

The Catholic Church and Redistributive Conflict: The Effects of John Paul II's Rollback of Progressivism in Brazil *

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Abstract

We study how changes in religious leadership influence redistributive conflict. Following the 1978 appointment of Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church undertook a doctrinal shift that curtailed the influence of progressive clergy in Latin America. Focusing on Brazil, where progressive bishops had supported landless movements, we exploit the staggered replacement of bishops due to a mandatory retirement rule. We find that the replacement of progressive bishops with conservative successors significantly reduced land invasions, driven primarily by a decline in new conflicts. Effects are strongest in municipalities where the Church owns land, suggesting that conservative bishops acted in part to protect institutional assets. The findings highlight how religious leadership can shape redistributive politics by altering the local infrastructure of support for contentious movements.

Keywords: Leadership, social conflicts, Catholic Church.

JEL Codes: D74, N36, P48, Z12.

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1 Introduction

High inequality need not produce redistributive conflict. For the poor to contest how resources are distributed, diffuse grievances must be turned into common claims, and mobilization organized and sustained despite the costs of collective action. This is why churches, unions, and parties are so often central to distributive politics: they often shape how people understand their material conditions, and can supply the local infrastructure through which claims get organized. Religious institutions are particularly well suited to this, often combining moral authority with territorial reach and dense local networks that extend into communities where other organizations seldom reach. This paper asks whether a change in who leads such an institution can change the course of redistributive conflict.

We examine this question in Brazil, where land concentration was extreme, rural poverty widespread, and land occupations became a central strategy through which landless peasants pressured the state for redistribution (Hidalgo et al., 2010; Alston and Mueller, 2010). The Catholic Church was central to this conflict. During the 1960s and 1970s, progressive Catholic leaders in Latin America embraced a “preferential option for the poor” and became deeply involved in struggles over inequality. In Brazil, bishops, priests, nuns, and lay Catholic organizations helped landless peasants frame land inequality as a moral injustice, disseminated information about land rights, and coordinate collective action (Mainwaring, 1986). In this context, the Church was not merely a religious institution. It was a locally embedded organization with the capacity to shape whether the rural poor could contest the distribution of land.

The appointment of John Paul II in 1978 marked a sharp change in the direction of the Catholic Church. The papacies of John XXIII and Paul VI had opened a period in which poverty, inequality, and the welfare of the poor occupied a central place in the Church’s public mission. John Paul II sought to reverse this political engagement, particularly in Latin America, and to reduce the influence of progressive clergy within the Church hierarchy. Because bishops exercise substantial authority within dioceses—including authority over doctrine, clergy assignments, and parish organization—the replacement of progressive bishops became a central channel through which this doctrinal shift could reach local communities.

We study the consequences of this leadership change for land conflict in Brazil. Progressive Church leaders had supported the landless movement, a redistributive conflict in which poor and landless peasants occupied large landholdings to pressure the state for land reform. Bishops appointed under John Paul II were more likely to limit the Church’s involvement in contentious redistribution. The empirical question is whether this change in religious leadership weakened the

organizational support that had sustained land conflict at the local level.

To answer this question, we assemble new data on the organization and leadership of the Catholic Church in Brazil. We collect information on all bishops in office from 1978 to 2015, including their appointment dates, birth dates, vacancy dates, and reasons for vacancy. We also digitize detailed records from seven editions of the *Anuário Católico do Brasil* to identify priests serving in Brazilian parishes between 1965 and 1997. We combine these data with municipality-year measures of social conflict from 1965 to 2000, distinguishing land disputes from labor disputes, natural-resource conflicts, and other forms of rural conflict.

To study the causal effect of the doctrinal change of the Catholic Church on social conflicts, we exploit the papal succession alongside the institutional rules governing bishops' tenure. While the pope exercises ultimate authority over Catholics throughout the world, he entrusts his leadership to a bishop in each diocese, the main administrative unit within the Catholic Church. Within their dioceses, bishops have autonomy over religious policy and are responsible for governing. For instance, bishops have complete power over the assignment of priests to parishes. A key element of our setting is that bishops cannot be dismissed, and their vacancy only arises upon retirement at the age of 75 or death. The main way through which a pope can extend his influence is by appointing bishops once a vacancy arises.

Following [Tuñón \(2026\)](#), we exploit the institutional rules governing episcopal tenure, which constrained the timing at which John Paul II could replace bishops inherited from previous papacies. In particular, bishops are expected to retire at age 75, generating staggered opportunities for JPII to appoint new bishops across dioceses. We use the expected timing of replacement of the pre-JPII bishop in each diocese as our main source of variation. We define expected replacement as the year in which the bishop serving as of October 1978—when JPII assumed the papacy—either reached the mandatory retirement age of 75 or passed away, whichever occurred first. Because these expected replacements occurred at different points in time across dioceses, we exploit this staggered timing in a Difference-in-Differences framework that accounts for heterogeneous treatment timing.

First, we show that our measure of expected replacement strongly predicts the timing of the transition to JPII-appointed leadership. The probability of being led by a JPII-appointed bishop rises sharply once the pre-JPII bishop reaches retirement age or passes away, with no evidence of differential changes beforehand. On average, expected replacement increases the probability of being led by a JPII-appointed bishop by approximately 50 percentage points.

Second, we examine the effects of expected bishop replacement on land conflict using data from

Brazil's Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), which systematically records rural conflicts across the country. We find that when a pre-JPII bishop reaches retirement age or passes away, the number of active and new land conflicts decreases significantly. Combining these estimates with the effect on JPII appointments implies that the appointment of a bishop by John Paul II reduced active land conflicts by 29% between 1975 and 1994. These results indicate that the removal of progressive religious leaders substantially reduced land conflict in Brazil. The decline is specific to land conflict: we find no significant effects on other disputes, such as those related to labor or natural resources. Moreover, using Agricultural Census data, we find that expected bishop replacement reduces the share of agricultural establishments operated by occupants, alleviating concerns that the main results are driven by changes in conflict reporting by the CPT.

Event-study estimates support the identifying assumptions and clarify the dynamics of the effect. We find no evidence that land conflicts were declining prior to the expected replacement of pre-JPII bishops. This supports the parallel-trends assumption and mitigates concerns that bishops changed their behavior in anticipation of retirement. After expected replacement, land conflict declines. The reduction is first visible for new land conflicts and later translates into a decline in active conflicts, consistent with a mechanism in which conservative Church leadership weakened the organizational conditions needed to initiate and sustain rural mobilization.

We further investigate whether these effects reflect bishop turnover per se or the ideological content of the leadership change. To do so, we exploit the 2005 papal transition from John Paul II to Benedict XVI. Unlike the 1978 transition, this succession did not represent a sharp doctrinal reversal, since both popes shared a broadly conservative orientation. We construct an analogous measure of expected bishop replacement for bishops in office at the time of Benedict XVI's appointment. When Benedict XVI replaced bishops previously appointed by John Paul II—a conservative-to-conservative transition—we find no significant effect on land conflict. In contrast, among the small set of dioceses where bishops appointed before John Paul II remained in office until 2005, the replacement of these late-serving progressive bishops is associated with a decline in land conflict, especially in the emergence of new disputes. This pattern suggests that the main results are driven by the replacement of progressive leadership with more conservative leadership, rather than by episcopal turnover itself.

We next examine the organizational channel through which bishop turnover affected land conflict. Bishops exercise substantial authority over diocesan religious life, but their influence over local communities is mediated through parishes and the priests assigned to them. We first show that the decline in land conflict is concentrated in municipalities with at least one parish. Parishes are the basic local units of the Catholic Church, serving as centers of religious activity, community

engagement, and social mobilization. By 1977, 27% of municipalities lacked a parish within their boundaries, reflecting a weaker Catholic institutional presence. The concentration of our effects in municipalities with a parish suggests that the Church’s local infrastructure was central to the impact of bishop turnover.

We then provide direct evidence that bishop turnover reshaped this local infrastructure. We construct a parish-level panel by digitizing and linking priest assignments across editions of the *Anuário Católico do Brasil*. This panel allows us to track whether a parish receives a new priest after the expected replacement of a pre–John Paul II bishop. We find that expected bishop replacement increased priest turnover at the parish level. The effect is also present when priest turnover is aggregated to the municipality level, and is larger in more rural municipalities, where land conflict was most salient. These results suggest that episcopal turnover altered the local clerical infrastructure through which the progressive Church had supported rural mobilization.

Our paper contributes to three literatures. First, it contributes to the existing literature on leadership, which has studied the influence of leaders on a range of outcomes, including social norms, identity, governance, and state performance. For instance, [Jones and Olken \(2005\)](#) and [Besley et al. \(2011\)](#) find that leaders matter for economic growth. [Assouad \(2020\)](#) studies the role of individual leaders in constructing a national identity. [Dippel and Heblich \(2021\)](#) examines the role of leaders in social movements. Most closely related to our work, [Tuñón \(2026\)](#) shows that longer exposure to progressive Catholic bishops facilitated the electoral development of the Workers’ Party in Brazil. We study a distinct question: what happens to redistributive conflict when progressive religious leadership is removed. Exploiting the staggered expected replacement of pre-JPII bishops in a municipality-year Difference-in-Differences design, we show that changes in Church leadership reduced the initiation and, over time, the persistence of land conflict. Our findings therefore highlight how changes in leadership within hierarchical organizations can alter the dynamics of redistributive conflict.

Second, this paper relates to the literature studying the emergence and consequences of land invasions. [Alston and Mueller \(2010\)](#) conducted a cross-sectional analysis across municipalities in Brazil to study how land conflict impacts the prevalence of tenancy agricultural agreements. They utilized the number of Catholic priests as an instrument for land conflict and found a negative effect, which they interpreted as a sign that land conflict exacerbates property rights insecurity. Furthermore, [Hidalgo et al. \(2010\)](#) find that negative economic shocks lead to more invasions in Brazil, particularly in areas with higher land inequality. Also, [Falcone and Rosenberg \(2025\)](#) show that the expansion of capital-intensive agriculture in Brazil increased the number of land occupations.

Finally, the paper contributes to the economics of religion. Much of this literature studies how religious affiliation, religiosity, or religious beliefs affect economic and political outcomes (McCleary and Barro, 2006; Iyer, 2016; Carvalho et al., 2019; Basten and Betz, 2013; Cantoni, 2015; Becker et al., 2021), or examines religious adherence as an outcome (Chen, 2010; Costa et al., 2023). A smaller but growing body of work studies religious organizations as institutions with internal structures, incentives, and strategic responses to their environment (Engelberg et al., 2016; Montero et al., 2025). We contribute to this organizational view of religion by studying a single denomination and showing how a doctrinal change at the top of the hierarchy filtered through bishops, parishes, and priests to affect local conflict. This focus allows us to hold fixed broad religious doctrine and examine how variation in leadership within the Church shaped its social and political role.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides background on the Brazilian land movement, the Catholic Church’s involvement in the landless movement, the Church’s organizational structure, and the doctrinal change following the appointment of John Paul II. Section 3 describes the data and empirical strategy. Section 4 presents the main results and evidence on mechanisms. Section 5 concludes.

2 Background

2.1 The Brazilian Land Movement

Brazil has the eighth-highest land inequality in the world, with a Gini coefficient consistently near 0.84 from 1967 to 1998 (Hidalgo et al., 2010). According to the 1995-96 agricultural census, properties exceeding one thousand hectares comprised only 1 percent of all farms but accounted for 45 percent of the total agricultural land (Malin, 2002, 180).

Rural poverty, extreme land concentration, and informal land ownership have been persistent challenges in Brazil since the colonial era, when vast estates were established (Albertus et al., 2018). The 1850 Land Law (*Lei de Terras*) granted legal recognition to informal holdings, legitimized pre-independence imperial land grants, and required that future land acquisitions occur through purchase rather than squatting or enclosure (Mangonnet, 2020). In 1889, land policy was decentralized, shifting responsibility to state governors for adjudicating land claims. However, the close relationship between the agricultural elite and political power holders led to selective enforcement of land laws—cracking down on landless occupiers while overlooking the enclosure of

public land by well-connected elites.

Agrarian activism became widespread in the late 1950s, beginning with tenant farmers in Pernambuco's sugarcane region before spreading to other states. These movements demanded radical land reform and threatened violence if their demands were ignored (Ondetti, 2010, 11). João Goulart, a left-leaning populist elected president in 1961, sought to implement agrarian reform, but his efforts were blocked by influential landowners in Congress. His eventual ousting in the 1964 military coup led to the repression of the land movement under the military regime.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, agrarian activists in Brazil's smallholder regions began organizing large-scale land occupations and roadside encampments (Brown et al., 2011). These grassroots efforts culminated in the formation of the Landless Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or MST) in early 1984. The landless movement expanded rapidly in the late 1980s, largely driven by the MST, which extended its geographic reach and strengthened its internal structure (Albertus et al., 2018). From its inception, the MST embraced large-scale land occupations as its core strategy. Occupations were meticulously planned, with activists recruiting families from rural areas and small urban centers. The MST identified large, underutilized properties that could qualify for expropriation under the constitutional mandate for agrarian reform, effectively pressuring the government to act (Ondetti, 2010). Occupations ranged in size from 50 to several thousand families.

With the transition to civilian rule in 1985 under President José Sarney, optimism for land reform grew. However, despite pressure from social movements and increasing rural unrest, Sarney's agrarian reform efforts were severely weakened by landowners lobbying for the integration of public lands rather than private estates and demanding higher compensation. Their influence not only crippled the reform program but also significantly weakened pro-agrarian reform forces during the 1987-88 constitutional convention (Ondetti, 2010).

2.2 The Catholic Church and the Landless Movement

Throughout the 20th century, the Catholic Church underwent several cycles of progressivism and conservatism, reflecting its evolving social and political role. A major progressive shift was driven by the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), held between 1962 and 1965, which introduced sweeping reforms aimed at modernizing the Church's teachings and practices (Wilde et al., 2010; Wilde, 2004).

Following Vatican II, the Catholic clergy in Latin America deepened its commitment to the

economic welfare of the poor. This shift—often described as the “preferential option for the poor” and associated with “liberation theology”—was particularly pronounced in Brazil. The Brazilian Church became one of the most progressive in the region, actively advocating for social justice and reform (Bruneau, 1974; Mainwaring, 1986). During the 1960s and 1970s, amid military rule, the Brazilian National Bishops Conference (CNBB) issued a series of progressive documents and public statements calling for significant socioeconomic reforms. Rural inequality quickly emerged as a focal point for the Church’s progressive wing, serving as a tangible arena where its commitment to the poor translated into direct action. In 1963, for example, the CNBB issued a statement in support of land reform, declaring that all individuals should have access to land (Cleary, 1997; Mackin, 2010).

At the local level, progressive bishops, priests, and nuns played a crucial role in organizing landless peasants to advocate for their rights. These religious leaders introduced ideas about social injustice and inequality that resonated deeply with the lived experiences of rural communities (Houtzager, 2001). Church dioceses distributed leaflets and brochures explaining land inequality, framing it as unjust, outlining the right to land, and assessing government land reform policies (see examples in Figures 1).¹ Through these materials and other outreach efforts, clergy emphasized the structural causes of economic inequality and poverty, encouraging political action to address these issues. By linking these concerns to religious principles, they imbued them with a heightened sense of legitimacy.

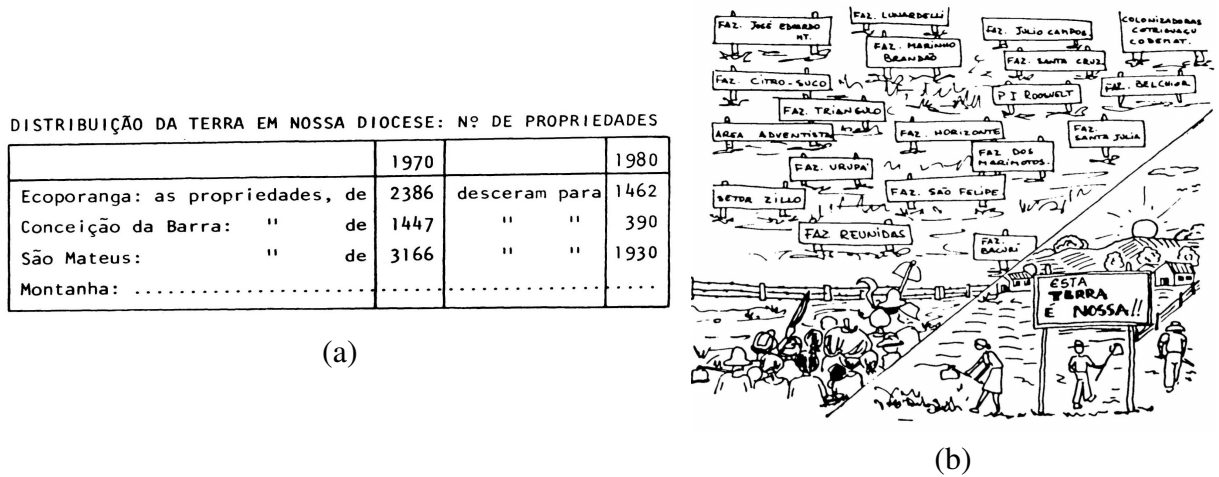
Beyond providing moral support and education, progressive Catholic leaders in Brazil actively leveraged the Church’s deep-rooted presence in rural communities to organize and mobilize rural workers. Clergy and lay activists successfully galvanized small farmers and peasants by drawing on the Church’s extensive associational network, hierarchical structure, and shared religious identity (Houtzager, 2001).

A 1980 government report on land conflicts in the Brazilian northeast highlighted the role of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) as a key mediator between the government and marginalized communities. The report acknowledged the CPT’s efforts to address land disputes and improve living conditions for the rural poor while also noting that its persistent advocacy—particularly its work in educating landless workers about their rights and fostering solidarity—could intensify land conflicts, as squatters increasingly received support from the clergy (SNI, 1980).

Overall, the Catholic Church played a pivotal role in raising awareness, organizing rural work-

¹These illustrations come from a collection of brochures, pamphlets, and newsletters published by the Brazilian Catholic Church and archived by the U.S. Library of Congress’s overseas office in Rio de Janeiro (Library of Congress, 1986).

Figure 1: Rural Inequality Reflected in Church Publications



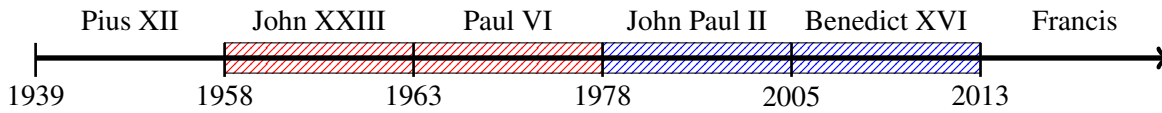
Panel (a) presents a table from a publication by [Diocese of São Mateus \(1982, p.5\)](#) aimed at raising awareness about land inequality within the diocese. It is titled ‘Distribution of land in our Diocese - Number of properties’ and lists the municipalities in the diocese along with the number of properties recorded in 1970 and 1980. The data illustrate a clear trend of increasing land concentration across all municipalities. Panel (b) features a cartoon from a publication by [Diocese De Ji-Paraná \(1986\)](#) highlighting the injustice of land inequality and the need for redistribution. In the top left, the illustration depicts vast private rural estates (*fazendas*) lying idle, with no one working on them, while a large group of landless workers observes from outside the fence. The second part of the cartoon shows the fence removed and a sign declaring, “this land is ours!!!”, reinforcing the call for land reform.

ers, and empowering emerging rural movements in their struggle for land rights and justice. This activism peaked during Brazil’s democratic transition (1975–1985) and has been widely recognized by scholars of the period, including [Mainwaring \(1986\)](#); [Adriance \(1985\)](#); [Hewitt \(1990\)](#); [Krischke \(1991\)](#); [Ondetti \(2010\)](#).

2.3 The Appointment of John Paul II and the Rollback of Progressivism

In this paper, we study the influence of Brazilian Catholic bishops in the decades following the 1978 transition from the progressive papacy of Paul VI to the conservative papacy of John Paul II. John Paul II’s appointment in 1978 was a watershed moment within the Catholic Church. Popes John XXIII and Paul VI (1958 to 1978) supported progressives within the Church and led the Latin American Catholic Church through two decades of progressivism (see [Figure 2](#)). The appointment of John Paul II in 1978 ended this progressive period and began a process of “restoration” which entailed an explicit effort to curb the influence of progressives in the Church hierarchy.

Figure 2: Catholic Popes from 1939



The timeline indicates the progressive period of the Catholic Church during the Papacies of John XXIII and Paul VI (1958 and 1978), shaded in red. The “restoration” period that followed and was led by John Paul II and Benedict XVI is shaded in blue. Pope John Paul I, not included in the timeline, was appointed in 1978 but died only a month after his appointment.

The 1978 transition had important consequences for the direction of the Catholic Church across the world, but its impact was most notable in Latin America (see e.g. [Mainwaring \(1986\)](#)). For example, in her book on the growing tensions between progressive Catholic movements in Latin America and the Vatican following the 1978 transition, [Lernoux \(1989\)](#) argues that “[John Paul II challenged] local churches that work with the poor” and attempted to reduce the influence of progressive bishops through “the appointment of conservative bishops and the emphasis on orthodoxy.” Indeed, the “election of John Paul II to the papacy strengthened the traditional clergy in Latin America. (...) The most visible aspect of this conservative shift was the appointment of new bishops” ([Betances, 2007](#), 55). This strategy was particularly significant in Brazil, which had one of the largest and most influential progressive factions in Latin America ([Adriance, 1985](#); [Bruneau, 1974](#); [Mainwaring, 1986](#)). Upon his appointment, John Paul II swiftly focused on reducing the power of progressives, making bishops his primary target.

While the pope holds supreme authority over Catholics worldwide, he delegates leadership to a bishop in each diocese, the fundamental administrative units of the Catholic Church.² Bishops, in turn, wield ultimate authority over their dioceses. Within their diocese, bishops maintain all executive, legislative, and judicial ecclesiastical power, control religious policy, and are responsible for teaching, governing, and sanctifying the faithful ([Code of Canon Law, 1983](#), 391). They control the creation of new parishes in their diocese and have complete power over the assignment of priests to parishes.³ Bishops are also responsible for overseeing the interpretation of the Catholic doctrine, the proper and regular celebration of all acts of devotion, and the fostering of the vocation

²Dioceses are exhaustive and mutually exclusive geographical areas akin to states or provinces ([Code of Canon Law, 1983](#), 368-430). We use “dioceses” generically to include dioceses, archdioceses—dioceses that are especially important and prestigious, usually those in large metropolitan areas—and ecclesiastical prelatures—districts that have yet to achieve formal diocesan status but are functionally equivalent to dioceses (see e.g. [Wilde \(2007\)](#); [Wilde et al. \(2010\)](#)).

³The parish is the territorial subdivision of the diocese. For a description of the role of priests within the Church, see e.g. [Dondeyne \(1964\)](#).

of priesthood and religious life (Woywod, 1918).

Appointing conservative bishops was a critical aspect of his strategy to diminish the progressive influence within the Brazilian church (Alves Barbosa, 2007; Lowy, 2000). In 1988, the New York Times reported that, having been unsuccessful in aligning the Brazilian church with his views, the Pope was “quietly using his authority to appoint new cardinals and bishops as a means of reasserting Vatican control over Brazil’s influential and outspoken Roman Catholic hierarchy.” John Paul II’s appointees were “clergymen who unquestioningly accept Rome’s authority and share the Pope’s interpretation of church doctrine,” and would “guide the church in the direction he believes it should follow” (The New York Times, 1988).

3 Data and Empirical Strategy

3.1 Data

Land conflicts Our primary measure of land conflicts comes from data collected by Brazil’s Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissao Pastoral da Terra*, CPT), an NGO dedicated to monitoring rural conflicts. CPT systematically gathers and analyzes data on land use and ownership disputes across Brazil.⁴

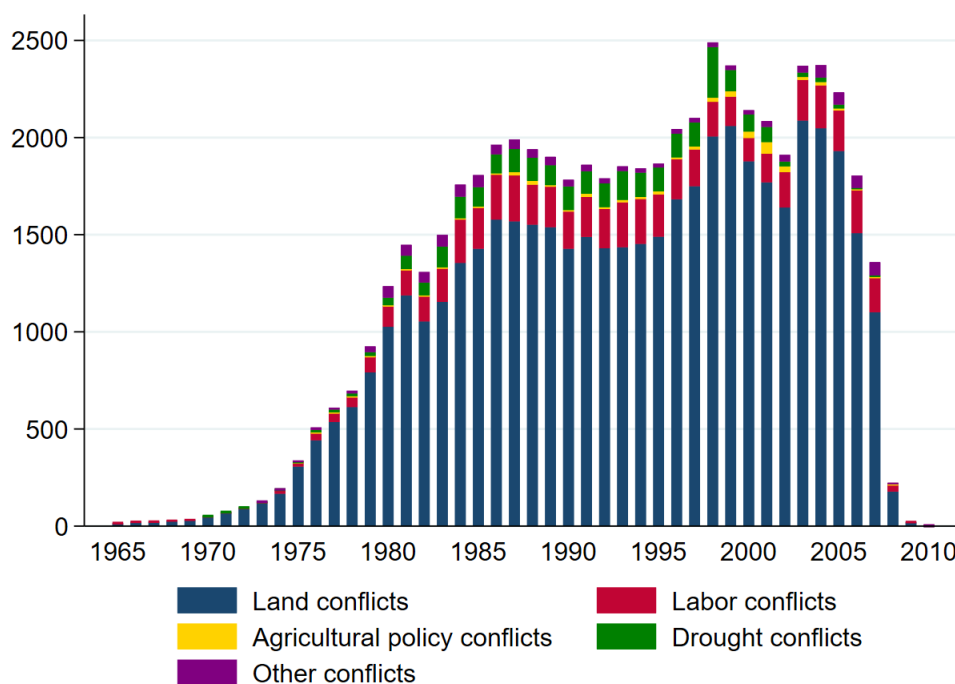
The CPT dataset is structured at the conflict-news report level. To analyze it systematically, we first aggregate the data to the conflict-year level, constructing two binary indicators: the first equals one if the given year marks the first instance of news coverage on the conflict, and the second equals one if the conflict remained active in a given year (i.e., if there was any news coverage of it that year). We supplement this with key conflict-level information from the CPT dataset, including the municipality where the conflict occurred and its classification—such as land disputes, labor disputes, or conflicts over natural resources. Finally, we aggregate the data at the municipality-year level, creating two key measures: the annual count of newly initiated conflicts and the total number of active land conflicts each year.

Figure 3 presents the time series of active conflicts over time, categorized by conflict type. Land disputes are the most prevalent category, aligning with historical accounts that identify land inequality as the primary driver of conflict during this period. The data figure also shows a rise in conflict intensity during the late 1970s, followed by a decline beginning in the second half of the

⁴CPT’s primary source of information is media reports, including newspapers, radio, and television broadcasts, which it monitors to identify and verify conflict occurrences. Additionally, CPT tracks court cases related to land disputes, collects court documents, and, in some cases, supplements its data with field observations.

2000s. In this study, we focus on conflict measures from 1975 to 1994, capturing the peak period of conflict intensity. During this timeframe, the dataset documents approximately 43,060 conflicts.

Figure 3: Active conflicts over time



Note: This graph illustrates the number of active conflicts per year available in the CPT data. Other conflicts include conflicts related to: gold-digging, water, and other.

The CPT data has two potential limitations. First, conflicts in remote areas may be underreported due to limited media coverage and accessibility. Second, as a Church-affiliated organization, the CPT may have greater capacity to monitor conflicts in regions with a stronger Catholic presence, which could introduce bias in its coverage. While our empirical strategy exploits within-municipality variation in conflicts, mitigating some of these concerns, we also validate the CPT data by comparing it against the primary alternative dataset on land conflict, produced by Dataluta.⁵ Although Dataluta does not capture identical conflict details, it provides data on land occupations—a metric closely related to land conflicts. However, Dataluta’s coverage begins only in 1988, limiting its temporal overlap with CPT.

Figure A3 in the Appendix presents a set of graphs comparing the time series of active land conflicts (from CPT) and land occupations (from Dataluta) across different regions of Brazil. The

⁵Dataluta was established in 1998 as a research initiative by the Center for Agrarian Reform Study, Research, and Projects (NERA) at São Paulo State University.

trends in both datasets align closely, not only at the national level but also within each region. Specifically, at the municipality-year level between 1988 and 2005, the correlation between the CPT and Dataluta measures is 0.95, with a standard error of 0.00. This strong correlation provides evidence that the CPT data reliably captures the evolution of land conflicts, mitigating concerns about potential reporting bias.

Catholic Church We integrate data from multiple sources to map the geographic boundaries, administrative structure, and leadership of the Brazilian Catholic Church, including detailed information on bishops and priests. To define the geographic boundaries of Catholic dioceses in 1978, we construct a crosswalk linking Brazil’s municipal and diocesan borders from 1970 to 1995. This crosswalk is derived from data provided by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) and the *Anuário Católico do Brasil* (Brazilian Catholic Yearbook) from 1970 to 1997. Appendix Figure A2 presents a map illustrating the diocesan and municipal boundaries. At the time of John Paul II’s appointment in 1978, Brazil had 221 dioceses, each encompassing an average of 20 municipalities.

Data on bishops, including their names, appointment dates, birth dates, and vacancy dates for all bishops in office between 1970 and 2000, comes from the Catholic Church’s *Annuario Pontificio* (Pontifical Yearbook) as reported by Catholic Hierarchy.⁶

We also collected original data on all parishes in Brazil and the priests who served in each parish between 1965 and 1997. This involved digitizing and processing records from seven editions of the Brazilian Catholic Yearbook published during this period.⁷ These yearbooks provide comprehensive listings of all priests, including their assigned parishes, denomination, birthdate, nationality, religious order, ordination date, and diocese of incardination.

Land Ownership We digitized municipal-level agricultural data from the 1975 Brazilian Agricultural Census. This dataset includes the total number of properties, total land area (in hectares), and the number of properties and hectares classified as publicly or religiously owned.

⁶<https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org>

⁷Yearbooks were published in 1965, 1970, 1977, 1985, 1989, 1993, and 1997. An additional yearbook was published in 1981, but it does not include information on the identity of the priest leading each parish.

3.2 Sample

We use municipalities, as defined by their 1970 boundaries, as the primary geographic unit of analysis. When municipalities were subsequently subdivided, we aggregate data to align with their original 1970 configuration. In a limited set of tests focused on diocese-level outcomes, we conduct the analysis at the diocese level, using boundaries as of 1978.

We exclude from the study the Dioceses of Anapolis, Cameta, Guamá, Paracatu, Rubiataba, and Santíssima Conceição do Araguaia—which together comprise 51 municipalities—as they were vacant as of October 1978. Further details on this exclusion are provided in Section 3.3. The resulting sample consists of 3,895 municipalities, representing 99% of all municipalities with stable boundaries since 1970.

Our analysis of land conflict focuses on the period from 1975 to 1994—a critical phase in which land invasions emerged as a widespread strategy of rural mobilization across Brazil. This timeframe captures the intensification of agrarian struggles and the organizational expansion of the landless movement. By focusing on this period, we examine the dynamics of land conflict during a time of profound social and political transformation in the Brazilian countryside.

Table 1 presents summary statistics at both the municipality and diocese levels for our sample and study period. In 1978, the average diocese had 28 parishes, equivalent to approximately 8.5 parishes per 100,000 people. At the municipality level, religious institutions owned a small share of the land, averaging just 0.2%. However, there was considerable variation across municipalities, with some recording religious landownership as high as 44%.

3.3 Empirical Strategy

To estimate the effects of the Catholic Church’s doctrinal shift following John Paul (JPII) appointment, we build on [Tuñón \(2026\)](#) and exploit the papal succession alongside the institutional rules governing bishops’ tenure. The Church’s territorial governance is organized into dioceses, each led by a bishop. JPII’s ability to replace Brazil’s progressive bishops was constrained by Church law, which stipulates that bishops cannot be arbitrarily dismissed; vacancies arise only upon a bishop’s death or mandatory retirement at age 75.⁸

Figure 4 presents the age distribution of bishops serving in Brazilian dioceses as of October

⁸At this age, a “bishop who has completed his seventy-fifth year is asked to voluntarily submit his resignation to the pope” [Code of Canon Law \(1983, 401\)](#). However, bishops can be removed before reaching retirement age in exceptional cases, such as serious misconduct, negligence, or doctrinal dissent.

Table 1: Summary statistics

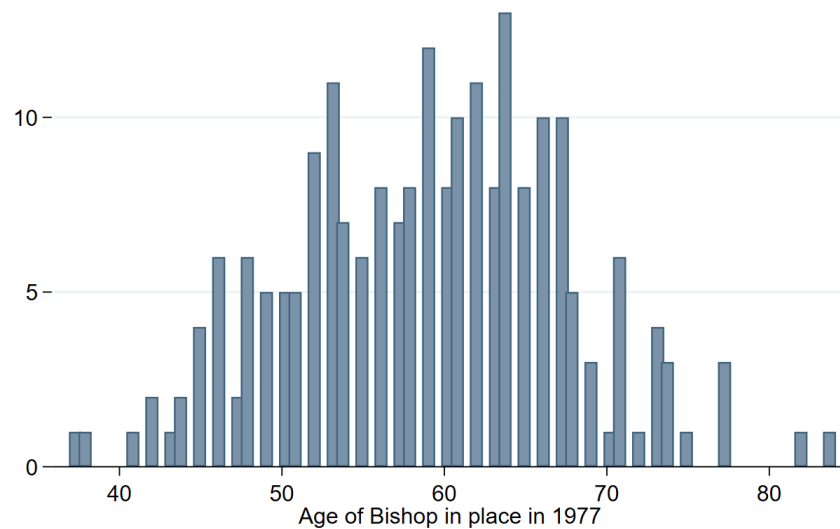
Variable	Municipality level			
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. dev.</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
<i>Active Conflicts per Year</i>	0.34	1.27	0	39
<i>Active Land Conflicts per Year</i>	0.29	1.11	0	31
<i>New Land Conflicts per Year</i>	0.07	0.37	0	14
<i>Other active conflicts per Year</i>	0.06	0.31	0	9
<i>Population size 1970</i>	23,631	126,754	834	5,924,612
<i>Share of rural population 1970</i>	0.67	0.21	0	0.99
<i>Number of Parishes 1970</i>	1.5	6.7	0	319
<i>Parishes per 100,000 inhabitants 1978</i>	8.9	8.7	0	120
<i>Share of religiously owned land</i>	0.002	0.012	0	0.44

Variable	Diocese level			
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. dev.</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
<i>Number of Municipalities of 1970</i>	19.75	18.0	0	179
<i>Number of Parishes 1978</i>	27.4	32.7	1	354
<i>Share of religiously owned land</i>	0.028	0.057	0	0.44

Note: This table presents summary statistics for the municipalities-year of the sample used in the study, which includes 3,895 municipalities and 216 dioceses. When the year is not specified, the variables are averaged for the 1975 to 1994.

1978, when JP II assumed the papacy (hereafter, “pre-JP II bishops”). The distribution indicates, for example, that approximately 10% of bishops were 60 years old in 1978. Under the tenure rules, JP II would be unable to replace this bishops until 1993.

Figure 4: Age distribution of bishops in office as of October 1978



Our primary independent variable is the expected year of turnover for the last pre–John Paul II (JPII) bishop in each diocese. This is defined as the year in which the bishop serving as of October 1978—when JPII assumed the papacy—either reached the mandatory retirement age of 75 or passed away, whichever came first. Because JPII’s papacy began in late 1978, we set 1979 as the earliest possible retirement year for bishops who were in office at the time. Since the variable is constructed based on the bishops in office in October 1978, we exclude the Dioceses of Anapolis, Cameta, Guamá (now known as Bragança do Pará), Paracatu, Rubiataba, and Santíssima Conceição do Araguaia—which together comprise 51 municipalities—as they were vacant at that point. Figure 5 presents a series of maps illustrating the geographic distribution of our independent variable. The figure shows that the expected timing of bishop turnover exhibits no clear spatial clustering, suggesting that the timing of pre-JPII bishop replacements was not systematically correlated across regions.

Note that while the death or retirement of a pre-JPII bishop allowed JPII to appoint a successor, it does not perfectly predict the timing of the actual turnover. For instance, a pre-JPII bishop may resign before reaching 75, or the pope may take additional time to select a suitable replacement. Therefore, our estimates should be interpreted as capturing the *Intention to Treat* effects of pre-JPII bishop turnover. Next, before outlining our estimation strategy, we demonstrate that our independent variable strongly predicts actual turnover.

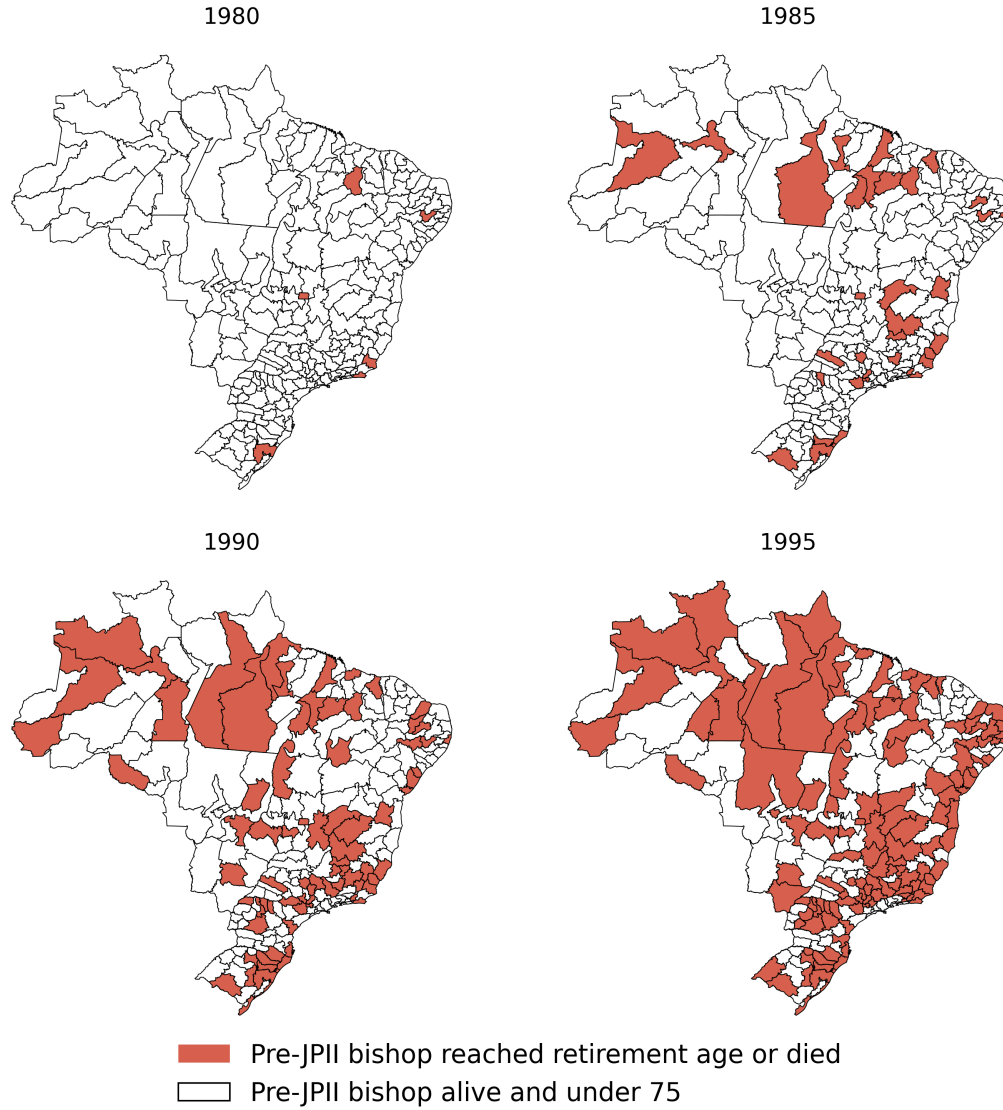
3.4 Expected Replacement of pre-JPII bishops and JPII Appointments

Does the timing of a pre-JPII bishop’s death or 75th birthday predict their turnover and subsequent replacement by a JPII appointee? To evaluate this, we estimate the following equation:

$$JPIIbishop_{dt} = \sum_p \beta_p YearsSinceExpRep_{ptb} + \psi_d + \psi_t + \epsilon_{dt} \quad (1)$$

The variable $JPIIbishop_{dt}$ is an indicator that takes the value 1 if the bishop in office in diocese d at year t was appointed by John Paul II and 0 if it was appointed by a pre-JPII pope. The variable $YearsSinceExpRep_{ptb}$ takes the value 1 if the pre-JPII bishop in diocese d is dead or has reached the age of 75 p years from the current year t , and 0 otherwise. Here, $p < 0$ denotes years preceding the expected replacement by JPII, while $p > 0$ indicates years following the point at which a JPII appointment would be expected. The coefficient vector β_p is a vector of coefficients that captures the effect of the number of years relative to the expected replacement of the bishop in office at the time of JPII’s appointment. Finally, ψ_t refers to time fixed effects, ψ_d denotes dioceses fixed effects,

Figure 5: Expected Appointments by John Paul II



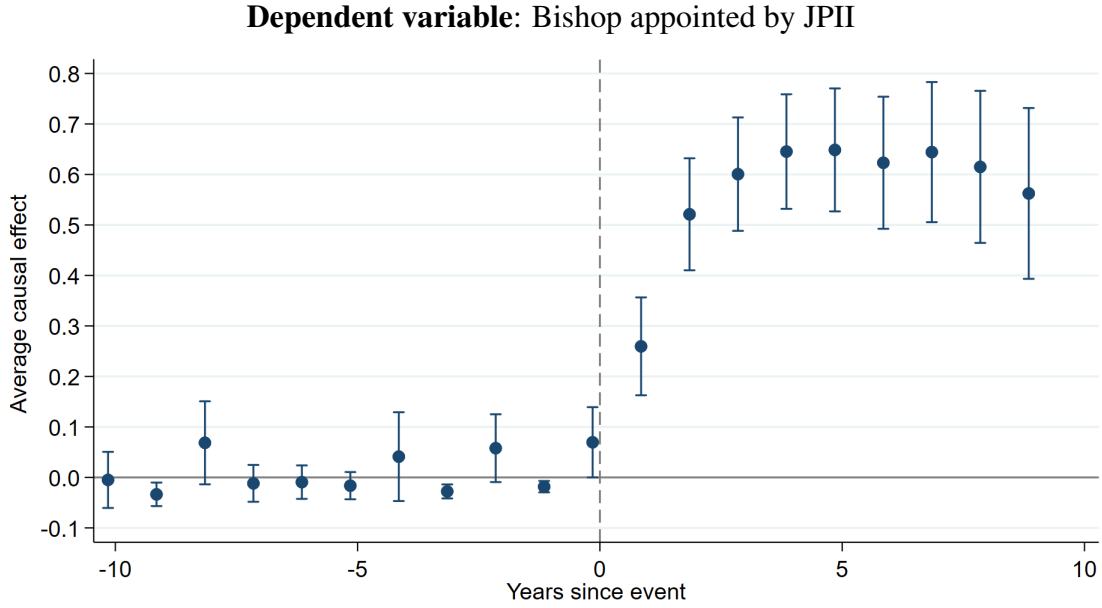
Note: The maps show dioceses where the pre-JPII bishop was projected to be replaced, based on the year in which the bishop serving at the time of JPII's appointment either reached retirement age or passed away.

and ϵ_{dt} corresponds to robust standard errors clustered at the diocese level. Given that we have a staggered treatment, we estimate Equation 1 using the estimator proposed by [Callaway and Sant'Anna \(2021\)](#).

Figure 6 presents the results of this analysis, showing a sharp increase in the likelihood of a JPII replacement once the pre-JPII bishop either dies or reaches the age of 75. By age 76 (or one

year after the pre-JPII bishop's death), the probability of receiving a JPII-appointed bishop rises by nearly 30%. This probability exceeds 50% by age 78 (or three years post-mortem) highlighting the strong association between a bishop's 75th birthday or death and the timing of their replacement. Crucially, we find no difference in the probability of a JPII appointment before the pre-JPII bishop dies or turns 75. This suggests that the year the bishop reaches retirement age or dies, “the expected year of replacement,” is a strong predictor of the actual timing of the first JPII appointment.⁹

Figure 6: Exogenous variation in timing of conservative bishop appointed



Note: The figure illustrates the estimated β_b coefficients from Equation 1 using the estimator proposed by Callaway and Sant’Anna (2021). The unit of analysis is the diocese-year. Confidence intervals are based on robust standard errors clustered at the dioceses level (95% confidence intervals).

3.5 Estimation

We now turn to detailing the estimation strategies we employ to study the effect of pre-JPII bishop turnover on social conflict in Brazil.

Event-Study To analyze dynamic effects, we conduct an event study that extends the estimation in Equation 1 to municipal-year level data. Specifically, we estimate the following equation:

⁹In Section A1 of the Appendix, we provide further evidence indicating that the turnover of bishops can be predicted by their 75th birthday.

$$y_{mt} = \sum_p \alpha_p \text{YearsSinceExpRep}_{ptd} + \psi_t \times X_{m1970} + \psi_m + \psi_t + \epsilon_{mt} \quad (2)$$

where y_{mt} is the outcome of interest for municipality m at time t , for instance the number of active land conflicts. The variable $\text{YearsSinceExpRep}_{ptd}$ is defined as in Equation 1. Then, α_p is a vector of coefficients that captures the effect of the number of years relative to the expected replacement of the bishop in office at the time of JPPII's appointment. ψ_t refers to time fixed effects and ψ_m to municipality fixed effects. Additionally, Equation 2 includes interactions between year fixed effects and the municipality-level baseline characteristics, X_{m1970} : the rural population share, the number of parishes, the log number of agricultural establishments, an indicator for whether the municipality experienced a land conflict before 1975, tractor density in 1975, and the total land area of the diocese containing the municipality. Finally, ϵ_{mt} refers to the robust standard errors clustered at the dioceses level. As before, we estimate Equation 2 using the estimator proposed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021).

Difference-in-Differences Analysis We examine the effects of the staggered replacement of pre-JPPII bishops using a Difference-in-Differences approach that accounts for heterogeneous treatment timing. Given the staggered nature of the treatment, we employ the estimator proposed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) to estimate the following equation:

$$y_{mdt} = \beta \text{PostExpRep}_{dt} + \psi_t \times X_{m1970} + \psi_m + \psi_t + \epsilon_{mdt} \quad (3)$$

where y_{mdt} denotes the outcome variable of interest for municipality m at time t , such as the number of active land conflicts. The key explanatory variable, PostExpRep_{dt} , is a binary indicator that equals one if the pre-JPPII bishop of diocese d either passes away or reaches the age of 75 at time t . Then, the primary coefficient of interest, β , captures the effect of having a pre-JPPII bishop replaced.

The term ψ_m denotes municipality fixed effects, which account for time-invariant unobserved differences across municipalities, while ψ_t represents year fixed effects, which capture changes over time that affect all municipalities in a similar way. Additionally, the interaction between time fixed effects and initial municipality characteristics is included, following the specification in Equation 2. The error term, ϵ_{mdt} , is clustered at the diocese level.

3.6 Identifying Assumptions

The main identifying assumption for our estimation is that the timing of pre-JPII bishops' expected replacement is as good as randomly assigned—that is, exogenous to underlying factors that could have influenced social conflict during the period we analyze. We find that this assumption is plausible for several reasons. First, the appointment of the last cohort of pre-JPII bishops preceded JPII's papacy. Second, the deaths of Paul VI and his brief successor, John Paul I—who passed away less than two months after his appointment—were unexpected and unrelated to Brazilian social dynamics, ensuring that the transition in papal leadership was not strategically timed in response to local conditions. Third, the identity and ideological leanings of papal successors are unknown prior to their selection, preventing any anticipatory adjustments based on expected ideological shifts. Taken together, these factors suggest that the timing of the expected replacement of the last pre-JPII bishops was likely uncorrelated with potential diocesan outcomes after the transition. In Appendix Table A1, we provide empirical evidence supporting the exogeneity of the expected timing of the replacement of the pre-JPII bishop. We show that it is uncorrelated with a number of predetermined diocese and municipal-level characteristics, such as the total population size, rural population size, population growth, and rural population growth.

4 Results

4.1 Effects of JPII Bishops on Land Conflict

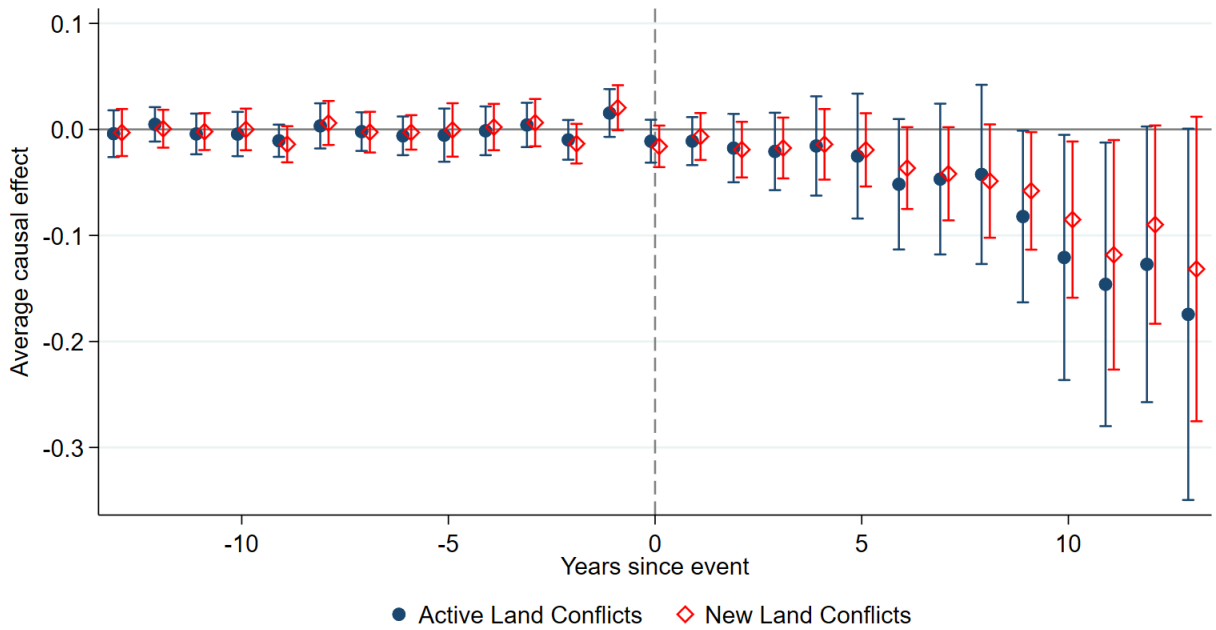
Event Study Figure 7 presents event-study estimates of Equation 2 using the estimator proposed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021). Event time is defined relative to the expected replacement of the pre-JPII bishop, which occurs in the year when the bishop serving in October 1978 either reaches the canonical retirement age of 75 or passes away, whichever occurs first. We examine two outcomes: the number of active land conflicts and the number of newly initiated land conflicts.

The pre-treatment coefficients are centered around zero and display no systematic pattern for either outcome. Thus, we find no evidence that land conflicts were already declining in dioceses with earlier expected bishop replacement. This pattern provides support for the parallel-trends assumption and also weighs against the possibility that incumbent bishops changed their behavior in anticipation of retirement.

Following expected replacement, the number of land conflicts declines. The reduction appears first for newly initiated conflicts and subsequently for active conflicts, with the latter becoming

statistically significant approximately seven years after expected replacement. This sequence is consistent with the relationship between the two outcomes: new conflicts represent the flow of disputes entering the stock of active conflicts. A decline in conflict initiation should therefore translate only gradually into a reduction in the number of ongoing conflicts. Overall, the event-study estimates indicate that expected bishop replacement reduced the emergence of new land disputes and, over time, the number of active conflicts.

Figure 7: Expected Bishop Replacement and Land Conflict



Note: The figure presents the estimated event-time coefficients α_p from Equation 2, using the estimator proposed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021). Event time is measured relative to the year in which the pre-JPII bishop serving in October 1978 was expected to be replaced, defined as the year in which he either reached age 75 or passed away. The unit of observation is the municipality-year, and the sample covers 1975-1994. Vertical bars report 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors clustered at the diocese level.

Difference-in-Differences Analysis Table 2 reports the average post-treatment effects corresponding to Equation 3, estimated using the estimator proposed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021). Column 1 first examines whether expected replacement predicts the appointment of a JPII bishop. Following expected replacement, the probability that a municipality is led by a JPII-appointed bishop increases by 49.5 percentage points. This estimate is statistically significant at the 1% level and is consistent with the event-study evidence in Figure 6. Expected replacement

therefore strongly predicts the timing of actual JPPII appointments.

Columns 2 and 3 report the reduced-form effects on land conflict. Expected replacement significantly reduces both active and newly initiated land conflicts. Relative to their respective sample means, the estimates correspond to a 14% decline in active land conflicts and a 47% decline in new land conflicts.¹⁰ The larger proportional decline in new conflicts is consistent with the event-study evidence: expected replacement first reduced the initiation of new disputes and only gradually affected the stock of active conflicts.

To assess the magnitude of the effect associated with the actual appointment of a JPPII bishop, we scale the reduced-form estimate in Column 2 by the first-stage estimate in Column 1. The resulting Wald estimate is approximately -0.08 for the effect of a JPPII-appointed bishop on active land conflicts.¹¹ This estimate implies that the appointment of a JPPII bishop reduced active land conflicts by approximately 29% relative to the mean during the period from 1975 to 1994.¹² Note that this interpretation relies on the exclusion restriction that the expected replacement of a pre-JPPII bishop, determined by retirement age or death, affects land conflicts solely through the actual appointment of a JPPII bishop.

Finally, columns 4 and 5 examine conflicts unrelated to land, including disputes over labor, drought, and agricultural policy. The estimated effects are small and statistically indistinguishable from zero for both active and newly initiated conflicts. This pattern is consistent with historical accounts emphasizing the Catholic Church's particular involvement in land mobilization rather than in rural conflict more generally.

4.2 Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

Table 3 examines whether the effects of expected bishop replacement vary with three characteristics of the municipality: the presence of a parish, religious land ownership, and the share of the population living in rural areas. All estimates use the specification in Equation 3 and the estimator proposed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021).

We first examine whether the effects vary with the local presence of the Catholic Church. Parishes are the main local organizational units of the Church and serve as centers of religious activity, community engagement, and social mobilization. In 1977, 27% of municipalities did not

¹⁰These magnitudes are calculated as $(-0.041/0.29) \times 100 = -14.1\%$ and $(-0.033/0.07) \times 100 = -47.1\%$, respectively.

¹¹Calculated as: $\hat{\beta}_{Wald} = \frac{\hat{\beta}_{RF}}{\hat{\beta}_{FS}} = \frac{-0.041}{0.495} = -0.083$.

¹²The implied percentage effect is calculated as $[(-0.041/0.495)/0.29] \times 100 = -28.6\%$.

Table 2: Expected Bishop Replacement and Land Conflict

	Bishop Appt.	Land Conflicts		Other Conflicts	
	by JP II (1)	Active (2)	New (3)	Active (4)	New (5)
<i>Post Expected Replacement</i>	0.495*** (0.050)	-0.041* (0.023)	-0.033* (0.017)	0.007 (0.010)	0.006 (0.004)
Mean Dep var	0.32	0.29	0.07	0.07	0.02
Municipality FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year FE $\times$ Controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	77,900	77,900	77,900	77,900	77,900

Note: The table reports estimates obtained using the estimator proposed by [Callaway and Sant'Anna \(2021\)](#). The unit of observation is the 1970 municipality, with the analysis covering the period from 1975 to 1994. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

have a parish within their boundaries, indicating a substantially weaker local Church presence.¹³

Columns 1 and 2 divide the sample according to whether the municipality had at least one parish in 1977. In municipalities with a parish, expected bishop replacement is associated with significant declines in both active and newly initiated land conflicts. The estimates correspond to declines of approximately 19% and 51% relative to their respective sample means. By contrast, in municipalities without a parish the coefficients are small and not statistically significant. This suggests that the Church's institutional presence played a crucial role in mediating the impact of episcopal turnover on land conflicts, likely by facilitating local organizational capacity.

We next examine whether the effects vary with religious land ownership. According to the 1975 Agricultural Census, religious institutions owned land in approximately 27% of the municipalities in our sample.¹⁴

Columns 3 and 4 of Table 3 divide the sample according to whether religious institutions owned land in the municipality. In municipalities with religiously owned land, expected bishop replacement significantly reduces both active and newly initiated land conflicts. In municipalities without religiously owned land, the coefficients are smaller and statistically indistinguishable from zero.

¹³Appendix Figure A4 shows the geographic distribution of municipalities with and without a parish in 1977.

¹⁴Appendix Figure A5 shows the geographic distribution of religious land ownership. The Agricultural Census records land owned by religious institutions but does not identify the denomination of the owner. Because the Catholic Church was the dominant religious institution in Brazil during this period, a substantial share of this land was likely Catholic-owned. We nevertheless refer to the measure as religiously owned land throughout the analysis.

Religious land ownership may have shaped the effect of pre-JPII bishop replacement by influencing bishops' incentives to support or suppress land disputes. Where religious institutions owned land, such disputes could pose a more direct threat to the material interests of the Church. If pre-JPII bishops were already responsive to these concerns, they may have been less willing to support land mobilization in these municipalities. Their replacement would then be expected to have a larger effect in municipalities without religiously owned land. Conversely, if pre-JPII bishops placed relatively little weight on protecting Church property, while their successors placed greater weight on institutional assets, JPII-appointed bishops would have had stronger incentives to discourage land conflict in municipalities where religious institutions owned land. The larger decline observed in these municipalities is consistent with this second interpretation.

Finally, we examine whether the effects vary with the rural composition of municipalities, given that land conflict was more prevalent in rural areas. Column 5 of Table 3 reports estimates for municipalities in which more than 40% of the population lived in rural areas, while Column 6 reports estimates for the remaining municipalities. Expected bishop replacement significantly reduces both active and newly initiated land conflicts in the more rural subsample. In less rural municipalities, the estimates are smaller and statistically indistinguishable from zero. This pattern is consistent with the effects being concentrated in areas where agrarian conflict was most salient.

4.3 Bishop Turnover or Ideological Change? Evidence from the 2005 Papal Transition

We next examine whether the results reflect bishop turnover per se or the replacement of progressive bishops by more conservative successors. To do so, we exploit the 2005 papal transition from John Paul II to Benedict XVI. Unlike the 1978 transition to John Paul II, which marked a substantial ideological shift within the Church's leadership, the transition from John Paul II to Benedict XVI largely preserved the same conservative orientation. In this placebo test, we construct an analogous measure of the expected replacement of bishops appointed prior to 2005, based on the year in which the bishop serving as of April 2005 either reached the canonical retirement age of 75 or passed away, whichever occurred first. This specification allows us to evaluate whether the estimated effects we document are specific to the substantive doctrinal reversal introduced by John Paul II rather than simply reflecting any turnover in diocesan leadership.

Furthermore, this placebo exercise allows us to distinguish between two scenarios. In the first scenario, Benedict XVI replaces bishops who had themselves been appointed by John Paul II, effectively resulting in a transition from conservative to conservative leadership. In this case, we

Table 3: Heterogeneous Effects

Sample	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Parish presence in municipality		Religiously owned land in municipality		Rural Population above 40%	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Dependent Variable: Active Land Conflicts						
<i>Post Expected Replacement</i>	-0.050*	0.016	-0.125**	-0.012	-0.056**	-0.049
	(0.026)	(0.039)	(0.053)	(0.022)	(0.028)	(0.058)
Mean Dependent Variable	0.30	0.15	0.40	0.22	0.27	0.26
Dependent Variable: New Land Conflicts						
<i>Post Expected Replacement</i>	-0.034*	-0.015	-0.085**	-0.013	-0.039*	-0.037
	(0.019)	(0.023)	(0.042)	(0.014)	(0.021)	(0.044)
Mean Dependent Variable	0.08	0.03	0.11	0.06	0.07	0.08
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE $\times$ Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	62,380	15,580	22,980	54,980	68,060	9,900

Note: The table reports estimates obtained using the estimator proposed by [Callaway and Sant'Anna \(2021\)](#). The unit of observation is the 1970 municipality, with the analysis covering the period from 1975 to 1994. Robust standard errors clustered at the diocese level are in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

would expect little to no change in the Church's stance toward redistributive conflict, since the doctrinal orientation remained stable. In the second scenario, Benedict XVI replaces bishops who had been appointed prior to John Paul II—progressive bishops who remained in office until the mid-2000s. This transition entails a shift from progressive to conservative leadership, comparable in nature, though occurring later in time, to the replacements we analyze following the 1978 papal transition. Notably, only 10 dioceses still had pre-John Paul II bishops in place by 2005, covering approximately 197 municipalities; this limited set of late-retiring progressive bishops provides a useful comparison group for isolating the consequences of doctrinal change.

This exercise allows us to analyze two important features. First, it helps assess whether the main effects we document are attributable to substantive changes in doctrinal orientation or simply to shifts in episcopal leadership that may be accompanied by changes in tenure, organizational practices, or local networks. Second, by examining both types of turnover, we can evaluate whether the effects on land conflict are unique to the doctrinal shift initiated by John Paul II or whether similar

dynamics emerged whenever progressive bishops were replaced by more conservative successors, even under a different papacy.

Table 4 reports results consistent with this interpretation. Panel A examines the conservative-to-conservative transition, in which Benedict XVI replaced bishops previously appointed by John Paul II. Expected replacement strongly predicts the appointment of a Benedict XVI bishop, but we find no statistically significant effect on either active or newly initiated land conflicts. We therefore find no evidence that episcopal turnover alone reduces land conflict.

Panel B examines the small set of dioceses where bishops appointed before John Paul II remained in office until the 2005 transition. In this case, replacement corresponds more closely to a progressive-to-conservative transition. The estimated effects on both active and newly initiated conflicts are negative and statistically significant. Although this exercise relies on a small sample, the contrast between Panels A and B is consistent with the interpretation that the main effects are driven by changes in the ideological orientation of Church leadership rather than by episcopal turnover per se.

Table 4: Robustness check: Bishop Turnover or Ideological Change?

	Bishop Appt. by BenXVI (1)	Land Conflicts	
		Active (2)	New (3)
Panel A: Bishop in place by 2005 appointed by JPII - Conservative to Conservative			
<i>Post Expected Replacement</i>	0.298*** (0.027)	-0.025 (0.049)	0.007 (0.029)
Mean Dep var	0.34	0.16	0.06
Observations	84,544	84,544	84,544
Panel B: Bishop in place by 2005 appointed pre-JPII - Progressive to Conservative			
<i>Post Expected Replacement</i>	0.711** (0.296)	-0.233* (0.127)	-0.148*** (0.021)
Mean Dep Var	0.47	0.15	0.05
Observations	2,512	2,512	2,512
Municipality FE	yes	yes	yes
Year FE	yes	yes	yes
Year FE $\times$ Controls	yes	yes	yes

Note: The table reports estimates obtained using the estimator proposed by [Callaway and Sant'Anna \(2021\)](#). The unit of observation is the 1970 municipality. The analysis covers the period from 2000 to 2015, corresponding to the years leading up to and following the 2005 papal transition. Standard errors, reported in parentheses, are clustered at the diocese level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4.4 Robustness checks

Alternative Outcomes from the Agricultural Census One potential concern is that the results reflect changes in conflict reporting rather than changes in conflict itself. Because the Pastoral Land Commission is affiliated with the Catholic Church, we assess this possibility using independently collected outcomes from the Agricultural Census. Using the 1975, 1980, and 1985 censuses, we construct two measures based on producers classified as occupants (*ocupantes*). The first is the share of agricultural establishments operated by occupants. The second is the share of total agricultural area accounted for by these establishments.

Table 5 reports estimates using the same difference-in-differences specification and baseline controls as in the main analysis. Expected bishop replacement reduces the share of establishments operated by occupants by 1.3 percentage points. The estimate is statistically significant at the 5% level. The estimated effect on the corresponding share of agricultural area is also negative, at 0.56 percentage points, although it is not statistically distinguishable from zero. Given that the Agricultural Census is available for only three years, these estimates are necessarily less precise than those based on the annual conflict data. Nevertheless, the negative estimates obtained from independently collected census measures provide additional evidence that the main findings are unlikely to be explained solely by changes in the reporting practices of the Pastoral Land Commission.

Table 5: Alternative Outcomes from the Agricultural Census

	Share of Establishments Operated by Occupants (1)	Share of Agricultural Area Operated by Occupants (2)
<i>Post Expected Replacement</i>	-0.013** (0.006)	-0.006 (0.004)
Mean Dep var	0.12	0.05
Municipality FE	yes	yes
Year FE	yes	yes
Year FE $\times$ Controls	yes	yes
Observations	11,685	11,685

Note: The table reports estimates obtained using the estimator proposed by Callaway and Sant’Anna (2021). The unit of observation is the 1970 municipality, and the analysis uses data from the 1975, 1980, and 1985 Agricultural Censuses. All specifications include municipality fixed effects, year fixed effects, and year fixed effects interacted with the baseline controls used in the main analysis. Standard errors clustered at the diocese level are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4.5 Mechanisms: Priest Turnover

We next examine whether bishop turnover reshaped the local clerical infrastructure of the Church. Bishops exercise substantial authority over diocesan religious life, but their influence over local communities is mediated through parishes and the priests assigned to them. If JPII-appointed bishops reduced the Church’s support for rural mobilization, one channel through which they could do so was by changing the priests serving local parishes.

To test this mechanism, we exploit our parish-level panel constructed from six cross-sections of the *Anu’ario Cat’olico do Brasil* between 1975 and 1997, which report the identity of the priest serving each parish at each wave. From these data, we build, for every parish i in diocese d observed at wave t , an indicator $NewPriest_{idt}$ equal to one if the priest listed at t differs from the priest listed at the immediately preceding wave for the same parish, and zero otherwise.¹⁵ This outcome captures reassignments, removals, and new appointments, which are a direct lever of diocesan control over local ministry.

We then estimate whether the expected replacement of the last pre-JPII bishop increased priest turnover. The design mirrors our earlier strategy: we anchor treatment timing at the pre-JPII bishop’s expected replacement year (the year he turns 75 or dies, whichever comes first). Specifically, at the parish level we estimate

$$NewPriest_{idt} = \beta PostExpRep_{dt} + \lambda_i + \lambda_t + \mathbf{X}'_{i0}\boldsymbol{\pi}_t + u_{idt},$$

where $PostExpRep_{dt}$ equals one in and after the expected replacement year. λ_i are parish fixed effects, λ_t are wave fixed effects, and $\mathbf{X}_{m0}$ is a vector of baseline characteristics of the municipality where the parish is located. Standard errors are clustered at the diocese level. Our main parameter of interest is β , which indicates whether the replacement of a pre-JPII bishop induces excess priest turnover at the parish level.

Table 6 provides direct evidence that bishop turnover altered the local personnel of the Church. Column 1 uses the parish-level panel and shows that the expected replacement of a pre-JPII bishop increased the probability that a parish received a new priest by 3.6 percentage points. Column 2 aggregates priest turnover to the municipality level, restricting the sample to municipalities with at least one parish, and yields a similar estimate of 4.0 percentage points. The similarity between the parish- and municipality-level estimates suggests that the effect is not driven by municipalities

¹⁵When a parish appears for the first time in our files, we code $NewPriest_{idt}$ as missing for that transition and retain it for subsequent transitions.

with unusually many parishes. Rather, the replacement of pre-JPII bishops appears to have induced broader changes in the clergy serving local communities.

The remaining columns show that this turnover was concentrated in settings where the Church's local role in land conflict was likely to be most relevant. The point estimate is larger in municipalities with religiously owned land, although neither estimate is statistically significant. More clearly, the effect is concentrated in rural municipalities: where more than 40 percent of the population was rural, expected bishop replacement increased priest turnover by 5.0 percentage points, while the estimate is smaller and not statistically significant in less rural municipalities. These patterns are consistent with the interpretation that the replacement of progressive bishops by JPII-appointed bishops did not only change diocesan leadership at the top. It also reshaped the local clerical infrastructure through which the Church interacted with rural communities and through which progressive clergy had supported land mobilization.

Table 6: Mechanisms: Priest Turnover

Sample	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	All		Religiously owned land in municipality		Rural Population above 40%	
	Parish-lev	Mun-lev	Yes	No	Yes	No
Dependent Variable: Priest Turnover						
<i>Post Expected Replacement</i>	0.037** (0.019)	0.0397** (0.0201)	0.0475 (0.0356)	0.0351 (0.0224)	0.0504** (0.0230)	0.0283 (0.0416)
Mean Dependent Variable		0.57	0.56	0.57	0.57	0.54
Parish FE	Yes					
Municipality FE		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE $\times$ Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	19,103	9,171	3,149	6,022	7,802	1,369

Note: Column 1 uses parish-wave observations. Columns 2-6 aggregate priest turnover to the municipality-wave level and restrict the sample to municipalities with at least one parish in 1975. The table reports estimates obtained using the estimator proposed by [Callaway and Sant'Anna \(2021\)](#). Robust standard errors clustered at the diocese level are in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Taken together, these results provide evidence that the replacement of pre-JPII bishops translated into changes in the priests serving local communities. The effect is visible both at the parish level and when priest turnover is aggregated to municipalities with at least one parish, and it is concentrated in more rural municipalities, where land conflict was most salient. This supports

the interpretation that bishop turnover reshaped the local clerical infrastructure through which the Church interacted with rural communities.

5 Conclusion

The conservative turn of the Catholic Church after the appointment of John Paul II changed the relationship between the Church and rural mobilization in Brazil. Progressive Catholic leaders had played an important role in supporting landless peasants, providing legitimacy, information, and local organizational resources for collective action. We show that the staggered expected replacement of pre-John Paul II bishops, induced by retirement rules and mortality, led to a decline in land conflict. The effect is driven by fewer new land conflicts and, over time, by a decline in active conflicts. We find no comparable effect on other types of rural disputes, suggesting that the results are specific to the domain in which the Church had been most directly involved.

The evidence points to the importance of local organizational structures. The effects are concentrated in municipalities with at least one parish, where the Church had a stronger institutional presence, and are larger in municipalities where religious institutions owned land. We also show that expected bishop replacement increased priest turnover, especially in more rural municipalities. These patterns suggest that the effect of episcopal turnover did not operate only through a change in doctrine or public discourse. It also reflected changes in the local clerical infrastructure through which the Church interacted with rural communities.

These findings have broader implications for the political economy of redistribution. Redistributive conflict depends not only on inequality, state policy, or economic shocks, but also on the organizations that help groups articulate and sustain claims. In settings where such intermediaries are weakened, observed conflict may decline even when underlying distributive tensions remain. Civil-society organizations are therefore not merely background actors in distributive politics; they can shape whether redistributive demands are organized, how they are sustained, and whether they reach the state.

References

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Appendix

A1 Bishop turnover

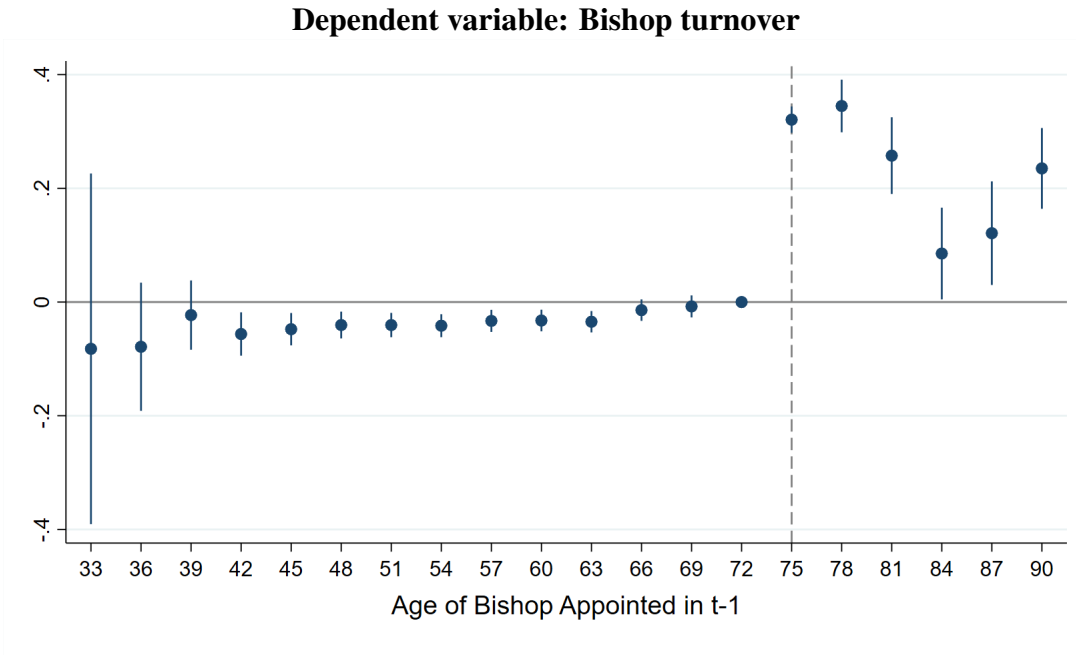
In this section, we provide further evidence to support the predicted timing of the turnover of bishops. Specifically, we estimate the following equation

$$TurnoverBishop_{dt} = \sum_p \alpha_b IVage_{dtb} + \psi_d + \psi_t + \epsilon_{dt} \quad (A1)$$

where $TurnoverBishop_{dt}$ takes value 1 if the bishop in dioceses d at time t is different from that at time $t - 1$, 0 otherwise (i.e. takes value 1 if there is a new bishop in time t). $IVage_{dtb}$ takes value 1 if the bishop assigned in dioceses d at time $t - 1$ is b years old in time t (Age grouped in intervals of 3 years). Then, ψ_d, ψ_t represent dioceses and year fixed effects.

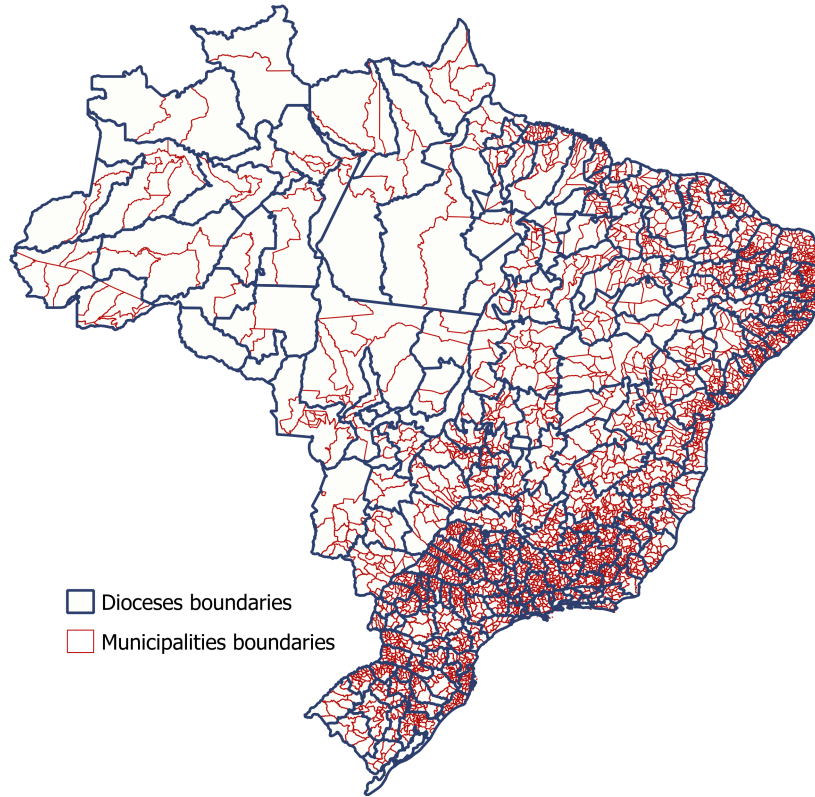
The results presented in Figure A1 indicate a significant increase in the probability of a new bishop being appointed at time t when the incumbent bishop reaches 75 years of age at time $t - 1$. This result provides reassurance that the year when the bishop in office in 1977 (i.e., the last progressive bishop) turns 75 years old is a suitable for predicting the timing of the appointment of a conservative bishop.

Figure A1: Exogenous variation in turnover of bishop



A2 Tables and Figures

Figure A2: Dioceses and Municipalities boundaries, 1970



Note: The map displays the Dioceses and Municipalities boundaries as of 1970, which are the ones used throughout the study. At the time of John Paul II's appointment in 1978, Brazil had 221 dioceses, each encompassing an average of 20 municipalities.

Figure A3: Data validity check



Note: This set of graphs illustrates the evolution of the number of active land conflicts and land occupations in each region of Brazil based on data from CPT and Dataluta, respectively.

Table A1: Endogeneity Check

	Year predicted appointment of bishop	
	Coefficients (1)	Standard Error (2)
Total population 1970	-0.015	0.460
Total population growth 1970-1960	0.035	0.130
Rural population 1970	-0.022	0.272
Land rented 1970	-0.008	0.710
Land occupied 1970	0.005	0.820
Land owned by producer 1970	0.005	0.820
Productive land not used 1970	-0.008	0.681
Parishes in 1978	-0.024	0.241

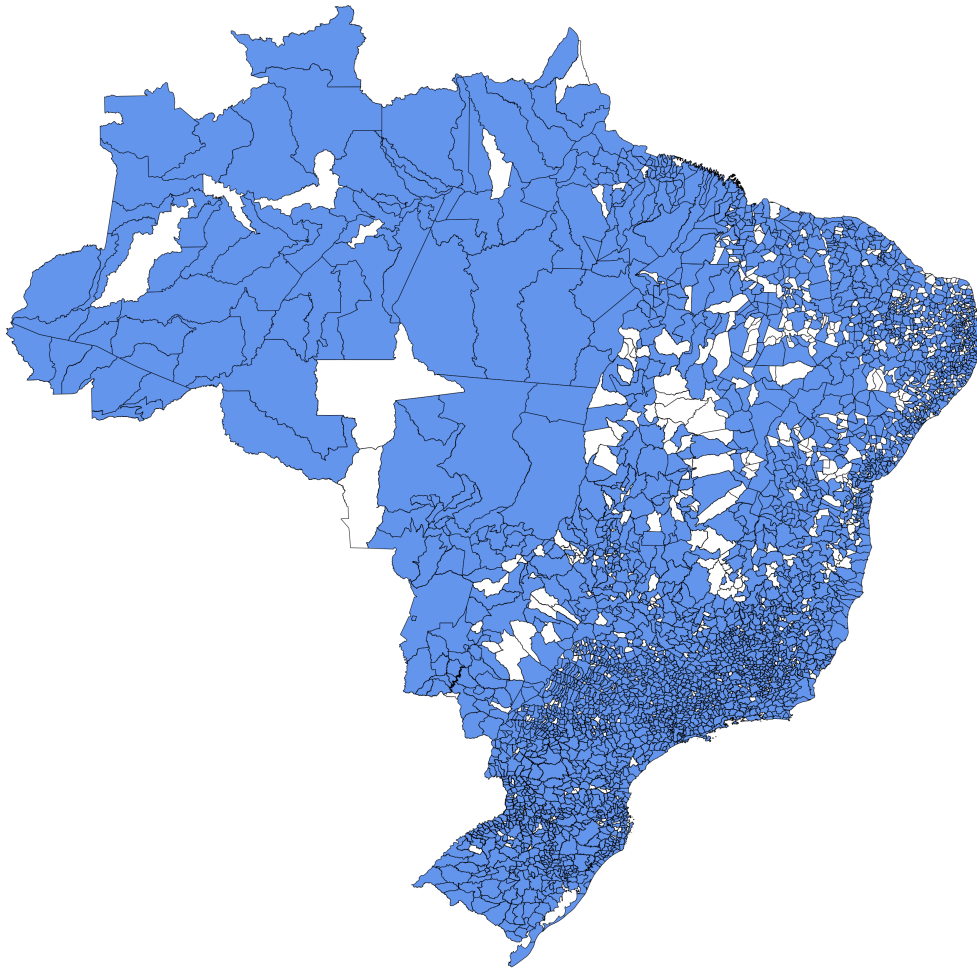
Note: This table presents the correlation between the year the bishop in place in 1977 reaches its retirement age and different characteristics of the municipality in 1970.

Table A2: Effect of Expected JPPII-Bishop on Non-Land-Related Conflicts.

	Active Conflicts related to				
	Labor (1)	Agricultural Policy (2)	Drought (3)	Logging (4)	Gold-digging (5)
<i>Post Expected Replacement</i>	0.012 (0.008)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.004 (0.004)	0.000 (0.000)	0.003 (0.002)
Mean Dep var	0.04	0.002	0.02	0.00	0.01
Municipality FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year FE $\times$ Controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	77,900	77,900	77,900	77,900	77,900

The table reports estimates obtained using the estimator proposed by [Callaway and Sant'Anna \(2021\)](#). The unit of observation is the 1970 municipality, with the analysis covering the period from 1975 to 1994. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Figure A4: Parish presence in municipality



Parish presence in the municipality in 1975

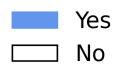
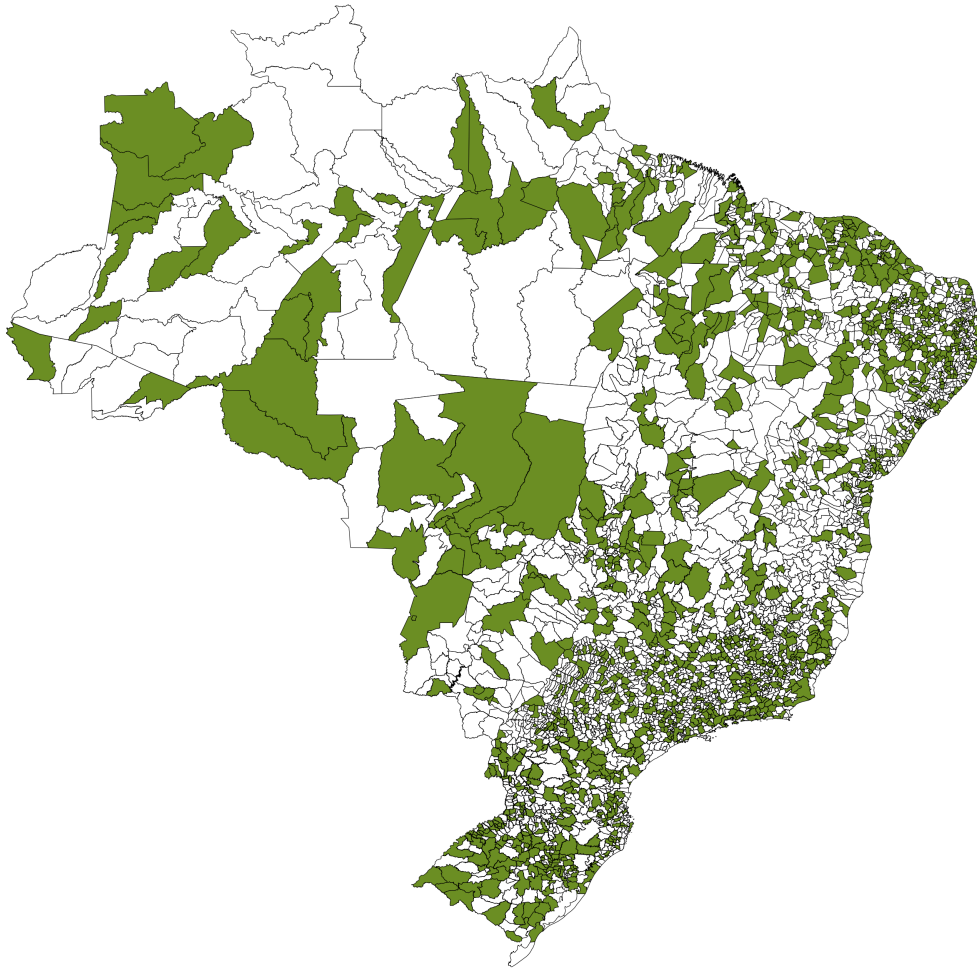


Figure A5: Religiously owned land in municipality



Religiously owned land in the municipality in 1975

