

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN POST-PEACE ACCORD CONTEXTS: the case of Colombia

The Peace Agreement signed between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) and the Government of Colombia (GoC) in November 2016 explicitly recognized the necessity of a democratic opening to build sustainable peace in Colombia. An entire chapter dedicated to political participation identified three priority areas: strengthen pluralism, increase citizen participation in politics, and put an end to the use of violence as a means of political action. It also spelled out measures to ensure the inclusion of the former FARC in Colombia's political life. This Spotlight outlines the milestones of the Peace Accord in terms of political inclusion and participation, presents the advances in the implementation of the political participation provisions, and analyzes the challenges to the FARC's participation in politics.

What is political participation?

In a democracy, every individual has the right to participate in politics, that is, to take part in, formulate and shape the decisions that affect their lives. Political participation entails a large range of actions which include joining groups that advocate for people's rights, campaigning, voting, becoming member of a party or running for election. It is understood as an activity or an action, undertaken on a voluntary basis by a nonprofessional individual, and whose concern is government or politics. In this sense, political participation appears as an indispensable feature of democracy and an indicator of its quality.

“Where few take part in decisions, there is little democracy; the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is” (Verba & Nie, 1972)

DEMOCRATIC OPENING AS A PEACEBUILDING INSTRUMENT

Political inclusion is considered a crucial element of the reconstruction of post-conflict societies, as it is meant to offer legitimate channels for the formulation of grievances and rule out the use of weapons as a method of political action. Thus, post-conflict societies seek to reform and strengthen their democratic system in order to render governments more legitimate, democratic, representative and accountable to society at large. The question is: how do democratic processes become more inclusive and more robust, so that conflicts can be solved through peaceful means?

This question is particularly relevant for post-conflict Colombia, whose history of political exclusion, its tradition of political violence, and its deep social divisions have been considered the main root causes of the emergence and proliferation of guerrilla movements (García Durán et al., 2008). Fostering pluralism to include historically marginalized sectors of society and dissenting political voices in the country is a challenging task. Indeed, political participation of former belligerents and security guarantees have been two of the contentious items on the negotiating agenda of both parties during the four year-long talks. As such, an entire chapter of the Peace Agreement specifically focuses on issues of political participation, under an overarching democratic opening. Three areas were prioritized: amplify political voices of underrepresented groups; increase citizen participation in public affairs; prevent that weapons are used for politics.

A cornerstone of the political participation chapter of the agreement was the transformation of the guerilla group into a legal political party. This transformation guarantees the participation of former FARC combatants in formal electoral processes. In addition, as a transitional measure from armed struggle to electoral politics, the Peace Accord secures the group a minimum representation of five seats in the senate and five in the lower house in the two legislatures following the signing of the agreement (2018-2022, and 2022-2026). Thus, the peace agreement guarantees the FARC political elite's participation in the State's electoral institutions regardless of their electoral results.

On the other hand, the Agreement explicitly proscribes the recourse to violence as a method of political action. It guarantees the protection of the exercise of political opposition and calls for the promotion of democratic values (Final Peace Agreement, 2016). Participation is understood in wide terms, and in this sense, the Accord aims to expand citizen participation through democratic openness but also through non-electoral participation mechanisms, in particular for most vulnerable populations. The GoC committed to support non-electoral political practices and to protect social activism, including by training and strengthening social organizations and social movements, guaranteeing the right to protest, and ensuring media coverage and information about marginalized communities and their organizations.

Political participation beyond elections

Political participation has tended to be understood as the mere exercise of representative democracy. This restrictive understanding focused on election-related activities such as campaigning, voting, and party membership (Berelson et al., 1954). Yet, as government responsibilities expanded, so did the domain of political participation to areas that would not be considered a matter of public policy in the past (van Deth, 2016). Likewise, citizen's growing involvement with government officials through statutory political institutions and community politics has provided a whole range of new participation fora.

Participation in the 21st century

In the 21st century, Internet-based technologies, as well as innovative forms political action have drastically transformed and expanded available forms of traditional political participation. Today, posting blogs, signing online petitions, joining flash mobs or suicide protests¹ have become powerful forms of political action. On the other hand, a wide-ranging list of nonpolitical activities are today used for political purposes. Individual actions which could be seen as simple life choices, when followed by a large number of people, can exercise political pressure or have political effects.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROVISIONS ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

According to the Kroc Institute which monitors the implementation of the Colombian Peace Agreement, the second point of the Agreement dedicated to Political Participation is the one that has registered the lowest levels of implementation since November 2016 (Kroc Institute, 2019).

Although some of the legal provisions have been formally adopted, they have not yet translated into sufficient effective protection for political, social and human rights activists. For example, the two stipulations regarding the Opposition Statute have been fully implemented formally guaranteeing security and protection in the exercise of politics and several preventive security mechanisms were adopted or strengthened, yet their implementation is lagging. Whether the delays are due to lack of funding, means, or technical capacity, the community security and prevention strategies need to be reinforced (Kroc Institute, 2018). Incomplete implementation is significantly affecting not only FARC combatants' but also human rights activists' and social leaders' effective capacity to participate in politics as political violence has been on the rise since the signature of the Accord. A challenge that becomes all the more worrying in a context where other armed and criminal groups compete to fill the power vacuum left by the demobilization of the FARC-EP with alarming humanitarian conditions in Chocó,

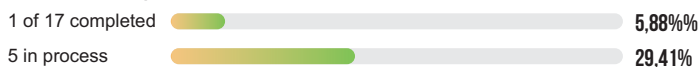
Cauca, Nariño, Guaviare, Putumayo, Córdoba, Valle del Cauca, Antioquia and Norte de Santander (Kroc Institute, 2018).

Most of the stipulations to promote democratic values, on free electoral participation and social action have not started implementation; these include measures promoting media for citizens, parties and political movements, support and training for organizations and social movements, special attention to organizations of historically marginalized social groups, etc. Organizations monitoring the implementation of the Peace Accord deplore a lack of effective coordination among citizen participation spaces as well as significant delays in the promulgation of the citizen participation law, the guarantee of social protest, the Electoral and Political Reform and Special Peace Voting districts. Although the National Council for Peace, Reconciliation and Coexistence was created in 2017, it has not yet completed any of the subsidiary actions contained in the Peace Accord.

At the same time, sections regarding the end of the armed conflict and the transformation of the FARC-EP into a democratic political party present some of the highest levels of implementation (Kroc Institute, 2019).

BUILDING PEACE THROUGH DEMOCRATIC OPENING: PROGRESS

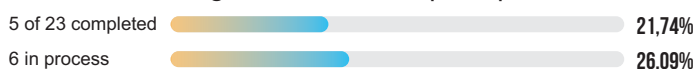
Foment and promote democratic values



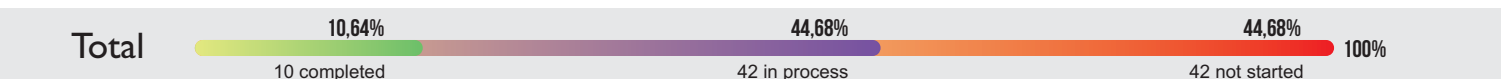
Guarantee security for persons and groups participating in politics



Facilitate and strengthen free electoral participation



Facilitate and strengthen non-electoral political participation and social action



Source: <https://pazedata.com/termometro/>

¹ On 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, set himself on fire as a sign of protest against the autocratic Tunisian regime. His self-immolation sparked a revolution, which subsequently spread across the Arab world and came to be known as the Arab Spring.

FROM GUERRILLA WARFARE TO POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING: THE FARC AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

In the aftermath of conflict, warring parties are presented with the opportunity to reinvent their agendas and their way to engage in politics. Yet are they capable, ready and willing to seize this opportunity? And is the political system and society ready to welcome them?

On 27 October 2019, the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (FARC - the political party created after the demobilization of the FARC-EP), participated in its first regional and local elections. The results confirmed the trends of the national elections of May and June 2018: popular support for the FARC party is evidently low. Of a total of 308 candidates for various local and regional positions, only one mayor and two local councilors were elected. Interestingly, two other former FARC combatants, were elected to mayorships in Turbaco (Bolívar) and Puerto Caicedo (Putumayo) but on coalition tickets that did not include the FARC (El Espectador, 2019). These results are revealing: decades of conflict have left a stigma for former FARC combatants and for the newly created party named after the guerrilla group.

The weight of the FARC's heritage

The causes of the FARC party's failure to win electoral support are multiple. First of all, the decision to baptize the political party with the same acronym which, for half a century, has been associated with an armed rebellion that has committed innumerable abuses, such as killings, disappearances, kidnappings, torture, sexual violence, forced displacement and recruitment (Human Rights Watch, 2013 & 2014), has contributed to the unpopularity of the new party. "Their human rights record hurt them. Their media image is terrible", warned Adam Isacson in August 2017 (Armario, 2017). The continuity in the branding of their movement made Colombians wary of the group's members genuine commitment to definitively renounce to armed struggle. In this sense, the FARC party has failed to reinvent itself as a political party, to build a trustworthy and inclusive political identity; its public image is tarnished by the continuous association with its past armed struggle and with its historical rejection of the very nature and structure of a State which it has considered exclusionary and illegitimate.

Secondly, the formal integration of the FARC into Colombia's politics did not necessarily translate into a technical capacity to operate as a political entity in a democratic system. Their lack of experience in the exercise of political leadership, campaigning and management and the absence of large grassroots support, significantly limited their genuine capacity to participate in the elections. In addition, considering the propensity of Colombia's regional elections to be ran by family affiliations, political clans, and vote rigging, the FARC's capacity to compete with traditional party machineries was marginal. Also, contrary to the national elections of 2018, the regional elections were the first elections in which the FARC participated on an equal foot to its counterparts; that is, it was not guaranteed any representation by the Peace Agreement. In this sense, as a new party, with little established structure and presence in the regions, limited financial means, which lacks the backing of electoral barons and

with marginal popular support, the nascent FARC party was at clear disadvantage. The challenge for the party now, is to consolidate its electoral base ahead of the expiration of the political participation guarantees sealed through the Peace Accord.

Finally, the rearming of the chief negotiator of the FARC-EP, Iván Marquez, along with important middle-ranking officers during the electoral campaign, further tarnished the image of those who swapped arms for votes, and who remained committed to the Peace Process. Their rearmament severely affected the trust that the members of the party are attempting to slowly build with local communities.

Political violence as a limit to participation

The 2019 contest was marred by increased electoral violence that has included threats, attacks, and politically motivated homicides against different parties' candidates. According to the Electoral Observation Mission (MOE, an independent NGO), there have been 54 direct victims of electoral violence since the beginning of the campaign, 3 months ahead of the scrutiny. Concerns about fraud, including irregular voter registration and vote buying were widespread, and some campaigns' links with organized crime are clear. This pre-electoral violence took place against a backdrop of increased generalized political violence against both political and social leaders argues the MOE, which has registered 364 victims (91 assassinations - 7 candidates) of political violence since October 2018 (MOE, 2019). Thus, rather than being an effect of the electoral period, the increase in violence appears to be a feature of the wider expansion of insecurity across the country, which elections may have simply amplified.

Militants and members of the FARC party were not spared. Although they only represent 2,5% of the registered election-related violence (MOE, 2019), the continuing assassinations of former combatants indicates that any type of association with the former guerrilla creates stigma and violence and has certainly impacted candidate's ability to freely participate and campaign. Up to date, 169 former combatants have been killed since the signature of the peace agreement, of which 89 under the Presidency of Iván Duque.

The post-conflict environment of increased political violence across the country may have led to a voluntary distancing of former combatants from the FARC, as much for security concerns as for political ones. This is exemplified by the ex-combatants who chose to run for mayorships outside the FARC party, demonstrating that although the FARC failed to reinvent itself as a party, former combatants could become elected representatives. Beyond security concerns, the party also faced difficulties when trying to build alliances, as it resulted being equally rejected by left-wing as much as by right-wing parties (El Espectador, 2019). These lack of guarantees and the security, economic and representation challenges faced by the FARC party, have limited their capacity to participate in the political contest of 27 October on terms equal to their counterparts.

A comparative perspective: the reintegration of the Unión Patriótica and M19

When comparing the electoral performance of FARC candidates with the results obtained by other parties formed by guerrilleros, such as the Unión Patriótica or the Democratic Alliance M-19, the scores registered by the “party of the rose” are disappointing.

Founded by the FARC and the Communist party in 1985 during a temporary truce and peace negotiations with the Betancur government, the Unión Patriótica had managed to get 23 members of the party elected to mayorships (16 on a single ticket, and 7 others through coalitions), 351 councilmen, and a total of 14 representatives in Congress, at the 1986 general elections (El Tiempo, 1985). In the May 1986 presidential race, the newly founded party's candidate, Jaime Pardo, came third with 4,5% of the total vote, at times when the peace process had not yet been signed and members of the party were gradually being decimated by drug lords and paramilitary groups (Osorio, 2018). Despite the continuous violence against party members, the UP conserved 14 municipalities in the following general election of March 1988. It is estimated that 5,200 members of the UP were assassinated between 1985 and 1994 (El Tiempo, 1985).

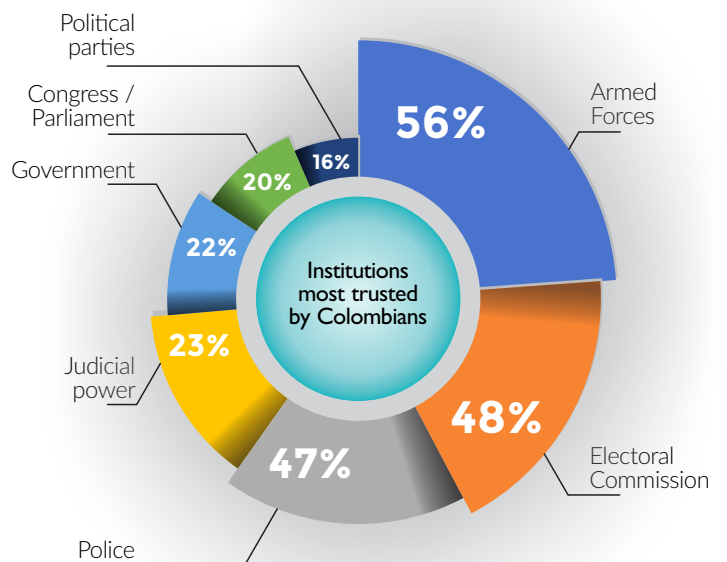
Contrary to the peasant resistant movements rooted in international models of communist insurgencies (ELN, FARC, EPL), the urban guerrilla of the M19 rejected the use of terror to achieve territorial hegemony and subdue the population to the cause. It enjoyed a relatively positive public opinion, seeking to understand and defend the needs of young urban populations and workers (García Durán et al., 2008). The M19 participated in elections on 11 March 1990 only two days after formally demobilizing and won a surprisingly high number of votes in the race for mayor of Bogota, their candidate Carlos Pizarro arriving third. In the following presidential election of 27 May 1990, despite the murder of its presidential candidate Carlos Pizarro, the Democratic Alliance AD-M19 gained 12,5% of the vote; it also won 27,3% of the votes in the election for the National Constitutional Assembly. Although this initial popularity was followed by a drop to 3-4% of votes in the subsequent electoral contests, demobilized combatants of the M-19 and other leftist armed groups (EPL and PRT) went on to form new political movements winning considerable popular support in the 1997 regional elections.

GENERAL DISSATISFACTION WITH POLITICS

According to the Latin Barometer, support for democracy in the period 2017-2018 has regressed by 4 points in Colombia, from 58% to 54%. The Barometer also suggests that Colombians distrust political parties, 55% of them declaring they wouldn't vote for a specific party, while 50% of Colombians consider that their country faces serious democratic problems (Latinobarómetro, 2018).

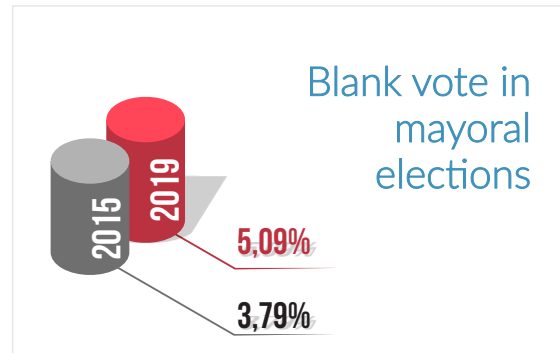
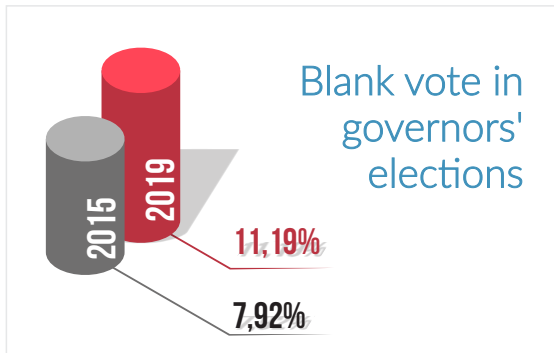
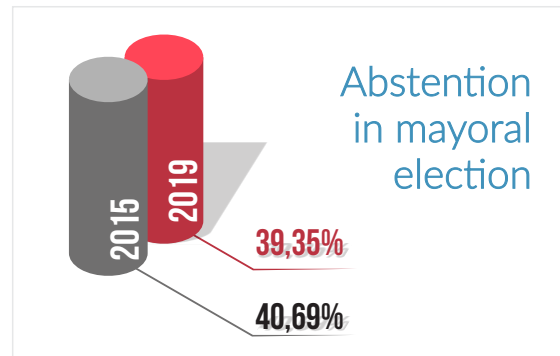
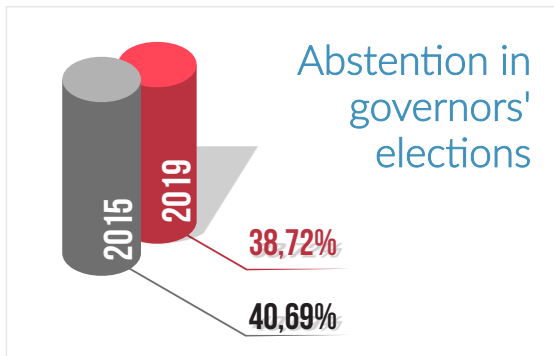
Overall, the results of the election confirmed the general weakening of mainstream political parties, the Government party “Centro Democrático” being without doubt the biggest loser of this election. The main beneficiaries of its downfall have been independent candidates and anti-establishment wide coalitions that appealed to centrist voters. In key urban centers such as Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Cúcuta and Cartagena, and main departments, voters supported “third options” amid the traditional bipartisan competition that has divided the country for decades (Liberal vs Conservative, Centro Democrático vs U Party, etc).

Abstention continues to be an evident feature of Colombian electoral processes. On a slight decrease, compared to the 2015 regional elections, national abstention level was evaluated at 51,99% this year. Another particularity of the 2019 regional and local elections was the high score registered by the



Source: Latinobarómetro Report 2018

protest blank vote, which alongside the success of anti-establishment campaigns, confirmed peoples' disaffection towards the establishment and mainstream parties at large.



Inaction as a form of political expression

Defining what political participation entails and what not, has been an exercise in constant development and evolution, as society and politics mutate over time. For example, the absence of action is increasingly used as a way to express disapproval or dissatisfaction with politics or particular phenomena; as such, although “specific abstentions of activities—for instance boycotting certain products, staying away from the ballot box, refusing to donate money—are, strictly speaking, not instance of activities or actions”, they can be regarded as relevant specimen of political action (van Deth, 2016). At the same time, activities that are not political per se, but that are undertaken on a voluntary and nonprofessional basis with the goal or intention to influence government policies, can be viewed as a specimen of political participation (van Deth, 2016).

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