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## Latin America's Shifting Politics

# THE PEACE PROCESS AND COLOMBIA'S ELECTIONS

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As his two terms in the presidency neared their end in 2018, Juan Manuel Santos might have expected that he would be enjoying high standing among his fellow Colombians. Having won the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize for his role as leader of a peace deal with the long-running leftist insurgency known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Santos could fairly claim to be leaving his country of fifty-million people a better democracy than it had been when he first took office in 2010. The peace agreement is Colombia's most important achievement in recent decades. Signed in November 2016, the accord ended an armed conflict that had gone on for more than five decades. Thousands of former combatants have demobilized, and Colombia has become a less violent place.

Despite the international accolades that he received, however, little credit seemed to reflect on Santos at home. In April 2018, his approval rating was an abysmal 23 percent.<sup>1</sup> In the March congressional elections, his Social Party of National Unity had come in fourth in lower-house races and fifth in Senate races. But worse was yet to come. In the June runoff for the presidency, Santos would watch voters give the office to a 42-year-old one-term conservative senator named Iván Duque, the handpicked candidate of Santos's greatest rival, former president Alvaro Uribe (2002–10). Duque, whose main campaign promise was a vow to take apart the peace accord, led a seven-candidate field in the May 27 first round with 39 percent of the vote. Then he defeated Gustavo Petro, the left-wing former mayor of Bogotá, in

the June 17 runoff with 54 percent. How did this inexperienced candidate who railed against one of Colombia's greatest achievements become president?

Duque's victory was the outcome of a perfect storm. During the first round of voting to fill the presidency, party-system deinstitutionalization, the peace process, and the end of the FARC's career as a violent guerrilla movement all worked against moderate candidates. Veteran centrist politicians who counted on traditional political elites to lift them to victory found themselves reduced to also-rans. A coalition farther to their right led by Uribe pushed them aside in terms of voter appeal and elevated Uribe's protégé Duque. At the same time, something similar was unfolding on the left, as a more extreme candidate (Petro) outflanked and outbid more moderate (though still left-of-center) options. The "flight from the center" continued as Duque and Petro moved to the runoff, the latter with a quarter of the first-round vote as compared to Duque's nearly two-fifths of it (in order to claim the presidency in the first round, a candidate's vote share must exceed 50 percent).

During the runoff campaign, the dire situation in neighboring Venezuela became a more salient topic, to the leftist candidate's detriment. Both Duque and Petro ran radical-populist campaigns with authoritarian undertones and disturbing implications for democracy. Yet once they entered the runoff, it was Petro who was effectively depicted as a "Hugo Chávez in the making." Politicians, business leaders, and news outlets with a record of having opposed Uribe found Petro so threatening that they endorsed Duque. They presented the *uribista* candidate as the lesser of two evils, rallying non-*uribista* voters of the center and center-right to cast their ballots against Petro.

Since the 1990s, Colombia has seen its party system deinstitutionalize. Demographic shifts, institutional reforms, decentralization, changes in clientelistic structures, and the security crisis of the 2000s withered party brands. The once-dominant Liberal and Conservative parties became shells of their former selves. The political-party scene in Colombia is now volatile and ideologically fluid.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, three of the five major contenders for the presidency were independents who had gathered enough signatures to get on the ballot.<sup>3</sup> No one ran as the candidate of President Santos's Social Party of National Unity.

On the right-hand side of the political spectrum, former presidents Uribe and Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002) used backroom deals to organize a multiparty primary—an electoral contest among different parties' or movements' presidential nominees, with the goal of choosing a single coalition candidate. The contenders were Marta Lucía Ramírez (who had Pastrana's endorsement), Iván Duque (who had Uribe's), and Alejandro Ordóñez (a socially conservative former inspector-general). Although Colombia has had intraparty primaries

since 1988, this marked the first use of this mechanism in order to make a selection from among presidential nominees of different parties and movements.

### The Primary

The primary was held on 11 March 2018, the same day as the congressional elections. Duque, running as the candidate of Uribe's Democratic Center (CD) party, emerged as the overwhelming winner of the three-way race, garnering more than two-thirds of the votes cast. The primary drew a turnout equaling 17 percent of the country's entire registered electorate, a record.

Duque was not a well-known figure. Prior to 2014, he had held junior posts at the Development Bank of Latin America, the Colombian Treasury Department, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the UN. Elected to the Senate on the CD ticket in 2014, he remained largely invisible until 2016. That year, he joined Uribe in leading the "no" side in the campaign preceding the October 2 referendum on the peace deal. Voters were asked simply, "Do you support the final accord for the termination of the conflict and the construction of a stable and lasting peace?" Arguing against the deal on the grounds that it gave FARC leaders immunity from punishment and guaranteed the organization ten seats in Congress, the rejectionists carried the day by the narrowest of margins: 50.2 to 49.8 percent with a 37.4 percent turnout (somewhat low by recent Colombian standards).

Duque campaigned almost entirely on his *uribista* credentials. Claiming that things had become worse in Colombia over the past eight years, he called for strengthening the armed forces to fight factions within FARC (as well as other leftist guerrillas) who would not lay down their arms. He also said that he wanted to reduce and streamline taxes in order to improve the climate for entrepreneurship and investment; fight impunity by reforming the peace deal's transitional-justice provisions; uphold family values by opposing same-sex marriage; and end the corruption that he associated with the Santos administration. While Duque presented himself as a conservative, free-market, technocratic candidate, his mentor Uribe was openly populist, calling Duque's foes "unpatriotic" agents of *castrochavismo*.<sup>4</sup>

As the 2018 campaign began, former Antioquia governor Sergio Fajardo was positioned as an outsider candidate on the center-left. A mathematician by training who had served from 2012 to 2016 as chief executive of Colombia's second-largest province and before that as mayor of Medellín, Fajardo was without ties to traditional parties or politicians. Although supportive of the peace process, he spoke mostly of the need to fight corruption and clientelism.

To Fajardo's left, Petro used signatures to get on the left-wing multi-

party primary ballot. He too backed the peace process, but his main concern was reducing socioeconomic inequality. With the armed conflict receding into the nation's rear-view mirror, issues such as corruption and poverty—27 percent of the populace still lives below the national poverty line of US\$85 per month—have become more salient.<sup>5</sup> Petro addressed these concerns. He promoted tax reform, land redistribution, free college, single-payer healthcare, environmental protection, a move away from extractive industries, and the renegotiation of trade deals. On paper, his platform resembled those on which moderate left-wing presidents in the region such as Chile's Michelle Bachelet or Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva had successfully run.

Yet Petro resembled Uribe, his ideological opposite, in his populist, polarizing, and even authoritarian style. Until 2017, he had publicly defended Nicolás Maduro's regime in Venezuela.<sup>6</sup> As Bogotá's mayor, he had been given to going around the city council, implementing policies that it had rejected. In 2012, he appointed as director of the city's television channel a political ally who was later accused of interfering with programming in order to silence Petro's critics.<sup>7</sup> As a presidential candidate, Petro framed his program as a fight between "the people" and sinister "mafias" of which, he claimed, he was a victim. Following the trend of potential autocrats of both the right and the left, he also proposed to convene an assembly to change the 1991 Constitution.<sup>8</sup>

The first round also featured a center-right politician (Germán Vargas Lleras) who resembled Santos and a veteran centrist figure (Humberto De la Calle). Both had roots in the old Liberal Party, which used to join the Conservative Party in defining Colombian politics. Vargas Lleras positioned himself as the candidate of non-*uribista* conservatives, a competent figure with an appreciation for free markets, a wary but respectful attitude toward the peace process, and moderate stances on sensitive social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. De la Calle was the winner of the Liberals' primary. He wooed centrist voters by mixing a fairly conservative economic agenda with liberal positions on social issues, but the real pivot of his campaign was his support for the peace deal. A former vice-president, interior minister, and Supreme Court justice, the 72-year-old De la Calle had been Santos's handpicked chief negotiator in dealings with the FARC. The accord was the culmination of a lifetime of public service, and De la Calle was determined to defend it.

Throughout 2017, it seemed as if Vargas Lleras was on a glide path to the runoff. He was leading in the polls, and was the choice of traditional politicians at both the national and subnational levels. His endorsements were impressive, spanning 55 Conservative, Liberal, Radical Change, and Social Party of National Unity leaders spread across thirteen of the country's 32 departments.<sup>9</sup> This had been the winning formula for Santos four years earlier. Colombia's party system has undergone deinsti-

tutionalization, but not to the extent seen in Peru or Venezuela. During the 2000s, the Liberals and (to a lesser extent) the Conservatives still won regional elections, and local party leaders remained important to anyone who wanted to win nationwide. In 2014, Santos finished second in the first round, but rescued his candidacy by making promises to local elites, who then got out the vote for him.<sup>10</sup> Turnout went up 8 percentage points in the runoff, and Santos won reelection with 51 percent of the vote.

The expectation was that such methods would work for Vargas Lleras and (to a lesser extent) De la Calle in 2018, but they did not. The deepening process of party-system deinstitutionalization and the overall “antipolitics” environment in Colombia had weakened party elites’ ability to move votes. De la Calle’s campaign never took off. Hindered by divisions among Liberals and the baggage of his role in forging the peace agreement, he received 2 percent of valid votes. Vargas Lleras started stronger, but he polled only 7 percent on election day. The regional and local leaders whom he knew so well proved unable to help him sway voters.

### The Peace Process

While the unraveling of the party system mattered, the dispute over the peace process mattered even more. After close to five years of talks that began in 2012, the guerrillas had agreed to demobilize and disarm, cut their ties with the drug trade, and assist efforts to promote substitutes for illicit crops. In return, the government agreed to boost rural investment, formalize land ownership for smallholders, restore land stolen during the armed conflict, and lower entry barriers for political participation. The bargaining teams also agreed to a transitional-justice framework that would offer reduced or alternative sentences (working in crop-substitution efforts, for instance) to any offenders—whether combatants, agents of the state, or civilians—who confessed their crimes and told the full truth about them.

Their imperfections and implementation challenges notwithstanding, the 2016 agreements were an unprecedented achievement, and marked an important step forward for Colombia’s democracy. The peace accords demobilized more than seven-thousand combatants.<sup>11</sup> Homicides, kidnappings, and terror attacks fell to historic lows. In 2018, for the first time ever, FARC took part in an election *solely* as a political party.

According to Freedom House, Colombia’s democracy has improved six points since 2010 (from 59 to 65 on a 0–100 scale). For the first time, it scores (slightly) above the Latin American mean (64.5). According to V-Dem’s democracy indices (0–1 scale), Colombia’s electoral (0.69), liberal (0.53), participatory (0.49), deliberative (0.57), and egalitarian democracy (0.39) scores reached their highest levels ever in 2016. This

trend is even more impressive if we keep in mind that, according to the same indicators, democracy in Latin America as a whole has stagnated and even declined since the years from 2003 to 2007.

Despite these achievements, the peace negotiations had uneven support. The talks met with a warm international response: The UN, the Organization of American States (OAS), the EU, and the United States all endorsed the deal. At home, however, the country was split. To back the accord, President Santos built a loose coalition of the center and center-left. His own Social Party of National Unity joined Radical Change, the Liberals, the Greens, the leftist Alternative Democratic Pole, and even some Conservatives and former Uribe supporters in the effort. To fight the deal, Alvaro Uribe built a much tighter coalition that brought together Social Party of National Unity dissidents, most Conservatives (including Andrés Pastrana), and several new right-wing politicians such as Iván Duque. Based on Uribe's charisma and continuing ability to appeal to voters, his own CD party became the face of opposition to Santos and the peace process.

Peace deals often require making concessions that the public will find unpalatable. Uribe's campaign skillfully exploited some of these concessions. His coalition charged that the government was negotiating "behind people's backs." He criticized the decision to sit down at the table before the FARC had agreed to a unilateral ceasefire, and labeled the administration "unpatriotic" for treating equally FARC ex-combatants and members of the armed forces accused of committing human-rights abuses. Uribe's coalition also denounced the proposed transitional-justice arrangements, charging that they would leave FARC crimes unpunished while the ex-guerrillas went into electoral politics with plans to bring the ideas of Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez to Colombia.<sup>12</sup>

Most of these criticisms of the prospective peace deal were misleading, untrue, or unfair, but the former president's strategy paid off. In the 2014 elections, Uribe's coalition became the second-largest in the 102-seat Senate and in Congress as whole. The CD itself held 19 Senate seats (including a seat for Uribe himself) plus 19 seats in the 172-member House of Representatives. The CD's 2014 presidential nominee, former senator and finance minister Oscar Zuluaga, beat Santos in the first round 29 to 26 percent, and lost the runoff to him by less than a million votes out of 14.7 million cast.

The Uribe coalition's most stunning triumph was yet to come, however. On 2 October 2016, it won its narrow victory in the popular vote on the peace agreement. The "no" camp waged an emotional campaign, turning the ballot into a referendum on the Santos administration and touching on topics—traditional family values and pension reform—that had nothing to do with the accords, but which moved voters.<sup>13</sup>

The peace deal nonetheless survived after additional revisions and a fresh signing ceremony, winning the approval of a congressional major-

ity in November. Yet the referendum defeat undercut the accord's legitimacy and created serious obstacles to its implementation. A key revision put Congress in charge of implementing the deal through legislation—a move that has made the peace process subject to the vagaries of politics, fueled uncertainty about the government's ability to keep its promises to ex-combatants and victims, and raised the stakes of future elections.

Santos and his bloc came out of 2016 weakened, while Uribe's coalition got a boost. For populists such as Uribe, polarization works well. Not only does it increase cohesion, but it makes voters less likely to punish or even notice misleading statements or antidemocratic behavior.<sup>14</sup> The polarization surrounding the peace process, as well as the uncertainty regarding the implementation of the agreements moving forward, became potent electoral tools for Uribe. They allowed the ex-president to undercut more moderate conservatives, who mostly supported the peace deal even as they tried to avoid becoming too closely associated with it. Uribe was able to build a cohesive and disciplined coalition with strong electoral machinery behind it.

Between 2014 and 2016, Uribe became the undisputable leader of the Colombian right. His strength could be read in the relative newcomer Duque's 2018 primary defeat of Marta Lucía Ramírez, a right-wing politician with a long resumé and the backing of former president Pastrana. Duque had only been in the Senate since 2014, and had never held elective office before that. His only meaningful credential in the presidential race was the unreserved endorsement of Alvaro Uribe—but that was all he needed. Once it was clear that Duque was going to represent them, the *uribistas* rallied behind him. Fully 96 percent of the municipalities that Zuluaga had carried in 2014 voted for Duque, as did 95 percent of those that had voted against the peace deal in 2016.

### The Rise of the “Farther” Left

If Duque's triumph over Ramírez on the right was surprising, so was Petro's over Fajardo on the left. In principle, Fajardo as the more centrist of two left-wing contenders had the better chance to defeat Duque. Yet in order to win the first round while remaining viable in the runoff, Fajardo had to cater to two very different audiences. The end of the FARC as an armed group allowed Petro to move left on social and economic issues without being associated with armed struggle. Petro's program energized left-wing voters, but in doing so it presented Fajardo with a dilemma. If he put himself forward as a moderate, he would improve his chances in a possible runoff against Duque, but at the risk of losing left-wing support in the first round as leftist voters flocked to Petro. Conversely, if Fajardo endorsed more radical leftist proposals to improve his chances against Petro, such stances would hurt him in the runoff against Duque.



In the end, Fajardo chose to run as a moderate independent without strong leftist or rightist overtones. The consequences were severe. The 11 March 2018 left-wing multiparty primary between Carlos Caicedo (Citizen Force) and Petro (Humane Colombia) raised the latter's profile, costing Fajardo crucial left-wing support. Officially, the Alternative Democratic Pole had endorsed Fajardo, but in practice many party members instead backed Petro.<sup>15</sup> A former M-19 guerrilla who had led that movement to disarmament talks in 1990, the 57-year-old Petro had served a total of fifteen years in Congress and the Senate before becoming the capital city's mayor in 2012. In short, he was a credible left-wing leader with a long track record in politics. In the May 27 first round, he won 70 percent of the municipalities that the Pole's presidential candidate had carried in the 2014 first round. Fajardo won only 21 percent of these districts.

The May 27 first round made Petro the first left-wing politician to reach a presidential runoff since Colombia adopted the two-round system in its Constitution of 1991. His success reconfigured the contest. On the right, the peace process took a back seat. Worried by Petro's left-wing agenda and authoritarian tendencies, the Social Party of National Unity, Radical Change, and the Liberal Party—theretofore unfriendly to Uribe and backers of the peace deal—threw their full weight behind Duque. Business leaders and some major newspapers that had supported Santos rallied to Duque as well.

At this point, the worsening of the Venezuelan crisis played an essential role. In 2016 and 2017, President Nicolás Maduro deepened authoritarianism in Venezuela. In the latter year, there were 2,902 arbitrary detentions and 397 deaths at the hands of state agents.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, according to IMF figures, Venezuela was experiencing 13,860 percent inflation. The Venezuelan human-rights group PROVEA reported that 90 percent of Venezuelans could not afford their daily food. The humanitarian and political crisis unfolding in a neighbor hit home hard: Colombia shares a border of more than 2,200 kilometers with Venezuela, and as of June 2018, in excess of 800,000 Venezuelans had crossed into Colombian territory.<sup>17</sup>

Uribe and his followers have long drawn parallels between their country and Venezuela. They have claimed that Santos and his allies are *castrochavistas*, have painted themselves as victims of state repression akin to the Venezuelan opposition, and have warned that Colombia is on the brink of suffering a fate similar to the one that the self-proclaimed "Bolivarian socialist" Hugo Chávez and his heirs visited on their own country. There is no evidence to support these *uribista* charges. Yet with the situation across the border in Venezuela spiraling downward and Petro reaching the runoff at home, the rhetoric of the *uribistas* gained traction. Politicians and voters who had backed Vargas Lleras or De la Calle in the first round as alternatives to *uribismo* now rallied behind

Uribe's man Duque in the runoff. A divided left was powerless to counter this alliance as Fajardo refused to back Petro, and instead joined De la Calle in calling for voters to cast null ballots.

Voters shifted rightward, giving Duque a 54 to 42 percent runoff victory. He claimed 74 percent of the municipalities that Vargas Lleras had taken in the first round. Meanwhile, Petro won 60 percent of the municipalities that Fajardo had taken in the first round. In the end, Duque's share of Vargas Lleras's voters was larger than Petro's share of Fajardo's.

### What to Expect Moving Forward

Over the past eight years, Colombia's democracy has moved forward. The peace process significantly improved the quality of Colombian democracy. Violence became rarer, and the political arena became open to new movements and ideas. Petro garnered the largest vote share of any left-of-center candidate in Colombian history.

Now there is uncertainty, however, and backward movement is possible. Duque is, to put it bluntly, a lightweight entirely reliant on Alvaro Uribe for his support. It is unlikely that Duque will imitate Juan Manuel Santos by distancing himself from his political godfather. It is also unlikely that the *uribistas* will carry out their vow to dismantle the peace accord, but they can be expected to stall and weaken its implementation. Uribe's disregard for democratic institutions, human rights, and civil liberties remains a concern, as do his ties to large landowners and paramilitary groups. The continuing influence wielded by these forces threatens to hinder the peace process and promote antidemocratic institutional changes.

Their influence could also thwart the fight against security threats that are becoming increasingly lethal. Since 2017, human-rights organizations have been trying to sound the alarm regarding the assassinations of human-rights advocates, social leaders, and former FARC members. In 2017 alone, there were 167 such homicides.<sup>18</sup> These killings are the work of criminal groups that exploit the absence of strong state institutions in the poorest regions of the country. In order to enhance democracy and truly end violence, Colombians need to address the economic, political, and institutional inequalities that foster such violent illicit organizations.<sup>19</sup> The chances of anything like that happening under an *uribista* administration are vanishingly small.

As for the left, its future is cloudy. On the one hand, Petro's success in reaching the runoff might be seen as having laid the groundwork for a united opposition front. The FARC's disarmament has given parties of the left and center-left space to approach the voters with ideas about social and economic policy that have heretofore been little heard in Colombian electoral politics. On the other hand, Petro is a highly

polarizing figure, and center-left and leftist politicians may not wish to follow his lead. Some have already suggested that they do not wish to join a possible multiparty pro-peace accord coalition in Congress with him at the helm. While willing to strike deals on specific bills, they have stated they wish to strengthen their own respective party labels while maintaining a more centrist position regarding political developments.

Perhaps we will witness developments similar to those in Brazil a decade and more ago. There, Lula made two runs for the presidency from the left only to fall short, then moderated his rhetoric and agenda. In particular, he vowed that he would honor Brazil's debts and refused even to flirt with policies pointing toward default. Moderation turned out to be Lula's ticket to the Planalto Palace: He won a massive 61 percent runoff victory in 2002 and repeated the performance four years later.<sup>20</sup> Were Petro to follow a similar course—move away from populist proposals that threaten democratic institutions, unambiguously condemn left-wing dictatorships in the region, and rebuild ties with other leaders on the left and center-left—he might gain a better shot at reaching the Colombian presidency and opening up more and better avenues for change.

## NOTES

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