

Consequential Elections in Colombia

written by Ted Zuur | May 24, 2026



While the eyes of the world are fixed on the Strait of Hormuz, China, Russia's war against Ukraine, and sometimes on the US created crisis in Cuba, Colombia is in the middle of a very close, tense and consequential election. The results will have repercussions throughout Latin America.

The *Pacto Historico* (Historic Pact), the rising left wing party here, is poised to win a historic second presidential election. By doing so, it can stop the tide of losses by the left in important elections from Chile to Ecuador.

Legislative elections on March 8 made the Pacto the biggest party in Colombia in every respect. The first round of the presidential elections is scheduled for May 31, but every poll indicates that a second round between the top two first round vote getters will take place on June 21st.

The front runner is the Pacto's Ivan Cepeda, but two right wing candidates, Senator Paloma Valencia of the Centro Democratico, and an attorney named Abelardo de la Espriella, are engaged in a bitter fight for second place.

The Centro Democratico is the extreme right wing party of former President Alvaro Uribe.

Uribe has maintained tight control of Colombia's right wing through his personal control of the Centro Democratico. A politician who had been on the USA's list of drug dealers and who had been close to Pablo Escobar during his career in Medellin and Antioquia where he and his family are major landowners, Uribe was President of Colombia from 2002 to 2010. He was responsible for rolling back workers' rights and for building up Colombian paramilitary organizations. He was also a close ally of US President Clinton and his Plan Colombia.

A Multi-Party Presidential Race

The president is elected in a two round system. Although the race began with several dozen candidates, there are now only twelve. Some of the others were eliminated in the primaries of parties, the primaries of coalitions of parties, or failure to gather enough signatures to appear on the ballot. Still other candidates left the race to support one or another candidate.

More importantly, the race has resolved itself into two parts: the left versus the right, and the right versus the right.

Most of the left has united in and around the *Pacto Historico* and its candidate Ivan Cepeda.

From Petro to Cepeda

Four years ago, Colombia elected its first ever leftist president, Gustavo Petro. Since then, Petro has struggled to implement his reform agenda despite the fact that the left did not have a legislative majority.

Using a combination of mass demonstrations, presidential decrees, and a spellbinding array of deals with centrist parties and politicians, and even occasionally with members of right wing parties, Petro managed to accomplish significant land reform, a major increase in the minimum monthly salary, a historic extension of pension coverage, significant improvements in public education and university access, and a general rollback of the take aways of workers' rights that were imposed during the presidency of Alvaro Uribe.

Nevertheless, Petro failed to implement most of his ambitious environmental agenda and fought a bitter and inconclusive battle over health reform with the private health care industry.

Petro is limited to one term in office by the Colombian constitution, so the *Pacto Historico* nominated Senator Ivan Cepeda as its presidential candidate in this year's election. Cepeda's nomination has put to rest most of the slanders that Petro was interested in becoming a president for life in the mold of Maduro in Venezuela or Ortega in Nicaragua.

Senator Cepeda has literally been in the struggle against paramilitarism, oppression and imperialism for all of his life. His father, Manuel Cepeda was a leader of the Unión Patriótica and the Colombian Communist Party who was assassinated in 1994 while campaigning for a seat in the Colombian congress. He was one of more than 6,000 UP leaders, militants and supporters assassinated by the right wing government of the time and its paramilitary arm.

Ivan Cepeda is known as the most fearless defender of human rights and the scourge of ex-President Uribe here in Colombia. As a member of the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate, he has led the struggle to uncover the links of Uribe and other members of the Colombian elite to the paramilitaries, dig up the links between the paramilitaries and the military, and investigate the thousands of murders, false positives, people tortured, and the tens of thousands displaced.

When Uribe tried to use the court system against Cepeda, Cepeda turned the tables resulting in Uribe's conviction for some of his many crimes (The conviction was reversed on appeal, but may still be reinstated.).

Cepeda has also been a central figure in most of the Colombian government's peace negotiations with various armed groups for more than a decade.

His political style is a sharp contrast to that of Petro who is a brash, longwinded, and aggressive speaker. Cepeda is careful, thoughtful, and measured but is also a forceful speaker.

The Right is Divided

Colombia's right wing is sharply divided by personal animosity, jealousy, hatred, and ambition. The divisions are so deep that there have been threats of violence by officials in the campaign of Abeleardo de la Espriella against prominent supporters of Paloma Valencia. The assassination of Miguel Uribe (no family relation to Alvaro Uribe), an early leader in the race for the nomination of the Centro Democrático, remains unsolved.

Abelardo de la Espriella, an attorney who has represented major drug dealers as well as the Venezuelan PSUV (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*) is Colombia's wannabe version of El Salvador's dictatorial ruler Nayib Bukele. De la Espriella is a close friend of Alvaro Uribe's and seems to have unlimited campaign funds from unknown sources. His emulation of Bukele includes

trying to dress like Bukele and wearing exactly the same style of facial hair as his idol.

At the start of the campaign, it was not clear whether de la Espriella or Valencia had Uribe's support, but he finally came down on the side of Valencia.

Both of these candidates rely on amplifying the fears of the middle class of crime and violence. The persistence of the illicit drug trade and armed drug gangs, including remnants of the FARC and the ELN, plays into their hands. Occasionally, they have made plays to win over sectors of working class voters, as in Valencia's recent proposal for the government to pay for the insurance of motorcyclists (A proposal she would finance by abolishing the Ministry of Equality.)

Divided Government

Cepeda has vowed to continue fighting for the program of the Pacto that Petro began to implement, but even if he wins, Cepeda will face a continuation of the divided Chamber of Representatives and Senate that has hampered Petro.

In the legislative elections held on March 8, the Pacto won 36 seats in the 183 seat Chamber, and 25 in the 103 seat Senate. These results are a significant improvement over the Pacto's 2022 results in which they won 32 seats in the Chamber and 20 seats in the Senate. The Pacto's percentage of the vote increased from 15.5% in 2022 to 23.8% this year,

Once upon a time, Colombia had a Tweedledee, Tweedledum two party system with a strong president much like the system in the United States, but it was abolished by the 1991 Constitution which introduced a complicated system based on proportional representation and other democratic measures.

The result was destruction of the traditional two party system and the rise of a complex multiparty system.

There are currently 28 parties represented in either the Senate or Chamber or both. Seven of those parties did not obtain the required vote percentages to win seats, but gained seats because they represent indigenous people or ethnic minorities. Six ballot qualified parties failed to gain any representatives.

Besides the Pacto Historico, the largest and most important parties are the Centro Democratico, the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, Cambio Radical, the Partido de la U, and the Green Alliance.

The Centro Democratico is the machine controlled by aging right wing strongman, ex-president Alvaro Uribe. The Liberal and Conservative Parties are the still powerful surviving machines of the old Tweedledee and Tweedledum parties (with the help of the Catholic Church in the case of the Conservatives). Cambio Radical and the Partido de la U are based on the machines of powerful political dynasties that were once part of the Liberal Party.

In this system, there is still a strong president and no prime minister, but the two houses of the legislative branch can overrule presidential initiatives, and a plethora of unelected government bodies including the several supreme courts and various independent prosecutorial, administrative and oversight agencies all have the power to block laws passed by the legislative branch and presidential initiatives and policies in many ways and at many levels.

In any case, passing legislation depends on cobbling together coalitions of parties, individuals and factions.

Polling and Trolling

According to the polls, Valencia and de la Espriella are running neck and neck for second place in the first round of voting. Depending on which poll you look at, Cepeda has around 40% of the votes, and Valencia and de la Espriella each has about 20% of the votes.

The traditional polls, notoriously imprecise and skewed to the right, show Cepeda winning the first round, and running neck and neck with either Valencia or de la Espriella in the second round. La Silla Vacía (The Empty Seat), an online and media investigative news source, ranks the performance of the main polling companies here on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being a perfect score, and 1 being catastrophically bad. The top poll, GAD3, has a score of 6.2, and the bottom poll, Guaramo, has a score of 5.1.

Nevertheless, the difference between polling and trolling here is sometimes difficult to discern. Polymarket, the online betting platform is now being used as a stand-in for election polls by the right wing media in Colombia. It now shows de la Espriella leading Ivan Cepeda in the betting race by 43% to 41%.

In other words, flipping a coin is almost as good a predictor as are Colombian polls.

The Pacto, the working class, and the left

The social base of the *Pacto Histórico* is the urban working class, especially the organized labor movement. Together the membership of the three union federations, the CUT, CGT and CTC, amounts to only about 850,000 workers out of a working age population of about 35,000,000. Nevertheless, the unions have a huge following beyond their membership because the unions negotiate with the government every year to determine the next year's annual minimum salary.

In brief, Cepeda and the Pacto's campaign could be summarized as *defend and extend the gains made during Petro's presidency*. However, Cepeda is proposing to do this by creating a National Accord to bring together all sectors of Colombian society, from big businesses to the poorest farmers, around the progressive reform program of the Pacto.

Officially, most of the unions support the Pacto, but this year the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) and the Unión Sindical Obrera de la Industria Petróleo (USO) are officially supporting Roy Barreras in the first round of voting. Barreras has become the vehicle for the CUT and USO to make public their differences with Petro and Cepeda on energy policy, and especially their displeasure with the current ban on fracking and drilling for oil and natural gas.

Almost all of the organized left in Colombia including the various communist and socialist organizations, the feminists, the indigenous movements, Afro-Colombianos, the LGBTQ+ movement and the environmentalist movement are either inside of the *Pacto Histórico* or are supporting the candidacy of Cepeda. While the anarchist movement is anti-electoralist, most if its sympathizers are also likely to vote for Cepeda.

The key question mark on the left had been the Alianza Verde which has significant support among voters and has a large block of votes in the Senate and the Chamber. It portrays itself as center-left.

While it had not nominated its own candidate for president, it also had not endorsed any other candidate. Two of its most important leaders, Claudia Lopez (former Mayor of Bogotá) and her wife, Angelica Lozano (former Senator) recently split from the Greens to mount an independent presidential campaign with Lopez as the candidate. She is languishing in fourth or fifth place in the polls with less than 5% of the voters supporting her.

At the end of April, the Green Alliance ended the suspense when its leaders voted 34 to 3 (with one abstention) to support the Pacto Histórico's candidate in the first round of the presidential election.

Throughout the race there have also been three minor candidates who had been in Petro's government: Roy Barreras, Luis Gilberto Murillo, and Mauricio Lizcano

Murillo, who is one of the most prominent leaders of the Afro-Colombian community and had been Governor of Choco and Petro's Minister of Foreign Affairs, has withdrawn his candidacy and thrown his support to Cepeda.

Barreras, a medical doctor, has been a key but controversial supporter of Gustavo Petro. He began his political career in the Liberal Party, moved to Cambio Radical, was elected Senator as a candidate of the Partido de la U, and then switched to Petro and the Pacto in 2022. He has been an outspoken supporter of Paz Total, Petro's attempt to negotiate peace with all armed groups in Colombia including criminal gangs.

Lizcano, was an important figure in the Partido de la U but became Petro's Minister of Information and Communications Technology.

According to the polls, both of these candidates have less than 1% of the voters behind them.

Project Jupiter, Hondurasgate and Fake News

Most of the media in Colombia is controlled by five very wealthy family groups: Organización Ardila Lülle, Grupo Santo Domingo, Grupo Gilinski, Organización Luis Carlos Sarmiento Angulo and Grupo Prisa. The same groups control the country's most important industries, banks, commerce, and health care and are enormously influential in all of the main political parties except the Pacto, which they all work overtime to defeat.

In this election, Project Jupiter has emerged as the Uribista hothouse for disinformation and fake news directed against Cepeda and the Pacto. The project is led by Uribe's former Foreign Minister, Jaime Bermudez. Bermudez is currently president of the Colombian branch of the multinational bank, Lazard.

The template for the Jupiter campaign appears to be the "Hondurasgate" operation which used an international network composed of the United States, Israeli and Argentine governments to produce and disseminate slanderous fake news against the left in Honduras.

Most recently, a fake audio linking Cepeda to an armed FARC dissident faction has been released. The audio has been featured in all of the right wing national media and reposted in the social media of Alvaro Uribe, Paloma Valencia, Abelardo de la Espriella, Claudia Lopez and many other right and center political leaders.

Soon after becoming the headline story of the right, the national police tracked the audio to its origins in a prison in Ibagué rather than to anyone related to the FARC dissidents.

Constituent Assembly

Parallel to the election campaign, Petro and part of the *Pacto Histórico* are campaigning for the convocation of a constituent assembly to radically amend the Constitution of 1991. Ivan Cepeda has distanced himself from the campaign but not repudiated it.

A major constitutional change is the greatest fear of the right and the center which use the many

checks on democracy embedded in the current constitution to thwart progressive reforms. El Tiempo, the country's most important newspaper, even featured a front page headline screaming, "Today, a constituent assembly would be a political civil war."

This issue was also at the heart of the split in the Green Alliance when Lopez, Lozano and their supporters left.

Petro used the threat of convocation of an assembly plus mass demonstrations to help pass his labor law reform last year. Now, some commentators speculate that the campaign for a constitutional change is his Plan B in case Cepeda is not elected.

The campaign needs more than 2 million signatures to put a referendum on the ballot. The organizing committee is shooting for 5,000,000 signatures to guarantee that the Registrar places the measure on the ballot. So far, it has collected more than 900,000.

On the left, the timing of the campaign is an issue of concern especially due to the failure of the Chilean left's efforts to radically change that country's constitution.

The International Situation

Colombia is surrounded on three sides by countries that are controlled by, or very close to, the Trump administration: Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador. Despite withdrawing most of the military forces it used to kidnap Nicolas Maduro, the President of Venezuela, the United States continues to attack boats alleged to be carrying drugs in the Caribbean and Pacific, a continuous threat against Colombian's fishing and tourist industries and a warning to the Colombian government.

Ecuador's government, now controlled by Trump ally President Daniel Noboa, is engaged in a US instigated trade war against Colombia. Noboa imposed tariffs of up to 100% on Colombian goods. Colombia reciprocated and then cut off its electricity exports to Ecuador. Noboa's family banana company has been implicated in cocaine exports but he portrays his trade war as a crusade against Colombian cocaine exports.

Meanwhile, Cuba is facing an existential crisis created deliberately by the Trump administration of the USA. It is preparing its defense in case of a US invasion, most likely on hold due to the failure of the United States to anticipate Iran's resistance to its attacks on that country.

Seemingly, the pendulum in South America has swung to the right in recent elections in Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, and Uruguay. A victory by the Pacto Historico here in Colombia could end that appearance and bolster the left throughout the region.

Prognoses

With Cepeda likely to win the first round of voting by a wide margin, a great deal of attention is now focused on who will come in second, Valencia or de la Espriella. According to the pundits and the polls, Valencia will be a stronger challenger in the second round of voting.

No matter who wins the second round, the next four years are likely to witness a significant increase in class conflict, social strife, and the political crisis here. A US invasion of Cuba would upset the entire region.

Global warming is also an unpredictable factor. Later this year, the weather phenomenon of El Niño is supposed to begin again. It will bring with it drought conditions and possible electric energy shortages in this hydroelectric dependent country.

A Cepeda victory will strengthen the hand of the working class, the social movements, and the oppressed whereas a victory of the right will place all of the repressive apparatus of the state firmly in the hands of the forces of reaction.