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*Annual Review of Political Science*

# Land and Politics

Michael Albertus[1] and Kathleen Klaus[2]

[1]Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

[2]Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden; email: Kathleen.Klaus@pcr.uu.se

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Annu. Rev. Political Sci. 2025. 28:19–36

First published as a Review in Advance on December 10, 2024

The *Annual Review of Political Science* is online at polisci.annualreviews.org

https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-040623-112955

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## Keywords

land, land tenure, property rights, inequality, political violence, development

## Abstract

Human societies and their politics are deeply rooted in the land. Land shapes politics through its material nature and distribution across society, by serving as a mechanism of control and state-building, and by acting as a symbolic site that imbues identity and belonging. That land is inextricably intertwined with politics makes it a crucial driver of a wide range of social, political, and economic outcomes. We explain and survey these rich and complex relationships, focusing on the formation of political preferences and identities, the forms and dynamics of political violence, and the long-term structure of society, ranging from patterns of settlement and dispossession to inequality, state capacity, and economic development and urbanization. Land access, land rights, and land tenure institutions are all implicated in these outcomes. We conclude with reflections on promising research frontiers in the study of land and politics, including climate change, migration, and urbanization.

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## INTRODUCTION

All human societies have their foundations in the land. For millennia, land has shaped how and where people live, how people structure their days, and the rituals and cultures that define human societies. For countless generations in societies around the world, control of sacred lands, hunting grounds, and agricultural surplus was an avenue to social status and power.

Land is tremendously valuable as a productive asset and as a host to natural resources. It is also a symbolic site, imbuing identity, belonging, and social status and providing a connection to ancestral heritage. It is a source of human flourishing and development as well as an arena for conflict and contestation. It has been tilled, settled, appropriated, and reappropriated throughout recorded history.

Land shapes the structure of societies and the lives of their inhabitants in fundamental and enduring ways. Competition over land, who has land where, who does not have land, how land can be used, and rights that stem from land play a role in everything from state formation to economic growth, from inequality to political violence, and from patronage politics to identity and belonging. It is hardly surprising, then, that land and politics are inextricably linked. Whether as a central issue, a mediator, or a background condition, land is everywhere in politics.

For nearly all of human history until recently, people lived in small bands and communities on the land. At the turn of the twentieth century—after much of Europe had industrialized—85% of the world's population still lived in rural areas. It was only in 2007 that the share of the global population living in urban areas exceeded that in rural areas (Goldewijk et al. 2010). In absolute terms, rural populations continued to grow across this time span, nearly doubling from 1950 to the present.

The importance of land, however, is not confined to the countryside. As a growing proportion of the global population flocked to cities over the last century, the value of urban land skyrocketed. The structure and politics of land rights and access in urban areas, including land use regulations and zoning, have shaped segregation and settlement patterns, infrastructure development, and housing and commercial development.

That land is inextricably intertwined with politics makes it a crucial driver of a wide range of social, political, and economic outcomes. This article begins by outlining some of the central ways that land shapes and frames politics. It then reviews a large body of literature that engages, in varying ways, with the question of how land structures social and political order. We focus on three broad outcomes: the long-term structure of society, ranging from settlement patterns to inequality and state capacity; political preferences; and political violence. The article concludes with reflections on research frontiers in the study of land.

## HOW LAND SHAPES POLITICS

Land shapes politics through several pathways, depending on how land is conceptualized. Drawing on a range of existing approaches, we highlight three ways of conceptualizing land: as a material asset; as a mechanism of control, power, and state-building; and as a symbolic site. While these dimensions overlap, they have distinct implications for thinking about how land affects politics.

**Table 1** provides an overview of these conceptual dimensions of land and their key observable features. It also provides a selection of important political implications, which are by no means exhaustive.

The first pathway—land as material asset—is the most intuitive, not least because it is visible. Land parcels and their attributes can be easily measured. The value of land lies in its productive capacity: its ability to sustain life, generate wealth, and endow future generations. The key political

**Table 1 How land shapes politics**

| Conceptual dimension | Key observable features | Political implications (examples) |
|---|---|---|
| Material asset | Size of land holdings<br>Use and productivity of land<br>Land distribution<br>Extent of tenure rights | Collective action aiming to constrain or remove constraints on ability to use, accumulate, or profit from land<br>Reallocation of land/land rights<br>State extraction from society; fiscal capacity |
| Control and power | Rules and norms determining assignment, control, enforcement, and adjudication of land rights (tenure regime)<br>Cadastral mapping and land registration | Extent, structure, and persistence of patronage politics<br>Strategies of claim making<br>Engineering of settlement patterns and land rights<br>Processes of state-building |
| Symbolic site | Symbolic values/nonmaterial attachments to land | Social construction of identity<br>Identity-based claim making<br>Mobilization to defend/reclaim land |

questions that arise when considering the material aspects of land derive largely from how land is distributed among individuals and groups within society, how rights to plots or parcels are assigned and enforced, and how or to what extent land users are able to derive economic benefits from the land. People whose ability to access, own, accumulate, or otherwise benefit from their land is constrained or threatened may act or organize politically to safeguard it. Constraints and threats can arise in many ways, including diminishing land quality, population pressure, exclusive land markets, weak tenure rights, or displacement. People who amass large amounts of land can also act to protect and advance their interests through activities like lobbying for favorable policies, winning political representation, raising militias to defend their land, or acquiring still more land (for a review of the long-term evolution and consequences of property rights in land and labor, see Levi & Russell 2025).

The second way of conceptualizing land is as a mechanism of control and state-building (Hassan et al. 2022). More than an asset alone, land connotes and reveals social and political power. To lack land is to be a squatter, tenant, renter, or client. In many contexts, to be landless or land insecure implies dependence on the government, politicians, or other authority figures—such as a chief, male family member, local patron, gang, or even landlord—who will provide protection and stability in exchange for support or loyalty. Historically, landlessness also translated into disenfranchisement. Until the mid- to late nineteenth century in countries like the United Kingdom, Sweden, and France, only propertied men—mainly landowners—could vote. Property requirements for voting endured even longer in places like Canada, Germany, and Ireland. Understanding who owns and controls land thus goes far in explaining the structure and sources of power and control in society (Boone 2014), as well as the foundations of inequality (Albertus 2025).

Viewing land as power, moreover, provides a lens into state-building (Honig 2022): how states use control over land and tenure rights to build constituencies and citizenship, extract resources from society, maintain patronage ties (Albertus 2021, Hassan & Klaus 2023), engineer social demography, and create and maintain national and territorial boundaries (e.g., Frymer 2014). This approach also provides insight into how other sources of political authority—from customary chiefs to rebel groups—use or seek control over land to build or maintain social and political power (e.g., Baldwin 2014, Lust 2022, Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili 2021).

Third, land has deep emotional and symbolic power. It imbues identity and a sense of belonging (e.g., Toft 2014). A connection to land, either physical or imagined, can provide people with a sense



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of who they are in the world and the communities to which they belong (e.g., Lentz 2013). Land can become synonymous with the notion of homeland and the political struggles that defending or reclaiming such spaces can entail (e.g., Manekin et al. 2019, Miller-Idriss 2020).

Examining these symbolic dimensions can help explain the politics of group claim making and boundary making between those who belong and those who do not: between insiders and outsiders, firstcomers and latecomers, or natives and foreigners. One especially powerful land claim is being a "son of the soil," which purportedly native or local communities have used to elevate their rights above migrants, settlers, or other outsiders (Côté & Mitchell 2017, Fearon & Laitin 2011). Many different types of groups have invoked ideas of nativeness to legitimize control or ownership over land and geographic space—from indigenous groups in the Amazon or Maasai populations in East Africa to white supremacists aspiring to racialized territory (e.g., Miller-Idriss 2020). This symbolic dimension of land can also help explain why narratives and beliefs about land—so closely intertwined with ideas about identity, entitlement, and belonging—can provide a powerful source of political mobilization and even violence (e.g., Klaus 2020a). Recognizing the symbolic attachment to land can also help explain why land reform may not only be about economic redistribution and instrumental concerns but also about restitution, reparation, and justice (e.g., Gibson 2010).

## WHAT THE STUDY OF LAND CAN HELP EXPLAIN

We highlight three broad sets of outcomes for which land is central: the long-term structure of society, political preferences, and political violence. Land access, land rights, and land tenure institutions, defined as the formal and informal rules and norms governing rights and access to land, are all implicated in these outcomes in various ways. Our aim is to draw out the role of land per se as we survey and assess existing literature.

### Long-Term Structure of Society

Land shapes the structure of society, the state, and the economy. This section identifies some of the most important and enduring consequences of decisions around land allocation, land use, and land rights, focusing on patterns of (*a*) dispossession, segregation, and settlement, (*b*) inequality, (*c*) state capacity, and (*d*) economic development.

**Patterns of dispossession, segregation, and settlement.** State formation and empire making in Europe drove competition over land in ways that became foundational for the trajectories of human populations and their societies around the globe. Beginning around 1500 and accelerating through the 1800s, European imperial powers like Britain, France, Portugal, and Spain colonized vast swathes of territory. They seized land from indigenous communities en masse and granted it to settlers, explorers, and colonial administrators. In many cases, as with Peru's *mita* or Mozambique's *chibalo*, they helped colonizers appropriate indigenous labor for agricultural production, mining, and personal services. In others, like in the southern United States and much of the Caribbean, imperial powers and, subsequently, postindependence settler populations imported slaves from Africa to work on plantations.

This large-scale land appropriation decimated indigenous populations, erased long-standing indigenous ties to the land and cultural practices, and introduced new and extractive institutions around the globe. The land relations that settlers constructed in colonial economies set those colonies and their people on new long-term trajectories. Where there were large surviving indigenous populations, as in Mexico and the highlands of Peru, or climates suitable to agriculture with economies of scale, as in the Caribbean and the southern United States, settlers created extractive haciendas and plantations that ran on indigenous or slave labor (Engerman & Sokoloff 2002). Where indigenous populations were sparser and climates more conducive to small-scale



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farming, as in Canada and the northern United States, settlers came to work the land themselves in small parcels.

Many new nation-states continued the process of land settlement and indigenous dispossession. Countries like the United States, Canada, and Chile continued appropriating land from indigenous communities, pushing them into reservations and reserves on marginal or far-flung lands (e.g., Frymer 2014). Other countries in the process of decolonization, like Tanzania, or in an effort at counterinsurgency and control, as in Kenya and Malaysia, reordered land settlement by physically moving dispersed populations into state-designed villages (Scott 1998, Onoma 2009). Still others, where ethnic competition loomed large, used land settlement as a way to marginalize and dispossess ethnic outgroups and award coethnics (Boone 2014, McNamee 2018).

Settlement patterns and the reallocation of land rearranged populations in various ways. In some places, like the early United States or land reform zones in Italy after World War II, populations dispersed into individual family units across the land. In others, such as Tanzanian villages or agricultural towns built by Franco in mid-twentieth-century Spain, populations clustered in groups (Albertus 2023).

Land also influenced later settlement patterns as urbanization and modernization proceeded. Racialized land zoning and redlining were both drivers of and responses to urban segregation in northern American cities as Blacks—formerly enslaved on the land and never given an opportunity to own it—fled the Jim Crow South during the Great Migration (Rothstein 2017). In a very different setting, Brazilian landowners, facing rising pressure from landless social movements, encouraged rural–urban migration and settlement in the Amazon as a way to deflate redistributive pressure (Fernández Milmanda 2024). Such a push, however, contributed to sprawling urban favelas alongside wealthy areas as well as rampant deforestation in the Amazon. China under Mao, meanwhile, veered in the opposite direction, keeping rural dwellers in the countryside in collective farms rather than risk instabilities associated with urban growth. However, beginning in the 1980s, the Chinese state changed course and began systematically expropriating rural land and rezoning it as urban to attract investment, while pushing rural farmers into China's rapidly growing cities (Chuang 2014).

**Patterns of inequality.** The historical centrality of land to the vast majority of the human population—along with who has controlled it and the uses, rights, and privileges associated with it—has imprinted political, class, ethnic and racial, and gender inequalities across societies. Population growth, war making, and land settlement patterns rooted in feudalism, colonialism, and enclosure drove growing economic gulfs between the landholding nobility and rural workers in Europe, landlords and tenants in Asia and parts of Africa, and hacienda owners and peasants in Latin America (Albertus 2025, Moore 1966). These divides, even if they waxed and waned, became stark and enduring, entrenched by extractive taxation and unequal schooling (e.g., Engerman & Sokoloff 2002). The increasing economic value of land enabled landholders to continually outpace the landless. Of course, scholars have also identified places where this trajectory has sharply ruptured, whether through war or economic depressions and attendant public policies (Scheve & Stasavage 2018) or through land redistribution (Albertus 2015). In certain cases, like the East Asian Tigers, land redistribution paved the way for a spectacular leveling of wealth (Galor et al. 2009, Haggard & Kaufman 1995). But in many places, political distortions to land reform, like the withholding of property rights from beneficiaries, reinforced inequalities and increased the wealth and opportunity gaps between cities and the countryside (Albertus 2021).

Income and class divides etched by land translated into sharp political inequalities. Large landowners long undergirded authoritarian and oligarchic regimes that denied voice to the majority of citizens (Moore 1966, Ziblatt 2008). Democratic beginnings in many countries were

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circumscribed and marred by property requirements for voting (Albertus & Menaldo 2018, Einstein & Palmer 2021) and by pervasive patron–client relationships between landowners and workers (Baland & Robinson 2008). Sweden in the late nineteenth century, for instance, had property requirements for voting, and for over a decade after the 1909 suffrage expansion, there remained steep land and wealth requirements for senate membership and indirect senate elections featuring a weighted voting scheme that favored landowners (Albertus & Menaldo 2018, pp. 184–97). Powerful landowners have long managed to gain outsized political representation in oligarchic regimes and democracies alike (e.g., Ziblatt 2008).

Land also shapes ethnic and racial inequalities. For example, the dispossession of indigenous groups in French colonial North Africa, Spanish colonial Latin America, and colonial North America was justified by ideologies of racial and religious superiority, and it deepened new racial hierarchies (Albertus 2025). Independence movements further entrenched these hierarchies in some cases while diminishing them in others.

Research also shows that land has entrenched and perpetuated gender divides. The rise of agriculture and the plough encouraged gendered labor division in many societies around the globe that continue to persist (Alesina et al. 2013). Norms of male land inheritance, along with other patriarchal norms, have concentrated assets, household expenditures, and social control in the hands of men around the world (Agarwal 1994, Brulé 2020). Waves of land redistribution and land settlement in the last two centuries have tended to deepen rather than alleviate gender inequalities by putting land in the hands of many more men to the exclusion of women (Albertus 2025). Women's movements and legal changes in the last few decades have begun to change that picture, but assets like land change hands relatively slowly, especially in the context of deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and institutions (e.g., García-Morán & Yates 2022, Joireman 2008). In most societies, men still hold the bulk of land and, therefore, wealth (FAO 2018). This gender gap in land rights, moreover, reproduces other forms of gender inequality and greatly diminishes the autonomy and decision-making power of women (Harari 2019).

**State capacity.** The creation and consolidation of states cannot be understood without attention to land. Competition over land or territory, and the ability to defend it and extract resources from it, is at the heart of European state formation. The administrative, bureaucratic, and political innovations of England's Glorious Revolution, for instance, are intricately tied to the Crown's bargaining with noble landowners over the scale, frequency, and predictability of the extraction and loaning of surplus from their lands. Many authors point to landholding patterns and landed elite power as key determinants of the development of state fiscal capacity. Engerman & Sokoloff (2002), for instance, show how concentrated land ownership in extractive parts of the early Americas drove limited government and a reliance on customs and excise taxes whereas distributed land ownership encouraged property and income taxes that ultimately fueled state fiscal capacity. In a similar vein, efforts at strengthening state fiscal capacity in Mexico came by prying power from large landowners over local populations (Garfias 2018). More recent research shows that powerful landowners sometimes support increasing taxation when they hold political control and benefit from selected public goods like transportation infrastructure, which can in turn bolster the state (Jensen et al. 2023).

Similarly, the state's ability to monitor, surveil, and extract from populations relies on its ability to impose bureaucratic order over the use and management of land, a process that Scott (1998) refers to as "legibility" [importantly, Ferree et al. (2023) argue that legibility can also be a strategic resource for citizens]. There are countless examples of groups trying to evade these state efforts. Landowners may deliberately fail to register their land and rebuff state authorities in order to avoid taxation and control. Indigenous and peasant communities may do the same to safeguard

their autonomy and evade the efforts of outsiders to reach into, extract from, and manage their communities (Honig 2022). In this regard, scholars have thought about state capacity as both a function and a feature of its ability to impose a legible and uniform property rights regime (Scott 1998, p. 35). Indeed, some scholars have used the creation and completeness of land cadasters as metrics of state capacity (Brambor et al. 2020). A related line of research, meanwhile, debates the extent to which the strength and effectiveness of property rights and the institutions surrounding them are a function of state capacity (e.g., Herbst 2000) or instead derive from political calculations (Albertus 2021, Hassan & Klaus 2023, Onoma 2009).

**Economic growth, industrialization, and urbanization.** The use and distribution of land also have profound implications for economic growth and performance. Acemoglu et al. (2002), for instance, link colonial land settlement patterns to long-term development, tying land dispersion among settlers in poorer colonies with little to extract to later economic booms, a so-called Great Reversal that they attribute to the proclivity for providing broad-based property rights that facilitated the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, Beramendi et al. (2019) link strong landed elites to resistance to economic transformation and industrialization because of the threats they pose to cheap rural labor and their political power. Landowning and industrial elites alike have fought pitched battles with one another to gain political control, with the outcomes shaping development trajectories (Llavador & Oxoby 2005).

The elimination of large landowners through land reform holds the potential to equalize assets and fuel economic growth (Besley & Burgess 2000). Not only does it remove landowners as a political obstacle to growth, but also it puts land into the hands of rural workers who work it hard out of necessity; those who improve their lot pass their better fortunes on to the next generation by sending their children to schools rather than to the fields.[1] Countries like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan all followed this formula to achieve spectacular economic transformation after World War II (Galor et al. 2009, Haggard & Kaufman 1995). Many more countries, however, floundered on the back of land reform, in part because of how governments withheld property rights from beneficiaries and used land for purposes of social control (Albertus 2021, Hassan & Klaus 2023).

Development economists came to emphasize land formalization and titling as foundational for unleashing investment and economic growth that was, as Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto prominently argued, impeded by informality (e.g., de Soto 2000). The World Bank and many national governments began to focus intensely on property rights for development, and dozens of countries began mapping land and registering land transactions.

The politics of land has also profoundly shaped the pace and dynamics of urbanization, especially with respect to land policies governing cities and the periurban periphery (e.g., Hoelscher et al. 2023). Rural-to-urban migration has been partly a function of land degradation, dwindling land supply for growing populations, and state-led urbanization efforts (e.g., Chuang 2014). Together with the pull of increasingly attractive urban opportunities, these processes have driven waves of rural inhabitants to cities, often with little advance planning. Land availability, land rights, and zoning, along with existing settlement patterns, shape where and how people settle in cities. Poorly designed or politicized urban land zoning policies, moreover, often contribute to urban sprawl and the proliferation of informal and spontaneous settlements, a process compounded by weak state capacity, lack of enforcement, electoral and political incentives, and ambiguous property rights (e.g., Holland 2016).

[1]An enormous literature in development economics investigates economic behavior around land, like decisions to invest in improvements and technological advancements, productivity and income growth, and economic mobility.



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## Political Preferences

How people use, hold, and own land, as well as their relationship to land, is crucial in understanding political preferences: how people view and form opinions about political leaders and parties, political regimes, redistribution and the role of the state in markets, and individualist versus collectivist societal structures.

**Redistribution and markets.** The demand for land in rural areas, while often insufficient to drive redistribution through land reform in itself, underpins political competition and undergirds most efforts at redistributive land reform (Albertus 2015). The importance of those episodes can hardly be overstated: More than one-third of the world's countries implemented major redistributive land reform programs in the last century, affecting at least 1.5 billion people and hundreds of millions of hectares of land since 1945 (Albertus 2015). These reforms have rewired markets and trajectories into modernity in every respect.

Of course, rural inhabitants are diverse, differentiated by, among other factors, the form of their tenancy and labor (Paige 1975). They encompass smallholders, renters, squatters, sharecroppers, day laborers, indigenous communities, and other groups, in many cases working alongside one another. Preferences among them can likewise differ. Smallholders, for instance, may act as a conservative force that favors the status quo over redistribution because of the uncertainties that reform can pose for them (Ansell & Samuels 2014, Huntington 1968). It would be hard to understand the underpinnings of fascism and social order in mid-twentieth-century Spain and Portugal, for instance, without recognizing the crucial political consequences of a peasantry divided between conservative northern smallholders and restive southern landless workers in these countries.

Political elites build on these preferences and weigh them against the interests and resources of large landowners, who generally oppose not only land reallocation but also property taxation.[2] Policies like land reform, the suppression of labor organizing, the enforcement of servile labor arrangements, and subsidies and tariffs all turn on how political leaders balance the preferences of landed elites and land users (Albertus 2015). The same is true of policies that advance or stall industrialization (Beramendi et al. 2019), which affect landowner influence and rural labor markets, as well as policies toward urbanization (Fernández Milmanda 2024), which can threaten the availability of cheap rural labor for large landowners or reduce land pressure to prevent unrest.

Holding or using land does not ensure control over it and protection of it. Insecure land rights are widespread and often generate demand for stronger property rights, especially title deeds, as a means of protecting land from expropriation and securing autonomy from the state or other actors seeking to exploit property insecurity for political gain (Albertus 2021, Klaus 2020a). Land titles can also enhance legibility in ways that can advance the interests of title holders (Ferree et al. 2023). Receiving property rights, in turn, can make the holders of those rights both more trusting of the state (Klaus 2020b) and more supportive of promarket and conservative parties (de Janvry et al. 2014). These tendencies, however, have crucial exceptions. Communities with strong customary law, as well as some indigenous communities, may oppose land titling because it threatens traditional leaders, reinforces local inequalities, can portend alienation, or comes in forms that are inconsistent with traditional landholding practices (Honig 2022).

As important as landholding is in rural settings, landholding, land use, and the nature of homeownership on top of the land also forge preferences in urban and suburban settings. Homeowners who benefit from rising prices, in a manner akin to certain groups of smallholders in

[2] However, there are exceptions. For example, Dyzenhaus (2024) shows that landholders in South Africa's sugar sector can have incentives to redistribute their land.



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rural economies, tend to become less supportive of redistribution and social insurance policies and tilt toward conservative parties compared with renters (Ansell 2014). Urban and suburban land and homeownership likewise condition reactions to urban land zoning and its political and social consequences. Trounstine (2020), for instance, shows that whiter urban communities in the United States, driven by white homeowners, have been more likely to support restrictive land use regulations and limited development, in turn entrenching racial segregation and market segmentation. Several studies also link homeownership to NIMBY-style preferences to limit development, even among liberals who might otherwise embrace more egalitarian housing policies, creating restrictive and expensive housing markets (Hankinson 2018, Marble & Nall 2021).

**Views toward community and government.** How people hold land shapes how they identify and relate to other members of society. In settler societies like the United States and Australia, characterized by highly dispersed land settlement patterns and weak government authority in early frontier regions, people developed strong individualist attitudes and a predisposition toward capitalism (e.g., Murtazashvili 2013). These preferences and attitudes have long animated antifederal government sentiment and even militarism in the United States, for instance through the creation of local militias and feuds between ranchers and the US Bureau of Land Management. Land-to-the-tiller reforms that spread families out on the land, as in Italy after World War II, have similarly shaped norms of social isolation and weak community ties (Langworthy 1964), in turn affecting the types of policies and parties that voters support.

By contrast, many long-standing indigenous communities in the Americas, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere, especially those that have historically faced times of scarcity on the land, have developed practices and institutions like common landholding and overlapping rights, work reciprocity, and norms of being charitable (Scott 1976). Experiences with the encroachment of capitalism, as well as land appropriation and land loss have in many cases fortified a sense of collective identity oriented toward self-preservation (Albertus 2021) and help explain political and policy preferences, especially regarding land formalization and preferred types of land tenure rules and political authority (e.g., Carter 2021).

**Partisan political preferences.** Issues and concerns around land play an important role in shaping the parties and political candidates that people support, as well as the ways candidates incorporate land into their campaigns. Scholars have identified how parties organize and message around land reform, land rights, and homeownership in contexts as wide-ranging as Kenya (Hassan & Klaus 2023), Mexico (de Janvry et al. 2014), the United Kingdom (Ansell 2014), South Africa (Wood 2000), and the Ivory Coast (Boone 2014). Candidates and parties have also positioned themselves around issues like the informal use of urban spaces (Holland 2016), the designation of protected natural areas (Mangonnet et al. 2022), urban land use regulations (Brouwer & Trounstine 2024), and resource extraction.

Historical legacies of land policies and reform can also shape people's partisan preferences. For instance, Albertus (2023) finds that in Spain, people in locales with farming towns built by the Franco regime tilted to the left after the democratic transition as a reaction to how they were controlled and mistreated on the land. Similarly, a massive land reform in Portugal during its democratic transition left a political legacy for the young democracy. The Communist Party, the main architects of the reform, retained appeal where there was high-level reform but lost vote share in areas with low-level land reform, mainly among those who could have received land but didn't and who were disappointed at being left out. The political right, once in office, gained traction through counterreform, principally by painting land reform as a costly and counterproductive policy to people who were ineligible to receive land (Albertus & Schouela 2025). Land policy, in essence, created politics.



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**Support for political regimes.** Distributive conflicts over land, property rights, and rural labor filter beyond political parties into preferences over political regimes more broadly. A large and influential body of research contends that large landowners prefer authoritarianism to democracy because it affords them the repressive tools they need to maintain their property and labor forces and because it denies political voice to their workers (Moore 1966, Ziblatt 2008). Rural workers, by contrast, are often assumed to support democracy because it empowers them to vote for redistributive policies like land reform and taxation (Acemoglu & Robinson 2006, Boix 2003).

Recent research suggests, however, that these tendencies are not ironclad and that they have shifted over time. Authoritarian regimes, it turns out, have consistently redistributed more land than democracies (Albertus 2015), making them a high-stakes bet for landowners. And as threats to landowners spread during the mid- to late twentieth century, whether from land reform or simmering popular insurgencies, many of them came to favor democracy for its checks and balances and predictability (Albertus 2017). Large landowners in countries like Colombia and Brazil have helped forge democracy and organized to make it work to their advantage by protecting their core interests. At the same time, the mechanization of agriculture has diminished the authoritarian proclivity of landowners since they no longer need to rely on cheap and potentially restive labor forces (Samuels & Thomson 2021), and crop technologies and innovations have in some cases strengthened political outsiders (Dasgupta 2018).

## Political Violence

In addition to helping explain the structure and development of societies over time and individual political preferences and identities, land is a key variable in explaining the dynamics and forms of political violence, ranging from large-scale civil war to localized communal violence, violent protests, and targeted assassinations.

An interest in connecting land with political violence gained traction during the Cold War, when scholars and policymakers alike wondered whether or how land reform might stave off support for insurgents that promised radical land redistribution—and that often had Communist affiliations or leanings (e.g., Paige 1975, Scott 1976). Huntington (1968, p. 37) succinctly captured the prevailing logic, writing that "no social group is more conservative than a landowning peasantry, and none is more revolutionary than a peasantry that owns too little land or pays too high a rental." In the decades since, scholars have continued to debate the pacifying effects of land reform, alongside related questions about how land might explain the occurrence and dynamics of violence.

Research linking land and conflict tends to take one of two forms. In the first, studies focus specifically on land-related conflicts: those in which violence is primarily about demanding or asserting rights or ownership over land, or specific resources on the land. Such conflicts tend to be localized, occurring between generations, family members, clans, firstcomers and latecomers, or farmers and pastoralists. The second, and the more common in political science, consists of studies where the primary incompatibility is not explicitly about land, but where land grievances, fears of losing land, or promises of gaining or reclaiming land shape local-level cleavages and provide a strong motive to fight and a mechanism for violent mobilization. In other words, because land can shape underlying narratives, grievances, and distributional inequalities, it can be a powerful lens through which to understand the deeper roots of violence across a range of settings—from civil war to electoral violence—even where it does not appear to be the primary conflict driver.

Existing research emphasizes a number of potential mechanisms linking land with violence, including land scarcity, land inequality, land reform, and land tenure institutions. We briefly outline each of these approaches and their implications for understanding when or why violence might emerge.



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**Land scarcity.** One approach emphasizes land scarcity—driven by population pressure, environmental degradation, and land consolidation—as a key explanation for violent conflict (e.g., Homer-Dixon 1999, Kahl 2006). This approach, especially prominent in the environmental security literature, argues that land scarcity makes violence more likely by increasing land competition and reducing access, which work to exacerbate poverty and landlessness, deepen ethnic divisions and grievances, and erode social cohesion and cooperation (André & Platteau 1998, Prunier 1995). Land scarcity, moreover, may lead to migration away from land-poor or land-scarce regions, leading to increased competition and violence between migrants and host communities. For example, in their study of Rwanda, André & Platteau (1998) describe land scarcity in terms of a "Malthusian trap" that creates "bitter tensions within families, intracommunity hatreds and violence," tensions which, they suggest, help explain the genocide as well. Yet while theories of scarcity may be intuitively appealing—and are common narratives in journalistic and policy accounts—the evidence that land scarcity itself fuels violent conflict is weak (e.g., Theisen 2012).[3] Current debates instead emphasize the political configurations and institutions that affect land distribution and govern the assignment and enforcement of land rights.

**Land inequality.** Many scholars have observed that the absolute supply of land matters far less than the distribution of land rights or holdings across different societal groups. As Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili (2021, p. 5) observe, distributional conflicts over land are "at the heart of political conflict," especially in agrarian-based societies. This observation implies a relational component to land: The potential for violent political action stems not from an absolute lack of land or poverty but rather from anger, resentment, and frustration about the uneven distribution of land or tenure rights. These grievances can arise, for example, between land-poor farmers and a landed elite (Acemoglu & Robinson 2006, Boix 2003), between ethnically distinct communities (Klaus 2020a), or between natives and settlers (e.g., Fearon & Laitin 2011). Inequality in land may be especially potent when patterns of inequality align with identity-based groups.

In addition to grievances "from below," land inequality can reflect the repressive capacity of landed elites and their willingness to use violence to deter unrest or to protect or expand their landholdings (Scott 1976, Thompson 2016). In Colombia, for example, Nieto-Matiz (2019) argues that land inequality matters insofar as it proxies for the ability of landowners to rely on armed groups to protect their interests and landholdings. Relatedly, in the context of Brazil, Albertus et al. (2018) show that land inequality activates collective action capacity among landowners, enabling them to deter land invasions and unleash threats and attacks on the landless.

The nature of land inequality, then, has implications for both the form and likelihood of violence. Several scholars, for instance, find that the likelihood for violent mobilization is highest at moderate rather than extreme levels of land concentration, given that extreme concentration endows landed elites with considerable repressive and defensive capacity (Albertus et al. 2018, Thompson 2016). Similarly, Klaus (2020a) finds that in Kenya, spaces of extreme inequality provide a weak collective action frame for election violence, given that the potential target (i.e., the landed elite) do not map clearly onto electoral divisions. Instead, election violence is more likely in spaces of moderate inequality in land rights between neighboring and ethnically distinct political rivals.[4]

**Land reform.** Building on the insight that land inequality can motivate or facilitate violence, a related set of studies focuses specifically on how land reform—aimed at redistributing landholdings

[3] Scarcity theories, moreover, receive criticism for being overly reductionist and resource deterministic.

[4] While many studies of land inequality focus on landholding, a number of recent studies focus instead on inequality in land rights, for example, discrepancies between smallholders with and without title deeds.



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or formalizing tenure rights—alters the prospects for violence or unrest. State-led land reform may alter the logic of violence, increasing the opportunities costs of violent action and reducing grievances (Wood 2003), while incentivizing regime loyalty—especially where land reform rewards regime supporters and punishes dissenters or insurgents (Onoma 2009).

Yet while land reform may be an intuitively appealing tool to address grievances and mitigate unrest, the empirical record is mixed (for an analysis of US-led efforts to use land reform as a counterinsurgency tool, see Kapstein 2017). Several studies suggest that under certain conditions land reform may indeed curb violence. For instance, Murphy & Rossi (2016) find that in Mexico municipalities exposed to land reform later experienced lower murder rates, which they attribute to reduced gains from violence. Keels & Mason (2019), meanwhile, find that the inclusion of land reform provisions in postwar peace settlements reduced the risk of renewed fighting.

Other studies, however, highlight how land reform can backfire, exacerbating or fueling conflict by creating new winners and losers (Boone 2014), reinforcing inequalities between beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries (Albertus & Kaplan 2013), increasing perceived electoral stakes (Klaus 2020b), or deepening grievances where land reforms fall short of expectations (Finkel & Gehlbach 2020). For instance, grievances can intensify when reforms are geographically limited in scope or intensity (Albertus & Kaplan 2013). In addition, land reform may fuel rather than curb insurgency where it is accompanied by extensive state violence and repression (Mason et al. 2024), when it is captured by elite interests and corruption (Finkel & Gehlbach 2020), or when the political prerequisites for land reform—those that ensure political capacity, constraints on elites, and institutional inclusion—are not in place (Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili 2016). Taken together, these studies underscore that land reform is not merely a technical endeavor but also a strategic and politically contentious process that invariably alters social and political orders and can both elevate and mitigate the prospects for violence (Hassan & Klaus 2023).

**Land tenure institutions.** A third and related approach to studying the land–violence nexus focuses on land tenure institutions. These studies emphasize how the strength, clarity, and reliability of tenure institutions, or the specific type of tenure institution (e.g., statist, private, or customary), affect the prospects for violence between ethnically or politically distinct groups (Klaus 2020a), settlers and natives (Fearon & Laitin 2011), nationals and refugees (Schwartz 2019), squatters and landlords (Alston et al. 1999), and societal groups and the state (Boone 2014).

Numerous studies have shown that where land ownership rules are biased, unclear, or weakly enforced, or where there are competing institutional orders, bargaining and commitment mechanisms can break down, raising the risk of violence (Eck 2014, Hartman et al. 2021). These studies also highlight the importance of land tenure institutions in adjudicating property disputes and clarifying ownership rules.

The type of tenure institution also matters for conflict. Boone (2014) argues that statist land tenure regimes—those where the state owns or controls the land—are especially vulnerable to large-scale violence. In these contexts, the state can use the allocation of land holdings or tenure rights as a tool of social and political engineering or as patronage, rewarding certain groups with land rights while revoking or restricting the rights of others. The stakes of elections are especially high where access or rights to land depend on the land user's relationship to the governing regime, which helps explain why people may be willing to use violence to ensure the victory of a particular political candidate (Kanyinga 2009, Klaus & Mitchell 2015).

Statist land regimes may also help explain civil war violence between state-backed settlers and groups identifying as indigenous or "sons of the soil," especially where the state uses its control over land to resettle certain groups (such as coethnics or political clients) in areas previously claimed by others. In Sri Lanka, for example, Tamils viewed the state-led expansion of



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Sinhalese settlements into Tamil lands as an act of colonization, one that threatened their livelihood, group identity, and political power (Fearon & Laitin 2011). McNamee (2018), meanwhile, suggests that Hutu beneficiaries of Rwanda's rural resettlement program, which resettled Hutu farmers in former Tutsi lands, were especially invested in the Hutu regime—fearing expropriation if the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front took power—and hence were more likely to fight and kill on its behalf.

A key insight from these studies is that where property rights institutions are weak and poorly defined, exclusive or inaccessible, or highly politicized, violence becomes a way of defending, litigating, or reclaiming rights. Mechanisms of land allocation, enforcement, and adjudication that are perceived as unfair, exclusionary, or ambiguous can all become grist for grievance. Of course, while the institutions governing land rights help explain the prospects and scale of potential violence, violence and war can also erode and alter property institutions, creating new relationships with the land and in some cases seeding new hierarchies and conflicts.

## RESEARCH FRONTIERS

Land is far more than the ground we stand on. It shapes the contours of politics and society in dramatic, if sometimes overlooked, ways. Beyond the linkages we have highlighted here, climate change and urbanization are two especially active research areas—studied across a range of disciplines—that will shape and be deeply shaped by land politics in the coming decades.

Climate change is profoundly influencing the way that populations use and interact with the land—both urban and rural. Research in this area examines how, for example, land ownership and tenure rights affect vulnerability and resilience to climate change (Murken & Gornott 2022), how climate change exacerbates the destabilizing effects of land competition and scarcity (Hendrix et al. 2023), and how vulnerability to climate change—a function of how and where land is held—influences support for proenvironment policies (Hazlett & Mildenberger 2020). In addition, in places prone to natural disasters, climate change is placing greater pressure on home insurance markets, rapidly shifting land values, and inducing migration. These changes may in turn unleash a range of political dynamics that will challenge societies in dramatic ways.

Scholarship on urbanization, and on housing and urban development specifically, is another area of expanding interest and importance. Urbanization is among the most consequential social transformations over the last century, and one that has been fundamentally shaped by both urban land planning and rural land policies that generate rural emigration. The explosive growth in urban peripheries in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa exemplifies how rural land policies drive an exodus to cities, where newcomers encounter willful planning neglect or engineered marginality and informality, which activate patron–client relationships and skewed markets for urban labor. Rapid urbanization can also activate antioutsider attitudes and identity-based claim making, especially around control of land, which can make urban growth a contentious and even violent process (Elfversson & Höglund 2018, Klaus & Paller 2017).

A focus on land, moreover, and the various concepts of land we outline here, provides a useful lens through which to study the intersection of climate change, urbanization, and migration. For instance, scholars might consider the ways that rules and norms governing access and rights to land shape the terms and prospects of human mobility—how and whether people are able to move, emigrate, and resettle in new lands and spaces that offer greater security or opportunity.

In addition, research on the historical legacies of land will remain an active research frontier. For instance, scholars are still learning how revolutions in land rights and major land reshuffles of the last century continue to mark politics and societies around the globe. Attention to historical land policies and practices, moreover, may help explain contemporary political attitudes, identities,



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and preferences. For example, as recently as 1950, 71% of the world's population lived in rural areas, indicating that many older urban residents were born and raised in rural or agricultural settings. These rural backgrounds may continue to inform their political worldviews, their levels of trust, and the ways that they identify socially and culturally.

Relatedly, scholars might also think about how, even in primarily urban societies like the United States, rural areas are dynamic and politically contested spaces. For example, a strong sense of rural consciousness can intersect with perceptions of injustice and racial resentment (Cramer 2016), beliefs that have far-reaching implications for local and national politics alike.

These research frontiers are but a few of many that pertain to land, or that benefit from attention to land politics. Future research might also, for example, examine how land relates to illicit markets, how war and displacement restructure land politics, or how overlapping property rights systems shape political authority and contentious politics.

Land is the most tangible and valuable of human assets. Its ownership and use confer power and create deep emotional attachments. In an increasingly crowded and environmentally precarious world, land will only become more important with time. Whether conceived of as soil, place, or space, sustained scholarly attention to land and people's varied relationships to land provides important insights into the foundations of political behavior, attitudes, and political order.

### SUMMARY POINTS

1. Land shapes the structure of societies and the lives of their inhabitants in fundamental and enduring ways.
2. Whether as a central issue, mediator, or background condition, land is everywhere in politics.
3. Competition over land, who has land where, who does not have land, how land can be used, and rights that stem from land play a role in everything from state formation to economic growth, from inequality to political violence, and from patronage politics to identity and belonging.
4. There are three principal ways of conceptualizing land: as a material asset; as a mechanism of control, power, and state-building; and as a symbolic site.
5. Climate change and urbanization are two growing research areas—among many others—that will shape and be deeply shaped by land politics in the coming few decades.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.


## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Margaret Levi for her helpful comments and suggestions.


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