

Are tropical forests threatened by democracy?

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Democracy may lead to more deforestation in the tropics. So write

environmental scientist Joeri Morpurgo and his colleagues in *Biological Conservation*. They found that competitive elections are associated with more loss of tropical rainforest than elections without competition. "We must prevent politicians from exploiting the remaining rainforest for political power."

"People who are electable try to garner votes in many ways," Morpurgo says. "They adjust their policies or make promises to win over voters. This is known to affect many things, from unemployment numbers to oil production or gross national product. We were curious about the impact on [deforestation](#) in the tropics. That had not yet been studied on a global scale. New satellite data and more accessible [election](#) databases now made that possible."

Data on elections, governments and deforestation

The researchers created a database containing annual information from 55 countries in the tropics, from 2001 to 2018. For instance, the annual rainforest loss, in which years there had been elections and whether they were presidential, Upper or Lower House elections. They also collected all kinds of information about the government. These included the level of corruption, media integrity and whether there was enough (fair) competition during elections.

Morpurgo says, "We looked at competitive election years, non-competitive election years and years without elections. In a competitive election year, all votes coming in affect who eventually gets into government. In a non-competitive year, there are elections, but you can only vote for one party, for example, or the election is just a sham. Then we laid all those different years alongside the annual deforestation numbers."

More deforestation in competitive elections

Morpurgo and his colleagues observed that more deforestation occurred in competitive election years compared to non-competitive election years. "We think this is because politicians use land and resources to win over voters. There are a lot of laws and regulations against monetary or real estate bribery, but not against exploitation of nature. Therefore, this is a great way to win votes from the agricultural sector, among others."

"For instance, by changing existing policies. Former President Bolsonaro of Brazil once even promised that he would abolish the then existing environmental and nature conservation laws if re-elected."

Curious about shorter-term and smaller-scale effects

"Competitive elections are of course not completely responsible for deforestation, but our results do suggest that they are indirectly a driving factor," Morpurgo says.

"To explore this further, we need to look at the effects at smaller scales or over a shorter time span. Currently, deforestation data is only available by year; the satellites that measure it simply don't fly by often enough. It would be very interesting to look at effects within a year. Or within country boundaries: what effect do state or provincial elections have? But for many [tropical countries](#), that kind of data is often not yet available or difficult to obtain."

Include nature when monitoring elections

But how do we protect the rainforest from power-hungry politicians?

"Elections are obviously an integral part of a functioning democracy, you cannot and do not want to abolish them. It might be an idea to move the

management of forests and other natural resources away from government to independent parties. That way, you take the rainforests out of the sphere of influence of elections. But that is difficult to get done."

According to the researchers, it is therefore especially important that organizations monitoring the transparency and fairness of elections also include monitoring the impact on the environment and nature. Nature organizations should also be extra vigilant in the run-up to elections.

Morpurgo explains, "Because it is precisely then that electors, for example, donate forest land to be mined in the hope for extra votes. This way, we can hopefully prevent democratic elections from being accompanied by deforestation, destruction of ecosystems and exploitation of natural resources."

More information: Joeri Morpurgo et al, The role of elections as drivers of tropical deforestation, *Biological Conservation* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.biocon.2022.109832](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2022.109832)

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