

**When Handpicked Successors of Charismatic Leaders Prosper:
The Surprising Success of Juan Manuel Santos in Colombia**

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Abstract:

Charismatic leaders, who loathe sharing power, often anoint sycophantic successors who fail to become powerful leaders in their own right. Curiously, however, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), the handpicked successor of Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010), became a remarkably effective leader who served two terms and oversaw Colombia's landmark 2016 peace agreement. We investigate this unlikely outcome and develop a novel theory to reveal a pathway through which some handpicked successors of charismatic leaders can establish independent authority. We argue that success is more likely when the successor breaks away from the predecessor. However, doing so requires the successor to engage in a sequential and highly strategic process we label *tightrope walking*, in which the new leader gains the predecessor's endorsement to win office, expands his/her coalition by incorporating new allies from outside the predecessor's base, and reforms the predecessor's unsustainable policies and narrative. To substantiate our theory, we trace how Santos moved through each stage of the tightrope-walking process and ultimately broke from Uribe to achieve independent authority. The results suggest a rare but important mechanism through which charismatic movements can be challenged from the inside out and curtail or reverse democratic erosion.

1. INTRODUCTION

The leaders of charismatic movements, who rely on affective attachments with their followers to consolidate hegemonic authority, loathe sharing power. When forced to step down, these leaders attempt to protect their legacy from being overshadowed, often by anointing sycophantic successors.¹ In turn, handpicked successors typically fail to establish independent leadership. Chosen for loyalty over skill, they lack personal appeal and struggle to maintain the impressive yet unsustainable policies of their predecessors. Consequently, most handpicked successors of charismatic leaders suffer political failure shortly after rising to power.²

In Latin America, many charismatic presidents have concentrated their power at the expense of other institutions. Among these leaders, handpicked succession has become increasingly common: since 2010, five such presidents in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela have attempted to extend their rule at least once through “surrogate candidates” since 2010 (See Table 1; *The New York Times*, April 16, 2021). Those candidates who rose to power struggled to step out of their predecessors’ shadow or enact effective policies.³

[Table 1 about here]

However, Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018)—the handpicked successor of the Colombia’s charismatic president, Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010)—had a different fate. Santos’ approval exceeded fifty percent during his first years in office and he won re-election in 2014, two years after Uribe rescinded his endorsement. Santos also negotiated and signed a peace agreement to end a fifty-year-old civil war with the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and passed legislation that reversed several anti-democratic reforms enacted by his charismatic predecessor.⁴ These accomplishments required Santos to exercise independent leadership rather than playing the minion to Uribe as would a typical handpicked successor.

While existing literature explains why most handpicked successors fail, we investigate the understudied mechanisms that lead to rare but important cases of success (i.e., rise to executive office, serve at least one full term, and assert independent authority to enact their desired policy agenda).⁵ We focus on handpicked succession in charismatic movements that satisfy three scope conditions: (1) the predecessor relies predominantly on charismatic attachments with his followers to overcome institutional constraints and concentrate power; (2) the succession process occurs in an electoral democracy; and (3) the predecessor publicly selects a candidate as his preferred heir.⁶ Although handpicked successors struggle in many settings,⁷ success is uniquely challenging in charismatic context and requires a specific set of strategies.

We argue that handpicked successors of charismatic leaders can achieve success by engaging in a process we call *tightrope walking*, in which the successor forges strategic alliances with specific actors from within and beyond the predecessor's movement. Through this process, the successor can temporarily broaden his/her coalition and increase his/her reserve of political capital—the set of skills, relationships, and reputation that substantiate a leader's authority⁸—ultimately enabling the successor to reform the predecessor's impressive yet inherently unsustainable policies. In doing so, the successor can prevent a crisis and distinguish him/herself as an independent leader. The successor can also foster connections across the charismatic cleavage long enough to restore democratic norms and procedures undermined by the predecessor.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we outline the dilemma faced by handpicked successors of charismatic leaders. Selected for their loyalty, successors are expected to continue the predecessor's beloved yet unsustainable policies and polemic style; however, to avoid political collapse and establish independent legitimacy, they must instead embrace change. Second, we draw insights from studies of leadership, political capital, and coalition-building to establish a

novel theoretical framework that explains how handpicked successors might navigate this dilemma through the three-stage process of tightrope walking. We illustrate this process in Colombia by tracing the steps Santos took to gradually break away from Uribe, drawing on leader speeches, party programs, public opinion data, media coverage, and secondary sources spanning the sixteen-year period from Uribe's rise to power (2002) to the completion of Santos' second presidential term (2018). We also examine two alternative explanations—stronger democracy and favourable economic performance—and illustrate why they are insufficient to explain Santos' success. To conclude, we clarify how the tightrope-walking concept provides a framework for understanding a rare but important pathway through which some leaders can challenge charismatic movements from the inside out and strengthen democracy.

2. THE HANDPICKED SUCCESSOR'S DILEMMA: CONTINUITY VERSUS CHANGE

In general, the succession literature indicates that new leaders must choose whether to continue or change the policies, strategies, and style of their predecessors.⁹ This choice is particularly fraught in charismatic movements where leaders transfer power to their chosen heirs, because the methods these leaders use to establish their authority in the first place tie their successors' hands (*The New York Times*, April 21, 2021). Materially, charismatic leaders “prove” their heroic power and win their followers' adoration by implementing bold, seemingly extraordinary policies. The personalistic nature and short-term impact of these policies make the leaders appear heroic, yet the policies' inherent unsustainability also plants the seeds for their eventual demise.¹⁰ Symbolically, charismatic leaders craft a quasi-religious narrative that glorifies them as redeemers, demonizes their opponents, and promises to transform society by vanquishing the malevolent opposition and providing the people with peace and prosperity. Combined with the

material impact of the bold policies, this narrative serves as a “world-rejecting, salvationist creed” that solidifies the bonds between the charismatic leaders and their followers.¹¹

The handpicked successor who passively inherits his/her legitimacy from a charismatic predecessor is incentivized to continue the predecessor’s policies and narrative. Continuity reaffirms followers’ support by reassuring them of the successor’s loyalty, strengthens the successor’s position vis-à-vis internal rivals, and allows the successor to remain in the predecessor’s good graces, whose “towering presence” shapes the followers’ expectations.¹² Given these advantages, it is unsurprising that most handpicked successors choose the path of least resistance by opting for continuity.

These incentives notwithstanding, embracing continuity is dangerous for the successor. First, s/he “face[s] an extraordinarily tough challenge to be seen and judged in [his/her] own right, rather than in the shadow of [his/her] formidable predecessor.”¹³ Second, continuity tethers the successor to the predecessor’s dysfunctional policies. Although they may appear miraculous at first, their personalistic, short-sighted nature makes them vulnerable to collapse. When they inevitably implode, the handpicked successor receives the blame, even though the dysfunction stems from the predecessor’s actions.¹⁴ Finally, embracing the predecessor’s narrative reinforces the successor’s subordinate position, while its Manichean character undermines the successor’s efforts to attract allies from outside of the movement.¹⁵ Thus, while perpetuating the predecessor’s charisma may initially benefit the successor, continuing his policies and narrative ultimately impedes the successor’s capacity to exercise independent and effective leadership.¹⁶

Conversely, our theory suggests that handpicked successors who embrace change are more likely to achieve success by liberating themselves from the predecessor’s overbearing influence. Initially, opting for change can make the successor appear traitorous, resulting in the evaporation

of the followers' support. Yet, by reversing the predecessor's irresponsible programs, the successor has the potential to correct looming policy failures before they occur. Additionally, stepping away from the predecessor's polemic narrative may incentivize the cooperation of actors from outside the movement who yearn for a more pluralistic political environment.

Few handpicked successors attempt, much less successfully reverse, the charismatic predecessor's policies and narrative. Moreover, it remains unclear how an effective break from the predecessor can be achieved. We argue that timing and sequence are key to success. First, the predecessor must willingly, if begrudgingly, step down and select a successor, who must in turn rise to power through an election. Second, the successor must sustain his predecessor's support base long enough to build alliances with both electoral and non-electoral coalition partners from the outside. Finally, the successor must use his/her newfound political capital to enact significant reforms to solidify his/her independent leadership, prevent a crisis, and strengthen democracy. The following section proposes a new theoretical framework rooted in the three-stage process of tightrope walking to illustrate under what conditions success is most likely to occur.

3. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WALKING THE TIGHTROPE

Stage 1: Candidate Selection

Charismatic succession begins with the predecessor's exit and selection of a likely successor. Here, the predecessor's mode of departure is important. An unexpected departure (e.g., death or exile) is likely to martyrize the predecessor and intensify his followers' emotional attachments to him, making the successor appear especially unworthy of his mantle. Under these circumstances, the successor faces increased pressure from the bereaved followers to faithfully uphold the predecessor's policies and narrative.¹⁷ The predecessor's unanticipated demise can also

intensify polarization between followers and opponents, impeding the successor's attempts to appeal to actors from outside the movement.¹⁸ We concur with extant literature that charismatic leaders who have been involuntarily forced from power all but ensure the failure of their handpicked successors.¹⁹

In contrast, charismatic leaders who step down due to a constitutional term limit, as Uribe and Rafael Correa recently did, or who lose their re-election bid, as Donald Trump did in 2020, appear less heroic. We move beyond existing literature to argue that this mode of departure opens a crucial window of opportunity for handpicked successors to establish independent authority. Although term-limited or electorally defeated predecessors remain deeply popular among their followers, these constraints erode the leaders' image of invincibility and suggest that key institutions, opposition politicians, and/or civil society groups sustain some influence despite the leader's attempts to concentrate power.²⁰

Even where term limits or failed re-election campaigns force alternation in leadership, however, the predecessor enjoys substantial control over succession and is likely to nominate the most loyal, unthreatening individual available. To secure the predecessor's nomination, the hopeful successor must first pursue a "covert candidacy" by avoiding a public bid for power and pledging loyalty to the predecessor.²¹ The surreptitious nature of the candidacy is essential, as the predecessor could interpret any public display of ambition by the potential successor as a threat. A seeming devotee, the covert candidate therefore avoids announcing his/her desire to run until the predecessor anoints him/her as the "heir apparent," and then campaigns based on the promise to continue in the predecessor's footsteps.²²

Stage 2: Coalition-Building

If the successor secures the predecessor's endorsement and wins the election, he/she faces the dilemma of continuity versus change: the successor feels pressure to uphold the predecessor's policies and narrative of salvation, yet the threat of policy failure and the need to establish independent legitimacy press him/her to enact significant reforms. While an agenda of reform has the potential to showcase strong leadership, the successor begins with scarce resources to enact this agenda because—even more than successors of non-charismatic leaders—his/her primary source of political capital rests with the predecessor and followers. Consequently, before breaking from the predecessor, the successor must accumulate independent capital by incorporating new allies into his/her coalition who embrace change.²³

While most leaders attempt to expand their electoral coalitions, this task is uniquely challenging for handpicked successors of charismatic leaders, who must overcome the influence of their predecessors and persuade sharply divided actors to unite. Unlike most democratic politicians, charismatic leaders seek hegemonic authority by polarizing society along personalistic lines, demonizing opponents, and undermining institutions that threaten their influence. To confront this challenge and expand his/her coalition, the handpicked successor must seek partners from within *and beyond* the electoral sphere. Whereas gaining new voters strengthens the successor's electoral base, repairing relationships with non-electoral institutions such as the military and judiciary is crucial to re-establishing democratic checks and limiting the predecessor's influence, thereby protecting the successor's independent authority.

Given the successor's handpicked status, establishing relationships with outsiders is unlikely to occur overnight. To buy time, he/she must temporarily sustain the support of the predecessor and followers while attempting to cultivate linkages with new allies. The successor

achieves this by showing the followers a desire to embrace continuity while simultaneously signalling to outside actors a commitment to bring about meaningful reforms. This strategy of divergent signalling is risky because each side may view the successor's attempts to appease the other as traitorous. By design, the strategy is also short-lived: the successor will almost assuredly lose the predecessor's support upon revealing his/her true agenda of reform during stage three. Nevertheless, in the interim, the successor must momentarily unite "antagonistic sectors of society" and accumulate sufficient independent capital with which to eventually enact this agenda and break from the predecessor.²⁴

To illustrate to followers the desire to uphold the predecessor's legacy during the coalition-building stage, the successor can temporarily avoid challenging the predecessor's celebrated, if decaying, policies. Additionally, the successor can sustain elements of the predecessor's narrative by praising the predecessor as the people's saviour and declaring his/her commitment to the predecessor's redemptive mission. These gestures signal the successor's personal devotion to the predecessor and enable the successor to maintain the followers' favour without engaging in significant substantive action.

While appearing to maintain the status quo during this phase, the successor must also signal to outside actors—opposition leaders and parties that can mobilize new voters as well as non-electoral institutions like the judiciary, the military and/or civil society organizations—an interest in working together to bring about meaningful change. Often, the predecessor has marginalized these actors, labelling them "enemies" of the people. Rather than offering superficial perks that can be easily revoked, the successor is more likely to entice their cooperation through building "intensive linkages" that reincorporate them into the political system by granting genuine

participation and representation.²⁵ In exchange, these partners can use their recuperated influence to aid the successor in curbing the predecessor's authority.

To relay the message to prospective allies, the successor can implement subtle, procedural concessions that benefit these actors without drawing the attention of the predecessor's followers. The successor can also dial down the predecessor's polarizing rhetoric to signal his/her openness to cooperation. For instance, while praising the predecessor to please the followers, the successor might adopt softer language when referring to outsiders whom the predecessor had demonized. Unlike the bold reversals the successor must eventually implement to break from the predecessor, these procedural and symbolic adjustments can signal his/her desire to cooperate with new allies without overtly threatening the predecessor's legacy.

Stage 3: Revelation

Having established a broader base, the handpicked successor achieves a "coalitional majority"²⁶ and increased political capital with which to reveal and enact his/her true agenda of reform. Unlike the subtle alterations undertaken during stage two, these decisive reversals are likely to displease the predecessor and many followers, causing the successor to spend much of his/her capital with little prospect of recuperating it. The successor's new allies become critical during this stage, transitioning from "peripheral" to "core" members of the coalition while the predecessor and some of his followers peel away.²⁷ If the reforms succeed, the successor has the rare opportunity to demonstrate strong, independent leadership, reinforcing the new supporters' trust and approval. By achieving positive outcomes and stabilizing the country, he/she may also retain the ongoing support of some, though not all, of the original followers despite defying the predecessor.

This three-stage process of breaking away from a charismatic predecessor produces two important consequences. First, the handpicked successor's efforts to repair relationships with influential actors from non-electoral spheres can undo some of the predecessor's authoritarian power grabs by restoring the influence of other branches of government, strengthening liberal institutions, and/or limiting executive aggrandizement. Second, the successor's broader, heterogeneous coalition can depolarize society by weakening the personalistic cleavage forged by the predecessor. Although the predecessor could mobilize a counterattack in an attempt to stage a comeback at this juncture, we expect the predecessor's efforts will be dampened to the extent that the successor curbs executive power, strengthens democracy, and enacts reforms that benefit society.

Figure 1 summarizes the tightrope walking process, indicating the key steps involved in each of the three stages. Next, we illustrate our theory in Colombia by tracing how Santos moved through this process to become a successful president, despite rising as Uribe's handpicked successor.

[Figure 1 about here]

4. WALKING THE TIGHTROPE IN COLOMBIA: THE CASE OF JUAN MANUEL SANTOS

Laying the Foundation: Uribe's Charismatic Rule

Uribe established a charismatic movement and rose to the presidency in 2002 in the midst of a terrible security crisis.²⁸ Throughout the 1990s, violence had skyrocketed in Colombia due to a decades-long armed conflict between the government, various guerrilla groups (most notably the FARC), and right-wing paramilitary groups. Recognizing citizens' deeply held frustrations

with the establishment's inability to resolve the conflict, Uribe promised to enact bold policies to rid the government of corrupt elites and rescue the Colombian people from the violence.²⁹

In office, Uribe solidified his heroic role by enacting a daring new policy to attack the security crisis and cultivating a narrative that glorified the Colombian people, demonized the political establishment as lazy and corrupt, and re-labelled the armed conflict a terrorist insurrection. His audacious and, initially, very successful program called the Democratic Security Policy (DSP—*Política de Seguridad Democrática*) channelled unprecedented resources to the armed forces, created a citizen informant network, and enhanced the scope of the US anti-drugs aid plan (*Plan Colombia*).³⁰ Uribe promised the DSP would liberate Colombians from unchecked violence, not by engaging in “meaningless negotiations” with armed groups—like his predecessor, Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002)—but rather by physically obliterating the source of the problem.

To reinforce his followers' enthusiasm, Uribe maintained direct contact with them by holding day-long town hall meetings (*consejos comunales*) every other weekend. During these meetings, he invited community members to express their grievances directly to him and responded by publicly admonishing the officer deemed responsible for the issue and demanding an immediate solution. While inefficient, such micromanagement solidified Uribe's image as a hardworking leader who listened to his people and side-lined “lazy politicians” to “get things done.”

Uribe's charismatic leadership weakened democracy,³¹ severely undermined human rights,³² and inhibited sustainable peace by refusing to acknowledge the core drivers of insecurity in Colombia: inequality, legacies of violence, and a history of conflict involving state and non-state actors.³³ Nevertheless, in the short term, his bold actions delivered impressive results and

made him immensely popular. By the time Uribe left office in 2010, Colombia's violence had decreased meaningfully (see Figure 2). He had also achieved a mean approval rating of 69% over his presidency, making him the fourth most popular president in Latin America since 1978, surpassing other charismatic leaders in the region including Hugo Chávez (1999-2013, mean approval of 47%) and Evo Morales (2006-2019, mean approval of 50%).³⁴

[Figure 2 about here]

Stage 1: Santos Launches a Covert Candidacy

A typical charismatic leader, Uribe sought to prolong his presidency rather than groom a skilled successor. He changed the constitution to allow for immediate re-election in 2006 and his supporters introduced a bill calling for a referendum to allow him to run for a third term in 2010. However, that February, the Constitutional Court (CC) ruled against the referendum, forcing Uribe to step down. While he remained popular, the referendum's failure undercut his image of unbounded authority and limited his ability to play the martyr and strengthen his followers' emotional attachments to him. In the aftermath of the CC's ruling, the national conversation quickly shifted from the possibility of a third term to the debate over whom Uribe would choose as his successor (*El Tiempo*, February 27, 2010).

Uribe's constitutionally mandated departure from power created an opportunity for Santos to compete for the presidency.³⁵ To secure his predecessor's endorsement, Santos launched a covert candidacy long before the succession process began, downplaying his political ambitions while emphasizing his loyalty to Uribe. For instance, as Minister of Defence (2006-2009), Santos faithfully carried out Uribe's aggressive attack on the FARC. Although he came from an influential political family and had accumulated experience in politics prior to Uribe's tenure, this position

enabled him to join Uribe's inner circle and express his commitment to security, the issue Uribe valued most. To reinforce the appearance of loyalty, Santos fervently supported Uribe each time the latter sought to prolong his presidency and refused to launch his own candidacy until the question of Uribe's second re-election was settled. This strategy advantaged Santos over other potential successors in Uribe's inner circle such as Germán Vargas Lleras and Noemí Sanín, who disqualified themselves by announcing their candidacies in 2009, before the referendum on Uribe's third term had been rejected.

If given the choice, Uribe would likely have anointed Felipe Arias, the Minister of Agriculture commonly known as "little Uribe" (*Uribito*), over Santos as his successor. However, in late 2009, Arias became the focus of a corruption investigation, effectively disqualifying him from the presidency. Thus, when the CC ruled against Uribe's referendum in February 2010, Santos became Uribe's most attractive choice. Santos made his candidacy official on February 26th, the same day the CC ruled against the re-election, and Uribe's blessing came five days later (*Caracol Radio*, March 3, 2010).

Santos styled his presidential campaign as a devoted handpicked successor, heavily evoking Uribe to win the support of his predecessor's followers. He called himself "Uribe's candidate" (*El Pais*, March 8, 2010; *El Espectador*, June 20, 2010), ran under the "U Party" label, which he had created in 2005 in Uribe's honour, emphasized the symbol "U" in campaign ads, and promised to build on Uribe's national security.³⁶ In his victory speech after the election, Santos attributed his success directly to his predecessor, calling Uribe the "best president Colombia has ever had" (*Caracol Radio*, August 7, 2010). In exchange, Uribe declared Santos the best "caretaker" of his legacy (*El Universal*, May 24, 2010).

Santos's covert candidacy and expressed loyalty were key to winning Uribe's favour. Polling data suggests he never would have won the presidency without Uribe's support. Upon stepping down from the Ministry of Defence in May 2009, Santos had a presidential vote intention of just 19%. By March 2010, after Uribe had declared Santos his preferred successor, that figure rose to 36%, illustrating the importance of the predecessor's endorsement.³⁷

Stage 2: Santos Broadens his Coalition

As president, Santos faced the typical cross-pressures confronting handpicked successors. His reliance on Uribe to become elected in the first place pressured him to sustain his predecessor's popular policies, namely the DSP. However, the unsustainable nature and declining performance of the DSP threatened to undercut Santos' performance and unleash a serious security crisis.

Like other charismatic leaders' policies, Uribe's programs were reckless and unsustainable in the long term. Towards the end of his presidency, the DSP was starting to crack, generating two increasingly urgent problems. First, the program plagued Uribe's administration with scandal. By 2010, between 42% and 50% of his coalition members in congress were indicted for ties to paramilitary groups;³⁸ his Peace Commissioner was under investigation for faking the demobilization of FARC combatants in 2006; his chief of staff and the head of the government security police were under investigation for using security police to spy on journalists, opposition leaders, and justices who spoke against the government; and his minister of agriculture was under indictment for misusing public resources (*La Silla Vacía*, May 23, 2011). While Uribe's charismatic authority shielded him from blame for these scandals, the public was growing impatient with the underlings in his administration.³⁹

Second, by the end of Uribe's presidency, the DSP's once-impressive performance was nearing the point of exhaustion. Convinced that Colombia suffered from a "terrorist menace"

rather than an “armed conflict,” Uribe refused to acknowledge the social, economic, and political complexities underlying the fifty-year-old armed struggle.⁴⁰ Designed on the faulty premise that violence in Colombia was driven solely by the lack of State presence, the DSP therefore failed to address the heart of the issue. While the program decreased the number of victims of criminal violence and enabled the State to reclaim important territory from armed groups, it also increased incentives and impunity for widespread, State-sponsored violence and failed to fully eradicate various armed actors, who remained influential in many of Colombia’s marginal regions.⁴¹ By the end of Uribe’s second term, guerrilla groups had adjusted to the government’s strategy and new groups and forms of violence had begun to proliferate.⁴²

Uribe left power relatively unscathed by the DSP’s failures, as reflected by his 65% approval rating.⁴³ However, his charisma would not shield his handpicked successor from blame for the DSP’s inevitable implosion. Aware of his predicament, Santos rose to power knowing that he would have to change course. Before running for office, he worked behind scenes to address some of the policy’s most problematic aspects, careful not to draw Uribe’s attention. For example, in 2007, he terminated the army’s reward system for casualties, which had generated thousands of extra-judicial killings (*La Silla Vacía*, May 22, 2010). However, to avoid relinquishing the valuable support he had inherited from Uribe, Santos was careful to avoid prematurely expressing his overt opposition to the DSP. Thus, before dismantling the policy, he engaged in the second stage of the tightrope walking process, in which he used divergent signalling to temporarily maintain his predecessor’s favour while furtively reaching out to new allies.

To sustain Uribe’s support for as long as possible, Santos initially maintained some popular iron-fist tactics against insurgent groups. For instance, he intensified the armed pressure Uribe had placed on the FARC. In September 2010, Santos ordered the Armed Forces to surround the hiding

place of the guerrilla's second most important leader, Victor Julio Suárez (Mono Jojoy), who was killed during the operation. A year later, in November 2011, Santos ordered the army to lead a second operation resulting in the death of the FARC's most important leader, Guillermo León Sáenz (Alfonso Cano). Through these aggressive initiatives, which appeared to uphold and even deepen the DSP, Santos maintained his credentials as a "pureblood" Uribista (*El Colombiano*, September 23, 2010).

To reinforce his commitment to high-ranking military officers, Santos introduced two pieces of legislation to protect its members from prosecution. First, in April 2011, he proposed a bill outlining a taxpayer-supported service providing defence lawyers to military members involved in domestic or international trials for crimes related to their service (*La Silla Vacía*, November 16, 2011). Second, in October 2011, he proposed to expand the purview of military tribunals such that all crimes committed by members of the military and police would be investigated and tried by military rather than ordinary courts. Crimes against humanity, genocide, torture and forced disappearances would be tried by ordinary courts only if it could be proven that these acts were not committed in the line of duty. Both the army and prominent Uribista politicians, including Senator Juan Carlos Vélez enthusiastically supported the two bills (*El Tiempo*, December 11, 2012).⁴⁴

While extending some iron-fist programs to main the favour of the supporters he had inherited from Uribe, Santos also sought to attract new allies who had opposed his predecessor. He targeted two groups: (1) members of political institutions whose autonomy had been compromised by Uribe, including Supreme Court and Constitutional Court justices and non-Uribista members of Congress, and (2) voters and politicians from left and centre-left parties who

Santos knew supported his ultimate vision of repealing the DSP and developing a more conciliatory resolution to the armed conflict.

To demonstrate his desire to cooperate with these actors without overtly defying Uribe, Santos began by restoring some horizontal accountability that his predecessor had undermined. For instance, in a show of good faith, he met with the Constitutional and Supreme Court Chief Justices shortly after his election. Although the meeting was part of the formal protocol, the president-elect reassured the Justices that his administration would be “respectful” and “open to dialogue”—a dramatically different position from that of Uribe, who had frequently attacked the courts (*Revista Semana*, August 5, 2010). Santos also allowed independent investigations of several former Uribista officers to proceed. He appointed Viviane Morales, a social conservative—but not an Uribista—as Attorney’s General, who opened investigations and issued indictments against Andrés Felipe Arias; Uribe’s former Chief of Staff; and two former heads of the Intelligence Department (DAS). Arias was indicted for corruption, while the latter three were indicted for illegally wire-tapping and creating misinformation campaigns against journalists, opposition politicians, or members of the courts who opposed Uribe. Without openly antagonizing his predecessor, Santos’ conspicuous silence regarding these judicial proceedings demonstrated his commitment to running a more transparent administration and thus distanced him from Uribe—who had vocally defended and protected the officers from prosecution.⁴⁵

Santos also signalled to voters and politicians from centre-left and leftist parties who staunchly opposed Uribe, including the Green Party (GP) and the Alternative Democratic Pole (*Polo Democrático Alternativo*—PDA), his intentions to embrace reforms that aligned with their interests. For example, he invited the leftist presidents of Venezuela (Hugo Chávez) and Ecuador (Rafael Correa) to his inauguration. Whereas Uribe had accused both leaders of providing safe

haven to the FARC (*New York Times*, March 3, 2008), Santos' diplomatic gesture signalled a more conciliatory style and willingness to interact with leaders from across the ideological divide.⁴⁶ To further appease centre-left and leftist actors, Santos adopted softer rhetoric concerning the security crisis. Whereas Uribe labelled the crisis a "terrorist insurrection," Santos began referring to it as an "armed conflict"—a term Uribe had refused to invoke. This rhetorical shift indicated Santos' willingness to recognize the FARC as both a political organization and an armed group, signalling to anti-Uribistas his openness to a peace process with the insurgents.⁴⁷

Finally, Santos deepened his commitment to a peaceful resolution of the armed conflict by enacting two important pieces of legislation. First, in September 2010, he introduced the Victims and Land Restitution Bill (*Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras*), granting victims of the armed conflict the right to truth, reparation, and no repetition. While this bill signalled Santos' intentions to reform the DSP, its focus on the protection of victims—a valence issue that not even Uribe could easily oppose—prolonged his capacity to sustain Uribe's endorsement. Nevertheless, the bill incorporated two items that directly threatened Uribe's legacy and signalled to opposition actors Santos' willingness to defy his predecessor. First, it encouraged ex-combatants to tell the truth about their crimes, many of which involved paramilitary forces connected to Uribe and his allies.⁴⁸ Second, the bill vowed to return small land holdings that had been co-opted by paramilitary groups to their original owners, to the chagrin of landowners and cattle ranchers loyal to Uribe.⁴⁹

In June 2012, Santos enacted a second bill that sent an even stronger signal to Uribe's opponents: The Peace Judicial Framework (*Marco Jurídico para la Paz*). The bill officially recognized the existence of an "armed conflict"—rather than a terrorist insurgency—and provided the framework for a peace process by creating legal space for future transitional justice mechanisms and a political role for ex-combatants. Though the legislation was worded

ambiguously, it indicated to opposition actors that Santos' preferences aligned with their desire for a negotiated settlement to the armed struggle.

By the end of 2010, opposition actors whose support Santos sought began to recognize his efforts to depolarize the nation. On the elite level, leaders of the GP and PDA demonstrated their appreciation for Santos' attempts to reach across the political divide. For instance, on November 2010, Luis Eduardo Garzón, president of the GP, stated:

In this Government, we have said and we have recognized...that there is a process of de-polarization, related to the candidates [Santos submitted] for the Attorney General's position, the dialogue with [political] parties that are not part of the coalition, and legislation such as the Bill of Victims and Land Restitution... (*El Espectador*, November 9, 2010).

Furthermore, in March 2011, the PDA met face-to-face with Santos for the first time. Clara Lopez, the party's president, stated that, among other issues, the PDA wanted to discuss the Victims and Land Restitution Bill and introduce a proposal for a negotiated settlement to the armed conflict (*El Espectador*, March 23, 2011). Lopez's desire to engage Santos in discussion suggests that the president's signalling strategy was effective in incorporating opposition actors into his coalition.

On the mass level, while Santos's approval rating declined throughout his first years in government (from 72% in August 2010 to 40% in August 2012), it did so at a very slow pace, indicating that his gradual separation from Uribe was successful (see Figure 3). Had Santos immediately broken with Uribe, he would have likely experienced a precipitous drop in popular support. Instead, Santos finished his first year in office (August 2011) with 68% approval, and his popularity hovered around 65% until May 2012 when, not coincidentally, Santos began sending stronger signals regarding his true agenda and Uribe prepared to announce his official rupture.

[Figure 3 about here]

In addition to sustaining the support of many Uribista voters during his first two years in office, evidence suggests that Santos mitigated the decline in his popular approval by incorporating new voters into his base. Ideologically, between 2011 and 2012, he received most of his support from people who self-identified as rightist, in line with Uribe's followership. Yet by 2013, after his decisive break with Uribe, most of Santos' supporters self-identified as centrists (see Figure 4). Vote intention statistics from 2010 and 2014 confirm this pattern. While most of Santos' likely voters self-identified as rightists in 2010, almost half self-identified as "centrists" or "leftists" in 2014 (see Figure 5).

[Figures 4 and 5 about here]

In sum, via meetings, discourse, public events, and diverse pieces of legislation, Santos sent divergent signals to key audiences that allowed him to maintain the favour of his charismatic predecessor and followers long enough to gain sufficient new allies to build a broad and ideologically diverse, if short-lived, coalition. Although radical Uribistas launched harsh criticisms against Santos as early as November 2010 in response to his conciliatory gestures (*La Silla Vacía*, November 8, 2010), Uribe did not officially withdraw his endorsement until August 2012, when the successor announced his government had been meeting with FARC delegates to initiate a peace process. This delay was crucial for Santos as it provided him with time to increase his political capital by courting new partners from electoral and non-electoral spheres without losing his ability to govern effectively due to the immediate defection of Uribe and his supporters.

Stage 3: Santos Reveals his True Position and Reforms the DSP

By May 2012, the relationship between Uribe and Santos had soured, primarily due to rumours that Santos had initiated a negotiation process with the FARC. While Santos denied these claims up through that July, the rupture between the two leaders became increasingly evident. In July, Uribe launched his official opposition to Santos' administration (*Revista Semana*, July 4, 2012); one month later, Santos revealed his true adversarial position by publicly confirming his efforts to initiate a peace process with the FARC (*El Tiempo*, August 27, 2012).

While the tenuous coalition of Uribistas and anti-Uribistas that Santos had built between 2010 and 2012 did not survive his break with Uribe, the successor's tightrope walking strategy and the resulting coalition enabled him to win his first presidential election (predominantly with the support of Uribistas) and carefully position his administration to enact sweeping policy reform (predominantly with the support of his new anti-Uribista allies, who had initially opposed him). Moreover, while some Uribista voters deserted Santos after he unveiled the peace process and formally broke from Uribe in 2012, some of them, such as traditional conservatives who had supported Uribe primarily due to their ideological affinity with him, remained in Santos' coalition after the break.⁵⁰ Thus, while Santos' base shrank significantly in 2012, it remained sufficiently large—thanks to the coalition partners he gained during his first two years in office and the few old supporters he retained—to ensure his re-election in 2014 against the Uribista candidate, Oscar Iván Zuluaga. This coalition also facilitated Santos' efforts to sign a peace agreement with the FARC and establish the institutional infrastructure that would help the agreement survive beyond his presidency.

In sum, though Santos left office with a 23% approval rating, he became a far more independent and effective leader than most charismatic leaders' handpicked successors. In 2017

and 2018, Colombia had historically low levels of violence and high levels of democracy, with a score of 0.67 on Varieties of Democracy—Liberal Democracy Index.⁵¹ While Santos' approval continued to gradually decrease over the course of his second term, he enacted remarkable policy reforms and became the first Colombian to win a Nobel Peace Prize. These achievements would not have been possible if the handpicked successor had remained faithful to Uribe. Had Santos upheld the legacy of his predecessor, he would likely have overseen the collapse of the DSP and an ensuing crisis of insecurity, violence, and ongoing human rights violations, disappointing Uribistas and anti-Uribistas alike. Instead, Santos engaged in tightrope walking to expand his coalition by repairing relationships with non-electoral institutions and gaining the support of opposition voters and parties while temporarily maintaining the support of his predecessor. This enabled him to lay the groundwork for, and ultimately carry out, his ambitious policy agenda.

5. ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENTS

Two alternative explanations could explain Santos' surprising success as the handpicked successor of a charismatic leader: the relative strength of Colombia's democracy and the absence of a serious economic crisis. First, while Uribe attempted to undermine democracy during his presidency, democracy remained relatively robust,⁵² with a Varieties of Democracy—Liberal Democracy Index score that fluctuated between .41 and 45 during his rule, just below the regional average.⁵³ Conversely, democracy deteriorated under charismatic leaders in neighbouring Venezuela and Ecuador.⁵⁴ It is therefore possible that, by limiting Uribe's illiberal influence, stronger democratic norms and institutions enabled the success of his handpicked successor. Certainly, the survival of democracy in Colombia facilitated Santos' efforts to break away from his predecessor by forcing Uribe to step down from power at the end of his second term, preserving

the influence and autonomy of the courts, and protecting the status of opposition leaders and parties to a much greater degree than in neighbouring Venezuela and Ecuador. These advantages enabled Santos to run for president in the first place and appeal to a more powerful set of non-Uribista allies when attempting to broaden his coalition.

However, a stronger democracy alone could not have ensured Santos' impressive success. Even in Colombia's relatively stronger democracy, Uribe posed serious illiberal threats. Backed by the devotion of millions of followers, he weakened democratic institutions and implemented policies that undermined human rights and civil liberties. As the handpicked successor, Santos inherited Uribe's legacy of violence and disrespect for civil liberties, and had to repair relationships with other institutions that Uribe had attempted—though ultimately failed—to sabotage. Moreover, democracy did not guarantee Santos' capacity to defy Uribe forever, as evidenced by the election of Uribe's "dauphin"—Iván Duque—to the presidency in 2018 (*The New York Times*, April 16, 2021). Ultimately, Santos' success hinged on his embrace of the tightrope-walking strategy to peel away from his charismatic predecessor. Only through this careful, sequential process was the successor able to rise to power, entice Uribe's opponents, and achieve a sufficiently large, temporarily depolarized base of support to enact his policy vision.

A second alternative explanation concerns the country's relatively stable economic performance throughout the presidencies of both Uribe and Santos. Often, the crises that generate widespread discontent and catapult charismatic leaders like Uribe into power are economic in nature. Yet, from 2002 to 2018, Colombia's GDP per capita steadily increased, inflation remained well below the regional average, and employment remained stable. Some might argue that Santos succeeded as a handpicked successor because the unsustainable program he inherited from Uribe steered clear of the economy.

While a stable economy helped Santos pursue his independent agenda, this argument underestimates the salience of the armed conflict in Colombia. Voters tend to care most about issues that affect their well-being, but these issues do not always centre on economic performance.⁵⁵ While economic performance is highly salient in countries where unemployment, inflation, volatility, and material underdevelopment are present, its importance tends to fade when these issues are absent and other issues such as corruption, terrorist attacks, or security crises shape citizens' everyday lives.⁵⁶ In Colombia, public security, not economic performance, has been the population's top concern for decades and has been prioritized in the policy agendas of leaders from across the ideological spectrum.⁵⁷ Thus, Santos' success—like that of his predecessors—hinged on his capacity to address the armed conflict, by far the Colombian people's most pressing concern.

6. CONCLUSION

This article investigates the rare but important situation in which the handpicked successors of charismatic leaders overcome unfavourable odds and become successful in their own right. We argue that success becomes possible when the successor engages in a sequential process of tightrope walking, ultimately breaking away from the predecessor and establishing independent authority. During this process, the successor (1) pursues a covert candidacy to secure the predecessor's endorsement and rise to power; (2) builds a broader coalition by cultivating alliances with outside actors from electoral and non-electoral sectors while temporarily sustaining his/her original base; and (3) uses the increased political capital resulting from this broader coalition to enact significant, meaningful change. If successful, this process enables the successor to reverse dysfunctional policies, prevent a crisis, and distinguish him/herself as a strong and independent

leader, all while slowing or reversing the process of democratic erosion set in motion by the predecessor.

We illustrate the tightrope-walking process focusing on Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, the handpicked successor of Álvaro Uribe. Although Santos began from a weak position as Uribe's underling, we demonstrate that he launched a covert candidacy in the leadup to Uribe's likely constitutional departure from power in 2010, ultimately winning Uribe's endorsement; used divergent signalling to broaden his coalition by temporarily maintaining his predecessor's support while building trust with high-ranking military officers, members of the judiciary, civil society organizations, and opposition voters and parties; and used the capital he gained from this expanded coalition to reveal his true agenda in late 2012 when he announced the peace negotiation with the FARC. Although Uribe and most of his supporters deserted Santos after this policy reversal, we show that, through completing the tightrope-walking process, the successor maintained enough support to win re-election in 2014 against Uribe's chosen candidate, Iván Zuluaga, and signed the final peace agreement with the FARC in 2016. Only by engaging in these sequential steps to break away from Uribe was Santos able to become a respected leader in his own right.

Santos' success story constitutes a rare occurrence among handpicked successors of charismatic leaders. Nevertheless, this case is important because it illustrates a mechanism through which some leaders can reorient charismatic administrations onto a more democratic path. Given that charismatic movements continue to rise around the world—and some of their leaders leave office, including Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Donald Trump in the United States, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, and John Magufuli in Tanzania—analyses

of the longer-term trajectories of charismatic movements and prospects of reversing their detrimental effects to democracy have become especially important.

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¹ We define charisma as a property of leadership that can result in the development of asymmetrical, unmediated, and emotional attachments between the leader and his/her followers. In turn, a charismatic movement is a political force that rests on the followers’ shared identification with the charismatic leader, whom they view as their savior (see Andrews-Lee, *The Emergence and Revival of Charismatic Movements*, 15-18).

² Kostadinova and Levitt, “Toward a Theory of Personalist Parties”; Weber, *Economy and Society*.

³ At the time of writing in August 2021, Nicolás Maduro has served president of Venezuela for over eight years since replacing Hugo Chávez. However, he has done so only through brazen authoritarian rule, as he oversees unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Due to Maduro’s scant popular legitimacy (his approval has stood at or below 30 percent since 2015, see Carlin et al.) his need to turn to authoritarian measures to remain in power, and his inability to prevent the economic and social implosion, we categorize his presidency as a failure.

⁴ Carlin et al., *Executive Approval Database 2.0*; Gamboa, “Latin America’s Shifting Politics.”

⁵ This definition success follows that of other scholars of leadership succession, who emphasize the new leader’s capacity to establish independent authority (See: Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*) and enact his/her own policy agenda (See: Bunce, *Do New Leaders Make a Difference?*; Bynander and Hart, “When Power Changes Hands”).

⁶ Because the vast majority of charismatic leaders are men, we use male pronouns to refer to the predecessor throughout the article. In contrast, we refer to successors using both male and female pronouns.

⁷ See Bynander and ‘t Hart, “When Power Changes Hands; Helms, “Heir Apparent Prime Ministers”; Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*.

⁸ Bennister, ‘t Hart, and Worthy, *Understanding Political Leadership*, 7.

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- ⁹ Ibid.; Bunce, *Do New Leaders Make a Difference?*; Bynander and 't Hart, "When Power Changes Hands"; Calvert, *The Process of Political Succession*; Helms, "Heir Apparent Prime Ministers"; Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*.
- ¹⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*.
- ¹¹ Zúquete, "Missionary Politics," 263–64.
- ¹² Horiuchi, Laing, and Hart, "Hard Acts to Follow," 358.
- ¹³ Ibid., 359.
- ¹⁴ Andrews-Lee, *Emergence and Revival*, Chapter 6.
- ¹⁵ Ostiguy, "Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach," 75–76.
- ¹⁶ Those successors who genuinely value loyalty above all else may still opt for continuity despite the consequences. Yet, we argue that ambitious leaders are likely to recognize the debilitating limitations of continuity and therefore prefer a pathway of change.
- ¹⁷ Horiuchi, Laing, and Hart, "Hard Acts to Follow," 260.
- ¹⁸ Bynander and 't Hart, "When Power Changes Hands," 727.
- ¹⁹ Andrews-Lee, *Emergence and Revival*; Bynander and Hart, "When Power Changes Hands"; Horiuchi, Laing, and Hart, "Hard Acts to Follow"; Kostadinova and Levitt, "Toward a Theory of Personalist Parties"; Weber, *Economy and Society*.
- ²⁰ Anria, "Delegative Democracy Revisited," 100.
- ²¹ Bynander and Hart, "When Power Changes Hands," 717.
- ²² Helms, "Heir Apparent Prime Ministers," 263.
- ²³ Renshon, "Political Leadership as Social Capital," 199; Bennister, 't Hart, and Worthy, *Understanding Political Leadership*, 4.
- ²⁴ Gibson, "The Populist Road to Market Reform," 342.
- ²⁵ Anria and Cyr, "Inside Revolutionary Parties," 1267.
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- ²⁹ Uribe Vélez, "Manifiesto Democrático."
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Gamboa, "Opposition at the Margins"; Mayka, "Colombia's Surprising Resilience."
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- ³⁶ "Relanzamiento Campaña Juan Manuel Santos" May 3, 2010, Speech by Santos, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7STeft1Jvww>.
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- ³⁹ Sierra, "Alvaro Uribe: Un Presidente de Teflón."
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- ⁴¹ Rojas Bolaños and Benavides Silva, *Ejecuciones Extrajudiciales En Colombia*, 58–91; Granada, Restrepo, and Vargas, "El Agotamiento de La Política de Seguridad," 97–101. The Democratic Security Policy established rewards for guerrilla casualties. To receive those benefits, members of the armed forces engaged in the extra-judicial killing of 6,402 young men and women who were kidnapped and killed, only to be reported as FARC casualties (Comunicado 019 de 2019, Justicia Especial de Paz, Accessed February 18, 2021).
- ⁴² Granada, Restrepo, and Vargas, "El Agotamiento de La Política de Seguridad: Evolución y Transformaciones Recientes En El Conflicto Armado Colombiano," 97–101.
- ⁴³ Carlin et al., *Executive Approval Database 2.0*. For context, Hugo Chávez's approval rating before he died was 53%.
- ⁴⁴ Botero and Gamboa, "Corte al Congreso."

⁴⁵ Gamboa, “Latin America’s Shifting Politics.”

⁴⁶ Posada-Carbó, “Latin America.”

⁴⁷ Paredes.

⁴⁸ Cepeda and Rojas, *A las puertas de El Ubérrimo*; Romero, *Parapolítica*.

⁴⁹ In Colombia there is a strong correlation between land accumulation and the armed conflict. Specifically, paramilitary groups, have used forced displacement to vacate ill-titled small land holdings, making them available to wealthier neighbors (Gutiérrez Sanín 2014).

⁵⁰ “The Americas Barometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)” 2014.

⁵¹ Coppedge et al., “V-Dem Dataset V11.1.”

⁵² Gamboa, “Opposition at the Margins.”

⁵³ Coppedge et al., “V-Dem Dataset V11.1.”

⁵⁴ The Liberal Democracy Index score in Venezuela from .47 when Chávez rose in 1999 to .11 when he died in 2013; the same score in Ecuador fell from .42 when Correa rose in 2007 to .33 when he left power in 2017, hitting a low point of .27 from 2013 to 2016 (See: Coppedge et al.).

⁵⁵ Singer, “Who Says ‘It’s the Economy’?,” 288.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 284–85.

⁵⁷ Wills Otero, “Colombia,” 195.