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Explaining Guatemalan Vigilantism

Bryant McConkie

Introduction

Ripped from his home in Concepción, Guatemala, the evening of October 13, 2015, Mayor Bacilio Juracán was brutally beaten, doused with gasoline, and burned to death by attackers convinced he had orchestrated the murder of a political rival they supported. In just this one isolated incident, the town hall, various cars, and at least six additional buildings were burned along with the mayor (“Linchan y Queman” 2015). A growing number of similar lynchings—vigilante attacks in which victims of the mob are severely injured or killed—across Guatemala have thrust Guatemalan vigilantism into the public consciousness, perplexing governments and political theorists alike for almost twenty-five years.

Relatively unheard of before the 1990s, the rise of Latin American vigilantism—the extralegal prevention, investigation, or punishment of offenses (Bateson 2021, 1)—has since drawn significant attention. Though exact statistics quantifying this phenomenon are hard to come by due to vigilantism’s unofficial nature, governments and human rights organizations are increasingly documenting the attacks. The Guatemalan Office of Human Rights, for example, reported 2,135 cases of vigilantism—including both lynchings and illegal citizen arrests—from 2005–2020, averaging 2.6 acts of vigilantism a week nationwide (Guatemalan Office of Human Rights, 2021). Lynchings have been of particular focus, and despite their increasingly common occurrence, they are by nature sensational, capable of sending shockwaves throughout both the local population and the world. This viral nature has been exacerbated by the rapid technological modernization of Latin America, which allows accounts of the violence to be propagated to a much wider audience through social media and video sharing sites. A simple search
of the term on YouTube yields thousands of depictions of the gruesome events, and corresponding news coverage further increases the lynchings’ exposure.

On a reputational level, vigilantism poses a great threat to both the credibility and legitimacy of Latin American governments. At one point or another in the last two hundred years, every republic in Latin America has fought for independence, sovereignty, and statehood—including the ability to govern the proper use of force within its borders. With independence came the desire to establish a respectable society in which order prevailed and citizens’ rights were protected, at least in theory. Essential to this fairness was a judicial system designed to interpret the law without bias and resolve disputes with even-handed fairness. Yet, in a matter of moments, vigilantism circumvents any notion of due process by subjecting its victims to the mercy of a mob. Lynchings often feature public trials in which furious vigilantes carry out the investigation, prosecution, and sentencing of their victims without any semblance of due process or legal representation (Godoy 2022). News of modern vigilantism spreads the idea that, despite living in a civilized, advanced world, some countries cling to lawless remnants of the past or lack sufficient penal systems to adequately punish criminals. Vigilantism is particularly repugnant in the eyes of western, “more-developed” countries, which view such acts as an utter rejection as two of their tightest-held core values: democracy and the protection of human rights. As developing countries seek to assert themselves as competitors and equal peers on the world stage, public acts of vigilantism such as lynchings discourage partnership and potential investment, suggesting that the nation still has work to do domestically before becoming a viable partner.

These destabilizing effects of vigilantism—in no way inclusive—necessitate investigation into the phenomenon’s root cause. Using Guatemala as a case study, I seek to do just that—first by exploring the theoretical underpinnings of the prevailing explanations for the violence and then by empirically testing the validity of each.

Theories

As one of the lynching capitals of Latin America, Guatemala presents an interesting case study for government agencies, human rights organizations, and political analysts alike (Tegel 2014). This is partly due to the frequency of the act in the country; in 2014, for example, the Guatemalan Office of Human Rights reported an incredible rate of 0.95 lynchings and illegal citizen arrests per day (2021). How the phenomenon relates to the country’s racially divided past and present makes the topic even more intriguing, as many of the most publicized of these violent acts occurred in the country’s indigenous, mountainous regions—the same areas subjected to brutal terror and persecution at the hands of US-backed, right-wing military squads during Guatemala’s thirty-six-year civil war. Fighting in the name of anticommunism and seeking insurgents, the army tore through the indigenous countryside, leaving 625 villages decimated and 186,000 Mayans dead in its wake (Commission 1999). In 1996, a signing of peace accords between the army and the leftist insurgents marked the end of the guerilla warfare, but rather than drying up, the violence merely changed forms. Instead of burned villages
and mass killings, more traditional crimes—such as robbery, extortion, and homicide—surged nationwide (Godoy 2002). Vigilante lynchings emerged as well, though not always highly correlated with traditional crime rates—a puzzling pattern that suggests an independent root cause for the phenomenon.

To gain insight into what the mysterious origin of Guatemalan vigilantism may be, I gathered research on the phenomenon and grouped the explanations into three prevailing theories, each pointing to a different root cause. To determine each theory’s validity, I examine the causal logic of each and calculate the correlation between its explanatory variable and provincial variation in vigilantism across Guatemala.

Operating under the assumption that the majority of vigilantism takes place in the country’s indigenous communities, the first two theories emerged with a focus on Guatemala’s largest ethnic minority, the Maya. The first, the “Mayan Theory,” views vigilantism as an institutionalized, inherent characteristic of Mayan culture both historically and today (“El Castigo Maya” 2018; Morales 2015; Arifin-Cabo 2011). The second prevailing theory, the “Scars of War Theory,” differs from the Mayan Theory in that it sees vigilantism as a response to years of unspeakable massacres and repression during the Civil War, shifting the explanatory variable from culture to historical trauma (Garcia 2004; Godoy 2002; Colussi 2014). The third and final prevailing theory, the “Government Incompetence Theory,” distances itself entirely from a Mayan focus, arguing that vigilantism is a direct result of the Guatemalan government’s institutional weakness, negligence, and history of unassumed responsibility and corruption, which have altogether left citizens feeling abandoned and left to fend for themselves in the face of suspected criminal activity (“Al menos 1.757”; “Linchan y Queman” 2015; Rodas, 2019; United Nations Secretary General, 2004; Colussia 2014).

Ethnic Explanations

Large parts of the academic community and the general Guatemalan populace seem to have settled on the belief that there is something inherently indigenous about Guatemalan vigilantism. Most articles on the topic—whether in academic journals or local newspapers—include either an anecdote or a study of collective mob violence in the provinces of Quiché, Alta Verapaz, San Marcos, Huehuetenango, or Sololá—all of which feature relatively high levels of lynchings and illegal detentions and are home to vast indigenous populations. This coverage, once disseminated to the general population, helps shape popular perception. Two general theories are derived from this perceived correlation. The first, the Mayan Theory, posits that Guatemalan indigenous communities’ cultural norms and governance structures enable and embrace vigilantism by providing an alternative method for resolving grievances outside of the Guatemalan judicial system. The second explanation, the Scars of War Theory, holds that for the historically oppressed indigenous Guatemalan community, vigilantism is a natural response to years of enduring government violence. While this causal logic does not apply exclusively to Guatemala’s Maya, it is often associated with them, as they bore the brunt of the violence during the country’s civil war.
The Mayan Theory

The idea that vigilantism is an inherent cultural and political feature of Mayan civilizations is a popular belief propagated by Guatemalan media. In one example of this argument, a local newspaper article, whose title translates to “The Mayan Punishment—A Method for Keeping the Homicide Rate Under Control,” highlights Quiché, a province of 89% indigenous population, and posits that its embracing of collective-action lynchings is the tool that has helped it lower its homicide rate to one of the lowest in the country. This willingness to engage in extrajudicial policing, the article asserts, is thanks to “the ancestral cohesion” that exists in the local ethnicity that “goes back to its origins” (“El Castigo Maya” 2018).

Despite its popularity in Guatemalan press, this proposed Mayan connection with the practice of vigilantism has received heavy pushback from both the academic community and local indigenous leaders, who deem the notion an ignorant misunderstanding of an ancient Mayan system of government that long predates the emergence of lynchings. Arifín-Cabo outlines this cultural misconception as follows:

The system upon which traditional Mayan conflict resolution rests is defined as a repair system: the aim is to repair what has been damaged, starting from the necessity and responsibility one has with nature, the cosmos, and being human. . . [it] implies resolving conflicts with these three elements, and not causing harm to any—when that happens, the balance is lost. Agreements made in this process are not a form of punishment; they do not seek to harm others. In this case, and contrary to popular perception, lynchings are not part of the Mayan tradition of conflict resolutions, nor what is called “the system of Mayan justice.” Mayan customs and traditions oppose the use of violence to resolve a conflict or a problem since they pursue a type of restoring justice. (2011, 3)

Cabo clarifies the nature of Mayan governance by emphasizing its peaceful, non-violent focus, standing in stark contradiction to those who assume the system to be a merely retributive, inherent part of Guatemalan indigenous culture. To shed some more light on this hotly debated issue, my study will test whether or not the core belief of the Mayan Theory explanation holds empirically with the following hypothesis:

H1: Provinces that have higher percentages of indigenous populations will exhibit higher levels of vigilantism than those with lower proportions of indigenous populations.

The Scars of War Theory

Departing from a strictly Mayan cultural explanation, the Scars of War Theory sees Guatemalan vigilantism as a natural response to years of abuse at the hands of the Guatemalan government, and it finds more general acceptance among the academic community. For many analysts, the nation’s Civil War and ethnic cleansing “was the seed that has given fruit to these lynchings,” as such a violent form of collective action
was unheard of before the waning years of the conflict (Garcia 2004, 2). Godoy emphasizes this point, asserting that “contemporary lynchings are only comprehensible against the backdrop of war’s incredible violence” (2002, 645). The collective violence and psychological torture endured by the Mayan people includes everything from being raped and murdered, to stumbling upon strewn plates, covered with remnants of the brains of neighbors cannibalized by army forces. In addition to being victimized by such atrocities and driven from burning villages, many indigenous people with no military experience, including women, were forcibly enlisted in army death squadrons where they were converted into killing machines trained to wield sharpened sticks with lethal precision (Garcia, 2004).

All of these atrocities undoubtedly left survivors disrupted—not only economically and socially, but also mentally and emotionally. Speaking on the devastating psychological effects of being forcefully conscripted into a militant self-defense patrol, one citizen of the indigenous San Mateo Ixtatan commented:

The patrols changed the people’s mentality—they brought us many problems and much pain—it wasn’t true that they were there to save life, but rather to kill our own brothers. . . a lot of violence remains inside us and sometimes it comes out. . . we are all sick because of what they made us do. (Garcia 2004, 11)

Though just a couple of thoughts, this man’s account speaks volumes to the psychological effects of Guatemala’s wartime violence. The Guatemalan military fed village people propaganda to convince them of imminent, existential danger to such an extent that they were willing to turn on their own friends and family for being sympathizers with the leftist rebel regime (Colussi 2014). Such indoctrination and violence, he explains, has not totally coursed its way through the Guatemalan system, and occasionally this infirmity manifests itself externally. Proponents of the Scars of War Theory posit that this effect is what drives vigilantism today and assert that Guatemalans exposed to violence during the Civil War have been desensitized to both severe violence and lack of regard for due process—two preconditions for spontaneous mob violence.

Though related to the Mayan Theory in its focus on Guatemala’s indigenous population, the Scars of War Theory does not point to ethnicity itself as the root cause of vigilantism, but instead to historic victimization. Thus, Guatemalans who experienced wartime violence should be equally likely to engage in vigilantism regardless of their race. To test the validity of this explanation, I propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Provinces that experienced higher levels of massacres during the Guatemalan Civil war will exhibit higher levels of vigilantism than those that experienced fewer or no massacres.

**Governmental Incompetence Theory**

“In politics, perception is reality.” These words, spoken by former United States Republican Party consultant Lee Attwater, perfectly capture the political conundrum of Guatemala (Willis 2013, 1). The general population, historically abused and neglected
by corrupt and incompetent ruling elites, has ceased giving the government the benefit of the doubt. Instead, the people’s default mindset toward their ruling authorities is one of indifference—or even skeptical cynicism. Thus, the country’s struggling government is not only weakened by its poor performance, but also by negative public perception. As a testament to this unpopularity, a nationwide survey conducted in 2018 revealed that 47.8% of the Guatemalan public disapproved of the police, 38% disapproved of the nation’s judicial system, and 76% disapproved of its prison system (ENPEVI 2018).

Proponents of the Government Incompetence Theory see the Guatemalan government’s unpopularity as a natural byproduct of the country’s checkered political past and present, which includes unsuccessful prosecution of civil war generals accused of war crimes, presidential corruption, and bribery of constitutional court members (United Nations Secretary General 2004). The people’s negative experiences breed mistrust, especially toward Guatemala’s law enforcement and justice systems, and hamstrings the potential efficacy of any top-down attempts to rectify past mistakes or abuses. According to the Government Incompetence Theory, such a lack of confidence makes Guatemalans feel obligated to take matters into their own hands to ensure justice is served: “justicia a la mano propia.” On the scene of a 2009 lynching that left behind the charred corpses of three alleged rapists, village elder Thomas Saquic commented:

This matter is now closed; there’s nothing more to say. Justice was done and it’s our business. The only thing I can tell you is that here we take a tough line [tenemos mano dura] and we know that the police, human rights, and the judges are all corrupt. (Sieder 2011, 3)

Sieder uses this elder’s justification of a lynching on the basis of the incompetence of his nation’s law enforcement to support her assertion that vigilantism has been implemented as a replacement for government intervention. This claim is further illustrated by the village peoples’ refusal to allow the police and ambulance to attend to the scene, a common theme of such events which is generally ascribed to the fear that suspected criminals will never be prosecuted (Sieder 2011, 4).

Though elements of governmental distrust are markedly high in indigenous communities that have historically been subjected to governmental abuses, it is important to note that this theory is more general than the previous two because of its inclusion of an even broader segment of the population. Not all Guatemalans are Mayan, nor have they all been the subjects of discriminatory wartime violence, yet all can harbor feelings of distrust or disbelief towards the government and be spurred toward vigilantism. This theory is important because it helps to explain the rampant vigilantism that has been observed in even Guatemala’s least-Mayan provinces.

The extent to which government mistrust correlates with vigilantism, the Government Incompetence Theory will be tested using the following hypothesis:

H3: Provinces that exhibit higher levels of distrust in the government will exhibit higher levels of vigilantism than those that have lower levels of distrust.
Research Design

Upon review of the three prevailing theories in the available literature, I find that the systematic empirical evidence supporting them is generally sparse. From my analysis, most articles on Guatemalan vigilantism depend on anecdotal evidence such as on-the-spot interviews which, though valuable in certain circumstances, are subjective and can fail to reflect true motives for action due to social desirability bias (Sieder 2011; Arifin-Cabo 2011; Garcia 2004). Additionally, most of the cases of vigilantism and lynchings cited in the literature are seemingly cherry-picked from provinces with high indigenous populations such as Quiché, Huehuetenango, and Sololá—suggesting possible confirmation bias in the research (Sieder 2011; “El Castigo Maya” 2018; “Linchan y Queman” 2015). Studies that do delve into the numbers do so delicately, including tables that indicate the general prevalence or rise and fall of vigilantism instead of quantitatively searching for root causes on a provincial basis. Though this shallow level of findings is understandable due to the newness of vigilantism statistics and the difficult and limited nature of Guatemalan government databases, such ambitious theories necessitate statistical substantiation and careful analysis before they reach wholesale acceptance.

To analyze the validity of each of the explanations, I performed correlation analyses between each of the proposed independent variables and all twenty-two Guatemalan provinces’ frequency of vigilantism. I measure the dependent variable, vigilantism, based on data from the Guatemalan Office of Human Rights Annual 2021 Report which provides provincial breakdowns of “vigilante acts” from 2005–2021. As part of this measure, I will not only include lynchings—illegal citizen detentions in which injury or death occurs—but also incidents in which the victim(s) were arrested but escaped unscathed. Though it could plausibly be argued that citizen detentions resulting in no injury to those apprehended have different root motivations than violent lynchings, the agency’s grouping of the two outcomes into one indicator suggests that, despite their differing outcomes, both types of detention should be considered as variants of the same vigilante phenomenon.

Admittedly, a municipality-by-municipality breakdown of vigilante acts would provide a more precise statistical analysis; however, after extensive research, it seems no such record exists. Additionally, the range of the data studied is somewhat limited—it seems that, despite the emergence of widespread vigilantism around the conclusion of the Civil War in 1996, the phenomenon was not reliably documented on a national scale until 2005 (Guatemalan Office of Human Rights 2021).

To control for the wide variation in provincial population, I divided each province’s total of acts of vigilantism for a given time period by its population as reported in the 2018 Guatemalan Census. In this way, instead of tilting the analysis heavily towards Guatemala’s most populous regions, this new indicator, “Acts of Vigilantism per Capita,” or AVPC, as I will hereafter refer to it, reflects an average citizen’s likelihood to be involved in an act of vigilantism in their province.
To test the Mayan Theory, I accessed data from the 2018 Guatemalan Census and calculated each province’s percentage of population that self-identifies as Maya to serve as the independent variable. Then, I performed a simple correlation analysis by plotting each province’s proportion of indigenous population with its respective AVPC for the years 2005–2020 (as the Office of Human Rights published its report in March, vigilante acts in 2021 were excluded).

To test the Scars of War Theory, I used a chart from Oglesby and Ross’s article, “Guatemala’s Genocide Determination and Spatial Politics of Justice,” which details the number of massacres documented by Guatemala’s Commission for Historical Clarification by province (2009). Just as with AVPC, I controlled each province’s number of documented massacres by dividing by population, thus hoping to capture the prevalence of the killings on an individual basis. Next, I calculated and plotted the correlation between massacres per capita and AVPC.

To test the Government Incompetence Theory, I first had to find appropriate proxies to represent the Guatemalan Government’s effectiveness or lack thereof. The Guatemalan Government has a historic lack of transparency and introspection, so records of corruption and bribery are not widely available in a central location. In addition, public opinion surveys, which can be costly endeavors, are not consistently realized on a national level. Despite this relative lack of documentation, however, I was able to locate a standalone government-sponsored survey from 2018 called ENPEVI—the National Survey of Public Security Perception and Victimization. Though the survey’s main focus was the extent to which Guatemala’s public felt safe in certain situations, it included a question used to gauge citizens’ overall confidence in specific government institutions on both a local and national level.

This analysis assumes public confidence to be a valid proxy for government competence because a government is only as competent as it is perceived to be by its constituents. As such, I decided to focus on the provincial perception of three judicial institutions whose proposed “weakness” is often blamed in the wake of vigilante intervention: the police, the judges, and the prison system. This data allowed me to calculate the strength of the correlation between provincial AVPC and confidence levels in each institution, providing a direct insight into the political thought process of everyday citizens—a thought process that, under the right conditions, can drive them to engage in extrajudicial violence. Since the survey was conducted in 2017–2018 only, I limited the analysis of AVPC to those years and the years that followed: 2017–2020.

Results

H1: The Mayan Theory
Figure 1: Percentage of province of Mayan ethnicity and AVPC exhibit a weak relationship

My test of the Mayan Theory suggests only a weak relationship between the percentage of a province’s population of Mayan ethnicity and vigilantism, with a correlation of 0.28. The less-Mayan provinces exhibit a fair amount of spread in AVPC, ranging from the only 2 percent Mayan Jutiapa with a country-low rate of vigilantism, to the 14.95 percent Mayan Retalhuleu that registers a national high. Though the three most Mayan provinces, Totonicapán, Alta Verapaz, and Sololá all exhibit above average rates of vigilantism, it must be noted that the far less Mayan provinces of Huehuetenango (64.99%), Quetzaltenango (51.13%), Suchitepéquez (38.06%), and Retalhuleu (14.95%) exhibit even higher levels of vigilantism, despite their varying ethnic compositions. Additionally, though Jutiapa, Jalapa, Zacapa, Santa Rosa, and El Progreso—all of which are below 5% Mayan and have the 1st, 2nd, 5th, 7th, and 9th lowest levels of vigilantism, respectively—present an interesting cluster, my analysis reveals far too many outliers throughout the rest of the country to produce definitive conclusions in favor of the Mayan Theory. Given the relatively high levels of vigilantism in the nation’s most Mayan provinces, it is easy to see how potentially biased media coverage could give the impression that vigilantism is most frequent in those regions; however, my per-capita analysis reveals generally disparately distributed levels of extrajudicial violence throughout the country, independent of Mayan heritage.
I also find very little support for the Scars of War Theory, which registers a meager correlation of 0.21. Worth noting is a slightly linear positive trend manifest in the provinces of Chiquimula, Sololá, Alta Verapaz, and Huehuetenango, implying that historic massacres might have a stronger impact on vigilantism in these specific provinces; however, a broader analysis reveals this pattern is not generalizable. Additionally apparent is the fact that Guatemala’s most ethnically Mayan provinces bore the brunt of the violence, and the vast majority of the country was relatively untouched. According to the Scars of War explanation, the relatively unscathed provinces should exhibit correspondingly low levels of vigilantism. This causal logic, however, does not manifest in my results, as provinces with low levels of massacres per capita exhibit an incredible range of variation of AVPC. In fact, just between provinces having experienced zero massacres, the number of acts of vigilantism per 100,000 people ranges from 2.46 to 11.5—a 367 percent difference. This general bunching of the data points along the y-axis suggests that the Scars of War Theory’s independent variable, historical government brutality in the form of massacres, does not effectively explain Guatemalan vigilantism on a nationwide scale. Furthermore, the correlation is significantly skewed by Quiché, which experienced 15 times more massacres than the average Guatemalan
province. Removing Quiché from the calculation results in a much lower correlation coefficient of only 0.14. From this analysis, I conclude that despite the link between the Mayan and the Scars of War Theories, the notion of vigilantism as a natural outgrowth of violent victimization from Guatemala’s Civil War finds even less backing than the cultural explanation.

**H3: The Government Incompetence Theory**

Government incompetence, despite being a conclusion reached by analysts and Guatemalans alike, similarly struggles to explain vigilantism. With correlations of 0.22, 0.14, and -0.03, respectively, the three selected proxies for efficacy—lack of confidence in the Guatemalan police, judges, and prison system—appear to explain little to no variation in AVPC. This evidence—or lack thereof—is illustrated in the loosely distributed spread of the scatterplots below.

*Figure 3: Percentage of province of with little to no trust in police exhibits a weak relationship with AVPC*
Figure 4: Percentage of province with little to no trust in Guatemalan judges and AVPC exhibits a very weak relationship
These findings cast significant doubt on the main premise of the Government Incompetence Theory, which predicts that as a province’s lack of confidence in a judicial institution increases, so does its likelihood to participate in vigilantism. Ultimately, these weak correlations suggest that, even if a slight causal relationship between governmental weakness and vigilantism does exist, academia and the public’s simplistic explanations that wholly blame institutional decay are likely misplaced.

Of contextual interest, additional tests revealed much stronger correlations between Mayan ethnicity and the negative perception of specific governmental institutions, including the army (0.57) and the Office of Human Rights Ombudsman (0.48). This level of tension, understandable considering the war’s victimization of the Guatemalan Maya, is assuredly well-known publicly; thus, exposure to reports of lynchings and vigilantism taking place in indigenous communities could reinforce the public’s convictions about both the Mayan Theory and the Governmental Incompetence Theory at once.
Implications

In light of the virtually nonexistent correlation between theorized causes of Guatemalan vigilantism and its actual occurrence, this study has two major takeaways, both of which call into question commonly held perceptions of the phenomenon.

First, given their relatively low correlations of 0.27 and 0.21, it seems both the Mayan and Scars of War Theories are largely unfounded—the general conclusion that Guatemalan vigilantism is uniquely a product of either Mayan culture or historical trauma is overly simplistic. The largely unvalidated Mayan Theory’s persistence to the modern day, despite academic pushback, may be a testament to residual racist stereotypes that have plagued Guatemala since colonial times, whereas the lack of evidence for the Scars of War Theory questions the prevailing assertion that the nation’s bloody history is directly responsible for its vigilantism—and by extension, high levels of other violence—today. Additionally problematic is these ethnic explanations’ hyperfocus on vigilantism in highly-Mayan provinces—whether pointing to their cultural qualities or their high levels of historic victimization—while seemingly ignoring the phenomenon in non-indigenous areas.

Furthermore, it seems these two theories are interconnected. As the Mayan Theory’s assertion that Guatemala’s Maya are inherently more violent than the rest of the population falls under increasing criticism in academia, it is possible that some analysts are shifting to the Scars of War Theory because it fits with their still unchanged view that Mayans have a higher propensity toward vigilantism by nature. Despite this shift, however, the findings of my study suggest that the latter explanation is even less supported than the former. Consequently, I call for a reframing of the general discourse on the topic at large and urge the elimination of preconceived prejudices and a more open-minded, careful consideration and coverage of vigilantism in all twenty-two of Guatemala’s provinces—not just the indigenous ones. Additional research regarding the role Guatemalan media has played in the promulgation of these seemingly misguided theories could contribute insight into their historical origins and current popularity among the Guatemalan population today.

Second, the Government Incompetence Theory’s proposition that institutional weakness drives Guatemalans towards vigilantism to compensate for the lack of justice, while logically sound and receiving wide acceptance in the literature, does not seem to reflect reality. The relationship between Guatemala’s judicial institutions—the police, the judges, and the prison systems—and vigilantism was found to be very weak in my tests. Though a government-conducted survey on the efficacy of government may admittedly elicit a certain degree of social desirability bias from certain respondents, the survey’s immense sample size helps negate this effect. These findings call into question the notion that Guatemalans spring into action because they mistrust the institutions tasked with administering justice—one of the most common tropes of media write-ups and international government reports alike. Additionally, they cast doubt on the academic use of anecdotal, on-the-spot interviews which traditionally blame a weak
or corrupt state, suggesting that the violent phenomenon is likely a consequence of an unmentioned factor.

**Conclusion**

Though admittedly my study of the causes of Guatemalan vigilantism could be refined with a more rigorous test, such as a regression that considers yearly, sub-provincial data for my variables of vigilantism, ethnic composition, and government perception, such data sources do not seem to exist. Despite this limitation, my simple correlations reveal that none of the prevailing theories successfully bears the weight of explaining Guatemalan vigilantism by itself. Simple, reductive explanations such as the Mayan and Scars of War theories find very little empirical support and may be evidence of a continued racist anti-Mayan sentiment today. The Government Incompetence Theory, while oft referenced and logical, finds even less backing. In a modern era in which simplified headlines and catchy clickbait reign supreme, the root of Guatemalan vigilantism stands out as a nuanced topic that calls for nuanced investigation.
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