

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10655-0 - Autocracy and Redistribution: The Politics of Land Reform

Michael Albertus

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1

**Introduction**

What are the political conditions under which land reform occurs? When is land reform redistributive, and what political purposes does it serve? Who are the chief beneficiaries of reform? And what place, if any, does land reform have in today's world?

Land reform dates back at least to the time of Solon and Pisistratus in sixth-century BC Greece. Distributional questions related to land use and ownership were at the heart of the French Revolution, the emancipation of the serfs in Russia, and countless long-standing social movements in the developing world. And land reform continues in the present day in countries such as Brazil, the Philippines, South Africa, and Venezuela. US President John F. Kennedy encapsulated the imperative of land reform in the Americas when he announced the 1961 Alliance for Progress, highlighting the need for countries to "improve the productivity and use of their land, wipe out disease, attack archaic tax and land tenure structures, provide educational opportunities, and offer a broad range of projects designed to make the benefits of increasing abundance available to all."

The answers that I provide to these important questions depart from much of the common wisdom about the rural sector that political scientists, economists, and sociologists hold dear. First and foremost is the observation that the most redistributive variety of land reform occurs under autocratic rule, not under democracy. Indeed, the spread of democracy has undermined land redistribution and left many disregarded rural populations cast adrift. This implies a second novel observation: in spite of the conclusions of influential scholars such as Barrington Moore and Alexander Gerschenkron, democracy has rarely been threatening to landowners. Indeed, democracy has not infrequently been a friend and savior of large landowners. Although democracy does not forestall all types of land reform, it tables land redistribution – the greatest threat to landed elites. Third, the focus on popular mobilization and the perception that mobilization drives redistribution is at least partly misplaced. Intra-elite

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

conflict and institutional constraints to rule largely determine where and when redistributive land reform occurs. Popular mobilization only rarely yields land redistribution directly; much more frequently, it directs the scope and targeting of redistribution once an opening for redistribution has been created. Finally, land reform is hardly dead. Negotiated land reform and land colonization – and to a lesser extent land redistribution – is ongoing in many developing countries, and rural populations will continue to press for reform. But if land reform is to have a chance at effectively tackling rural poverty and landlessness in the future, it needs a major overhaul.

This book is dedicated to developing and explaining these findings. My main argument, from which these conclusions stem, is that redistributive land reform occurs when there is a coalitional split between ruling political elites and landed elites alongside low institutional constraints to rule. A coalitional split provides political elites with the incentives to eliminate a powerful rival elite out-group while simultaneously currying the favor of regime insiders. But a coalitional split is not enough; land reform is an onerous process that requires the sustained cooperation of a wide range of political actors. Redistributive land reform therefore also necessitates the concentration of power most often found under autocracy if landed elites are to be stymied from acting as a cog in the wheel of reform. Institutional constraints simply provide too many footholds for landed elites to leverage their influence and obstruct reform. The less redistributive types of land reform – negotiated land reform, which compensates owners at market rates, and land colonization – operate under logics distinct from those of land redistribution. Foreign aid, wealth, and popular pressure from below have a greater impact on those types of land reform.

## LAND, LAND REFORM, AND THE RURAL SECTOR

Land is the chief productive asset for the world's rural poor. Most of the rural poor, and some of the urban poor as well, depend on agriculture as their main source of income (Lipton 2009, 148). Land also serves as social insurance in the developing world. It provides not only employment and income but also sustenance, a place to live, insurance for infirmity and age, and security for future generations. Land reform in developing countries is therefore viewed as a type of affirmative action or as a substitute for income and employment transfers that is analogous to the Western European welfare state (e.g., Thiesenhusen 1989).

Yet throughout most of the past several hundred years and most of the history of settled agriculture during which there was surplus, the majority of rural people have been dependent on local landlords for access to land, inputs, and credit. Rural inhabitants frequently worked small plots of land at the discretion of a local landlord who required labor on the landlord's property in exchange.

Take the case of Bolivia prior to the 1952 revolution. The largest 6 percent of landowners held 92 percent of the entire country's farmland. Most highland

Cambridge University Press

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Michael Albertus

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

peasants operated under the system of *colonato*, wherein workers were given a small house and a plot on a hacienda for subsistence farming in exchange for labor on the landlord's fields, often 5–6 days per week in the growing season and every day of the harvest (Thiesenhusen 1995, 54). On top of this, domestic service was required in the landlord's house. Women often served as maids and men as busboys or deliverymen. As one priest put it in 1870, "the Indian continues to be considered by us as a degenerate being born to serve, to be employed without pay in the vilest of occupations" (Condarco Morales 1965, 37). Where land was not a limiting factor, peasants were allowed to plant in unoccupied territories but were mandated to turn over a portion of their crops and livestock to the landlord. Landlords that did not reserve land for themselves to be farmed by peasants instead often imposed taxes. Physical abuse and exploitation of peasants was common. A fieldworker from the Inter-American Committee for Agricultural Development reported the following on the eve of the revolution:

So the patrón [landlord] would say to the headman (*jilacata*): "this man is working badly – give him the lash" – and calling his people together he would say – "come, now, my son, down you get. Come along, headman, three lashes for this lad, three of the best!" So the headman would give him three strokes and if they were not hard enough then the patrón himself would thrash the headman, saying: "This is the way to thrash and this is how thou'llt thrash the workers, so that they feel it as thou art feeling it now." (Pearse 1972, 269).

*Colonos* were kept in debt peonage and therefore lacked freedom of movement. They were sold with the land.

Landlords in Bolivia justified the status quo with arguments of racial superiority, economic necessity, and the imperative of social order. All of this was lacquered over with a touch of cynical paternalism, as the differing post-land reform accounts by a landlord and a service tenant from the same former estate indicate:

Patrón: "In my estate, we gave equal treatment to whites and to *indios*. All of the *indios* were well loved. When they needed something they would come and ask: 'Master, lend me the so-and-so' and we gave them all they asked for. More than this, my father arranged their marriages. He would grab hold of a peasant and ask him whom he wanted to marry, and no matter whether the one he chose was widowed or single, my father would immediately make them marry. It was a splendid life – and see what it has come to now!"

Peasant: "Before, we were slaves because we were stupid, we didn't understand what was going on. We didn't have anybody to defend us and we were afraid to do anything for fear that the patrón would beat us. We didn't know why we were beaten. We didn't know about our rights." (Muratorio 1966, 5).

Asymmetric and in some cases feudal relationships like those that defined the *colonato* in Bolivia clearly delineate social class. They also have important political implications, not least of which is the ability of powerful landowners to

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Michael Albertus

Excerpt

[More information](#)

exclude rural workers from the franchise or to influence rural workers' votes (Baland and Robinson 2008; Moore 1966; Ziblatt 2009). Agrarian institutions "are one of the best outward manifestations of social class: they reflect status within society, they reflect privilege, they reflect power" (Thiesenhusen 1989, 31). Land is therefore also fertile ground for contentious politics. Unequal or weak agrarian institutions and skewed landholding patterns are linked to land conflicts in diverse contexts across the world (e.g., Albertus and Kaplan 2013; Boone 2013; Paige 1975; Russett 1964; Wood 2000).

The impact of rural relationships on society in developing states has been enormous, and it continues to be so today. In 1950, 71 percent of the world's population was rural. As of 2010, 49 percent of the world's population was rural. In most of sub-Saharan Africa today, the level of ruralization is similar to that in Western Europe around 1850 and to that in most of Latin America around 1900, and rural populations are continuing to grow (Boone 2013). Poverty is concentrated in these rural areas. Slightly more than three-quarters of the 1.2 billion people in extreme poverty (the "dollar-poor") were rural in 2002 (Lipton 2009, 148). Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the rural population works in agriculture. Roughly 67 percent of the world's economically active population worked in agriculture in 1950, and that figure remained at 45 percent in 2000 (FAO 2000).

Land reform can fundamentally transform the material and social well-being of the poor. Although definitions of land reform vary, most share in common one often-stated end: the reduction of rural poverty by transferring the control of farmland to the land-poor. Land reform can increase the well-being of rural workers by increasing income from land for the land-poor, raising the demand for labor, and creating farm enterprise opportunities (Lipton 2009). It can simultaneously contribute to agricultural growth, given that small farms are typically more productive than large farms (e.g., Berry and Cline 1979; Deininger 2003). Furthermore, by redefining the relationship between rural inhabitants and landlords, land reform enhances social inclusion, converting the poor into more equal citizens with greater political clout. Land reform therefore represents an economically important and politically charged type of redistribution that amounts to what Huntington (1968, 299) calls a "reordering of basic social relationships." It is perhaps the most consequential form of social and economic redistribution in agrarian societies – certainly much more consequential than income redistribution.

The effects of land reform are not limited to the rural sector. Increased rural income often spills over to increases in non-farm income as input suppliers gain business and consumption increases. Land reform can even have economy-wide effects as the retarding influence of inequality wanes (Alesina and Rodrik 1994; Vollrath and Erickson 2007).

The legacy of land reform bears witness to its transformative potential. Land reform has contributed considerably to the decline in the economic and social oppression of the rural poor. It has affected at least 1.5 billion people since 1945

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10655-0 - Autocracy and Redistribution: The Politics of Land Reform

Michael Albertus

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

(Lipton 2009, 1). Land reforms under Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia, and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe attacked landed elite interests, as did the elimination of the zamindars in India and land collectivization in Tanzania. Radical land reforms implemented by the United States in Taiwan, Korea, and Japan led to the destruction of the landed classes and a fundamental social and economic reformation as large landholders were destroyed in favor of smallholders (Walinsky 1977). China, Russia, and much of Eastern Europe under communism expropriated landed elites and collectivized property only to later decollectivize in a relatively egalitarian manner (King 1973; Lipton 2009, 283).

Even Western European countries, such as France and the Netherlands, witnessed major land reforms during the nineteenth century that are seen as key milestones in their political and economic modernization (Swinnen 2002). Similarly, land reform in southern Italy following World War II targeted large estates for redistribution among peasants and transformed the semi-feudal rural social structure (King 1973).<sup>1</sup> Other examples abound in cases as diverse as Iran, Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Vietnam (see, e.g., Borras 2007; El-Ghonyemy 2002; Herring 1983; Tai 1974). As Lipton (2009, 7) writes, land redistribution in favor of the rural poor “has spread much further, and with more success, than is widely believed.” By contrast, where land reform has been absent, the poorest half of rural workers typically control less than 10 percent of the farmland (Lipton 2009, 2).

Land reform has also played a key role in empowering indigenous and minority communities in many countries. The physical recognition of historical land claims has been a motivating force behind a host of social movements by populations that are facing discrimination and seek formal recognition, cultural autonomy, or policies of affirmative action. South Africa, for instance, instituted a market-based land reform following the end of apartheid that provides state support to restitute lands to blacks dispossessed through racially discriminatory practices such as the Native Land Act (Thwala 2006). Similar efforts to restitute land to blacks dispossessed during colonialism are also under way in Kenya and Zimbabwe. Yashar (1999, 83) details how many major land reforms in Latin America prior to the onset of neoliberalism provided space for the reemergence of indigenous leaders, the reconstitution of communities, and the institutionalization of indigenous community practices and identities at the local level. Although some of these gains were eroded following democratization and the adoption of neoliberal policies, marginalized indigenous groups and rural Afro-Latino communities that descended from runaway slaves have recently organized in many Latin American states to gain collective land rights that strengthen their identity and traditions (Hooker 2005).

<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Spain’s failed attempt at land redistribution during the Second Republic led to the persistence of the agrarian aristocracy among the “Grandes de España.” See, e.g., Malefakis (1970).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Of course, land reform is not always transformative. Radical attempts at reform can be watered down, gutted, or countered. Landed elites can try to subdivide their land among relatives and friends in an effort to evade landholding ceilings or to inflate their perceived family size to qualify for higher land-retaining thresholds, as some landed elites did in West Bengal (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2010). Large landowners can marshal influence with local judges, the police, and even militias to keep land reform laws from affecting them, as many did in Brazil and Colombia (Albertus, Brambor, and Ceneviva 2015; LeGrand 1986). And landed elites who cannot wiggle out of land expropriation but who have diversified assets can sometimes relocate to cities and continue to exert influence over policy in other economic sectors. Furthermore, low state capacity can hobble reform implementation. Weak state penetration into the periphery can raise the cost and decrease the efficacy of reform, as occurred under Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. Land reforms can also be entirely derailed. Landed interests can capture or influence legislators to reverse the terms of land reform; in some cases, land-concentrating policies are cynically advanced under the banner of “land reform.” Landed elites can also directly threaten the executive by leveraging their economic power or an alliance with the military.

The primary – but not exclusive – empirical focus of this book is Latin America. The history of land reform and political development in the region makes it an ideal testing ground for theory on the conditions under which reform is implemented. Latin America inherited a legacy of lopsided and semi-feudal land ownership following Spanish and Portuguese colonization (de Janvry 1981; Thiesenhusen 1989). Following independence, land long remained a key component of net wealth for both rich and poor and a major economic foundation of political power and social prestige for ruling elites (Barracough 1973). Although only 21 percent of the population was rural in 2010, more than 50 percent was rural before 1961. The majority of the economically active population was employed in agriculture in fourteen of nineteen countries in Latin America in 1950. The same number of countries had more than 40 percent of the economically active population employed in agriculture in 1970. Yet the vast majority of these rural laborers were poor. A mere 10 percent of the population in Latin America owned 90 percent of the land even in the 1960s (Lapp 2004, 2).

Political variation in the region against this backdrop of inequality has provided a wide range of institutional arrangements under which land reform could be pursued. Every country in Latin America has experienced both autocratic and democratic rule since the early twentieth century. Institutional variation has also been wide within these regime types. There have been long periods of single-party rule under dictatorship, as in Mexico and Paraguay, as well as many episodes of military dictatorship and unelected civilian rule. Democracy has been characterized by periods of presidentialism and parliamentarism, varying degrees of judicial independence, single legislative chambers and bicameralism, and differing levels of malapportionment. Furthermore, most countries in the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10655-0 - Autocracy and Redistribution: The Politics of Land Reform

Michael Albertus

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

region, as exemplified by Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Honduras, and Peru, have oscillated between democracy and various forms of dictatorship.<sup>2</sup>

Under what political conditions has land reform been implemented? How has it been structured, and who has benefited from it? What are the consequences of land reform in these countries? Thiesenhusen (1995) denigrates many of the cases of land reform in Latin America as little more than “broken promises” when they are measured according to their intended goals. Rather than eliminating haciendas by redistributing them to peasants, de Janvry (1981) argues that many agrarian reforms accelerated the modernization and transformation of the hacienda system. Kay (1998) echoes this thesis, contending that although a host of Latin American countries implemented substantial land redistribution, the majority of reforms ultimately favored the development of capitalist farming by the 1990s.

Yet despite the large literature on land reform, this conclusion is incomplete. There has been no scholarly work that uses a cross-national comparative framework to empirically analyze the political foundations and outcomes of these programs. Furthermore, many accounts of land reform’s failures reach this conclusion by treating partial reforms as failures or by focusing exclusively on direct rich-poor transfers. But as Lipton (2009, 281) argues, “Enormous social changes, challenging *some* ‘rural tyrants’ and placing land and power in the hands of *some* of the rural ‘masses’ for the first time in centuries, should not be written down – or written off – because they fail to meet exaggerated targets or expectations.” No land reform program could possibly resolve all forms of rural poverty at once and eliminate every large- and medium-sized landholder. Nor could a reform program redistribute all targeted land simultaneously. Problems of noncompliance, finite administrative funding, and limited state capacity imply that some groups will inevitably be untouched by reform efforts. Finally, even reforms that are subsequently undone or undermined merit attention, even if they do not yield long-standing or widespread changes; the unraveling of reform may occur because of factors distinct from those that led to reform in the first place.

The lack of systematic empirical evidence is one major reason why existing scholarship comes to widely varying conclusions about the causes and successes of land reform. Research to date has also often failed to conceptually distinguish between the types of reforms that have occurred, thereby conflating dissimilar policies.

## CLASSIFYING AND MEASURING LAND REFORM

This book makes sense of some of the disparate findings in the land reform literature by developing a typology of land reform – focusing on the source of

<sup>2</sup> The findings in following chapters are not simply driven by the relative lack of stability in some Latin American democracies or other potentially unique regional features. A global analysis of land reform in Chapter 8 yields findings that closely parallel those for Latin America.



Cambridge University Press

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Michael Albertus

Excerpt

[More information](#)

land and how it is acquired or incorporated by the state for the purposes of reform – and then systematically collecting data across this typology for all of Latin America since 1930. The book also provides a framework for understanding the different conditions under which governments are likely to implement one type of land reform instead of another. It consequently fills a major gap in the study of comparative politics. Land reform has been dramatically understudied despite the fact that land is at the center of rural life and rural politics.

Land reform encompasses a variety of policies: land expropriation and redistribution, negotiated transfers from the private market, colonization programs, land titling, tenure reforms, and the generation of private land markets.<sup>3</sup> I focus on three analytically distinct policies of reform that are oriented at physically transferring the ownership of land: redistribution, negotiation, and colonization.<sup>4</sup> I define land redistribution as the undercompensated or uncompensated expropriation of land from the private sector and the redistribution of that land to the land-poor. Land negotiation is the acquisition of land from the private sector with market-value or above-market-value compensation and its subsequent transfer to the land-poor. Land colonization is the state-directed transfer of state-owned land to settlers.

Coding the physical area of land transferred through these policies provides the clearest picture to date of the extensive scope and character of land reform in Latin America. A total of 128 million hectares, or 1.28 million km<sup>2</sup>, of land was expropriated and redistributed in Latin America from 1930 to 2008. There were 37 million hectares transferred through compensated land negotiations and another 106 million hectares transferred through land colonization. A total of 14 percent of all of the land in Latin America – 271 million hectares – transferred hands between 1930 and 2008 as a result of these three types of land

<sup>3</sup> The term “land reform” is used by some scholars to refer to a subset of the broader policies that constitute agrarian reform. These broader policies may include, but are not limited to, the provision of credits, inputs, infrastructure (e.g., irrigation), marketing assistance, and services directed at the rural sector (see, e.g., Deininger 2003; Thiesenhusen 1989; Tuma 1965). Although I discuss many of these consequential policies, a systematic analysis of them is beyond the scope of this book.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that other land reform policies are unimportant or that they are not redistributive. Land tenure reforms, such as the modification of leasing laws or revisions of the terms for distributing surplus production from sharecropping, for instance, can certainly influence rural welfare (see, e.g., Swinnen 2002), as can securing land tenure via titling or other mechanisms (see, e.g., De Soto 2003; Deininger 2003; Galiani and Schargrodsky 2010). Similarly, progressive taxes on agricultural land, while presently and historically very low (Binswanger-Mkhize, Bourguignon, and van den Brink 2009; Bird and Slack 2004), may prompt “voluntary” land reform by encouraging more efficient land use and spurring changes to land tenure (see, e.g., Binswanger-Mkhize et al. 2009). Nonetheless, the physical transfer of land ownership is at the core of land reform and holds the potential to be the most redistributive reform method, both because of its economic importance as the transfer of assets (plus future income) and because of its implications for rural social relationships. The land reform literature has therefore long focused primarily on land transfer programs as the most consequential reform policy and as an indicator of total land reform effort (see, e.g., Tai 1974, 11–13).



*Introduction*

9

reform. This represents an area nearly the size of all of Western and Northern Europe or the equivalent of roughly 1.5 times the land area of Mexico. Given that most land reform focused on arable or cultivable regions, *more than half of all the cultivable land in Latin America* transferred hands through land reform.

Bolivia, Chile, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru all implemented considerable land redistribution programs. These programs had a significant impact on landed elites and the welfare of rural inhabitants. Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Paraguay, and Venezuela did less redistributive reforms, focusing more on negotiated land transfers with full compensation to landowners than on expropriation and redistribution. Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, and Venezuela all had large land colonization programs to grant state-owned land to rural colonizers, some of which complemented other land reform policies and others of which served as substitutes to alleviate demographic pressure on privately held land. Furthermore, land tenure reforms abolishing feudalistic tenure arrangements, such as *pongeaje* (Bolivia), *huasipungaje* (Ecuador), *inquilinaje* (Chile), *peonaje acasillado* (Mexico), and *yanaconaje* (Peru), destroyed some of the most exploitative labor conditions and enabled peasants to increase their political and social independence vis-à-vis landlords. As Mayer (2009, 3) writes of General Velasco's land reform in late 1960s Peru: "[I]t was the first government ever to execute significant income distribution in a society of great inequalities. It completed the abolition of all forms of servitude in rural estates, a momentous shift in the history of the Andes, akin to the abolition of slavery in the Americas."

Land reform was also blocked or reduced in scope by landed interests in a number of cases. Landed elites watered down reform in countries such as Colombia and Costa Rica, and they almost entirely blocked it in Argentina and Uruguay.

There is significant variation in the timing and pace of land reform in the region. Early land redistribution began in Mexico following its 1917 constitution. Land negotiation began in Uruguay in the 1920s and continued in the 1930s, when Colombia began purchasing private land for redistribution in conflictive areas, Chile expanded land colonization, and the Dominican Republic began land redistribution. Land redistribution, negotiation, and colonization continued at comparatively low levels until the late 1950s with Cuba's large-scale expropriation. Land reform efforts increased in many countries in the 1960s. Rafael Trujillo's extensive holdings in the Dominican Republic were expropriated in 1961 following his assassination. Land reform laws were passed in the early 1960s in Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, and Venezuela, but all of these countries relied on land negotiation and colonization instead of expropriation with the exception of Honduras, which was under military rule in the 1970s. The late 1960s witnessed increasing reformism in Chile and Mexico as well as under military generals in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru. Land reform remained very active in the 1970s.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Land redistribution declined in a host of countries during the 1980s. Yet land reform persisted in the 1990s and 2000s, primarily but not exclusively in the form of land negotiation and colonization. Land reform during this most recent period has been dominated by Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela. There was also substantial trailing reform (the *rezago agrario*) in Mexico after the officially declared end of reform in 1992, most prominently in response to the Zapatista Uprising. Land reform then reentered the political debate in the mid- to late 2000s in several countries.

Land reform is, of course, hardly limited to Latin America. To test the generalizability of my main theoretical argument explaining land redistribution, I also present data on every episode of land redistribution across the world since 1900. I code more than fifty episodes of land redistribution beyond Latin America across roughly a third of all countries, spanning every region of the world. Many more countries than this have undertaken large-scale programs of land colonization and land negotiation, and still others experienced reform prior to the last century.

#### THE POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION

Land reform is only one potential redistributive policy that governments might pursue to benefit the poor. There is a large literature on redistribution that provides a series of important insights into the political underpinnings of socially redistributive policy. What does this literature tell us about when governments implement equality-enhancing reforms?

One particularly influential argument comes from social conflict theory. Social conflict theory anticipates that democracies should be more likely than autocracies to adopt policies that will benefit the majority of citizens (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Boix 2003). Rooted in Meltzer and Richard's (1981) median voter model of tax rates, social conflict theory argues that majority rule allows poorer citizens to exert greater influence over the political economy than the oligarchy, therefore narrowing the income gap between the rich and poor through progressive social policies. As Acemoglu and Robinson (2006, 104) write, "[T]he median voter, who becomes poorer relative to the mean [with franchise extension], prefers greater tax rates and more redistribution."

This thesis echoes the classic arguments of Aristotle, Alexis de Tocqueville, and *The Federalist Papers*. Aristotle (1992, 192), for instance, stated, "Where men rule because of the possession of wealth, whether their number be large or small, that is oligarchy, and when the poor rule, that is democracy." For Aristotle, this had important implications for public policy, particularly because the rich in a society were few in number compared to the poor. Democracy was therefore tantamount to redistribution: "In democracies all share in all things, in oligarchies the opposing practice prevails" (Aristotle 1992, 415).