A few years back, when I interviewed a former Argentine official who had been brought in during the mid-1990s to clean house in the notoriously corrupt and violent police department of Buenos Aires province, he spoke of the force’s staunch resistance to his anticorruption measures. Shots were fired into his home. His office was put under surveillance. At a police gathering, his picture was affixed to a doll, and “one by one, the officers would pass by the doll and urinate on it.”

His candid account underscores not only the contempt with which many would-be reformers are regarded by police leadership and the rank and file, but also the capacity of police to disrupt or altogether dismantle reform efforts—and not just in Argentina. This man’s short tenure as the provincial secretary of security would usher in two decades of police reform and counter-reform in Buenos Aires. Ambitious reform measures were repeatedly discarded in response to police pressure, not long after being passed by the provincial legislature.

The police of Buenos Aires province—who came to be called the maldita policía (damned police) during this period due to their widespread and widely known malfeasance—leveraged extraordinary power in defense of their prerogatives. Similar legacies of stalled reform are common to police forces throughout the world, in developing and advanced democracies alike. In Buenos Aires province, as elsewhere, the ability of the police to thwart reform can be explained by a simple political fact, summed up by the former security secretary, Eduardo de Lázari: “Civilian officials come and go; the police will always be here.”

Advocates of police reform typically face an unfavorable political landscape. It is necessarily a long-term project, highly vulnerable to resistance from the police and changing political winds. Majority opinion can quickly swing from favoring the status quo to demanding reforms to accusing reformers of “handcuffing” police and limiting their ability to fight crime. These varying political pressures may, in turn, lead to considerable turnover of the political actors who hold formal responsibility for security policy and police governance. The police, in contrast, display a remarkable permanence regardless of shifting political conditions, making any potential reform efforts difficult to see through and sustain.

A cursory glance at the records of police forces around the world reveals the persistence of endemic problems, seemingly unchanged by the passage of time. In the United States, the 1968 Kerner Commission Report and the 2015 report of the President’s Task Force on Twenty-First Century Policing both decried racial bias in policing, noted that police were accorded low trust and legitimacy in communities of color, and raised concerns about aggressive strategies such as “stop and frisk” and militarization. Both commissions also recommended targeted recruitment to increase diversity in police forces and engagement in community service to improve relations with the public, among other measures.

In Chicago, a blue-ribbon panel concluded in the 1972 Metcalfe Report that police use of force was racially biased, to the extent that 75 percent
of those killed by the city police were black. More than four decades later, the Police Accountability Task Force appointed by the mayor similarly found that three-quarters of victims of police shootings were black.

Across the Atlantic, a government commission convened following the 1993 murder of a young black man, Stephen Lawrence, determined that the London Metropolitan Police were “institutionally racist.” Two decades later, the department’s own chief declared that it “could take 100 years” for the police ranks to reflect the city’s diversity.

In Brazil, a key debate during the transition to democracy in the 1980s was whether to abolish the military police force and merge it with the civil police. When brutal repression of massive protests in 2013 put police violence back on the agenda, security experts, activists, and legislators once again debated abolition and unification. In the end, neither was enacted.

These recurring diagnoses and proposed remedies may give the impression of stagnant security policies, but the persistence of such conditions actually reflects the abrupt pendulum swings that often characterize police reform. In the span of just a few years after the 2014 police killing of a young black man, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, official US policy shifted from concerted federal police reform efforts—including Justice Department investigations and consent decrees (court-enforced reform agreements)—to the withdrawal of these vigorous oversight instruments after Donald Trump succeeded Barack Obama as president, having campaigned on a “law and order” platform.

A few years earlier in Venezuela, sweeping pro–human rights police reforms that had been adopted following national outrage over a police abuse and corruption scandal gave way to official security policies that enabled rampant police violence, ushering in some of the highest rates of police killings in the region. In Brazil, since President Jair Bolsonaro took office in January 2019, federal programs to reform police and promote human rights have been supplanted by “anticrime” legislation whose only substantive provision is to effectively eliminate legal restrictions on police killings—which have predictably increased. Across these diverse contexts, governments have shifted, from one administration to the next, from resolute commitment to reform to complete reversal, even as underlying conditions remain largely constant and the problems of policing remain largely unaddressed.

The failure of police reforms is often seen as the result of entrenched and insurmountable historical legacies, the lack of salience of policing issues in electoral politics, weak institutions incapable of holding police accountable or implementing reforms, or rogue, uncontrollable police forces impervious to political pressure and citizens’ demands. Such conditions are typically cited to explain the persistence of violent, discriminatory, corrupt, or ineffective police forces.

Yet the continuity of police institutions and practices is best understood not as an institutional failure or evidence of the unresponsiveness of democratic institutions, but rather as the result of what political scientists Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, in an influential 1962 article, called “nondecision-making,” the process by which consequential but contested issues are left off the policy agenda. It is common to observe a swing from long periods of non-decision-making in the face of profound policing deficiencies to social and political mobilization in favor of ambitious reform, followed by its rapid unraveling. This pattern reflects the ways in which police exercise their power to keep certain issues off the policy agenda, and how divided opinions over policing within society tend to shape politicians’ electoral incentives in a manner that diverts them from reform.

The fact that the fate of police reform is determined by ordinary democratic politics and robust contestation is often left out of the usual diagnoses of policing deficiencies. This leads to an incomplete assessment of the problems and yields policy proposals inadequate for resolving them. Recent discussions of police reform in the United States, for instance, after Ferguson and a spate of other police killings of unarmed black men that were captured on video, have tended to focus on diagnoses such as implicit bias (stereotypes that may unconsciously affect police actions) and poor police-community relations, and proposals for reform such as body-worn cameras and implicit bias training for officers. In Central America, where citizens must contend with the dual scourges of some of the highest homicide rates in the world...
and violent, corrupt police forces, some of the leading proposals focus on operational reforms such as “hot-spot” policing—targeting police resources and action in territories with a high concentration of crime.

Without rendering judgment on the effectiveness of these strategies, one can say that such an approach sidesteps the broader political and institutional context that endows police with considerable structural power to defend their prerogatives and thwart reform. High crime and inequality often shape public demands, creating a constituency for repressive and unaccountable policing. By narrowing the locus of the problem to promote technical fixes, we risk misdiagnosing entrenched deficiencies and constraining the scope of proposed solutions.

We can learn a great deal about the challenges of transforming policing by looking to recent cases in Latin America in which comprehensive police reform rose on the agenda only to unravel in the face of police and political resistance. As a region of young democracies grappling with high levels of crime and inequality, Latin America can be especially instructive about how these factors shape relationships between police and the politicians who ostensibly control them. It also shows how the fragmentation of societal demands can make consensus over police reform difficult to sustain. These cases offer broader lessons about the intersection of inequality, policing, and ordinary democratic politics.

**STRUCTURAL POWER**

Accounting for the persistence of abusive and deficient police forces and their ability to resist reform requires understanding policing as a political resource that can be distributed toward electoral ends. Police are charged with carrying out central tasks of the state: the provision of security and the enforcement of the laws. In their exercise of the state’s coercive authority, police forces wield tremendous power over the daily lives of citizens. They are endowed with the authorization to use force on behalf of some citizens against others. This distribution of protection and repression is, of course, a central concern for citizens—a process that they will likely seek to influence and shape.

The importance of security to citizens gives politicians an incentive to use the distribution of protection and repression to achieve political objectives. But police forces also have considerable agency. They leverage their monopoly on “legitimate” force to selectively serve the interests of elected leaders, but they can also threaten leaders by withdrawing their service of providing order and security.

The role of exercising the state’s coercive authority makes the police both an instrument of power and a formidable political actor whose cooperation is needed by politicians. This predisposes politicians to choose to accommodate their police forces, granting them greater autonomy in exchange for cooperation. Police are thus endowed with considerable structural power to constrain the policy options available to politicians and raise the threshold for reform.

When politicians do not accommodate them, police forces routinely withdraw their cooperation in defense of their interests, creating challenging or embarrassing political conditions to ratchet up the pressure. Police forces in the Brazilian states of Bahia and Espírito Santo created security crises when they went on strike to demand salary increases and other benefits, leading to dramatic spikes in homicides in 2014 and 2017, respectively. Rio de Janeiro’s police pressed a demand for increased salaries by embarrassing their state’s government on the world stage, greeting international visitors arriving at Rio’s airport for the 2016 Olympics with a sign that read: “Welcome to hell: Police and firefighters don’t get paid, whoever comes to Rio de Janeiro will not be safe.”

Such acts of police resistance can be quite successful in pressuring politicians to limit reforms. For instance, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio was forced to temper his calls for police reform after the so-called blue flu of 2014, when many officers scaled back patrols and enforcement actions in response to the mayor’s criticism of the Police Department—and even turned their backs on him during a speech. These acts of resistance shaped local politicians’ approach to police reform for several years, and were used as justification for the passage of a watered-down reform bill in 2017. As the bill’s sponsor, Councilman Ritchie Torres, put it:

> We all have searing memories of 2014, when there was an open revolt in the rank and file of the New York City Police Department. And so if we have an opportunity to pursue a path to police reform without provoking an upheaval in the New York City Police Department, then why not do it?

The fear of “provoking an upheaval” among police can serve as ample motivation for politicians to avoid measures intended to address glar-
ing deficiencies. This political calculus may well explain why many police forces are seemingly able to avoid external interference and resist pressure to reform despite exhibiting enduring structural problems, such as entrenched corruption, widespread extrajudicial violence, and incompetence in the face of rising crime. Even in moments of broad institutional transformation, police may be singularly able to evade reforms.

During the early 1990s in Colombia, for instance, a profound institutional crisis fueled by the protracted internal armed conflict, drug violence, and loss of state legitimacy led then-President César Gaviria to undertake what he called an “institutional shakeup” (revolcón institucional). This entailed an ambitious, far-reaching, and at times controversial reform agenda across a range of policy areas. The shakeup, however, excluded the National Police, ignoring many years’ worth of evidence of profound deficiencies and warnings from various officials about the need for reform. As judges in the Council of State, Colombia’s highest administrative court, declared at the time in a verdict against the National Police for its failure to adequately sanction officers who tortured and burned alive two criminal suspects, “Something is failing in the recruitment, oversight, and administration of the Public Force.”

Despite these dire assessments, police reform bills languished in the Colombian Congress. Asked about the failure of one 1992 measure, the former minister of defense told me, “The police would say that it was taking corrective measures, and the Congress would not challenge the opinions of the institutions of the Public Force.” Tarnished by years of institutional decay, considerable infiltration by drug cartels, widespread corruption and extrajudicial violence, and incapacity to effectively address rising urban crime and violence, the Colombian National Police emerged unscathed from the “institutional shakeup.”

The reform attempts of Eduardo de Lázari, the security secretary of Buenos Aires province, met a similar fate in the mid-1990s. According to news reports at the time, following repeated clashes with the police chief, Lázari went to convey his displeasure to the governor in person, only to find the chief at the governor’s side. The would-be reformer was promptly replaced with a long-time political operative from the governor’s party. Police reform stalled in the province, despite a chorus, as in Colombia, of repeated warnings and calls for reform from other officials. One opposition legisla-
are more likely to suffer—but also call for curbing police abuses to which they are disproportionately subjected.

In the face of these divided preferences and conflicting demands, politicians are unlikely to see taking on police reform as an electorally advantageous strategy. Instead, political leaders will be more likely to accede to the demands of more privileged social groups—and the police force—both of which favor the status quo.

Throughout the early 1990s, as President Gaviria undertook his “institutional shakeup” that excluded the country’s police force, marginalized citizens throughout Colombia protested against police abuses—unlawful detentions and searches, extrajudicial killings and massacres—from low-income urban districts such as La Iguaná, Medellín, and Ciudad Bolívar, Bogotá, to rural indigenous communities like Mingueo, La Guajira. At the same time, many Colombian business leaders rebuffed calls for robust police reform, warning against “extreme positions” and “permissive justice.”

Politicians in Buenos Aires province faced similarly contrasting demands. Throughout the 1990s, residents of low-income municipalities protested against “gatillo fácil” (trigger-happy) police after dozens of killings of young men. But in the context of Argentina’s deepening economic crisis and social unrest, other communities demanded more police authority to address the increasing insecurity, and celebrated justicieros (vigilantes) who took the law into their own hands. In one dramatic instance, residents of the well-to-do municipality of Pilar marched in defense of their police chief, Luis Patti—who was accused of having participated in torture, disappearances, and killings during the period of military dictatorship that lasted from 1976 to 1983—and subsequently elected him as their mayor.

Such differences in views of policing along the lines of social cleavages are common in the United States as well, even when the deficiencies of police forces are well known. In 2016, the same year that the Police Accountability Task Force issued a devastating diagnosis of the Chicago Police Department, a public opinion survey conducted by the New York Times found stark divisions along racial lines in Chicagoans’ assessments of the police. Among whites, 47 percent evaluated the police as excellent or good, and only 16 percent as poor; these percentages were inverted among black residents. Similar disparities set apart views in the wealthier (and whiter) North Side from those in the South and West Sides.

Even in the cases of deeply troubled police forces, the status quo is often reinforced by the ways in which social inequality is channeled into conflicting demands. The strongest calls for police reform often come from social groups with the least political power, and constituencies in favor of the status quo tend to form among more powerful social groups. Since political leaders must also contend with the police’s structural power, their electoral calculations may well lead them to conclude that the risks of police reform far outweigh the benefits.

**ELECTORAL THREAT**

Police reform may stall due to the constraints of police pressure and the conflicting demands of different social groups; both factors shift politicians’ incentives away from police reform. But politicians’ calculations about the risks and benefits of police reform can also shift in response to changing political conditions. When politicians perceive that a demand for police reform is broadly shared across social divides, and when they face a robust political opposition, they are more likely to enact reforms. This threat of losing the next election acts as a counterweight to the structural power that typically enables the police to thwart reform.

My research in Argentina and Colombia showed the importance of electoral pressures in shifting politicians’ incentives and reviving the fortunes of reform: measures that were dead on arrival suddenly moved onto the fast track to implementation. In both cases, political leaders rapidly reoriented their decision-making from avoidance to the embrace of ambitious, comprehensive reform in response to short-term changes in public preferences and political competition.

The timing of these decisions strongly suggested that it was newly emerged electoral threats—and not the long trajectory of grave structural policing deficiencies—that prompted political leaders to reform their embattled police forces. In Colombia, following the failure of police reform bills in late 1992, Gaviria and congressional leaders an-
nounced a joint legislative agenda for the remain-
der of the term on March 1, 1993. Although this agenda covered a range of policy areas, reforming the National Police was not on the list.

In the days that followed, however, news emerged of an egregious act of violence: the rape and murder of a little girl by an officer—in a police station. The scandal rocked Colombia, generating a convergence of public opinion in favor of reform and subjecting the National Police to unprecedented scrutiny. Within just a month of excluding police reform from the legislative agenda, Gaviria convened a commission of diverse political actors and civil society groups to study the matter and propose major reforms. With the 1994 presidential elections approaching, and Gaviria’s Liberal Party facing the strongest political competition Colombia had seen in many years, the outrage over the police scandal convinced the president and congressional leaders to reintroduce and pass the reform bill that had failed in Congress the previous year.

A similar sequence of events unfolded in Buenos Aires province in 1997. The murder of a journalist at the hands of provincial police officers stirred widespread outrage, leading to several months of protest and calls for reform from diverse civil society groups. Although Governor Eduardo Duhalde’s party created a special bicameral commission dedicated to investigating the case, he kept sidestepping the question of police reform, even firing his own reformist secretary of security. But a month after his party lost the midterm legislative elections in October 1997, Duhalde declared the provincial police to be in a state of emergency, appointed a civilian as chief, and solicited proposals for structural reform.

In both cases, just months following scandals and electoral shifts, the Colombian Congress and the provincial legislature of Buenos Aires enacted sweeping reform measures overhauling their police forces in remarkably similar ways. The legislation passed in Colombia in 1993 and in Buenos Aires province in 1998 sought to transform police training and upgrade standards for recruitment and promotion; advance decentralization, demili-
tarization, and specialization of the police; create stronger, novel mechanisms for internal and civilian oversight and accountability; and develop new institutions for citizen participation. Not long af-

Politicians eschew reforms in order to avoid the risks of alienating police.

ter calling their police “a source of pride for the country” and “the best police force in the world,” the Colombian president and the Buenos Aires governor had been compelled to back dramatic restructuring measures in response to changing political conditions.

Such politically driven shifts in police reform outcomes have also occurred recently in the United States. In Chicago, reform of the city’s long-troubled police department finally happened not as a direct result of its endemic structural deficiencies, but following a similar combination of scandal and electoral threat. After winning the first-ever runoff in a mayoral election by a relatively narrow margin in early 2015—the city had seen few competitive mayoral elections in recent decades—incumbent Mayor Rahm Emanuel faced a massive police scandal later that year following the release of long-withheld video footage of the fatal police shooting of Laquan McDonald, a 17-year-old black youth. Like his counterparts in Argentina and Colombia, within a month of the video’s release and the widespread protests that followed, the mayor convened the Police Accountability Task Force to study the options for police reform and make recommendations. Important civilian oversight reforms were enacted in the months after the release of the Task Force’s report the following year.

The Pendulum Swings Back

For all of the drastic institutional change that police reform laws promise, they are often unceremoniously revoked once political conditions return to the pre-reform status quo. In both Buenos Aires province and Colombia, the comprehensive reforms enacted following broad social and political mobilization were rolled back almost as soon as implementation began. Both settings saw a change in administration in the year following the enactment of reforms. Neither the new Buenos Aires governor nor the new Colombian president had much incentive to push ahead with their predecessors’ difficult reforms in the face of police resistance.

Public opinion also shifted, as successful police operations against drug cartels in Colombia and rising crime in Buenos Aires province led majorities to oppose greater restrictions on police authority. Assisted by these changing political
winds, the police succeeded in resisting reform. The new mood was best encapsulated in a remark by Colombian President Ernesto Samper as he announced the rollback of external oversight measures in the mid-1990s: “Let’s let the police regulate itself.”

The structural power of the police is formidable. Police reform requires politicians to be convinced that avoiding action will cost them at the ballot box. Absent an electoral threat, they are unlikely to undertake the risks of reforming, and potentially alienating, the police forces whose cooperation they need.

Although such an electoral threat constitutes a potent counterweight to the structural power of the police, it may well fail to materialize or to endure in highly unequal societies, where conflicting demands pose another crucial obstacle to police reform. That is what happened in Colombia and Buenos Aires province, where reformist officials pointed the finger of blame at “erratic” public opinion, lamenting that the instability of social and political consensus had prevented them from pushing through sweeping and sustainable reforms.

Cities like Chicago, and countries like Brazil, continue to grapple with containing police violence against marginalized communities while also providing meaningful security. Even the most urgently needed and well-designed reforms can lose public support. This underscores the importance of building enduring constituencies to sustain mobilization and pressure politicians to constrain police authority and protect disadvantaged citizens from police violence. A more stable societal consensus can shift politicians’ incentives, letting them know that there will be an electoral price to pay for continuing to accommodate the police. Such a shift in political conditions can also counterbalance the police’s structural power and capacity to resist reform. As one Colombian official told me, consistent social and political pressure acts as a warning to police: “We either reform ourselves, or they’ll reform us.”