



Colombia, a democracy with flaws



How do elections influence the strengthening of our democracy? In this special report, we have asked several researchers of Universidad del Rosario about aspects of the electoral processes in our country that influence the quality and scope of democracy in our country.

By Juan Manuel Sarasua Suárez

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The vote is one of the characteristic mechanisms of citizen participation in modern democratic states. It is expressed during the electoral contest and is the most civilized way that human societies have devised for citizens to participate in decision-making, choose our leaders and decide on the management and destination of our country's resources. Participatory democracy grants us that power, which we then transfer to political parties with the desire that what we have chosen will be fulfilled.

However, the vote is only one component of a democracy and it is not enough for citizens to give our full trust in our politicians and their parties. A country needs much more than elections to function; above all, it requires strong and transparent institutions and control processes that grant independence to the three branches of power.

Perhaps this is why, historically, abstention in Colombia has been very high. Since 1978, at the end of the National Front, abstention has exceeded 50 percent in the majority of electoral events. In the 1994 elections it reached 66 percent, and in the plebiscite on the 2016 peace agreement it was 62.6 percent. Only in the 1998 presidential elections was there a respite, both in the first round (48.1 percent) and in the second (41 percent). However, it took another 20 years (the presidential elections of 2018) for abstention not to exceed the 50% threshold.

Trust in institutions and politicians has been clearly low throughout the contemporary history of the country, and denouncing the slow and uneven economic and social development does not seem to be a sufficient reason for Colombians to attend to the polls. Nevertheless, the election period (before, during and after that Sunday, the traditional day of elections in Colombia) is a sure rendezvous with controversy and media spectacle, and, in recent years, the opportunity to use new digital techniques aimed at achieving a greater engagement with the voter, knowing them better and attracting them.

Several researchers of Universidad del Rosario spend much of their time studying the voting days in all its stages and facets. In this edition of *Advances in Science*, we wanted to talk with some of them about the topic and the scope of their observations. We also ask them their opinion on the electoral processes, on the aspects that influence the strengthening or weakening of our democracy and on the administrative processes surrounding them.

Perhaps by the end of this text, we will have some answers and clarity on whether our electoral processes are mediocre and unfair, and constantly disappoint us, or, on the contrary, are monitored processes, with reliable and transparent results. Or maybe they are a mix of everything!

A democracy of low quality?

“Despite having clear economic growth and social progress, the country has a democracy of low quality. That is, democratic processes are correct and do not have so many flaws, but this does not translate proportionately into widespread well-being for all Colombians,” says [Andrés Miguel Sampayo](#), PhD in Political and International Studies from the Faculty of Political Sciences, Government and International Relations at Universidad del Rosario.

“Here electoral democracy is performing efficiently, supported by fair and free elections and an admirable electoral system,” he continues. “Competition is fair and multi-party both in the campaign and in the elections, although isolated cases of violence do occur. The transfer of power, even when the parties that are governing lose, is carried out in a respectful manner. However, the shortcomings are evident when trying to extend the democratic benefits, in terms of social and economic rights, in order to cover more people. Another serious flaw lies in the close connec-

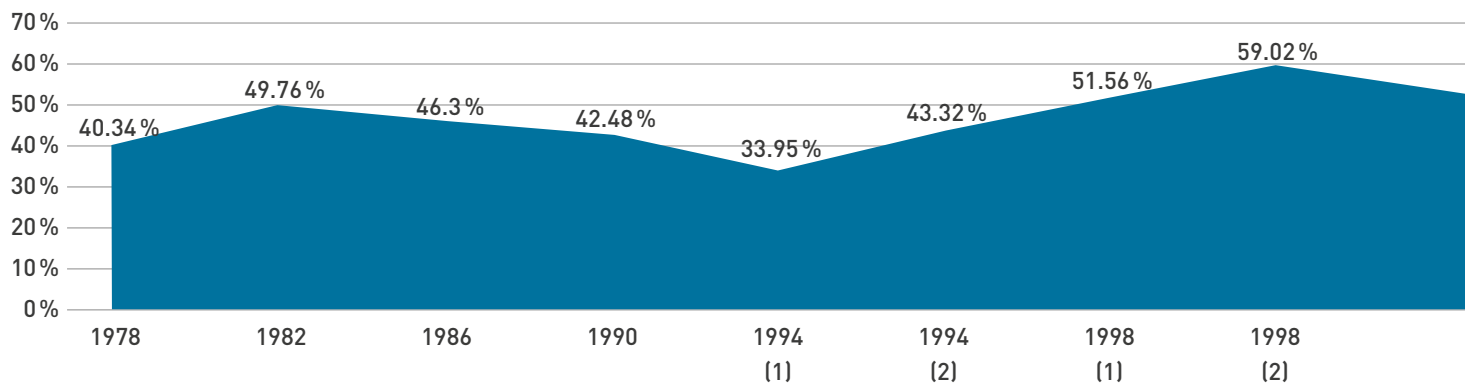


tions between many of the elected or candidates and outlawed groups.”

With this premise, Sampayo developed his doctoral thesis to investigate why dissatisfaction with our democracy persists, despite the country's economic growth in recent years.

Percentage of participation in presidential elections from 1978 to 2022

Source: Data taken from the report Electoral Abstentionism in Colombia (2013) of the National Registry and the Center for Studies in Democracy and Electoral Affairs, and own elaboration with current data, January 2024.





It initially focused on the Santander department, its place of origin, due to its remarkable economic progress and recent social advances, although several of its politicians participate in illegal practices. To do this he obtained a scholarship from the Faculty of International Studies, which for six years awarded him salary, office and resources.

Sampayo employed surveys, a linear probabilistic model, and the unsupervised classification algorithm k-means. It observed the grouping of municipalities according to electoral trends and determined territorial patterns. The algorithm identified clusters that reflect the electoral behavior of nearby municipalities. He found that municipalities do not vote independently when they are neighbors, but that geographically close ones share ideological patterns and trends.

"This methodology allowed me to see that there are some patterns of electoral 'niching'" he says. "It is the limitation of political competence in a specific number of municipalities,

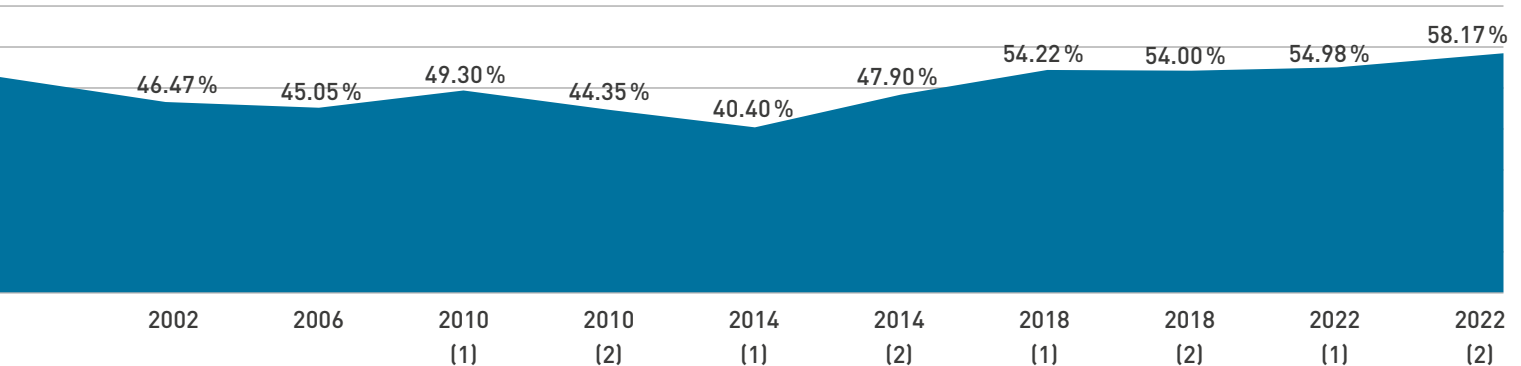
by a political faction that manages to have a majority vote in a sustained way over time," he replies.

According to his study, this niching occurred mainly in municipalities that had three characteristics in common: the first is that they are the least economically developed in the department. To analyze this variable he used the index of light intensity: the more light is radiated in urban centers, the more development. It compared satellite data from 1990 to 2013 obtained by the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program ([DMSP](#)) and the Operational Line-Scan System ([OLS](#)), both from the United States Office for National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and also from the [Global Forest Watch](#) platform.

The second characteristic of the municipalities that are announced is that they had more difficulties in generating their own resources. And the third, that in these municipalities there are fewer planted hectares, even though they depend on agriculture to generate income.

The reason, then, why in many municipalities traditional political parties always win, is because they niche and thus consolidate in power. Many of the political parties or movements have therefore decided not to activate their campaigns in those municipalities where they know they would not get good results.

Sampayo applied similar models throughout the country and found that the niching is repeated in other regions. "The research data show that the Conservative Party is strongly anchored in Bolívar, Córdoba and Tolima; the Liberal Party in Chocó and some areas of Cesar and Sucre, the Party of the U in the Valley and Cambio Radical in the Atlantic region. Alternative parties, on the other hand, win in the big cities and from there they grow to other places; example of this is the Green



"I discovered patterns of electoral niching, which is the limitation of political competition in a specific number of municipalities, by a political faction that manages to maintain a majority vote over time. These municipalities are less economically developed, with difficulties in generating their own resources and with less commercial agricultural activity."

Andrés Miguel Sampayo.

Party, which is already strong in Boyacá and Bogotá."

"Not every form of niche is bad!" he says. "There are many ways to explain that niching, but it doesn't have to be bad. The proposal of the thesis allows us to understand the causes of this niching and proposes to use them for the benefit of honest and committed candidates with Colombia."

This is where the practical part of your thesis comes into play. At the moment, Sampayo is the Coordinator of the Legislative Work Unit (UTL) of [Julia Miranda Londoño](#), the Nuevo Liberalismo militant who got her seat in the House of Representatives of Congress for Bogotá in the last regional elections (October 2023). He was the manager of the campaign in 2022, for which he used this data methodology in order to find patterns to win those elections.

The campaign strategy identified that voters of alternative, progressive and liberal ideas, similar to those of Julia Miranda, vote at the same tables in Bogotá. In this way, the team dedicated inputs, advertising budget and people in the street only in the surrounding areas to the identified tables, and thus, in its first elections, Julia Miranda, achieved 40 000 votes, enough to get that seat.

Increasingly, the percentage of the electoral campaign budget devoted to managing the image of candidates on social networks is higher, as it practically allows us to choose who should receive our message. However, Sampayo says that radio also gave them excel-



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The Intelligence Unit of The Economist magazine publishes an annual Democracy Index, which classifies the democracy of 167 countries based on a rating. In 2022, Colombia was described as a "deficient democracy" and ranked 59th in the world and 10th in Latin America.

lent results and that their cost-benefit is much more favorable than in the case of television.

"It is necessary to study why these niching occur in certain places to better understand how democracy works in Colombia. This also makes it possible to increase the level and sophisticate the quality of the candidates who apply. Perhaps this way will allow new leadership to appear or emerge in various places" he concludes.

And what are the boundaries of these niching? Sampayo says it depends on each place. "In Santander, the boundaries between one *cluster* and another are strongly marked by the boundaries between provinces. In Bogotá, the results are clearly marked by [UPZ](#) (Zonal Planning Units)."

In his doctoral thesis he concluded "that the low quality of democracy in Colombian departments, despite economic development, is due to the lack of homogeneity in such development. Territorial heterogeneity leaves pock-



ets of marginality exploited by political groups, which reveals the importance of ‘niching’ as an intermediate variable.”

This dynamic explains the paradoxical coexistence between development and low-quality democracy, as Sampayo concludes is the case in Santander.

Does Class Voting Exist?

It is precisely this difference between strata that has been studied by a group led by [Yann Basset](#), a political scientist researching in the Faculty of Political Sciences, Government and International Relations at UR, and member of the Group of Studies of Democracy Demos-UR. This research group publishes research and disclosure pieces on their website [Procesoselector.org](#), in which they analyze some aspect of the country's politics related to voter behavior and try to explain the singularities of the electoral processes carried out in the country, something that is usually not easy to understand. Most of them are conducted by students.

We need to unravel that political gibberish from the elections, to educate ourselves thoroughly at all levels. Above all, however, we need to combat the obstacles to the representation of women in our political positions, something that, although it involves education, requires more precise and realistic regulations.

One of the formats that the team pays the most attention to is the bulletins that they publish biannually. They analyze the results of the elections, once they are issued by the National Registry, in search of electoral patterns.

In bulletin number 17, titled [“Votes and Social Strata: Impact on Colombian Local Elections \(2007–2019\)”](#), published in August 2023, researchers analyzed how different social strata vote in the local elections of mayors of the six main cities of the country (Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla, Bucaramanga and Pereira), from 2007 to 2019. “We were more interested in mayoral elections than national ones, as they are less politicized and more immersed in issues of local interest,” Basset says. The bulletin was presented at the latest political science congress of the Colombian Association of Political Science (Ascopol) in June 2023, and around 10 students from various semesters collaborated in its production.

The results say that the stratum, the logic of the ‘class vote’ is a very important variable in the mayoral elections in the big Colombian cities. “Stratification does not occur in all cities; the bigger it is, the clearer the stratification becomes. There is a form of ‘confrontation between social strata,’ with the lower strata supporting one candidate and the wealthier strata supporting another, which shows that it is a key to the strong reading of local elections in large cities,” argues Basset.

However, this is not the case throughout the country, as the situation changes when analyzing smaller municipalities.

“In these, social strata do not show as many differences in lifestyles; the inequalities are

not as deep as in larger cities because there is not so much diversity; the traditional parties have greater power and are multiclass (having votes across all strata),” he continues. “It is a feature of traditional parties: liberals and conservatives don’t really have a class identity, they ‘fish’ in all strata. The logic of the difference in votes is seen much more in big cities where these parties do not have large votes. In these elections a series of electoral confrontations is presented that has much to do with the differences in lifestyles between social strata.”

Likewise, the data of his observations indicate that in some cities there are cycles of alternation: “Cali, for example, shows that after very stratified elections, there come others that are not so stratified. This means that there is more alternation between candidates who polarize socially and others who achieve greater consensus in the population.”

In the Stratification graph of the local elections between 2007 and 2019, it can be seen that stratification only grows in Medellín, but it is not so in the rest of the cities. In more detail, the 2019 elections in Medellín, in which Daniel Quintero was elected, show a strange event in the city: a high stratification above

the historical trend of the city, which, like other large cities, used to vote with a very little stratification. dominated by traditional parties or those initiatives that gathered consensus (such as that of Federico Gutiérrez).

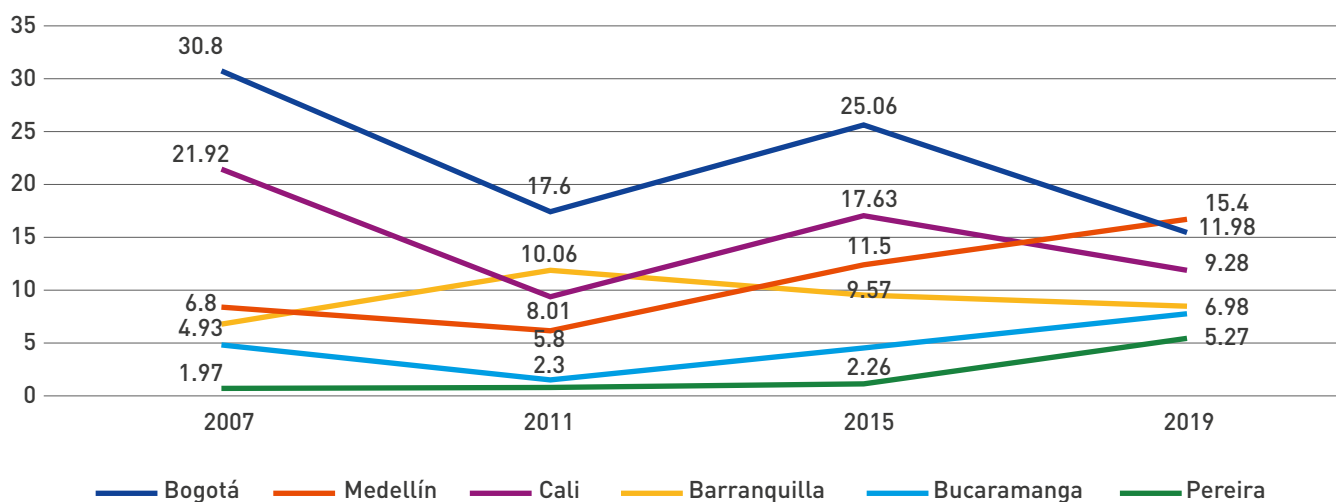
In the following published bulletin, #18 (“...Chiefdoms and local elections: How Much Relation Exists Between the Local and the National?”) In November 2023, researchers analyzed the results of the October 2023 regional elections and map the results of each party in the territories. “We study the logic of candidacies and their relationship with the legislative power; whether there is a link between the power of a congressman over a territory and the fact that his party presents or does not presents a candidacy, either independently or in coalition,” explains Basset.

Do We Need Electoral Education?

Colombians tend to participate regional elections in greater numbers than the presidential ones, something that is not usual in other countries, since it is assumed that the latter are more important for the nation. “Colombia is a very diverse country and not very integrated geographically and culturally; many people feel the impact of their local mayor more than that of the president. In addition, it is a country with many municipalities, where numerous candidates present and where a large majority has a relative or an acquaintance on the lists. These regional elections involve everyone and that is why we have an excess of passions and participation that sometimes end very badly,” adds the researcher.

Stratification local elections 2007-2019

This is the behavior of the stratification in the different cities. Only Medellín shows a clear tendency towards greater stratification. Bucaramanga and Pereira show a more timid increase.



Source: Bulletin 17 of Procesoselectorales.org, portal of the Group of Studies of the Democracy of Universidad del Rosario (Demos-UR). August 2023 .

The candidates who stood in the last regional elections are not few. According to the [Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil](#) (National Registry of Civil Status), 132 553 candidates registered, 13.73 percent more candidates compared to the 2019 elections (116 546). Among coalitions, citizen groups, social movements and political parties with legal status, there were 251 candidates for 32 governorships (an average of 7.8 candidates per governorate); 6 175 candidates for 1102 mayorships (an average of 5.6); 3894 candidates for the Departmental Assemblies; 106 429 for the Council and 15 804 for the Local Administrative Boards (JAL).

“Political contests are a means to conquer, exercise and preserve power. The electoral system is crucial. It constitutes a set of elements through which citizens express their political preferences and those preferences become seats or political power,” states [Ana Beatriz Franco Cuervo](#), a professor in the Faculty of Political Sciences, Government and International Relations at Universidad del Rosario. Precisely, through this system, power can be conquered or retained, or what is the same, with the same number of votes and depending on the interaction of the set of elements that are understood in this system, it is possible to win, continue or lose.

We have had more than 60 years of a strong bipartisanship that was electorally predetermined and that began to gradually fracture with the 1991 constitution, especially by the change in the senatorial constituency, which went from territorial to national. All this allowed the entry of new actors in the repre-

sentation and conquest of political power both at the local, regional and, recently, national levels.

Depending on what is being chosen and with what principle of representation (whether majority or proportional), constituencies can be in many ways and this can crucially influence outcomes.

“For example, there are political-electoral constituencies as in the parliaments of England, Canada and the United States (Congress) and France (National Assembly). They have a [majoritarian single-member electoral system](#) with one seat per constituency.” This means that the voter can choose a single candidate from among those who stand and the one who has the most votes wins, by a simple majority, except in the French Assembly which is by an absolute majority, which implies a second round.

In Colombia there are predominantly political-administrative constituencies, where the principle of representation is proportional for territorial and population-based corporations. Representing national interests, the Senate is a national constituency, with 100 seats elected and 2 additional seats elected for indigenous people (art. 171, Colombian Constitution).

Since 1991, the Senate has been represented nationally and proportional to the votes obtained. Thus, when the candidate was able to add the votes of all the territories (not only those of the department where he is presented), the departmental electoral fiefdoms that historically prevented the entry of new actors could be broken. In this way, candidates who were once an alternative to traditional ones, such as Carlos Gaviria in 2002, and Gustavo Petro in 2006 became senators.

In contrast, the House of Representatives is elected through territorial constituencies: population-based and special ones. The latter ensure the participation of ethnic groups (2 seats for Afro-descendants and one for indigenous communities) and Colombians living abroad (with one seat).

The issue is not over yet. Since 2016, there are also the Special Transitional Peace Constituencies ([CTEP](#)), through which 16 seats are elected for two electoral periods (from 2022 to 2030). These correspond to specific areas identified in the Peace Agreement as having low political representation and belonging to sectors most affected by violence. The areas include Southern Meta and Guaviare, Montes de María, Pacífico Medio, Nariño Pacific, Putumayo, Sierra Nevada del Perijá, Southern Bolívar, Southern Córdoba, Southern Tolima, and Urabá.

In order to initiate motivation and electoral pedagogy from schools and universities, and not only during the days immediately before the elections, in 2021, Professor Franco Cuervo and political scientist and political communicator Danny Ramírez Jaramillo, graduate and professor in the Faculty of International, Political and Urban Studies (Feipu) and the Institute of Communal Participation and Action ([Idpac](#)), undertook the socialization and digitalization of the board game [Election Party](#), which simulates an electoral campaign in Colombia.

Researchers indicate that the lack of adequate education leads to misunderstanding of the electoral system, and this aspect would be one of the factors that explain the low participation of Colombians in the elections. “In times of low

What is the Stratification Index ?

It is obtained by subtracting from the percentage of votes obtained in strata 5 and 6, those obtained in polling places located in strata 1 and 2. Thus, the stratification index of a candidate can be either a positive or a negative number. A positive stratification index indicates that the candidate has more votes in strata 5 and 6, in relative terms, than in strata 1 and 2. A negative stratification index means that the candidate has a higher percentage of votes among the lower strata.

Source: Bulletin No. 17 DEMOS-UR

participation, fake news, and the resurgence of populist movements, both left and right, playful-pedagogical experiences such as Election Party become a powerful tool of approach to the voter to address the complexity of the political system,” adds Professor Franco Cuervo.

In addition to this initiative, since 2010, the Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) [has developed several educational booklets](#) covering topics, advice and even warnings about irregularities and electoral crimes, both for general and local contests.

On the other hand, in 2022, the Canal Capital Public Communication System created the campaign [#MásVotosMásDemocracia](#) (More Votes, More Democracy), aimed at addressing questions about the electoral mechanics, the composition of the chambers and, in general, about the democratic system of the country.

To conclude, Professor Franco Cuervo mentions that “the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, in his well-known work “The Rebellion of the Masses” stated that “the health of democracies, whatever their type and degree, depends on a paltry technical detail: the electoral procedure. Everything else is secondary. Without the support of genuine suffrage, democratic institutions are in the air.”

How are women represented in elected positions in Colombia?

This is the main premise of the project [“Women in the Colombian councils: a red balance”](#) coordinated by [Professor Sandra Botero Cabrera](#), from Feipu at Universidad del Rosario, together with Ana María Moncayo, and whose results are still in the process of publication.

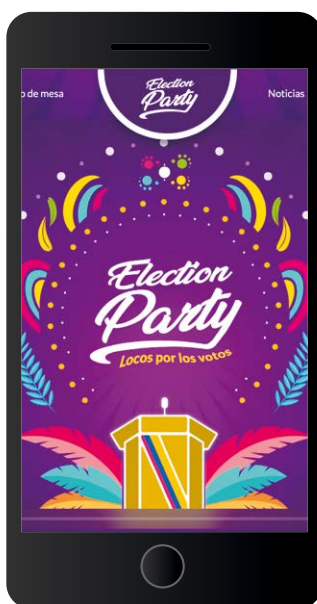
The project analyzes the representation of women in the councils from two perspectives: “On the one hand, we quantitatively monitor the factors associated with the election of women at the national level, in the presidential elections of 2015 and 2019. And on the other hand, we did a case study, based on candidates for the Bogotá Council, on the barriers and obstacles they encountered while the campaign,” explains Botero.

The initial results reveal three gender-related aspects that define these problems. The first is that it is much harder to get campaign funding if you are a woman. “The lack of transparency in campaign financing, which increases the risk of illegal campaign money entering campaigns, means that opportunities for women to participate in politics are restricted, especially if these women do not come from traditional political families or clans,” clarifies Botero.



Sofía Carrerá Martínez studied an example of this [in her thesis of degree](#) for Universidad del Rosario, where she analyzed, among other things, the obstacles that hinder the access of women to the candidacies of the mayoralty of Cartagena between 2007 and 2019. Carrerá found that, to get the endorsement of the parties, women face much greater challenges for three reasons: “Parties are highly informal, women aspiring to the mayoralty lack experience in electoral politics, and local parties often operate as endorsement-producing brands inhabited by local powers, especially political houses (power groups with a strong family component).”

The second aspect related to gender is the existence of “an endemic machismo” – as defined by Professor Botero – which generates a clear discrimination against women and that limits their professional growth within political organizations.



And a third aspect that they have been able to distinguish from that first analysis of results prior to formal publication, is related to domestic and caregiving responsibilities at home: “There is a great difficulty in balancing work as candidates with the caregiving tasks for children or older relatives, something that traditionally falls disproportionately on women,” concludes the expert.

And on social media, is there discrimination against female candidates?

Social networks, which has liberated and enhanced the possibilities of connecting candidates with the population, also generate a differential treatment towards women. Botero and other researchers from the UR collaborated in the production of [a report on digital violence against women in politics \(VDCMP\) during the electoral campaign to the Congress of the Republic of Colombia in 2022](#), originated by the Karisma

“In times of low participation, fake news, and the resurgence of populist movements, both left and right, playful-pedagogical experiences such as “Election Party” become a powerful tool for engaging voters to address the complexity of the political system,” Ana Beatriz Franco Cuervo.

Foundation in alliance with UN Women, the UR and the Swedish Embassy.

The document starts from the premise that “the violence exercised in digital environments is based on gender (through stereotypes that deny their abilities because they are women; attack their privacy and their physical appearance or delegitimize their gender agenda) and in general affect them in a differential and disproportionate way in their right to participate, to access or to remain in the public sphere [...]. This reveals that there is a widespread and standardized VDCMP that refers to their bodies, appearance, race, the way they speak, their skills and their professional abilities.”

[UN Women also found](#) that this type of gender-based violence “affects their integrity, dignity and security, with an additional consequence: it limits their right to participate and, therefore, to democratic exercises.”

Examples of such violence include discrediting based on their abilities or intellect, online threats, extortion, identity theft, information manipulation, virtual harassment or cyberbullying, discriminatory expressions, negative reviews of their physical appearance, sexualization, insults related to their ethnic and ‘class’ origin, and attacks or belittling based on sexual orientation.

All of these constitute deep obstacles that prevent our democracy from consolidating. Promoting greater participation of women in politics is the most important path because until that number and the quality of female candidates increase, there will be no more women elected.

Data from the latest regional elections (29 October 2023) by the National Registry



show that 51.4 percent of the country's voters (around 20 million) are women, but the candidacies put forward by them are only 39 percent. In the 2022 legislative elections, out of 295 congressional seats, 85 were occupied by women (28.8 percent), only 30 (9.1 percent) more than in the previous 2018 legislature, according to [data from the Colombian office of the organization UN Women](#).

Although there has been progress compared to previous years and the data brings women's participation in political representation bodies closer to the average in the Caribbean region and Latin America (35.8 percent in 2023 according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union - IPU), much remains to be done.

Botero highlights that one of the tools that was initially believed to help strengthen women's participation in the political arena was the creation of the [Law 581 of 2000, called the Quota Act](#), which requires that at least 30 percent of high-ranking public officials must

be held by women. Unfortunately, this number has become the ceiling, since in neither chamber representation exceeds 30 percent, "and that considering that this is the Congress with the most women."

The way candidates are presented, the preferential vote, or open lists also do not help women participation more. In this case, discrimination is again present. So, until there is a closed 'zipper' list (an electoral list in which gender parity exists) that will not change.

For non-preferential voting, or closed list, there are a number of people who are preceded by a list head. The more votes that list gets, the more people from it will be chosen. The order of the list gives priority to the candidate. And the zipper type means that the gender of the candidate is interspersed to ensure fairness in representation.

"Colombian politicians would not do so well with the closed list, in which the order of the list is not chosen," continues Professor Botero. "However, if you want to take an institutional measure that does not put the weight on women to solve what is an institutional problem, it is very clear that the only thing that works is a closed list with a clear mandate of location, that is, it has to be a 'zipper list'. Otherwise, our

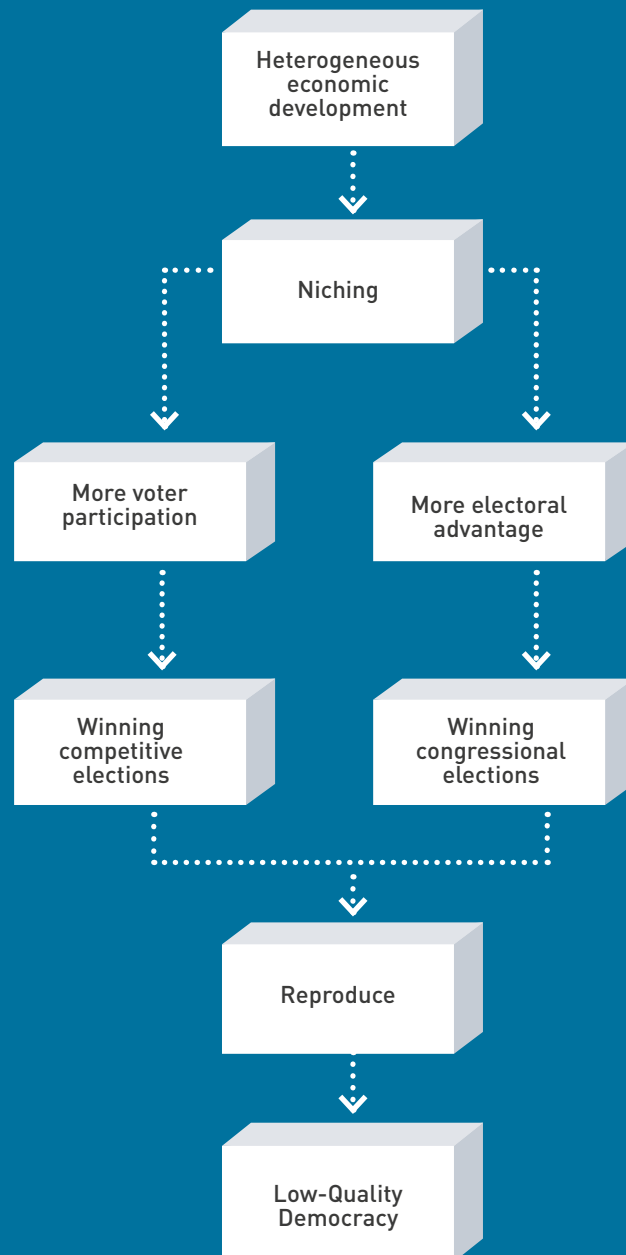


historical bias gets people to know more male candidates and so women will continue to be at a significant disadvantage.”

A perfect example is the lists submitted to the Bogotá Council for the regional elections of 2023. Among them, the Pacto Histórico list was the only one closed and zipped, and obtained four seats for women and three for men, while in the other lists there were fewer women: Alianza Verde and Nuevo Liberalismo each won eight seats, with seven men and one woman; Centro Democrático, seven (five men and two women); the Liberal Party, six (four men and two women); and the Cambio Radical and Mira Parties each won four seats, all for men.

“In terms of the design of the institutional structure for suffrage, the only known tool that can help fight for that parity is this list. This will encourage parties to focus on creating and supporting female leadership,” concludes the professor.

Gap between development and democracy at the subnational level. Santander case study.



Taken from the doctoral thesis in Political and International Studies de Sampayo, Andrés Miguel. 2023. Universidad del Rosario

Recommendations to Combat Violence Against Women in Politics

For the State and the Colombian government:

- Fulfill their constitutional obligations and their international commitments to guarantee women a life free of violence, including promoting the training and awareness of operators against violence towards women who are exercising their right to political-electoral participation.- Empower judicial authorities to deal in a timely manner with cases of Digital Violence Against Women in Politics (VDCMP).
- To contribute in the legislative processes that are processed in the Congress of the Republic, in such a way that the processes of prevention, care, sanction and reparation of the VDCMP are framed within the harmonious collaboration of institutions.
- Consider including as a variable within the different reporting systems that relating to the level of public exposure, leadership or political exercise of women victims of any VDCMP act.

For electoral authorities :

- Follow up on the commitments of the protocol formulated in [Resolution 8947 of 2021](#), so that joint inter-agency efforts can be made for the prevention, care, punishment and reparation of victims of VDCMP.
- Make diagnoses about VDCMP during electoral processes.
- Call on social media platforms to take measures to safeguard people's rights to a life free from gender-based violence online.
- Generate public transparency reports, with data on requests filed with the platforms that own social networks.
- Create a register of violence before the National Electoral Council (CNE) and other competent authorities to monitor the protection and care measures provided within the respective party or political movement.

Do We Vote for a Person or an Ideology? Who Has the Power in Colombian Politics?

The Intelligence Unit of The Economist magazine publishes an annual [Democracy Index](#), which ranks the democracy of 167 countries based on a rating. In 2022, Colombia was described as a “flawed democracy” and ranked 59th globally and 10th in Latin America (with Uruguay in first place). At its heart, this is not a bad position considering that we are located in one third of the most democratic countries on the planet. It should be noted that this index evaluates aspects such as electoral processes and pluralism, present civil liberties, the functioning of government and political participation and culture, in addition to economic and social achievements.

Democracy in Colombia is generally good, even if it is not perfect. “The data indicates that we are improving, and that we have had significant advances in the economic and social fields,” comments Professor Andrés Miguel Sampayo. So, why is democracy not consolidating? “There are positive things like the fact

that, although we have always had violence, an election has never been called off. Things get twisted when the elected candidates have close relationships with criminal organizations; this sets us back several steps on the path to a much more effective democracy,” he adds.

“The political heart of our democracy is the congressmen, and they are the ones who make the executives work well. Despite this, we mistakenly place power in the executive rather than in the congressmen. Developed countries, by contrast, are more aware of the importance of their legislators. Winning elections gives a lot of power, especially within a political party. And that power continues to be maintained mainly in the regions and in some cities, where it has been seen that many clans and chieftains are still key to winning,” says Professor Sampayo.

On the other hand, even if the congressmen exert a strong influence, it is not completely clear that the vote in Colombia is personalist. “Contrary to common perception, the election of mayors, presidents, governors, councilors, senators or representatives to the chamber, implies a process of internal party democracy. This dynamic influences the candidate's performance and can give the idea of personalism. The presence of strong leaders, like Uribe in the Centro Democrático, or Petro in the Pacto Histórico, has consolidated political parties that emerged apparently from nowhere,” he adds.

For political parties and movements

- Develop inclusive communications strategies with the express intention of making visible all women candidates, so as to ensure that their communication spaces do not reproduce historical power asymmetries.
- Distribute resources equitably among all its candidates for the management of social networks, taking into account criteria that address the digital divide.
- Develop strategies for handling VDCMP incidents that include activation of routes to the political party or movement, authorities and web platforms.
- Develop an institutional discourse of rejection of VDCMP, especially when personal attacks associated with the candidate's race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or socioeconomic level are identified.

Source: Report on Harassment, Solitude, and Discredit. March 2023.



Despite the fact that there are no visible or transformative changes yet,

new developments have been seen on the political scene over the past two years. The 2022 general election elected the first clearly left-wing candidate, thanks to the Pacto Histórico, a 12-party national coalition that won 50 congressmen. They were also the first post-pandemic elections, and because of this, they carried with them the blows of the economic crisis, the criticism of its management by the Duque government and the social outbreaks that took place from 2019 to 2021 in many territories of the country. All this got the [left-wing earn much more than the right and the center](#) in those elections.

Despite this step forward, it is true that in the last regional elections in November 2023, the electoral machinery once again exerted control over their territories. In this regard, political scientist, journalist and twice councilor of Bogotá (2003 and 2007), [Lariza Pizano](#), comments as follows: “We cannot say that democracy came out stronger in these recent elections. Traditional clientelism prevailed in several cities, many political clans regained strongholds, thanks to the electorate choosing the well-known candidate, and political endorsement campaigns were consolidated. It is worth remembering that 2019 was the stage for new political forces, something akin to a 1991 version 2.0. But now, the regression was total.”

“The barriers and obstacles that women face in campaigning are related to funding, with clearly sexist spaces, and with the historical allocation of childcare and elderly care work”: Sandra Botero Cabrera

Should we try new things?

So, if the election works moderately well, and if, overall, we are moving forward and making some improvements, what needs to change so that we can move forward?

The proposals are diverse. One is to reassess the territorial constituencies that paved the way for many candidates to find the votes

they needed far from their locality, which somehow transformed the way politics is done. “The single national constituency of the Senate, starting with the 1991 Constitution, allowed new national leaders to emerge. Consequently, figures emerged who had significant support but were limited to a specific sector. It also enabled candidates who could not win at the local or regional level to win at the national level. An example of this is the individual figures and Christian groups, who find it difficult to secure a seat at the regional or local level but can achieve something in a national constituency,” explains Yann Basset.

However, the national constituency has its criticisms and drawbacks. “It makes no sense for a Senate candidate to compete with the entire country to pick one of the 100 seats. If you are a senator from the Caribbean Coast, for example, one or two departments will vote for you, no more. So why go and compete for the vote across the country? That is where the power of traditional parties and chieftains, as well as the source of funding, come in to make their masterpiece.”

The importance of the constituency also has to do with the number of representatives that are elected for each department or province. Regarding this, Andrés Sampayo suggests that we should think more about the system: “On one hand, Bogotá has eight million inhabitants and elects 18 seats in the Chamber. Meanwhile, Antioquia, which has only six million, has 17. Santander, with two million one hundred thousand, has only seven, while Vichada, with one hundred thousand inhabitants, has two representatives. This is not proportional. These are questions that must be asked throughout the country in order to properly identify the person who will be elected to exercise power.”

Running for office costs money. Building a large, strategic network of contacts and managing finances intelligently is no easy task at all. However, there are still a lot of people who go into politics.

“One does not get rich by directly engaging in political campaigns. Unfortunately, in many regions of the country, the public budget is the main source of resources and jobs, and perhaps that explains why some regions are more involved in politics than others,” continues Sampayo.

So, if we have a lot of people eager to participate in politics, couldn't we force those eligible to vote to fulfill the duty of suffrage? The fact that there is little voter participation

“Regarding mandatory voting, I think it is more important to talk in terms of democratic ethics in its favor. When the vote is optional, as in the case of Colombia, and we see the composition of those who abstain, we realize that they are the most excluded, the poorest, the youngest, the urban low strata, the most abandoned groups. Because these people vote less, politicians respond less. With mandatory voting, each person's vote does count and politicians are more obligated to respond to those disadvantaged groups: Yann basset.



also creates ethical problems and illegal practices such as vote buying. As always, before imposing ideas that seem simple, it is enough to understand some aspects of our country to see that they are not so simple.

There is an economic rationale that supports mandatory voting. It is often said that when very few people vote, fewer votes are needed to win; that is when vote buying becomes ‘effective’, because in the end there are few votes that must be ‘bought’. However, if the vote is mandatory, the price to pay would be too high, as it would force a huge amount of capital to be paid out.

But there are several arguments against mandatory voting, mostly related to practical aspects, such as the characteristics of our geography that would make it difficult to easily access or move to polling stations, or poor access to electricity in many places in the country. This would imply a higher budget for the conduct of the elections, but above all, it would be quite unfair if those populations, which have historically been ignored by the state and ravaged by violence, were to receive a penalty in the form of a fine for not voting.



So there is nothing positive about mandatory voting? On the contrary, there are other equally valid reasons why it should be supported. Basset believes that the anti-corruption arguments of mandatory voting or those of the moralistic view that “voting is a duty” are not the most important thing. “I think it is more important to speak in terms of democratic ethics in favor of mandatory voting. When the vote is optional, as in the case of Colombia, and we see the composition of those who abstain, we realize that they are the most excluded, the poorest, the youngest, the urban low strata, the most abandoned groups. Because these people vote less, politicians respond less. With mandatory voting, everyone’s suffrage does count, and politicians are more obligated to respond to such unfavorable groups.

In any case, the worst scenario would be for something that often happens in the country to occur: to make voting mandatory but not enforce it, rendering it ineffective.

We need to change many things so that our elections produce results that positively affect the country and that help its development in all aspects.

We need more professional campaigns, with new and more transparent techniques, as well as understanding party strategies to be sure, whether or not there is a true answer to the needs of voters or whether these are just successful ways to stay in power.

Likewise, we urgently need to review how constituencies can really represent the voice of citizens and understand that if there is an influence of the social strata in the way we vote, this must be combated with credible actions that reduce social differences.

We need to untangle this political gibberish of the elections, educate ourselves thoroughly, not only at the school level but also in the higher education stage. We should all be educated about the political forms of representation available to us.

Above all, we need to combat obstacles to the representation of women in our political positions, which, although it involves education, requires more precise and realistic regulation. Intention is important, but actions are even more so. ■