2021; Khoury, 2017; Masterson, 2024; Pearlman, 2020), and speaks to long-standing discussions about the potential for migrants to "remit" social and political norms (Córdova & Hiskey, 2015; Levitt, 2001). Second, it advances scholarship on the long-term effects of forced displacement (Charnysh & Peisakhin, 2022; Lupu & Peisakhin, 2017; Menon, 2023) by showing that exile experiences—particularly the degree of host-society inclusion—can leave lasting imprints on refugees. In addition, while much of literature focuses on determinants of refugee return (Alrababa'h et al., 2021; Beaman et al., 2022; Camarena & Hägerdal, 2020), this article highlights how returnees engage politically in post-conflict contexts, often at pivotal moments of national reconstruction. Finally, the article contributes to research on citizen-state interactions in the Global South by demonstrating how institutional encounters in exile shape refugees' expectations of state responsiveness and the strategies they adopt to make political claims after return (Gallagher, 2024; Kruks-Wisner, 2018b; Kumar, 2022).

The remainder of the article develops and tests a theory of the long-term political legacies of refugee interactions with host policies. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, identifying the institutional and social features of inclusive reception that shape refugee participation in nonviolent protest after return. Section 3 provides some background on the displacement of Mayan indigenous civilians from

Guatemala and their settlement in Mexico in the 1980s. In Section 4 I describe the data and methods, combining extensive archival sources, an original household survey of hard-to-reach returnee populations, and in-depth interviews with former Guatemalan refugees. The analysis leverages the exogenous assignment of Guatemalan civilians to Mexican refugee settlements varying in inclusiveness, allowing for a credible identification strategy. I first demonstrate the relationship between inclusive hosting and postwar political mobilization in Section 4, before probing the underlying mechanisms through qualitative evidence in Sections 6 and 7. Section 8 discusses how refugee politicization in exile spills over to home politics and explains their protest engagement after return. The conclusion reflects on the contributions and limitations of the study and suggests avenues for future research.

2 A Theory of the Political Legacies of Inclusive Refugee Hosting

How do refugee reception policies shape political behavior in exile and beyond? This article theorizes that inclusive refugee hosting can foster political engagement, especially nonviolent protest, after refugees return home. Refugee reception policies vary widely across and within host states (Abdelaaty, 2021; Norman, 2021). Inclusive refugee hosting refers to policies that extend rights approaching parity with citizens, including access to work, services, free movement, and political participation (Blair et al., 2022b; Zhou et al., 2023). Such approaches embed refugees into local communities and treat them as stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries or security threats.

This study focuses on nonviolent protest as a key form of political participation. Return often occurs during volatile post-conflict transitions. Because formal channels of participation are often inaccessible due to documentation barriers or political exclusion (Macdonald and Porter 2021), peaceful mobilization offers returnees a unique way to assert their claims, gain visibility, and establish connections with political actors who can help scale their demands without relying on formal institutional access (Dudouet, 2021; García-Montoya et al., 2025). Drawing from the social movement literature, which highlights organizational capacity and interpretive frames[1] as core to mobilization (Benford & Snow, 2000; McAdam, 1999), I suggest that inclusive hosting policies have the potential to shape refugee organizational capacity and expectations in ways that sustain future mobilization. I offer suggestive evidence of four mechanisms plausibly underlying this relationship: organizational strengthening, internal efficacy, expectations of responsiveness, and peer learning.

First, inclusive environments often involve refugee-led organizations in aid delivery, reinforcing organizational autonomy and networks (Krause & Schmidt, 2020; UNHCR, 2008). Refugee organizations can serve as vital sites for political learning, leadership

[1]Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 614 define frames as "action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization"

development, and collective mobilization (Bloemraad et al., 2022). Inclusive policies may therefore strengthen refugee autonomous organizations by involving them directly in decision-making and delivery of aid and services, a mechanism I call *organizational strengthening*.

Second, inclusive settings can enhance *internal political efficacy*—a sense of competence in politics (Charnysh & Peisakhin, 2022). For many, inclusive hosting institutions may provide the first meaningful opportunity to engage in civic activity. How individuals are treated sends powerful messages that can either affirm or undermine individuals' sense of civic worth and shape their construction as citizens (Edelman, 1977; Pateman, 1970; Soss & Schram, 2007) . When refugee-hosting institutions recognize refugees' cultural traditions, organizations, and agency, they send a message about the social and political value of these attributes. Host policies that treat refugees as full members of a political community, with voices worth hearing, can empower them, but paternalistic or exclusionary policies that cast refugees as passive recipients of aid can reinforce feelings of marginalization and discourage participation (Bruch et al., 2010; Pierson, 1993). In turn, belief in personal efficacy is a core foundation of agency, as the belief one can effect change provides an important incentive to act (Bandura, 2000).

Third, inclusive policies can cultivate *expectations of responsiveness*. Public policies are not merely distributive tools but also influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of those they target (Mettler & Soss, 2004; Michener, 2018; Pierson, 1993; Soss, 1999). Interactions with refugee-receiving institutions shape access to resources, incentives, and expectations of institutions (Gallagher 2024), ultimately determining how citizens make claims (Kruks-Wisner, 2018a, 2018b; Kumar, 2022). Policy experiences have the power to affect the "kind of messages individuals receive about the legitimacy of their claim to benefits and their worth to society" (Campbell, 2012, p. 342). Thus, access to services and experience of political voice may lead refugees to develop expectations about the legitimacy of their demands and the quality of services they will receive in the future, providing new the frames to motivate mobilization in exile and upon return.

Fourth, inclusive policies often promote integration into host communities (Betts et al., 2020) and seek to economically benefit locals (Alix-Garcia et al., 2018; Lehmann & Masterson, 2020; Zhou et al., 2023), increasing opportunities for peer learning. Contacts with local peers may lead to alignment of refugees' preferences with host populations (Schmidt-Catran & Careja, 2017), and settlement in more politicized neighborhood may lead refugees to internalize norms of political participation (Bratsberg et al., 2021), especially if they settle in an area where participation is allowed and valued. Settlement in areas with a large concentration of coethnics may further facilitate engagement, through information flow and secondary political socialization (Cho et al., 2006).

Figure 1: Theoretical Illustration-A Theory of the Political Legacies of Inclusive Refugee Hosting

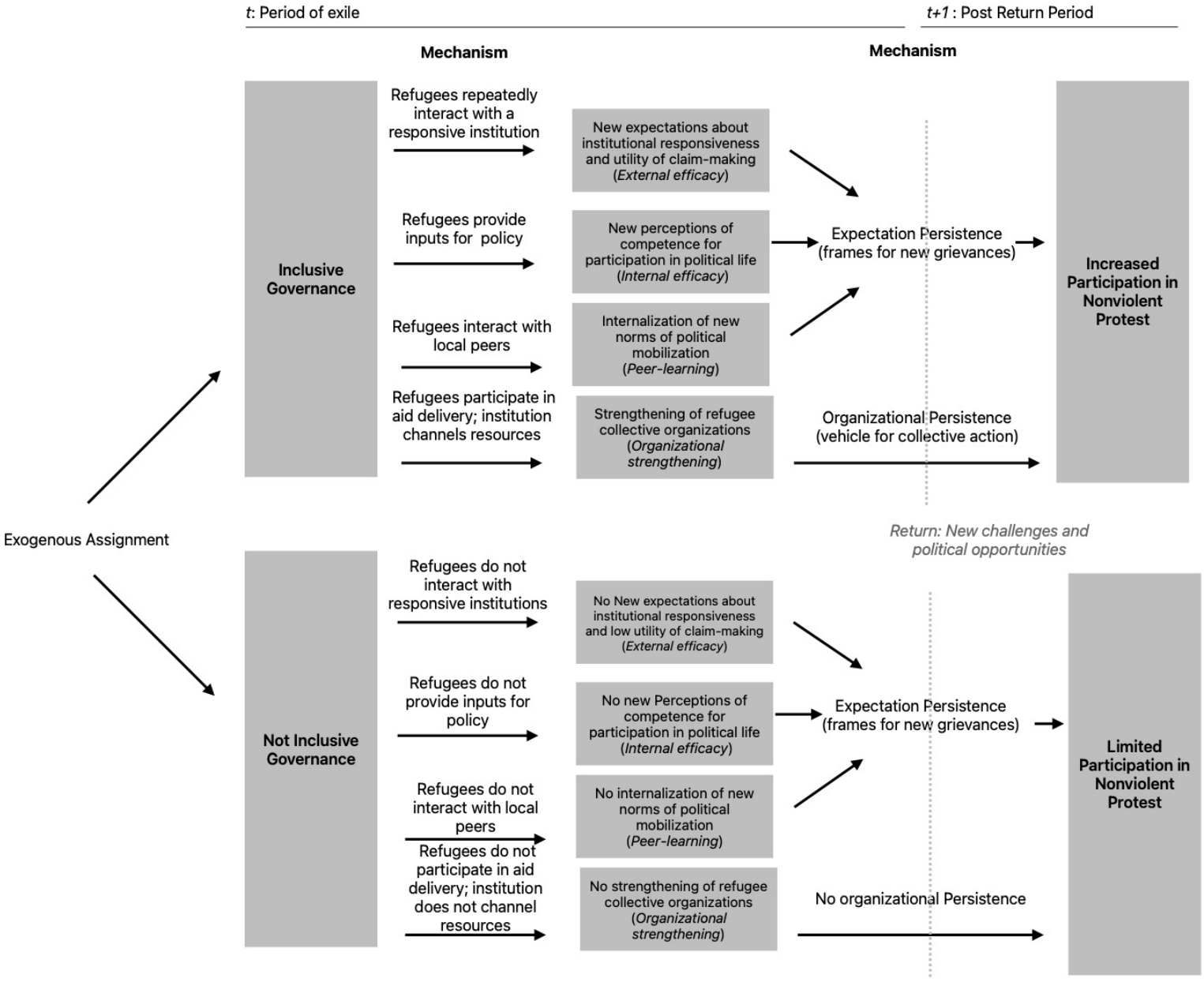


Figure 1 outlines the mechanisms driving the relationship between inclusive refugee hosting policies and engagement in non-violent protests upon return. This theory shifts the analytical lens to the "supply side" of refugee hosting to explain variation in post-return mobilization. While it emphasizes the role of institutional context, it does not deny refugee agency in settings of constraint. Refugees have long relied on everyday resistance (Mahmood, 2012), quiet encroachment (Bayat, 2020), and informal organizing to assert claims even in the absence of formal rights (Hajj, 2017; Khoury, 2017; Masterson, 2024). Rather, the argument here is that the political opportunities available in exile—shaped by the institutional and social features of refugee reception—structure the form, visibility, and long-term impact of that agency. The theory applies most clearly to cases of sustained exile under relatively inclusive conditions, and where refugees return to contexts that allow at least some civic reintegration. It is less applicable to cases of short-term displacement, refoulement, or extreme repression[2]. While focused on cross-border displacement, this theory may also apply to internally displaced people (IDPs), with the main difference that IDPs are citizens of the state they are displaced in, opening possibilities for more formal political engagement during displacement. In summary, the central claim is:

H1: Refugees exposed to inclusive hosting policies are more likely to participate in nonviolent protest upon return.

I test this claim using a subnational study of Guatemalan indigenous refugees displaced to southern Mexico in the 1980s. I leverage variation in reception across Mexican states - some inclusive, others more restrictive- combined with exogenous assignment patterns to first probe the relationship between refugee exposure to inclusive

[2]Importantly, the degree of inclusiveness is determined by refugee-receiving institutions and do not necessarily reflect the host country's political regime. In the case of Mexico, while qualified as an authoritarain regime when the refugees arrived, the country maintained an open asylum policy and delegated the care of refugees to inclusive institutions such as the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

policies and post-return protest participation, using an original survey of Guatemalan returnees. The mechanisms linking refugee experiences and long-term political behavior are uncovered using extensive archive work in refugee reception areas in Mexico and in-depth interviews with former Guatemalan refugees

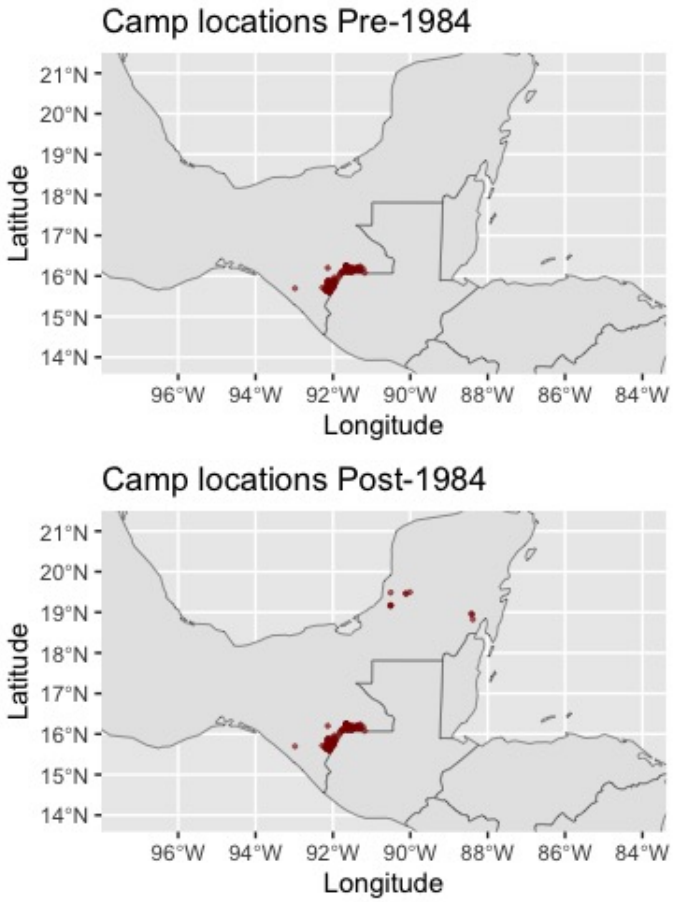
3 Guatemalan Armed Conflict and Refuge in Mexico

3.1 Empirical Context: The Guatemalan Armed Conflict, Refuge in Chiapas, and Resettlement to Yucatán

The conflict waged by the left-wing guerrilla Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) against Guatemala's military dictatorship since 1960 escalated brutally in the 1980s. The Guatemalan army adopted an indiscriminate counterinsurgency strategy, targeting rural indigenous populations believed to support the guerrillas. Between 1960 and 1996, about 200,000 people were killed or disappeared (Ball et al., 1999). Indigenous civilians comprised 85% of these victims, leading to the recognition of a genocide committed by Guatemala against its Mayan indigenous population in 2015 (CEH 2012).

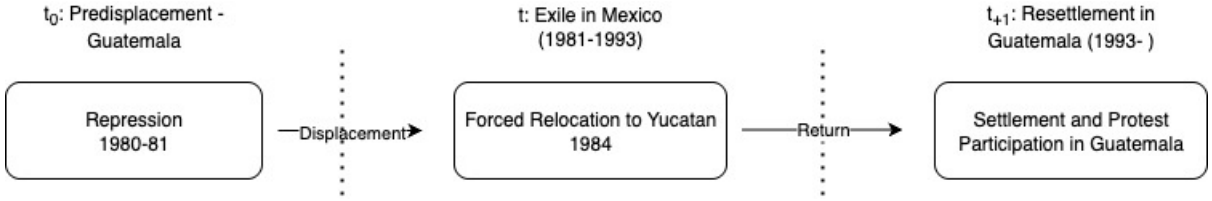
In the North of Guatemala, a series of massacres by the Guatemalan army forced tens of thousands of indigenous civilians to flee to Chiapas, the closest state in neighboring Mexico, and to seek refuge in emergency camps. The Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas responded spontaneously by providing humanitarian aid and organizing the refugees into settlements. In 1983, 36,000 Guatemalans lived in 56 settlements in Chiapas, a number that increased to 46,000 in 92 settlements by 1984 (Kauffer, 2000). These refugees remained in Mexico until the violence in Guatemala subsided, progressively returning home between 1993 and 1998.

Figure 2: Refugee Camps Before and After the 1984 Resettlement. Author's elaboration based on data compiled by Zhou & Shaver(2021)



While the Mexican government had initially adopted a policy stance of "strategic indifference" (Norman 2021), leaving the Diocese of San Cristóbal the responsibility of providing relief to the refugees, US pressures and border security anxieties led the government to directly get involved in the refugee question. In April 1984, invoking "national security concerns", the Mexican authorities decided to relocate half of the Guatemalan refugees from Chiapas to the remote eastern states of Campeche and Quintana Roo in the Yucatán Peninsula, as shown in Figure2. Half of the refugee population in Chiapas (about 20,000 individuals) was forcibly moved to four new camp sites in Yucatán in May 1984. Figure 3 provides a timeline of Guatemalans' displacement in Mexico.

Figure 3: Timeline of Refugee Displacement in Mexico



3.2 Refugee Hosting Policies in Chiapas and Yucatán

The 1984 forced refugee relocation prompted the Guatemalan refugees to experience significantly different reception environments in Chiapas and Yucatán. Blair et al., 2022b, p. 353 define inclusive hosting along five dimensions: (1) access—status and entry procedures; (2) services —access to education, aid, and health care; (3) livelihoods—property and employment rights; (4) movement—encampment requirements and identity documents; and (5) participation—citizenship and political rights. Based on extensive archive work and secondary literature, I reconstruct the policies adopted in the two refugee-receiving areas of Chiapas and Yucatán, determining that Chiapas followed a fully inclusive reception strategy, while Yucatán adopted a more restrictive approach, as detailed on Table 3.2. I expect that refugee experiences with policies in Chiapas and Yucatán would lead to divergent participation outcomes, with inclusive hosting experiences leading to greater nonviolent protest engagement in Chiapas upon return.

Table 1: Comparison of Refugee Hosting Policies in Yucatán and Chiapas based on Blair et al. (2022)

Policy Area	**Yucatán (Not Inclusive Hosting)**	**Chiapas (Inclusive Hosting)**
Access	Refugees are granted temporary residence visas[3].	Refugees are granted temporary residence visas[4].
Services	Health clinics are built in each camp. Access to elementary education: building of schools and formation of education promoters. Access to food, medical supplies, and financial assistance [5].	Mix of health clinic construction in larger settlements and use of local medical services in smaller settlements. Access to elementary education: building of schools and formation of education promoters. Access to food, medical supplies, and financial assistance[6].
Livelihoods	Lack of inclusion in local economy, no property rights.	Inclusion in local economy, no property rights.
Movement	Encampment requirements and limitation of movement within the states of Quintana Roo and Campeche.	No encampment requirements but limitation of movement within Chiapas.
Participation	Limited participation in refugee camp governance.	Extensive participation in camp decision-making, recognition of refugees' autonomous organization.

4 Identification and Estimation Strategy: A Natural Experiment

Testing whether refugee hosting policies shape post-return protest participation presents a key empirical challenge: refugees may self-select into more inclusive areas, or authorities may relocate them based on preexisting political activism. To address this problem, I analyze a novel natural experiment in which Guatemalan indigenous refugees' exposure to inclusive hosting was randomly assigned. Leveraging the causal power of the exogenous relocation of refugees in 1984, I test how hosting policies shape protest behavior using a mixed-method design. I combine original survey data, archival research, and semi-structured interviews to generate what Collier et al., 2010 term causal process observations (CPOs): data points that illuminate context, sequence, and mechanism. As Dunning, 2012, p. 211 notes, qualitative research often contributes to causal inference by tracing such observations. I draw on different types of CPOs to document (1) the plausibility of the as-if random assignment; (2) variation in the treatment—that is, exposure to inclusive reception policies; and (3) the mechanisms linking inclusive experiences to post-return protest behavior. Table 2 summarizes how each form of CPO contributes to the proposed causal chain.

Table 2: Mapping of Theory to CPOs

Elements of the Causal Chain	Data	Evidence
Treatment Assignment CPO: Exogenous Assignment to Mexican States		
Probabilistic Assignment Assumption	Archive data about relocation decision-making process and relocation policy execution	Identifying assumptions subsection; Balance test Figure 5; Figure A4 & A5
Unconfoundedness Assumption	Secondary data on refugee displacement; archive data on prewar community characteristics	Appendix 1a. Figure A1 & A2
Independent Variable/Treatment CPO: Inclusive Governance		
Refugee Exposure to Inclusive Governance in Chiapas	Interviews and archive data about camp policies in Chiapas and Yucatán	Table 1; Qualitative empirical sections "From Beneficiaries to Actors" + "Exile Without Voice"
Mechanism CPO: Refugees Exposed to Inclusive Hosting		
Have higher levels of organization	Interviews, Archive Data & Original Household Survey	Figure 7; Qualitative empirical sections
Have greater levels of political efficacy	Interviews, Archive Data & Original Household Survey	Figure 10; Qualitative empirical sections
Have greater expectations of responsiveness	Interviews, Archive Data & Original Household Survey	Figure 9; Qualitative empirical sections
Learn from local peers	Interviews & Archive Data	Qualitative empirical sections
Outcome		
Spillover of mobilization after return	Interviews and ethnographic observation	Qualitative empirical section "From Refugees to Citizens"
Protest Participation	Original Household Survey	Figure 6; Table A1 & A2
Additional Participation Measures	Original Household Survey	Figure A7-A9

4.1 Assignment Mechanism and Identification Strategy

Establishing that refugee exposure to inclusive hosting was exogenously assigned is central to causal inference in this study. While non-random placement is a common concern in forced migration research, the 1984 relocation of Guatemalan refugees from Chiapas to the Yucatán Peninsula provides a plausibly exogenous source of variation in hosting conditions. This section outlines how the assignment worked, why it can be treated as probabilistic, and how I address potential selection concerns.

4.2 Coercive Relocation as Exogenous Assignment

In early 1984, the Mexican government announced plans to relocate all the Guatemalan refugees away from the Chiapas-Guatemala border to more centrally managed settlements in Campeche and Quintana Roo in the Yucatán peninsula. Initially framed as a voluntary program, the policy quickly escalated into a militarized operation. On April 30, 1984, authorities announced the relocation of all 46,000 refugees (Meislin, 1984). Yet, a cross-border incursion by the Guatemalan army that left 68 refugees dead in El Chupadero settlement a few days later (Aguayo et al., 2000) marked an important inflection point in the government's policy towards the refugees. Although the relocation plan initially contemplated a voluntary sign-up phase, the Mexican government announced that refugee transfer constituted a matter of "national security" on May 5 and switched to a blanket relocation policy. US pressures to dismember the camps, which were seen as possible recruitment pools for the Guatemalan guerrillas, (NSA 2) also encouraged an indiscriminate approach to refugee transfer and discouraged the strategic selection of individuals to relocate (AGN 1)[7].

By May, the Ministry of Interior placed a military officer, Infantry Colonel Jorge Carrillo Olea, in charge of the operation (CIRMA 1). Declassified defense cables show that Carrillo Olea unilaterally requested naval support to execute what became a coercive, indiscriminate relocation, and acknowledge violence against the civilians (AGN

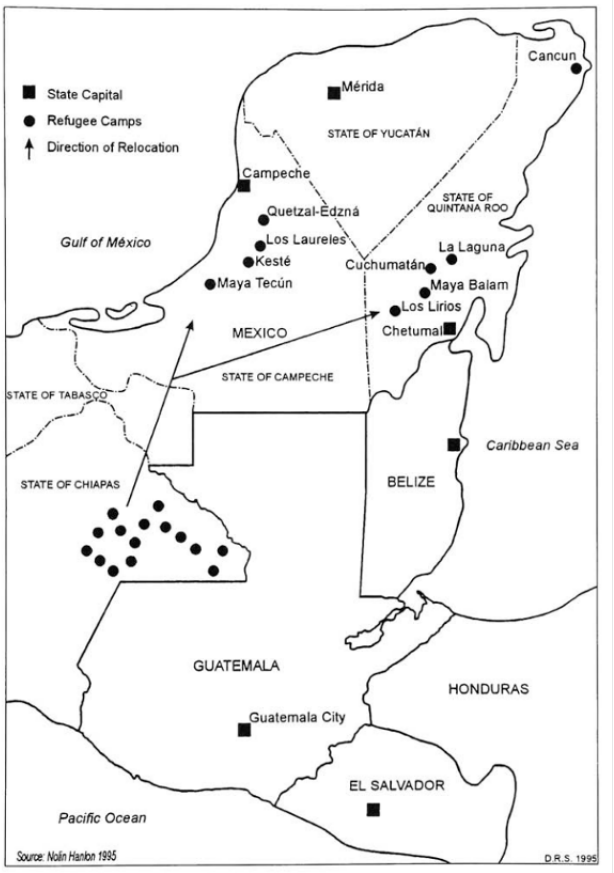
[7]Citations with this format refer to archive sources, a list of which is available in the appendix.

2). The sudden securitization of the refugee question left no room for refugee choice (Kauffer, 2000, p. 198). Special forces surrounded the Lacandon jungle camps, gave families minutes to gather belongings, and forced them onto boats to transfer to Yucatán via the Lacantun River. Those who tried to escape were captured during military combings of the jungle (CIRMA 2).

However, the relocation campaign was abruptly halted mid-execution. Public outcry over human rights violations—including forced transfers, inadequate food rations, and the suspension of humanitarian aid—forced the Interior Ministry to abandon the full plan (GNIB 2). Furthermore, according to internal reports of the Mexican Secretariat of Defense (SEDENA), the operation was marred by inter-agency conflict and logistical failures related to the hard terrain of the operations (AGN 2–3). As a result, only the camps located on the eastern bank of the Lacantun river in the municipalities of Ocosingo and Marqués de Comillas, where the operations had started, were ultimately relocated. Camps in the highlands and foothills remained in Chiapas. The operation resulted in the relocation of half of the refugees of Chiapas to Yucatán. Importantly, this policy reversal occurred for reasons unrelated to refugee characteristics, lending support for the hypothesis of probabilistic assignment of the two groups of refugees to Chiapas and Yucatán. Figure 4 provides a visual illustration of the relocation of the refugees from Ocosingo and Marques de Comillas[8] to Yucatán.

[8]The eastern bank of the Lacantun river had been chosen to start the relocation process because it was the area of most difficult access, where most refugees lived, where the conditions were most precarious, and where the refugees were most vulnerable to attacks from the Guatemalan army (AGN 1).

Figure 4: Relocation of Refugees of Ocosingo and Marqués de Comillas to Campeche and Quintana Roo (source: Nolin Hanlon 1997)]



4.2.1 Addressing Selection Concerns

Three threats to inference warrant consideration. I examine two threats to the plausibility of the exogenous assignment: that relocation was driven by prior political activism, and that better-organized camps successfully resisted relocation, and one alternative mechanism; that the refugees who remained in Chiapas retained ties to guerrillas and populations that stayed in Guatemala.

A key assumption of exogenous assignment is that the refugees were relocated for reasons orthogonal to their characteristics. A concern would therefore be that refugees were relocated selected to relocate based on prior political activism. However, archival sources and interviews consistently suggest that the 1984 relocation was indiscriminate.

Internal SEDENA and U.S. documents provide no evidence of screening individuals for political characteristics. Refugees were removed collectively, often under duress, with no apparent effort to distinguish politically engaged from non-engaged individuals. Communiqués contemporary to the relocation and interviewees consistently described the process as chaotic and coercive, with entire camps evacuated regardless of their organizational profiles (SCLC 17). Another concern is that better-organized communities resisted relocation, potentially confounding treatment assignment. To assess this, I systematically reviewed the 47 petitions sent by refugee settlements between April and June 1984 protesting the relocation housed at the Diocese of San Cristóbal. Of these, 19 originated from camps that remained in Chiapas and 28 from camps that were ultimately relocated (SCLC 1). The letters are signed by elected committees, which points to the presence of a leadership structure and a level of organization that could have been leveraged to resist relocation. The examinaion shows that settlements that exhibit similar levels of organization such as Frontera Corozal and Las Delicias (relocated), and Nuevo Jerusalén and Rancho Alegre (not relocated) were located across the relocation divide. These patterns suggest that internal organization did not determine relocation outcomes; rather, geographic location and the phased, ultimately abandoned execution of the military operation account for the variation.

I also address the eventuality that post-return political behavior in Chiapas was shaped not by hosting conditions, but by continued ties to guerrilla forces or populations that remained in Guatemala. Available evidence undermines this alternative mechanism. Author interviews with former combatants[9] indicate that guerrilla activity extended into Campeche and Quintana Roo after the 1984 relocation, suggesting continued contact in both treatment and control areas. Furthermore, while they confirm that guerrillas were present in all three states, SEDENA cables and interviews emphasize that camps served primarily as logistical hubs, not sites of political indoctrination (AGN 2). An internal guerrilla document seized by the U.S. Department of State explicitly instructed combatants to avoid actions that might jeopardize their refuge in Mexico,

[9]Tomás C. and Juana, former guerrilla combatants, Guatemala City, November 2022.

including political propaganda, and to blend in with the refugee population (NSA 1). Another potential influence—contact with guerrilla-aligned populations in Guatemala's border areas, particularly the Communities of Populations in Resistance (CPR)[10]—was similarly limited. Though refugees occasionally sent logistical support such as medicine and food, interviews confirm minimal direct contact[11]. The Guatemalan military's aerial bombing campaigns targeted CPR zones and aimed to cut supply routes through Mexico, further restricting cross-border exchanges (CIRMA 5).

A final concern pertains to the comparability of the groups. If the refugees settled across the relocation divide in Mexico following patterns correlated with political activism, then the two groups may not be comparable. As discussed in Section 1 of the Appendix, I find no evidence of this.

4.2.2 Compound Treatment

A last source of inferential concern comes from the fact that refugees in Yucatán were not only exposed to a less inclusive institutional setting; they were also forcibly relocated. I address the possibility that the relocation itself had a meaningful effect on refugee participation. Qualitative evidence suggests that long-term differences in political behavior between the two group of refugees was driven primarily by reception policies rather than the relocation event per se.Refugee testimonies show that the Guatemalans remained politically engaged after relocation to Yucatán, but that opportunities and support were closed off by the refugee-receiving institutions, as Efraína's interview reflects:

> The Catholic Church, those guys, they did work hard. The Church personnel were always there, they supported the organization. Now in Campeche, Quintana Roo, we did not see that. [...] When we arrived there we wanted to continue with our struggle, but the Mexican institutions closed the doors,

[10]For a history of the CPR, see the series by Ricardo Falla, *Al Atardecer de la vida*.

[11]Tomás C., Guatemala City, November 2022.

and the Church in Yucatán was just not the same.[12]

A report from an external verification commission also attributed the lack of organizational continuity in Yucatán to the governance structure:

> The lively and strong organization that they used to have in Chiapas collapsed and the refugees blame it on the manipulation that they suffer from COMAR. The representatives have been captured into the bureaucracy of COMAR and represent the institution rather than their people [...] There was a person who did duly represent their camp, but they were removed from their position; according to the refugees due to the machinations of COMAR employees. (GNIB 1)

Finally, the appendix addresses whether divergent reception experiences affected refugees' decision to return. I find no evidence that the refugees from Chiapas and Yucatán returned at differential rates to Guatemala, which I attribute to their similar attachment to the land left behind – an important feature of Mayan cosmovision.

4.3 Research Design

Following the natural experiment described above, this study uses a multi-method research design to generate CPOs probing the long-term political consequences of variation in refugee hosting policies. I conducted fieldwork between 2021 and 2023 in three multiethnic indigenous villages in the Guatemalan border municipality of Ixcán, El Quiché; Primavera del Ixcán, Victoria 20 de Enero, and Xalbal. All three communities received a large number of returnees from Mexico in the first major wave of return in 1993, including former refugees from both Chiapas and Yucatán.

Case selection was guided by three criteria: timing of return, community composition, and structural context. First, I selected villages where refugees settled during

[12]Efraína, former refugee in Quintana Roo, Xalbal, December 2022.

the first return wave in 1993[13] to minimize variation linked to the timing of repatriation. Research shows that earlier returnees may differ systematically from later ones. Refugees who return earlier may have experienced higher levels of pre-displacement violence, a variable associated with greater risk tolerance and propensity to return early (Ghosn et al., 2021), but also with postwar political engagement (Bateson, 2012; Blattman, 2009). Early returnees may also have faced steeper challenges in reclaiming land and rebuilding communities, potentially incentivizing political mobilization compared to later cohorts. Community composition and structural conditions were also considered. Refugees often avoid returning to areas where non-coethnics are perceived as being associated with perpetrators (Camarena & Hägerdal, 2020). Yet, violence during Guatemala's armed conflict in Ixcán was mostly perpetrated by the military without widespread civilian involvement, and no indigenous identity is significantly associated with perpetrators (Ball et al., 1999). Furthermore, the three villages studied are multiethnic and correspond to the refugee population's ethnolinguistic diversity. Third, the structural context of Ixcán helps minimize confounding. Structural factors such as economic opportunities, the degree of wartime destruction, and legal status also shape return decisions (Arias et al., 2014). The municipality of Ixcán the area most severely affected by the armed conflict, with nearly total material destruction (Falla, 2013). The three communities included in this study therefore offered similar postwar conditions: limited infrastructure, scarce economic resources, and the challenge of rebuilding from near-total devastation[14]. The returnees also enjoyed the same legal status

[13]A total of 2,466 individuals from all three Mexican states divided between 503 families took part in the first wave of collective return on January 13, 1993 This case selection involves a trade-off. By focusing solely on the first wave of returnees in 1993, I improve comparability between refugees from Chiapas and Yucatán by holding constant the timing of return and post-return conditions, thereby isolating the effects of their experiences in exile. However, this strategy limits the ability to compare these early returnees to later ones, who may have been less politically engaged. The sample is therefore likely to overrepresent politically active individuals, meaning I am comparing the most mobilized refugees from Chiapas to the most mobilized refugees from Yucatán.

[14]An independent commission reported that by the second trimester of 1993, 100% of the villages

in each village.

I combine three sources of evidence to generate CPOs: an original household survey in the three villages, semi-structured interviews, and archival records. The survey, administered between May and July 2023, includes 1,134 indigenous respondents, of whom 424 identified as former refugees in Chiapas or Yucatán. The analysis focuses on the 379 individuals who reported living in refugee camps in Yucatán and Chiapas between 1981 and 1993[15]. The main dependent variable is a binary indicator of non-violent protest participation since return and the main dependent variable records the camp location of former refugees as a proxy for exposure to inclusive hosting. A team of 45 local indigenous enumerators recruited and trained by the author administered the questionnaire face-to-face and recorded participants' answers on mobile phones.

To reach this population, I employed two data collection strategies. First, I organized public raffles offering household goods. In each villages, the raffle took place over two weekend days and was advertised by local leadership via community microphones. Respondents were invited to come to the main community building and were given a ticket to enter the raffle upon completion of the survey questionnaire. About half of the participants were recruited at the raffle. To achieve a sufficient sample size, the raffle was complemented by a household survey[16]. Based on local census records provided by the leadership of each village, the household survey followed a simple random sampling strategy, which teams of enumerators surveying in every neighborhood.

I also visited major archives in Mexico and Guatemala to collect historical records

in Ixcán lacked electricity and only 7 had an access road in good condition (**cear˙encuesta˙1995**).

[15]The 45 remaining refugees reported living in other states. The analysis for this article is restricted to adult respondents aged 31 and older. The age restriction is based on the timing of refugee return, which began in 1993; individuals younger than 31 in 2023 would have been born after the start of the return process and therefore would not have experienced exile directly. The survey collected data on general demographics, prewar political engagement, wartime experiences, and postwar political participation

[16]In the village of Xalbal, the survey relied exclusively on a household-based strategy, based on guidance from local leaders who anticipated low attendance at a public raffle.

on refugee reception, refugee petitions, and return negotiations. These sources serve as both historical context and independent CPOs on the nature of the treatment and the mechanisms linking reception policy and posterior political engagement. The Appendix provides a list of the archive sites visited and the methodology followed to identify and select relevant documents.

To explore mechanisms and validate the historical record, I conducted 48 in-depth interviews with former refugees and community leaders. I used a theoretical sampling strategy[17] (Gerson & Damaske, 2021) to ensure variation in gender, pre-displacement political participation, and displacement experience. Interviews were triangulated with participant observation during community meetings and protest events. I address how I assessed counterfactual explanations, the reliability of sources, social desirability bias, and respondent bias in the Appendix.

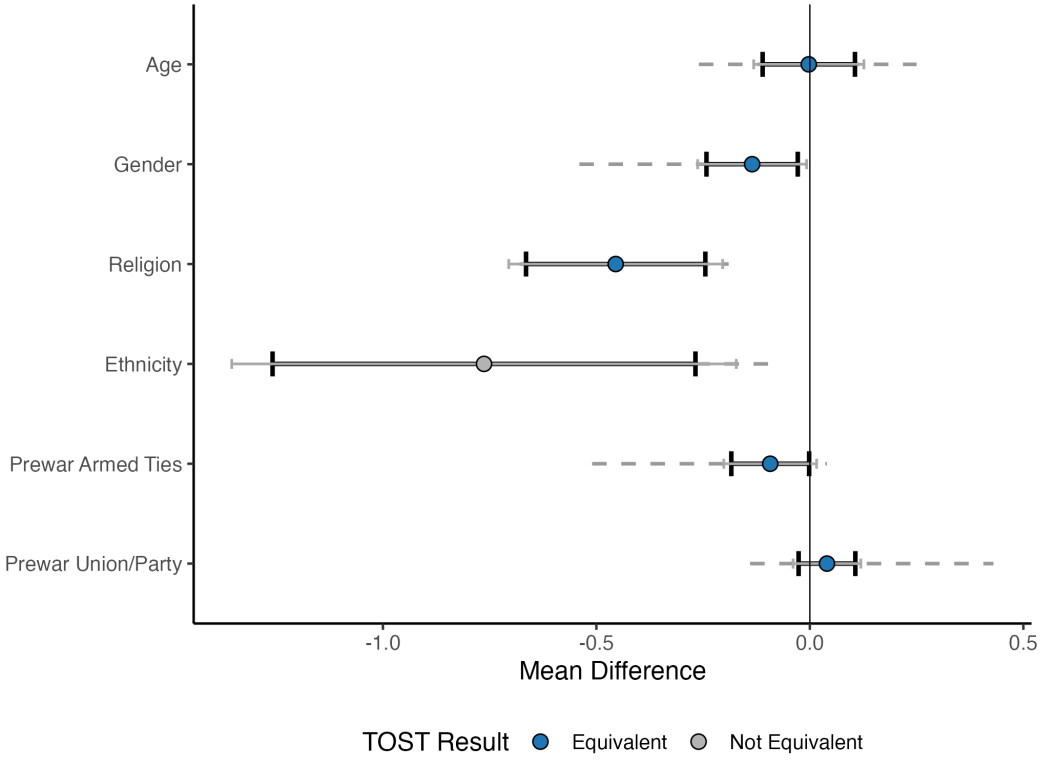
In short, this research design leverages the natural experiment in hosting exposure, combined with triangulated fieldwork and historical data, to generate CPOs that establish treatment plausibility, document intervening mechanisms, and adjudicate between alternative explanations. In the following section, I present illustrative excerpts from the Chiapas and Yucatán cases, organized around the four mechanisms proposed in the theoretical framework.

[17]This approach involves selecting a "sample capable of yielding theoretically generalizable insights" (Gerson & Damaske, 2021, p. 46)

5 The Effects of Inclusive Hosting on Non-Violent Protest Participation

Drawing on data from an original household survey of 379 former refugees from both Chiapas and Yucatán conducted in the villages of Xalbal, Primavera, and Victoria in the municipality of Ixcán, El Quiché, Guatemala, I test whether refugees' experiences with inclusive hosting significantly shaped their post-return engagement in non-violent protest.

Figure 5: Pretreatment Covariate Balance Across Groups

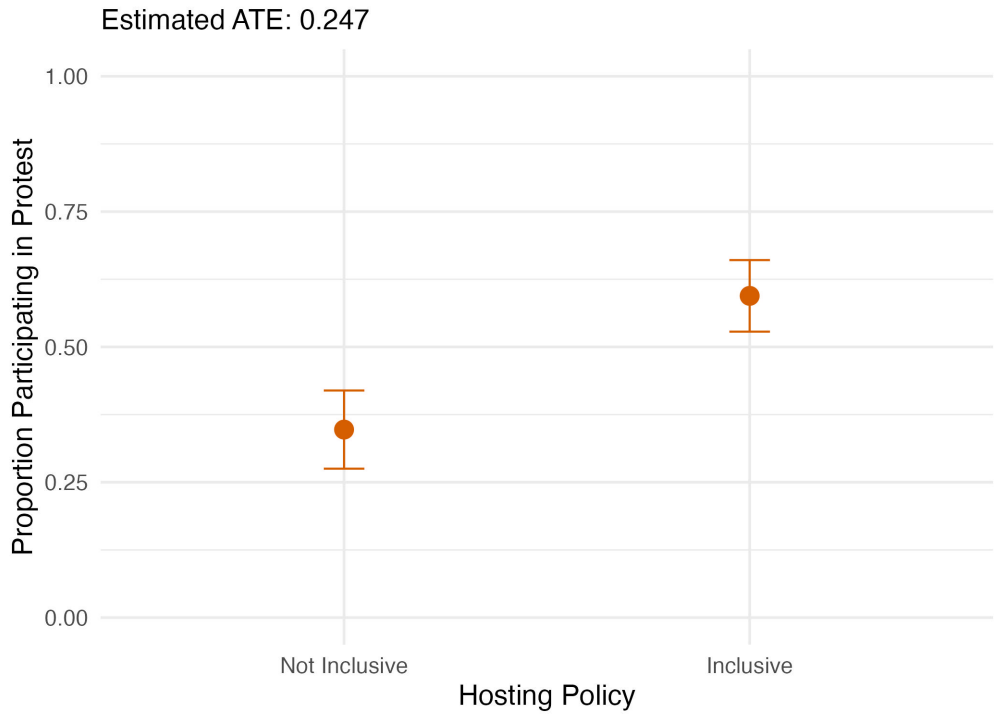


Equivalence test for the sample of surveyed returnees aged 45 and above, who experienced the relocation process in Mexico in 1984. The graph compares the means of the group of refugees relocated to Yucatan with the group of refugees who remained in Chiapas (N = 235). The baseline is the Chiapas group. Coefficients in blue show which coefficients are within equivalence bounds, based on a two-sample equivalence test (TOST). Equivalence bounds are plotted using horizontal dash lines for every coefficient and represent the range of effect sizes considered practically equivalent based on a standardized mean difference computed using Glass's Delta. All coefficients are equivalent except for ethnicity.

Figure 5 shows the results of an equivalence test for pretreatment covariates among the refugees that were relocated in 1984. The test examines balance on key demographic variables and two political factors: Prewar Guerrilla Ties and Prewar Political Activism. The first is a binary variable indicating whether the respondent was affiliated with guerrillas before exile, while the second indicates membership in a union or political party before exile. These variables are critical as they likely correlate with both treatment assignment and post-return participation. The balance tests indicate that the confidence intervals of the differences between the means of the two groups are within the equivalence bounds for all coefficients except ethnicity, suggesting overall balance[18].

[18]I show that imbalance on ethnicity is likely not correlated with treatment assignment and post-return protest engagement in Section 1b and 1c of the Appendix, and correct for it in the regressions presented on Section 4 of the appendix. Balance is similar for the full sample of refugees included in the survey (includes respondents aged between 31 and 45 years old who were born after the 1984 relocation)

Figure 6: The Effects of Inclusive Refugee Hosting on Participation in Non-Violent Protests.



Note: Ninety-five percent confidence intervals are plotted. The dependent variable is a binary variable reporting individual refugee protest participation in non-violent protest after return to Guatemala. N = 379 (167 refugees from Yucatan, 212 Chiapas). Full Models are available in Table A4 of the Supplementary Materials

Treating inclusive hosting in Chiapas as the main treatment, I estimate an average treatment effect (ATE) using a bivariate ordinary least squares regression, where the dependent variable is a respondent's self-reported participation in non-violent protest since return and the main independent variable is exposure to inclusive refugee hosting. The results presented in Figure 6 provide strong empirical support for the hypothesis that inclusive refugee hosting fosters long-term political engagement among displaced populations (H1). Refugees who settled in Chiapas - where hosting policies granted political and economic inclusion - were significantly more likely to participate in

non-violent protest after returning to Guatemala than those hosted in Yucatán, where policies were more exclusionary. The estimated ATE of 0.247 indicates that inclusive hosting is associated with a 24.7 percentage point increase in protest participation, a substantively large effect that reflects nearly a 70% increase relative to the control group.

This substantive difference is particularly striking given that Guatemalan refugees in Yucatán were not entirely excluded from support—they had access to livelihoods and basic services. While reception policies in Chiapas were notably inclusive, granting refugees both economic rights and political voice, Yucatán still offered a relatively supportive, though less participatory, environment. The comparison thus contrasts a highly inclusive setting with a moderately exclusionary one. That the effect size remains large despite this relatively narrow policy gap suggests that the impact of inclusive hosting on post-return participation might be even greater when compared to more restrictive host settings.

6 From Beneficiaries to Actors: Inclusive Refugee Hosting in Chiapas

The experience of Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas suggestive evidence that refugees' proactive engagement with inclusive governance structures during exile can contribute to increased participation in nonviolent protest upon return. In line with the social movement literature, which emphasizes organizational strength and interpretive framing as key precursors to mobilization (Benford & Snow, 2000; McAdam, 1999), the Chiapas case demonstrates how inclusive refugee reception fostered both the structural and cognitive preconditions for collective action. Four complementary mechanisms are identified: organizational strengthening, increased internal political efficacy, new expectations of institutional responsiveness, and peer learning. These mechanisms not only facilitated refugees' civic participation during exile but also equipped them to engage in sustained mobilization upon return to Guatemala.

6.1 Organizational Strenghtening

In the absence of direct state intervention, the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas assumed responsibility for Guatemalan refugees. While the first years of exile were characterized by a humanitarian approach focused on immediate relief, starting in 1984 the Diocese switched to an inclusive, sustainable development approach that directly incorporated refugee organizations in the design and delivery of programs. This approach recognized and institutionalized the indigenous forms of organization that refugees had brought from Guatemala, including democratic elections and communal labor. Inclusive governance not only preserved traditional forms of indigenous organizing but expanded them into more complex systems of self-governance. Refugees elected representatives and "committees or commissions for distinct aspects: education, security, external communication, health, everything necessary for the proper functioning of the community" (CIRMA 3, SCLC 13) that directly partnered with the Diocese for settlement adminis-

tration. One letter from the La Gloria settlement describes the creation of a collective organizational structure, expanding participation beyond smaller traditional indigenous leadership:

> We formed the Coordinación de la Dirección Colectiva with more than 100 people [...] so that many people could gather to assess issues and find solutions... We named a Collective Management Board... We started being taken into account more. [. . .] we built schools for more than 500 kids, [. . .] improving the cooperative, collaborating so that there would be enough water, [. . .], and improving everything in our community. (SCLC 6)

Educational governance illustrates well organizational scaling up and the incorporation of indigenous customs into settlement management. Rather than incorporate refugees into Mexican public schools, the Diocese supported the development of autonomous systems led by refugee volunteers. Refugee education promoters received training from NGOs and the Christian Solidarity Committee (CCS), a Diocesan organization, and built schools with diocesan support. The Guatemalan refugee educators played a proactive role in shaping the curriculum; they took the initiative to develop educational materials and negotiated their integration into the formal school program of the camps. As Bishop Samuel Ruiz noted, education plans were developed "at the initiative of the communities themselves" (CIRMA 3). As a result, the curriculum included an important component of indigenous empowerment, encouraging refugees to "search their roots" and valuing indigenous knowledge and customs (SCLC 4). Refugee-designed materials were later adopted by COMAR and included topics such as cultural identity, community development, environmental conservation, and peace education (Sáenz-Romero & Sánchez-Sosa, 1996).

6.2 Efficacy

Inclusion in camp decision-making offered broad-based opportunities for refugee engagement. The recognition of their agency and forms of organization infused feelings of

competence and led to a process of empowerment in the refugee population, summarized by Jacinto:

> When we arrive [in Mexico] we are quite blind in our minds. After, we are awake [...] If there had been no war, I don't think we would be how we are now. [...] if you go to a neighboring village, they have no idea, they don't know how to work collectively, they have no idea of how to build their road, how to organize their community[19].

Others similarly credited exile with developing political awareness and organizational skills. A current community leader stated:

> The communities that did not leave, that stayed in Guatemala, are in the same [situation], they lack development. Those in Victoria were able to leave, and as a result we got organized, we became aware of [how to organize for] the development of the community[20].

It is likely that over time, past experiences with inclusive governing bodies also increased the refugees' knowledge of how to make claims. This is evident in the refugees' use of an increasingly sophisticated political language in the correspondence housed at the Diocese. As time passed, the refugees' petitions to the Diocese started mobilizing the language of democracy and self-determination, reflecting the terms used in the international refugee protection regime (SCLC 6). In particular, the Guatemalans started defining themselves as "indigenous refugees", referencing the protections guaranteed under International Labor Organization Convention 169, which recognized indigenous peoples' right to consultation and self-determination (SCLC 2). These experiences bolstered a belief in their capacity to organize and press claims, shaping post-return mobilization strategies.

[19]Jacinto, former refugee in Chiapas and current community leader, Primavera, November 2022.

[20]Eustaquio, former refugee, Victoria, October 2022.

6.3 Expectations of Institutional Responsiveness

Increased belief in their ability to effect political change and repeated interactions with an inclusive institution—the Diocese of San Cristóbal—plausibly led the refugees to develop new expectations about what authorities should provide and how institutions should behave. Refugees came to view institutions not only as reachable, but as accountable to citizens. This shift is evident in a letter sent to Bishop Ruiz after ten years in exile, which reacted to a conflict with the Catholic Solidarity Committee (CSC):

> Since February of 1989, the coordination of the CSC ignored and belittled our most legitimate representation. [...] The CSC said the representatives we sent were not representative of our people and tried to treat them as if they were nothing. [...] The Committee wants to negotiate with us individually, destroying the organization we have in our settlement. [...] The CSC is trying to act as a great cacique that makes and unmakes representatives at its will [...] threatening to cut economic support. This is economic repression. [...] We are a united people; we have an internal organization. If the Church wants to help us, it must do so while respecting our people and its legitimate institutions. (SCLC 5)

This transformation in expectations was also evident in refugee-led education. Marcos, a promoter in Chiapas, described how historical and political awareness became part of the school curriculum—another space where expectations of state responsibility were actively cultivated:

> Interviewer: What did you tell them [the pupils] about the root causes of the conflict in Guatemala?
>
> Marcos: [...] we said: poverty, inequality, the lack of rights, the lack of freedom. This was the cause of the conflict. That the state had abandoned us, that it did not give us attention, that there were no health centers. The

> indigenous population, we said, was isolated, marginalized by the state, because we did not get attention[21].

Through both political participation and education, refugees redefined their expectations of state-society relations. They no longer accepted marginalization as natural or inevitable, and instead came to view government responsiveness and institutional recognition as political rights. These revised expectations likely contributed to continued political engagement after return, as returnees drew on their experience in exile to evaluate, contest, and demand accountability from the Guatemalan authorities.

6.4 Peer Learning

When Guatemalan refugees arrived in Chiapas in the early 1980s, they entered a region already undergoing deep social and political transformation. The state had experienced a prolonged demographic and agrarian crisis, the rise of indigenous self-defense organizations, and the emergence of Protestant and liberationist Catholic currents; all of which converged to fuel a new wave of indigenous political mobilization (Hale, 2018; Trejo, 2012). The Guatemalan's settlement in Mexican *ejidos* placed them in close proximity to politically active neighbors, catalyzing mutual learning. While land use conflicts occasionally surfaced, the prevailing tone was one of solidarity and mutual aid. Written testimonies describe how Mexican residents welcomed the Guatemalans, offered them shelter, and helped them find work in local agriculture and industry:

> The [Mexican] Catholics of that colony met to agree on how they would help us. First, they gave us food and later they reached agreements about how to distribute us across their properties to give us shelter. [...] While we were there, Mister Agustin Montoya arrived to offer us contracts to cut sugar cane in the cane area of Pujiltic. For all of us this was a huge opportunity. [...] Since then we have been working for that Union of Ejidos in sugar cane cutting and other offices.(SCLC 15)

[21]Marcos, former education promoter in Chiapas and current teacher, Victoria, November 2022.

Through these interactions, Guatemalan refugees were also incorporated into the traditional rotating communal labor system practiced by indigenous communities across southern Mexico, as Luisa recalled:

> Luisa: Everything was in harmony, some of them even cried when we left. Also, at the end of each month all the refugees gave labor to build roads, fix roads.
>
> Interviewer: In other words, the refugees worked for the whole colony?
>
> Luisa: Uh-huh, one day a month.[22]

In this environment, refugees acquired not only material resources but also vital social and political skills. One of the most frequently mentioned was language. For many indigenous Guatemalans who had spoken only Mayan languages prior to exile, contact with Mexican neighbors became an informal school in Spanish, as Andrés observed:

> And we learned Spanish. Because we don't know how to speak Spanish before arriving. I don't know anything. Until there. When we went out there, we started to talk and we started to go out, to earn our living with the Mexicans. There we start to hear what word, what they say, this how we start talking [Spanish][23].

Learning Spanish had long-term political implications: it facilitated engagement with Mexican and Guatemalan institutions and enabled refugees to participate more fully in bilingual organizational structures, return negotiations, and postwar politics. Just as important, interactions with politicized indigenous Mexicans likely strengthened a sense of shared identity and taught the Guatemalans new ways of articulating their cultural and political demands. Yet this cultural osmosis was neither one-directional nor uncritical. Refugee leaders were quick to push back against what they perceived

[22]Luisa, former refugee in Chiapas and midwife, Primavera, December 2022.

[23]Andrés, former refugee in Chiapas and current community leader, Victoria, November 2022.

as the threat of "Mexicanization," using that term strategically in negotiations to preserve their cultural autonomy. In advocating for culturally appropriate schooling, for example, education promoters insisted on the inclusion of Guatemalan history and indigenous identity within the curriculum (SCLC 6). In some cases, the flow of influence even ran in the opposite direction. Refugee pride in their identity and political clarity reportedly "helped the indigenous people here recognize the value of their own identity and potential." (CIRMA 4)

7 Exile Without Voice: Bureaucratic Containment in Yucatán

The Guatemalan refugees who resettled in the Yucatán Peninsula did not encounter the same inclusive, participatory environment enjoyed by their peers in Chiapas. Instead, they dealt with distant, discretionary institutions, like the ones they were used to back home. While many of these refugees brought with them strong traditions of community organizing developed in Guatemala or during earlier stays in Chiapas, the institutional environment in Yucatán constrained the space for political engagement and did not allow for organizational expansion. Refugees remained organized actors, but their scope for action was narrowed by centralized camp structures, marginalization from decision-making, and isolation from local civil society. These constraints disrupted the development of the four mechanisms of mobilization identified in Chiapas. The result was not the absence of agency, but its fragmentation, attenuation, and reduced translation into sustained protest upon return.

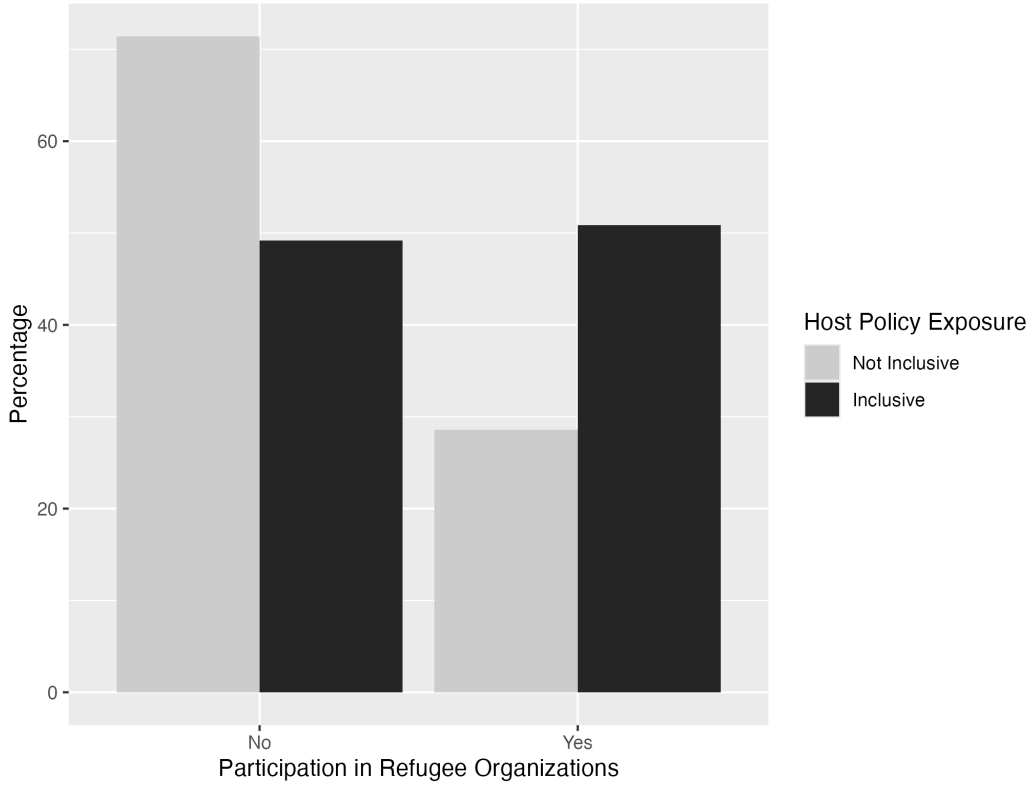
7.1 Organizational Constraints

Refugees in Yucatán retained elements of the communal governance and mutual aid practices they had developed in Guatemala prior to displacement and during their stay in Chiapas[24]. However, camp authorities in Yucatán only marginally included refugees' organization to decision-making, which constrained the development of robust collective structures. While this shift did not entirely erase refugee organizing, it led to a weaker and more uneven infrastructure for collective participation, with refugee organizations remaining centered on localized self-help and refraining from assuming a more political role, as was seen in Chiapas. This was partly due to the centralized nature of camp governance, which limited both the extent of refugee organizing and broad

[24]However, as mentioned earlier, the robust organization process in Chiapas took off after 1984 and the refugees of Yucatán therefore only had limited exposure to it prior to relocation.

population input. While refugees elected representatives, these figures were few—six representatives per camp, each responsible for thousands of people—and largely symbolic. They wielded little real influence over decisions and were frequently accused of being "spokespersons of the COMAR and not of the people" (SCLC 12). This dynamic sharply curtailed the refugees' ability to mobilize collectively, bred frustration and mistrust, and led to less generalized engagement in refugee organizations compared to Chiapas, a finding corroborated by the survey as shown on Figure 7.

Figure 7: Participation in Refugee Organizations



Survey Question: Which, if any, of the following organizations did you take part in while living as a refugee in Mexico? The graph shows an binary measure of whether a respondent selected one or several organizations. Analysis for full sample (N=379).

In addition to institutional exclusion, the indigenous practices of refugees in Yu-

catán were treated with suspicion. As one traditional healer recalled, midwives were forced to operate in secret after COMAR banned them from offering care, mandating treatment by unfamiliar outside doctors (Aguayo et al. 2000). Such measures delegitimized refugee knowledge and limited their ability to maintain culturally rooted forms of assistance and cross-camp organizing. Still, traces of prior organizing survived. One striking example was the formation of Mamá Maquín, a women's organization that emerged from cross-state meetings initiated by Chiapas-based refugees, as described by Cecilia:

> The women from Chiapas invited those in Quintana Roo and Campeche. They invited us from Chiapas so that's where we met. And after the meeting there was a plan, we were organized. 49 women. Well, and we are going to go to our town, our camp, everyone in their own camp in Quintana Roo is going to hold their women's meeting. People from Campeche also came [...] They named me as coordinator of a group in Quintana Roo along with another girl, Andrea[25].

Though modest in scale, initiatives like Mamá Maquín created inter-camp solidarity networks and preserved practices of mobilization. In some cases, these trans-camp linkages also later fed into negotiations with COMAR and UNHCR around schooling, where refugee communities in Yucatán advocated for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in educational materials, drawing on curricular experiments developed in Chiapas (Sáenz-Romero & Sánchez-Sosa, 1996).

7.2 Internal Efficacy

Marginalization from camp decision-making largely repeated the patterns of exclusion the refugees of Yucatán had known in Guatemala, where the state took important decisions on behalf of indigenous communities without consultation or regard for their

[25]Cecilia, former refugee in Quintana Roo and women's rights advocate, Victoria, June 2023.

traditions. The lack of avenues for refugee participation in decision-making greatly weakened the populations' trust in the UN and COMAR and likely inhibited the development of negotiation skills and a sense of political competence.

While Chiapas had promoted refugee-led planning and deliberation, refugees in Yucatán received rather than initiated policies. In letters, the refugees criticized a "bureaucratized and centralized management" that "does not trust the self-management capacities of the population" (SCLC 18). A telling example is the 1987 multiannual "self-sufficiency" plan promoted by COMAR, which initially proposed participatory involvement but later sidelined refugees in favor of top-down decisions. The plan introduced mechanized monoculture farming techniques unfamiliar to most refugees, who had traditionally practiced subsistence agriculture, reinforcing a perception that refugee input was unwelcome or irrelevant. On many of these projects, COMAR insisted that agricultural land be worked collectively, a mode of work which the refugees actively resisted (Manz, 1988, p. 166). This pattern was generalized across sectors. Working in the camps of Yucatán in the 1980s, Manz observed that refugees who voiced concerns were often scolded by camp officials or accused of being dependent and ungrateful (Manz 1988). The constant monitoring of refugee movement and threats of losing work permits for non-compliance further reinforced a sense of surveillance and powerlessness (Kauffer, 2000).

7.3 Expectations of Institutional Unresponsiveness

Over time, patterns of exclusion that mirrored the situation they had known back home likely shaped refugees' broader expectations about institutions and claim-making. As one independent observer noted, refugees in Campeche and Quintana Roo felt manipulated and abandoned:

> The representatives have been captured into the bureaucracy of COMAR [...] people tried to ask for a better treatment and solutions to their problems, but their petitions were only met with arrogant responses (GNIB 1)

Refugees came to perceive these institutions as distant and arbitrary, reinforcing preexisting beliefs about lack of institutional responsiveness. While some awareness of injustice remained, the lack of institutional responsiveness discouraged the kind of claim-making observed among refugees from Chiapas. Pablo, a refugee from Quintana Roo, captured this sense of resignation when he stated:

> There was a lot of discrimination from the Mexicans, among the Mexican authorities [...] they take advantage of one's poverty, one's condition as refugee. I was very offended and I wanted to leave. But there [in Guatemala], there was only war. So we are in the hands of the United Nations, and we can't really say anything[26].

7.4 Far from Peers

Finally, the opportunity for peer learning and political socialization was significantly constrained by the encampment model adopted in Yucatán. Camps were isolated from local Mexican society and tightly controlled. Most refugees worked on agricultural land purchased for them by UNHCR close to the camps. A small number of refugees benefitted from inclusion in the economies of the distant resort towns of Cancun or Chetumal without, however, being authorized to settle there, limiting interactions with local civil society. José, a refugee from Quintana Roo, explained:

> José: After two years in Chiapas, we were transferred to Quintana Roo [...] two years after arriving in Quintana Roo, I worked as a bricklayer in the city of Cancun.
>
> Interviewer: And where did you live in Quintana Roo, did you live in Cancun?
>
> José: No, we were in a municipality called Othón P. Blanco, where the displaced communities settled. [...] to go to Cancun it's a six-hour bus ride,

[26]Pablo, former refugee in Campeche, Xalbal, November 2022.

six hours [...] but (with) the United Nations, you couldn't, you couldn't go live in any Mexican community, no. You had to be in one place only. So already in that place they started to establish schools there, they built schools through the United Nations, they built a health post, and they even built a training center back then [...] I am one of the lucky ones. I got into the carpentry training[27].

[27]José, former refugee in Quintana Roo and carpenter, Xalbal, November 2022.

8 From Refugees to Citizens: Bridges to Home Politics

In 1993, thousands of Guatemalan refugees returned home after spending 12 years in exile in Mexico. While refugee organizations were initially created to coordinate camp life, their role evolved over time into explicitly political structures, becoming key focal points during the return process and for later returnee mobilization in protests. In preparation for return, refugees created the Permanent Commissions of Guatemalan Refugees (CCPP), which became the first refugee-led body to directly negotiate its own repatriation with its country of origin (O'Sullivan, 2010). The CCPP comprised representatives across the three Mexican states and was headquartered in La Gloria camp in Chiapas. This organizational network became a political vehicle for the refugees to negotiate the terms of their return and their reintegration in Guatemala.

The CCPP spearheaded independent negotiations with the Guatemalan government, culminating in seven formal agreements signed on October 8, 1992. These agreements addressed critical aspects of return: access to land, identity documentation, recognition of educational and professional credentials, and guarantees of safety. Many existing refugee committees were repurposed to support the return effort, searching for land, organizing return logistics, and advocating for service provision (SCLC 16).

However, many returnees recalled their frustration as the Guatemalan government failed to deliver on some of its commitments, such as providing the refugees with land, which they juxtaposed to expectations of responsiveness derived from their time in Chiapas. This mismatch between expectations and reality, contrasted with the returnees' own sense of political competence prompted important non-violent protests, as Baltasar recalled:

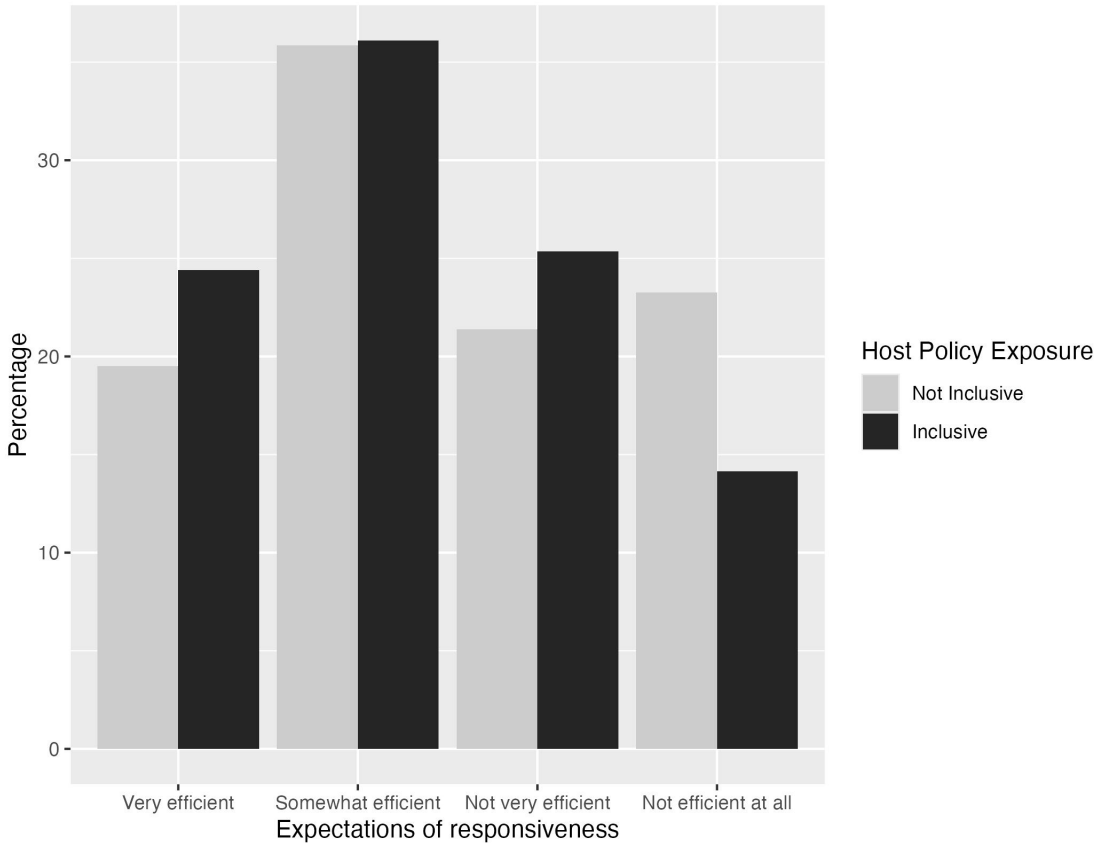
> We started petitioning the government because it is part of our reparation as victims of the armed conflict and as refugees, and we negotiated a nationalized plot of land. [...] our struggle is just, because we are people, we are

> humans, we are citizens, we need to eat, we need to work, we need land, we need education, we need health, all of that. We need to make clear that we can fight because we are back in Guatemala, and we are in our country[28].

The results from the household survey further help to triangulate these qualitative observations. As shown on Figure 8, while the refugees of Chiapas are not more likely to expect greater success from their petitions, likely frustrated from the government's perceived lack of responsiveness, but they are indeed more likely to express greater levels of internal efficacy, as reported on Figure 9.

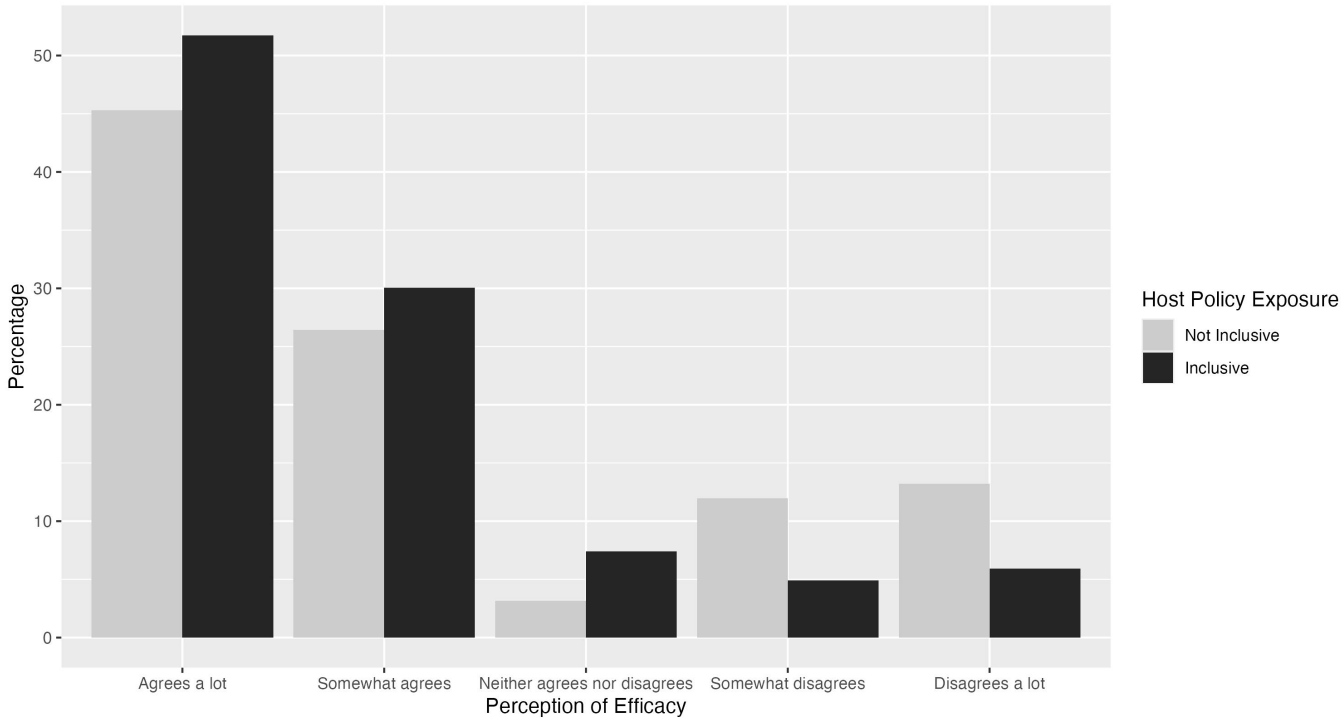
[28]Baltasar, former CCPP Representative and first community leader in Victoria after return. Victoria, November 2022.

Figure 8: Expectations of Responsiveness - Current



Survey Question: How efficient do you think it is to contact a government representative to make a claim? That is, how likely do you think it is that this action will lead to a successful outcome? (N=379).

Figure 9: Internal Efficacy - Current



Survey question: How much to you agree with the following statement? I am confident that I understand the social and political issues that affect my country

This mismatch between expectations and facts drove sustained returnee protest, particularly regarding of education policy. The returnees drew on the organizational networks and the leadership they brought back from exile to sustain renewed mobilization. The CCPP had negotiated recognition for the training of refugee educators, their placement as community teachers, the construction of schools, and the recognition of the curriculum developed in exile (CIRMA 4). Yet, the Guatemalan state failed to honor this commitment. In response, the education promoters of Chiapas created a new organization, the Association of Northeastern Educators (AEN) to negotiate with the Secretary of Education (Maldonado, 2011). The returnees also petitioned independent

NGOs to help them gain the accreditation and increase pressure on the government. Marcos, a community teacher recalled:

> The educational authorities [the state] denied us, they did not give us attention, but we put so much pressure that we got it[29].

The returnees' sustained mobilization led to the accreditation of 53 education promoters as teachers in 1996 (Maldonado, 2011, p. 108), an important victory for the returnees, who sought to provide pupils with a culturally appropriate education and to transmit the legacies of their life in exile (O'Sullivan 2010). These protest efforts reflected not only organizational continuity and political confidence, but also elevated expectations of state responsiveness, a core legacy of refugees' experiences with inclusive governance. Marta, a community leader in Victoria, articulated frustration with contemporary state neglect of public schooling, contrasting it with institutional norms learned in Mexico:

> The community tried to get ahead with its own efforts [...], but thinking well about it, it should not be like this. Normally this is what the government is for, the different institutions, they have to look out for the needs of the communities. In the case of the school, there is the Secretary of Education. Who should be taking care of this? You see that the school buildings are deteriorating. The Secretary of Education should make this a priority because it is part of the development of the community. But they don't take us into account. [...].[30]

For several former refugee promoters, the training and organization that they had benefited from in Chiapas became an important springboard for the launch of local and even regional political careers (Kauffer, 2000, p. 100), as explained by Marcos:

[29]Marcos, former education promoter in Chiapas and current teacher, Victoria, November 2022

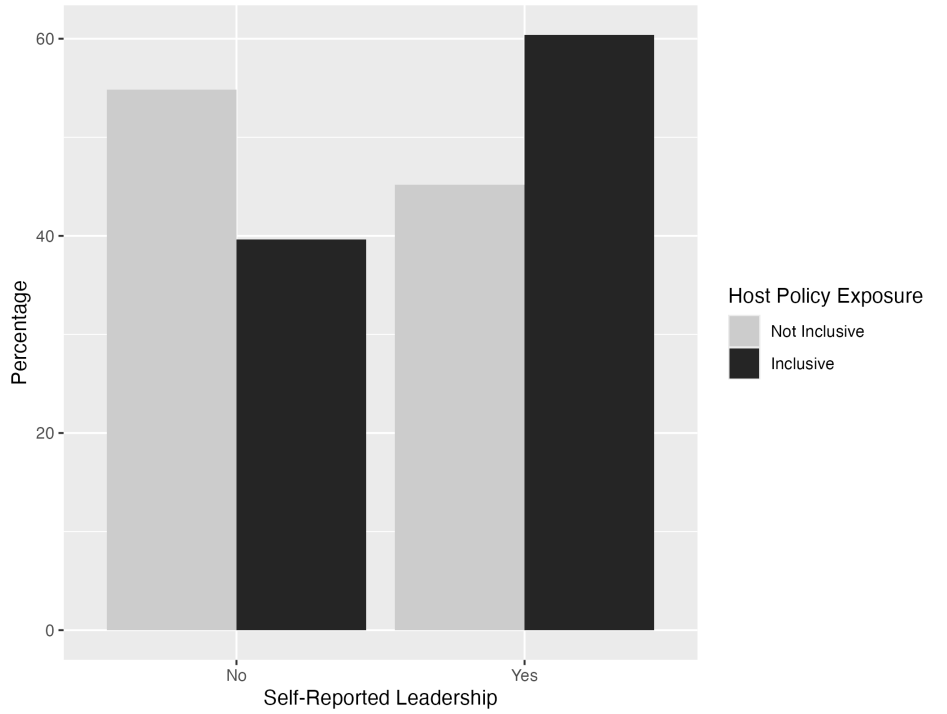
[30]Marta, teacher and community leader. Victoria, November 2022.

"[...] I command a little bit of politics. I got involved a little, and this is something that we were taught by a teacher. She was a *licenciada* from Toluca, Mexico. She came to give us a week of workshops [...] She told us: you, the teachers have to be involved in everything, know politics a little, get involved with the people, make suggestions to the leadership about how to solve problems. [...] It helped me quite a bit. There was an assembly to elect those who would be the leaders of the area of Margaritas, and so *me tocó la chibola*, I got elected by vote. [...] Then when we were about to go back, they put me as leader in the international commission. through that I met a lot of people [...] I have friends in France, in Spain, in Belgium, I went to Belgium[31].

In the survey, the returnees of Chiapas reported greater propensity to have occupied leadership positions in their communities as displayed in Figure 10:

[31]Marcos, opcit

Figure 10: Returnee Leadership



Survey Question: Have you ever exercised a leadership position in your community?

Beyond education, returnees from Chiapas have remained highly active in local and regional protest since return. The women's organization Mamá Maquín, initially formed in exile, became a founding member of the Red de Organizaciones de Mujeres del Ixcán (ROMI). Led by returnee Marta, ROMI successfully lobbied for a forensic office in Playa Grande to investigate gender-based violence[32]. Other former refugees established advocacy organizations for reparations, disability rights, and the search for missing children[33]. Many returnees also regularly participate in protests addressing corruption, land rights, and the enforcement of peace accords, as shown in Figure A10

[32]Marta, opcit.

[33]Albino and Francisco, leaders of disability association in Ixcan and members of an organization for the search of children missing from the armed conflict, Primavera, November 2022

of the Appendix.

During my field research ahead and during the 2023 general elections, I was also able to observe how returnees often leveraged rights-based discourses developed in exile to make demands, mirroring the advocacy language developed in Mexico. Ángel, another Chiapas returnee, described the following, referencing a conflict with the municipality of Ixcán:

> [In response to state encroachment over the powers of the indigenous authorities] We started elaborating a document that we presented to the community, showing that there are community agreements, there is Convention 169, the Constitution of the Republic, the Criminal Code, international rights. We started bringing all of that, looking at what article establishes what, what article favors the indigenous population[34].

In sum, the evidence from returnee communities shows that organizational structures built in exile, combined with political efficacy and norms of institutional accountability, helped transform former refugees into active protest participants . These capacities enabled returnees not only to demand rights for themselves but also to shape the broader civic landscape of postwar Guatemala.

8.1 Discussion and Conclusion

This article introduced a theory of how inclusive reception policies shape refugees' opportunities for claim-making in exile and the development of organization and cognitive structures that drive mobilization upon return. Drawing on a natural experiment involving Guatemalan refugees displaced to Mexico in the 1980s, the analysis shows that those who experienced an inclusive reception were significantly more likely to participate in nonviolent protest after returning to Guatemala compared to peers who did not. I proposed that four complementary mechanisms plausibly underlie this relationship:

[34] Ángel, community leader and teacher, Victoria, November 2022.

the strengthening of autonomous refugee organizations, increased feelings of political efficacy, heightened expectations of institutional responsiveness, and peer learning.

This article extends prior findings on the effects of inclusive hosting (Blair et al., 2022b; Savun, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023) by demonstrating that these effects endure beyond exile and shape political behavior in the post-conflict home context. The evidence presented here illustrates that the politics of refuge do not end at the border. The institutional arrangements and social interactions that refugees encounter in exile shape their identities, expectations, and political capacities in ways that persist long after they return home.In addition, the findings underscore the value of studying the "supply side" of refugee governance; how host-country policies and institutions structure refugee agency and political socialization. Beyond the Guatemalan case, these findings speak to contemporary efforts to craft inclusive models of refugee protection. Uganda, for example—the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa—has been lauded for its inclusive, development-focused reception policy (Hansen et al., 2024). It grants refugees freedom of movement and association, access to education and employment, and the right to form organizations. Humanitarian aid is explicitly designed to benefit both refugees and host communities (Zhou et al., 2023). Refugee-led organizations are increasingly involved in planning and implementation, possibly contributing to the formation of civic expectations and institutional trust (Getachew et al., 2022; Gitahi, 2023). While Uganda's long-term effects remain understudied, the Guatemalan case suggests that such inclusive approaches may have durable political consequences.

A limitation of my research refers to the scope conditions of my findings. The present study captures only early returnees to Guatemala, excluding those who remained in Mexico, migrated elsewhere, or returned later. While my analysis focuses on variation among early returnees, this source of attrition limits broader generalizations about the effects of exile on the full displaced population. Furthermore, inclusive hosting is defined as granting refugees both economic and political rights, following Blair et al. (2022b)'s classification. Future research could further isolate the relative role of economic and political inclusion on refugees' political empowerment.

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