

A Small Step to the Center Brings Opportunity for the Left

Presidential Elections in Colombia

By: Sandra Rátiva

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On June 17, Colombia will elect its president for 2018-2022. After the first round of the election, two men will face each other in the runoff: Iván Duque, representing the right, and Gustavo Petro, for the left. Results from the first round of the election, held on May 27, evidence several changes in Colombia's political dynamics, while other trends remain the same. These reflections are discussed in this article.

1. Specifics

In runoff election, Iván Duque of the Center Democratic Party, representing the various right-wing tendencies of Colombia, will be facing off against Gustavo Petro, former mayor of Bogotá, representing leftist and working-class sectors. In the first round, Duque received 39.14% of votes (7,569,693)¹, while Petro obtained 25.08% (4,851,254).

There were two big surprises on election day: i) a significant show of support for the former mayor of Medellín, mathematician Sergio Fajardo, a centrist candidate who received

¹ According to the Colombian Civil Registration Bureau, 97,663 voting sites were set up in the country's 32 departments. Of the 36,783,940 registered voters, 19,363,714 came out to vote, making voter turnout 53.38%, with a 46.62% abstention rate. A total of 56,935 votes were left blank (0.28%), and 243,645 were invalid (1.24%). Source: <https://presidente2018.registraduria.gov.co/resultados/html/resultados.html>

23.73% of the vote (4,589,696 votes in total, only 261,558 fewer than Petro), and ii) rather limited support for former president Germán Vargas Lleras, who had seemed to have the political machinery on his side, but only garnered 7.28% of votes (1,407,840). While many talk about the high levels of polarization in the country, the truth of the matter is that the runoff election will be decided by the centrist voters, and, if one of the two candidates is able to excite the electorate, traditional non-voters, who total 17,420,226, the equivalent of 46.62% of Colombia's eligible voting population.

2. Who's who?

Iván Duque. "The one Uribe says."

Given their similarities, both in terms of ideology and proposals, a group of political forces came together to fight on a united front in this election: the Conservative Party (one of the two long-standing parties in Colombia, with a close relationship to the Catholic Church, and which has been represented by 22 presidents), the Central Democratic Party, and Alejandro Ordoñez, an independent candidate (former solicitor general who was removed from office for influence peddling; he is an active member of the SSPX Church).² Together, they held a primary election to decide on a candidate

² Ordoñez is a member of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary congregation in the La Soledad neighborhood in Bogotá, a church belonging to the Society of Saint Pius X, which was created by the French Cardinal Marcel Lefebvre in 1970, see: <https://www.las2orillas.co/alejandro-ordoñez-fanatico-religioso/> and <http://www.vanguardia.com/santander/bucaramanga/139354-en-la-intimidación-del-cultolefebvrismo-de-bucaramanga>

to represent them all. On March 11, on the date of the parliamentary elections, this primary election ended with Senator Iván Duque as the winner, garnering 4,032,736 votes, also choosing Martha Lucia Ramírez (former minister of defense under Uribe and also a minister under Pastrana) as the running mate.

This coalition is based on defending institutions, tradition, and social and economic and social conservatism, and has waged its fight against what amounts to the ghosts of Castro and Chavez in Colombia. The group has been vocal in its criticism of the Havana peace accords, claiming that they have resulted in impunity and that crimes against humanity have gone unpunished. Their political movement alleges that instead of punishment, the FARC (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force) have been awarded parliamentary representation.³

This coalition played to votes from Liberal Party's regional patronage structures (the Liberal Party is the other long-standing Colombian political party, which represented political liberalism in the 19th century and boasts 14 former presidents), as well as from the Radical Change Party (founded in 1998, which includes parts of what used to be the Liberal Party and regional political movements; it has connections to the paramilitary). These parties themselves ended up receiving only a small number of votes. The

³ "Interview with Iván Duque, presidential candidate supported by Uribe -- Presidential Elections - Colombia 2018 - EL-TIEMPO.COM," retrieved on June 4, 2018, <http://www.eltiempo.com/elecciones-colombia-2018/presidenciales/entrevista-de-yamid-amat-con-ivan-duque-candidato-presidencial-del-uribismo-225870>.

Liberal Party, represented by the La Paz negotiator Humberto de la Calle received only 399,180 votes, while the official candidate for the Radical Change Party was President Santo's former vice president, Germán Vargas Lleras.

Iván Duque is the son of a well-known family from Antioquia. Attorney. Worked for the Inter-American Development Bank upon the personal recommendation by Juan Manuel Santos (2001-2013). Senator for the 2014-2018 period, representing the Central Democratic Party.⁴ Duque resigned his senate seat to run for president. In December 2017, the party ran an internal survey and ended up giving him their presidential nomination. Iván Duque's candidacy was openly and strongly supported by Alvaro Uribe Vélez.

Sergio Fajardo (62). “I am a teacher.”

Coalition Colombia is a political alliance that was created under an agreement between three parties: the Green Alliance Party, the Alternative Democratic Pole, and the Citizen Commitment Civil Movement. This alliance focused its efforts on fighting corruption and a new code of ethics for politics. Green Alliance Senator Claudia López, Democratic Pole Senator Jorge Robledo (the longtime political adversary of Alvaro Uribe Vélez), Senator-elect (2018-2022) and former Bogotá Mayor Antanas Mockus, and other famous Colombian intellectuals were

⁴ He won his senate seat by being on the list headed by former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez. Therefore, in the strictest sense of the word, Duque did not win his seat outright, but rather thanks to his party, which is the same as saying thanks to Uribe himself.

behind this campaign. Fajardo's candidacy was not the result of an internal decision by the political parties involved, but rather an agreement between their leaders. The agreement was not an easy one to reach, since Robledo, López, and Fajardo were all interested in being presidential candidates. Within the coalition, the Democratic Pole's support became blurred, as best evidenced by the campaign colors (green). Major differences of opinion and debate arose within the party, as many of its members decided to support Gustavo Petro in the first round of the elections, arguing that Coalition Colombia did not represent the Pole's opposition-based, leftist ideology.

Sergio Fajardo is also from Antioquia. Mathematician and university professor. Medellín Mayor (2004-2007) and Antioquia Governor (2012-2015). He was Antanas Mockus's running mate in 2010 (vice presidential candidate).

“My name is Gustavo Petro and I want to be your president.”

As Coalition Colombia was coming together in December 2017, Gustavo Petro insisted that the various centrist and leftist political forces should come together to choose a single presidential candidate for 2018 to participate in the elections with a united front. However, disagreements within the Democratic Pole⁵, especially within the sector represented by Senator Jorge Robledo, as a result of the heady presidential campaign launched by former senator Piedad Córdoba

⁵ [https://www.las2orillas.co/por-que-jorge-enrique-robledo-nunca-votaria-por-gustavo-petro/;](https://www.las2orillas.co/por-que-jorge-enrique-robledo-nunca-votaria-por-gustavo-petro/)

(who ran under the Citizen Power Party, but dropped out in April), and also because of the Green Alliance Party's placing its hopes on its most visible face, Claudia López, and also due to Fajardo's own belligerence, the multi-party primary only included Gustavo Petro for Human Colombia and former Santa Marta Mayor Carlos Caicedo. This primary was also held on March 11, and Gustavo Petro was the clear winner. That day, Petro was also endorsed by six newly-elected parliamentary representatives from the "list of decency" group, which during those elections included the Patriotic Union (a leftist party that had suffered political genocide back in the 80's), the Alternative Indigenous and Social Movement (MAIS - a party that included the highly politicized and autonomous sectors of various indigenous communities), and the Independent Social Alliance (ASI- a centrist party that has traditionally served to give a brand of legal endorsement to independent center-leftist candidates.)

As the weeks went by, the Alliance, known as "Human Colombia," received the support of several working-class social movements and groups, including peasant workers, black communities, indigenous groups, and members of the informal economy. Petro met with leaders representing the Agrarian Summit, where the country's environmentalist platforms were proposed, and at his campaign rallies, Petro was always accompanied by social leaders such as César Pachón (senator-elect for 2018-2022 and a popular peasant leader) and Francia Márquez (leader of the Black Communities Process PCN and

recipient of the 2018 Goldman environmental award)⁶.

Undoubtedly, one Gustavo Petro's most strategic moves was naming Senator Angela Maria Robledo as his running mate. Robledo is a university professor, self-proclaimed feminist, and one of the nation's most charismatic figures, especially adept at reaching agreements and consensus across the democratic spectrum. Her participation in the campaign brought a feminist perspective to the debates on women's rights, caretaking professions, and the political participation of all types of sectors of the economy.

Gustavo Petro (58) was born in Sucre, in the Colombian Caribbean Region, but he grew up and studied in the center of the country. Economist. M-19 Guerrilla Member. Member of the 1991 Constituent Congress. Senator (2000-2012), Bogotá Mayor (2012-2015).

3. What do the numbers say?

At first glance, it is clear that the regions abandoned by the state and poorly integrated into the national economy have voted for Petro. The country's poorest departments (Chocó, La Guajira, and Cauca) gave Petro a majority, with Duque coming in second, and Vargas Lleras third, showing the political machinery's level of importance in those regions.

In the wealthier departments, which have a greater contribution to the GDP (Antioquia,

⁶ <http://lasillavacia.com/petro-se-queda-con-el-grueso-de-las-estructuras-de-izquierda-66099>

Valle del Cauca, Tolima), Duque won, but Fajardo took an important third-place slice of the vote, supported by higher-educated and middle class sectors. This serves to reinforce the idea that income (or wealth) is an important variable in elections. Duque's platform focuses on defending the business sector, the promise of lower taxes for corporations, and giving a boost to economic groups. Meanwhile, right-wing opinion leaders accuse Petro of representing socialism or "Castrochavism" (the name given to the ghosts of Castro and Chavez across Latin America). For Duque, it is the business sector that produces wealth, and so it is based on that group that the entire country stands to benefit.

Meanwhile, Petro has been emphatic in stating the need to make public education free and putting health services and land-use matters back in the hands of the government. He also proposes a more progressive and redistributive tax system, ideas which have come to define his campaign.

A second variable to keep in mind are the impacts of the armed conflict. On this issue, the website LaSillaVacía.com reports that "of the 169 municipalities prioritized⁷ by the government in the post-conflict era, Duque won in 80, Petro in 86, Sergio Fajardo in 2, Germán Vargas in 1, and Humberto de la Calle, in none."⁸ This reflects the differential impacts of the war: for a wide swath of towns, the conflict meant displacement and

death at the hands of the paramilitary and the army. Meanwhile, for others it meant kidnapping and extortion by the guerrillas. Without necessarily seeking to do so themselves, the amplified stereotypes of the two men in the media have Duque representing one side of the victims, and Petro, the other.

What about the referendum on peace accords?

In 2016, once the peace agreements were reached between the Juan Manuel Santos administration and the FARC delegation, a referendum was held to decide whether to sign the accord reached by the delegations. On October 2, 51% of Colombians said no to the agreement. This translated into a political and ideological defeat for Juan Manuel Santos' administration, but even more so for the democratic sectors that defend a negotiated exit to the Colombian armed conflict. Undoubtedly, the peace referendum gave Alvaro Uribe Vélez a political catapult to reemerge as the country's conservative and right-wing political leader. At that time, it became clear that the regions most affected by the war voted "yes," while the medium-sized cities and less-affected regions punished the government for the agreement thanks to the smear campaign run by the right-wing pushing for a "no" vote.

Although President Juan Manuel Santos validated the Havana Accords via parliament and then through the Supreme Court, adding several major changes⁹, it became

7 The municipalities given priority in the Territorial Approach Development Programs (PDET) are those where investment will be focused in the post-conflict stage to generate social and economic integration.

8 <http://lasillavacia.com/petro-y-duque-gana-non-por-igual-en-los-municipios-del-posconflicto66355>

9 In its passage through the parliament and then the Supreme Court, the peace agreement ended up being changed on issues relating to women's rights (following the demand by

very clear that the peace negotiations, which were carried out without the participation of several sectors of Colombian society, would never be fully accepted due to its not receiving a majority in the referendum.¹⁰

In these presidential elections, where compliance with the Havana Peace Accords and the promise to continuing negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN) have been hot topics in the debates, votes seem to reflect continuity in terms of the referendum results in places where the war simply is not yet over. The territorial dispute between drug trafficking groups (including Mexican groups), paramilitaries, and FARC factions that have not yet demilitarized, continues to be a reality, and violence continues to rage in Chocó, Buenaventura City in the Cauca Valley, Cauca, and Nariño.¹¹ At the same time, in places where there is no more FARC presence and a certain pacification has taken hold, there seems to be a change in the voting trend; in these places, people who voted “yes” to the peace accords appear to also have voted for Duque (Caqueta, Meta).

Some of the most interesting voting statistics in Colombia come from the Bogota district. There, while the peace accords won the day in the 2016 referendum, a surprisingly high percentage voted “no.” There are several

Christian right-wing sectors that this be qualified as “gender ideology”), the Special Justice for Peace - JEP - which is a transitional justice instance, and the FARC political participation plan.

- 10 Facing this reality, and the government’s obvious lack of action in its regions, the ELN, which is currently holding negotiations in Havana, insists on having serious political participation.
- 11 Unfortunately, this is a region that is affected by a series of factors that include an armed conflict, poverty, government abandonment, and the presence of drug trafficking because of its access to the Pacific Ocean.

reasons behind this, but perhaps it is most linked to the fact that the capital city is the least unequal and least poor area of the country, because it is there where wealth is generated and moves about. This could explain why Sergio Fajardo won the district in the first round of voting (1,240,799 votes from middle class neighborhoods). The central option. However, coming in at a very close second, was Petro (1,098,478 votes, mostly from working-class neighborhoods), and Duque not far behind (983,931 votes from upper class neighborhoods). This proved the existence of a concentrated Bogota-based middle class, which represents the Colombian “opinion vote.” This information is key to say the least, given that Bogota is home to one-fourth of the country’s population and 25.7% of its GDP.

Does Uribe continue garnering support? 2014 Presidential and 2018 Parliamentary Elections

The 2014 presidential elections were focused on the Peace Accords. At that time a large swath of the centrist and leftist groups voted for Juan Manuel Santos to support and continue with the “peace” negotiations, over the Uribe-leaning candidate (Oscar Ivan Zuluaga), who threatened to walk away from negotiations with the FARC. This support came even as the Santos government both supported the peace accords and continued to strengthen the neoliberal model, something that cost his administration strikes and demonstrations during his last year in office. At that time, Juan Manuel Santos obtained 50.95% (7,816,986) and Zuluaga 45% (6,905,001) of votes.

However, in the March 11 parliamentary elections this year, Uribe's party, called Democratic Center, obtained a mere 2,394,266 (16.56%), gaining only 19 of the 102 senate seats (one less than in 2014).¹² Of these votes, only 860,000 went to former President Uribe (a scant showing after winning 5 million votes in 2002 and more than 7 million in his 2006 reelection campaign). While they do have the largest group in parliament, they are not the majority, nor have they increased the number of party faithful. In any case, they would have quite a strong position in the event that Duque wins the presidency, since Uribe would be Senate President.

Adding up the votes for parliament, we find that the other 5 million votes that Duque received in the first round apparently come from the conservative party (1,799,974), a segment of the liberal party (which gave De La Calle the 1,792,973 votes won in the parliamentary elections), and a million votes from the Radical Party, which chose not to support Vargas Lleras (200,211 parliamentary votes), plus the MIRA Christian Party (478,553 votes). It is clear that a large majority of these votes come from politicians and regional leaders who tend to end up supporting the candidate most likely to go on to the runoff election. In this case, that person appears to be Duque.

Is the center-left political spectrum expanding?

This is what appears to be the case. Pro-Uribe groups do not appear to be growing;

rather, what used to be a broad hegemony is cracking, requiring them to forge alliances with other right-wing groups to win back the presidency in the face of a center-left surge that is gaining ground. In the parliamentary elections, the Green Alliance won 1,260,830 votes, Democratic Pole won 703,473, and the "list of decency" (ASI, UP, MAIS), came out with 504,503 votes. Adding all of these together, we find that 20% of the parliament goes to center-left groups, not including the seats won by FARC, which add another 5%.

This is something never before seen in the history of Colombia! It also poses the possibility of proposing a hypothesis that, 6 years after the Havana Talks began, and after the guerilla turned over their weapons, today we are seeing new opportunities in the Colombian political and ideological spectrum. If war is no longer the most important issue and not the root cause of everything wrong with the country, it means that now may be the time for economic issues including unemployment, underemployment, and poverty, or other social issues related to inequality, segregation, and marginalization to take on importance and weight as political issues within Colombia.

How can we explain this slight movement toward the center-left?

Ever since 2013, when several agrarian strikes happened simultaneously, Colombia has seen a strong increase in social movements. These social movements are unrelated to political parties or the major unions, and have brought isolated persons in cities

¹² In interviews and campaign events, the CD affirmed that they would fill 30 seats.

into their fold. Only in 2017, the world saw how thousands of Afro-descendants came out to demand minimum conditions for their cities.¹³ We also saw how teachers, going against their teachers' union's tendency to favor negations, followed through with a strike that not only focused on salary issue but, for the first time in years, demanded major transformations to the Colombian education system.

It is also worth pointing out that in the face of recent administrations' plans to push extraction industries forward (including both the two Uribe administrations' and two Santos administrations), rural communities have organized to make 7 referendums a reality (referendums are citizen consultation mechanisms consecrated under the nation's constitution), saying NO to large oil and mining projects, with 54 more referendums in the works. These efforts have brought ideas to the forefront, including water as a product for the greater good and the importance of rural economics in food production, effectively destroying the long-standing myth propagated by the media that rural residents are manipulated by the insurgency.

Uncovering Corruption and Scandals with *false positives*.

As we have seen all around the world, corruption has become a major issue in recent years. Money stolen from soup kitchens for children, tainted medicine and undistributed drugs at health clinics, connections to the

13 <https://www.telesurtv.net/telesuragenda/Buenaventura-Colombia-a-dos-meses-del-parocivico-20170802-0066.html>

Odebrecht Scandal, embezzlement in major public works projects, high-level influence peddling, and political favors have been in the news non-stop over the past few years. These cases include the children dying of malnutrition in areas where there are major mining and oil concessions¹⁴, useless public works¹⁵, and unexplainable increases in personal wealth by public officials.

Investigations, court rulings, and sentences against officials who served in the Uribe and Santos administrations have all but done away with the credibility of the country's political elite. Undoubtedly, investigations into army officials and sentences handed down against military servicemen for the more than 3,500 cases of extrajudicial executions of poor young men (misnamed false positives), who were incorrectly taken as militia and guerilla members, in exchange for army perks, were just too much for large parts of Colombian society to tolerate.¹⁶

So, who will win the runoff?

To understand the increase in centrist voting, it is first important to recognize that people are generally sick of hearing about war in Colombia, and the possibility of moving forward on a platform of minimum social reforms, stepping out of the shadow of the armed conflict, is attractive to both the middle and working classes, which have experienced the conflict firsthand. This is even more true for the youth who have gradually

14 <http://sostenibilidad.semana.com/impacto/articulo/sequia-y-hambre-en-la-guajira/35773>

15 <https://www.elspectador.com/noticias/nacional/meta/por-que-se-cayo-el-puentechirajara-articulo-733713>

16 <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-historia-inedita-falsos-positivos/349851-3>

seen de-escalation of the violence. Continuing down this path, we could say that a large percentage of the “U” Party votes won by outgoing President Juan Manuel Santos (1,719,405 in the parliamentary elections), will go to Sergio Fajardo, as he represents the continuity required to push forward with a minimum social agenda that complies with the results of the Havana Peace Accords. This is not because Santos is a great philanthropist, which is the image of him that has been marketed to the rest of the world, but rather to avoid the political persecution that could be undertaken by Uribe under a Duque presidency.

Maybe the only thing that the Colombia’s right-wing, centrists, and leftists have in common is their “anti” vote: anti-Uribe for the central-left, and anti-Petro from the center right. This means that many of the “anti” voters who voted for Fajardo will tend to make a protest or blank vote. In effect, Jorge Robledo, Sergio Fajardo, and Humberto de la Calle have already publicly declared these to be their plans. This leaves Gustavo Petro at a clear disadvantage, since the patronage machinery will support Iván Duque. However, the opinion vote, concentrated in the cities, and particularly Bogota, is where Fajardo has left more than one million votes in play.

However, Gustavo Petro and the leftists have already won in Colombia. As a political proposal, such ideas have the possibility of winning and “seducing” an important part of the centrist vote, as well as some of the people who would normally stay home on election day. Maybe the most interesting

part of this campaign, and something that has marked a major milestone in Colombian history, is the political creativity that has developed within Colombian society, supporting democratic sectors, both in the center and at the left.

The most interesting and hopeful phenomenon that we see in Colombia today is the idea of politics becoming an integral part of what state institutions are focused on. This means political parties representing actual policies in the election, and politics becoming a part of daily life. Where the media and political analysts focus on the country’s polarization, we see diverse expressions of thought, spontaneous street gatherings, self-organization, cultural manifestations, dialogues backed up with actual arguments, jokes and memes on social media, all of which translate into a healthy, democratic, and diverse politicization of Colombian society.

This would be one of the great achievements of the political solution to Colombia’s armed conflict: opening up the possibilities for a wide variety of social stakeholders who previously were denied a voice in the nation’s progress. Environmental issues and ideas related to sex-gender-diversity, feminist platforms, and the recovery of art and grassroots politics are all deeply significant.

At the same time, there are still death threats and threats of aggression, insults, accusations and other negative behaviors at play. We are still a society very much immersed in *animus belli*, and conflict has not disappeared¹⁷, but

¹⁷ Between January 2016 and March 2018, more than 282

we clearly desire peace, and peace not only as the silencing of rifles, but as a new array of possibilities, in the words of Gabo, to have “*a second chance on this Earth.*”

social and community leaders in the country have been murdered. See: <http://www.defensoria.gov.co/es/nube/destacados/7075/%E2%80%9C282-1%C3%ADderes-sociales-y-defensores-de-DDHH-asesinados-en-dos-a%C3%BD1os-es-una-cifra-aterradora%E2%80%9D-Defensor-del-Pueblo-Carlos-Negret-derechos-humanos-1%C3%ADderes-sociales-alerte-temprana-Defensor%C3%ADa-del-Pueblo.htm>

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