Colombian Mavericks

Álvaro Uribe, Juan Manuel Santos, and the Politics of Securing a Country

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Colombian Mavericks: Álvaro Uribe, Juan Manuel Santos, and the Politics of Securing a Country

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my Noni, Barbara Dulik. You were gone too suddenly and too soon, but you left me great gifts: joy for learning, a passion for Latin America, and the belief that all people deserve to be treated with kindness (I’m still working on that one). I love you, and miss you every day.
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ABSTRACT

Why did Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos decide to pursue a negotiated settlement with the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)? As the government’s war with the FARC nears its fiftieth year, Santos surprised many observers by announcing his desire for peace talks in September 2012. The puzzle, broadly construed, is consonant with two questions of political science: Why do states negotiate peace with armed insurgencies? What causes a political leader to change course from previous, or anticipated, policies? The study evaluates literature from political science to frame these questions. The subsequent analysis complements these texts with numerous primary source materials, including speeches, public opinion polling, legislation, news reports, public statistics, memoirs, and personal interviews. They yield three hypotheses to respond to the thesis question. First, that electoral concerns motivated Santos. Second, that he was responding to international relations, such as diminishing military aid from the U.S. Third, that the president was appraising the consolidation of citizen security in Colombia, and responding as he saw most appropriate. Consideration of the data leads to validation of the first two explanations as plausible. However, due to the government’s resource constraints, and the remaining obstacles to security consolidation, the third explanation is largely ruled out. Nevertheless, security concerns are expressed through the lens of electoral politics, allowing for some of that hypothesis to be salvaged. These findings then are applied beyond Colombia’s borders to a broader school of thought. Ideally, they contribute a new perspective on the possibility of Colombia peacefully concluding five decades of grueling civil war.
“There are moments in history when a president must decide if he will risk undertaking new means of solving the fundamental problems of his nation. This is one of those moments.”

—President Juan Manuel Santos (Presidencia de la República)

In the fall of 2011, I had the adventure of taking a semester off from Georgetown University to live in Bogotá, Colombia and attend the Universidad de los Andes. I had never been to Colombia, and the thought of relocating to a country most known for drugs and violence made me somewhat apprehensive. My fears quickly dissipated: Colombia was an extraordinary host to me; I took in its beauty and diversity from my vantage point in Bogotá, then tackled as much of the country as I could: Medellín’s vibrancy, Cali’s flair, Villa de Leyva’s charm, Cartagena’s stunning beauty, and the Amazon’s steamy mystery. As I traveled throughout Colombia, I did what I loved: talked politics. Every Colombian I asked (and many I didn’t!) had a strong opinion on former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, and the incumbent President Juan Manuel Santos. The exploding feud between the two was trumpeted daily on the front pages of nearly every newspaper.

I returned from Colombia convinced of my desire to write a senior honors thesis concentrated on the turbulent and enthralling political landscape I had just witnessed. After a semester’s worth of coursework on Colombian history, government, and politics at the Universidad de los Andes, I noticed a trend: for a country defined by nearly two

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1 Author’s translation from original Spanish: “Hay momentos en la historia en que un gobernante debe decidir si se arriesga a emprender caminos nuevos para resolver los problemas fundamentales de su nación. Éste es uno de esos momentos.”
centuries of entrenched electoral institutions, the Liberal and Conservative parties, Colombian politics featured an extraordinary degree of maverick behavior. It was more than mere flip-flopping: politicians genuinely went rogue on their party establishments and one-time mentors, allies, and friends. Some of history’s most prominent Colombian leaders exemplified the trend: Rafael Núñez, Rafael Reyes, Enrique Olaya Herrera, Mariano Ospina, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, Luis Carlos Galán, and without question, both Uribe and Santos. On September 4, 2012, President Santos gave the most appropriate grounding for this thesis with his announcement of peace talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to achieve resolution of the armed conflict between the rebels and the government.

The purpose of this investigation is to consider that question: Why did President Santos take the maverick step of negotiating with the FARC? My hope is that the answer I provide will not only resonate in the larger context of Colombian politics, but also will address broader political science questions, such as why states negotiate with armed insurgencies, and why leaders abruptly will change policy direction.

I believe that my use of numerous diverse source materials equips me with the best information to conduct a levelheaded analysis, and I hope that my work can serve as a testament to the labors of all Colombians, who long have struggled to enjoy the fruits of their country in peace.

Samuel Henry Dulik
Washington, D.C.
April 2013
INTRODUCTION

Restarting the Peace Process

The speech was stunning in its brevity. On September 4, 2012, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos announced the formalization of a “General Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict,” in the hopes of peacefully concluding the government’s decades old war with the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). His remarks began with a straightforward premise: “I have said that a process to end the conflict under my government could only be possible if it were to meet three principles: learning from the errors and successes of the past so as not to create false expectations; effectively achieving the end of the conflict – not its prolongation – and not ceding a single millimeter of the national territory” (Presidencia de la República).

Santos’s government career had been defined by commitment to intense military engagement with the FARC, making his decision to pursue a negotiated settlement a significant surprise for observers in Colombia and beyond. This investigation attempts to answer that puzzle: Why did President Santos decide to negotiate with the FARC?

Santos’s account, echoed by chief government negotiator Humberto de la Calle, was compelling: the Colombian state was inclined to negotiate with the FARC because they reached a satisfactory accord that met critical benchmarks and allowed the government to negotiate from a position of strength. In his eighteen-minute remarks,

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2 Author’s translation from original Spanish: “Dije que un proceso para terminar el conflicto en mi gobierno solo sería posible si éste sigue tres principios: aprender de los errores y aciertos del pasado para no crear falsas expectativas; lograr efectivamente el fin del conflicto – no su prolongación – y no ceder un solo milímetro del territorio nacional.”
Santos delineated the fact that the specific points of the pre-negotiation accord ultimately facilitated the government’s moving forward with the talks. By laying out a concrete time horizon of months, not years, for the talks to take place, and holding the government to a strict timeline of exploratory discussions, work sessions, and finalization of an agreement with the FARC, the president expressed confidence that this would be a final successful effort to honorably conclude Colombia’s blood-drenched half-century of conflict (Presidencia de la República).

These government talking points are reinforced by de la Calle: “Neither the economic model, nor military doctrine, nor foreign investment are being discussed. The [negotiating] table will be limited solely to the subjects that are on the agenda. If the FARC wishes to vent its ideas, it may do so, without weapons, once the conflict is resolved… As soon as the FARC lays down its arms, and signs a final agreement ending the conflict, it will be able to engage in politics as an organization. But that material of discussion is not yet on the table.” (Gómez).³ The carefully worded nature of this explanation was critical to the government’s ability overcome the opposition of the talks’ toughest skeptics. The topic of negotiations with the FARC caused a pessimistic backlash, which is historically justified. Yet the Santos Administration’s spin was cogent and unwavering: the only reason these talks could advance is because the FARC accepted the strict preconditions of the government. Still, the question remains: Why pursue a negotiated settlement in the first place?

³ Author’s translation from original Spanish: “Ni el modelo económico, ni la doctrina militar ni la inversión extranjera están en discusión. La mesa se limitará sólo a los temas que están en la agenda. Las ideas que quieran ventilar las FARC les corresponden y una vez acabe el conflicto tendrán que hacerlo sin armas… Las FARC una vez depongan las armas, una vez se firme el acuerdo final para terminar el conflicto, hará política como organización. Pero esa no es la materia de discusión de esta mesa.”
Methodology

The evidence supporting this investigation is heavily oriented towards primary source materials, including personal interviews, news coverage, written speeches and memoirs, and quantitative data on public opinion, citizen security, state resources, and military expenditures. Working with current events presents a challenge to a researcher; indeed, considerable benefit came from reading various Colombian newspapers online every day. With a politically charged question like this one, it can be difficult to determine the objectivity of sources at times. Data has been held to the highest standards of credibility, and commentary with implicit bias will be acknowledged as such.

A series of conversations and formal interviews lent a first-hand perspective to the ensuing analysis. President Uribe served as a distinguished professor at Georgetown University during the 2010-11 academic year, and offered numerous frank comments on the Santos Administration prior to the announcement of the current peace negotiations, which appear only to have exacerbated further his criticisms of his successor. Conversations with President Uribe, together with communications with his staff and his new memoir, No Lost Causes, provide a strong articulation of the uribista perspective on this puzzle. President Santos, on the other hand, joined a Georgetown University delegation in October 2012 during a Latin American summit in Bogotá, incidentally on the very day the peace talks with the FARC were initiated in Oslo. The president offered a speech on the prospects for peace, giving personal insight on his approach to the talks. With the added benefit of phone conversations in February 2013 with Colombian Senator Juan Manuel Galán, a key congressional ally of the president’s, this study gained the santista angle. An April 2013 discussion on the peace talks with Colombia’s Ambassador
to the United States, Carlos Urrutia, rounded out the list of those interviewed. This investigation also benefitted from the news that Santos had charged former Vice President Humberto de la Calle with heading the government’s delegation to the negotiations – de la Calle was a visiting lecturer on Colombian politics at the Universidad de los Andes in 2011. Additional analysis stemmed from Colombian news sources such as *El Tiempo, Semana, La W Radio, Caracol Radio, El Espectador, El Colombiano, Posición, Portafolio*, as well as Uribe’s *Primero Colombia* foundation and the press office of the Casa de Nariño (the Colombian White House).

From primary source materials to literature on political science, the methodology of this investigation required a scrutiny of each text with intent to extract information pertinent to the central question: Why did President Santos decide to negotiate with the FARC? Throughout the subsequent analysis, data will be evaluated and applied to competing arguments seeking to explain the president’s desire to negotiate. Three compelling hypotheses will be examined, and either validated or ruled out as indefensible. Each is falsifiable on the basis of contrary trends in the data. First, it is possible that President Santos is negotiating with the FARC out of concern for electoral politics. For example, developments in public opinion polling could create a political incentive to entice the president to seek a peaceful settlement. Second, the president could be pursuing talks out of necessity, if foreign military assistance had diminished to a level that constrains his ability to prosecute a sustained military campaign against the FARC. Third, a consolidation of citizen security in modern Colombia could compel Santos to determine that a negotiated settlement is the most appropriate means of resolving the armed conflict, due to the security gains made under the Uribe
Administration. While these three possible explanations are in competition with one another to a certain degree, they are by no means mutually exclusive. All three, two, one, or even none could emerge as a legitimate explanation of the reasoning behind the negotiations. Furthermore, a hypothesis may be only partially validated.

Based on the above hypotheses, a multifaceted explanation emerges. As the ensuing analysis will show, the main findings of this thesis are that President Santos is responding to political incentives, while facing serious resource constraints due to reductions in Plan Colombia military funding. Citizen security trends have not impacted Santos’s calculations directly as much as voter perceptions have. This fact further advances the electoral politics hypothesis, as the data analysis will reveal.
APPROACHING THE PUZZLE

A Question, Broadly Construed

President Santos’s decision to negotiate with the FARC was unlikely. The following chapter will survey the specific historical and political context of Colombia, but first, one must consider the ways in which experts have addressed two broad questions relevant to the puzzle. First, why do governments choose to negotiate with armed groups? Second, what causes a politician to change course on a set of policies? Review of academic literature reveals five separate approaches, each of which is discussed below. They include: (1) emphasis on military strategy, (2) response to citizen security, (3) elite schisms, (4) dissection of political parties, (5) the logic of regime transitions. The varied approaches taken by political scientists and scholars offer a sound theoretical foundation for understanding the Santos Administration’s thought process.

Military Strategy

The first school of thought as to why governments negotiate with rebel groups is anchored in military strategy, and states that the reversal of the factors that sustain civil war will allow for actionable peace negotiations. Barbara Walter details this theory in “Bargaining Failures and Civil War,” wherein she isolates three elements that prolong a conflict, and prevent bargaining: information asymmetries between the two parties, an inability to make credible commitments, and conflict over indivisible stakes (Walter, 245-6). In a civil war, these phenomena lead to an entrenchment of armed conflict, in
which even good-faith efforts by the government can precipitate moral hazard. By signaling openness to negotiations, and by engaging in them, the government can often incentivize rebel groups to prolong their armed campaigns in light of the increasing likelihood of government pliability at the negotiating table (Walter, 257). With that in mind, the decision of a government to participate in a negotiated settlement becomes precarious. Walter’s logic is that resolution can be realized only when information asymmetries, lack of credibility in commitments, and indivisible stakes are overcome by their respective opposites: transparency, credibility, and power sharing. Applying Walter’s formula to the Colombian case means that the president is negotiating due to a perceived military and informational advantage over the rebels.

Santos’s stated perspective is consonant with Walter’s theory. According to the president and his chief negotiator, Humberto de la Calle, Colombia’s government is now disposed to dialogue with the FARC in the wake of a pre-negotiation accord that granted the government an upper hand in the talks (Presidencia de la República). More generally, states will take this position when their adversaries meet the requirements for pre-negotiation they have set. While the government’s statements may be authentic, they fail to address the underlying value of pursuing a negotiated settlement as opposed to outright military victory. Negotiations by definition imply compromise, and based on the government’s recent successes in combatting the FARC, one should ask why the government would not seek a total military victory, rather than a non-violent peace process. Yes, the government is negotiating with the FARC because the General Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict puts it in a position of strength, but that does not explain the impetus for ending a civil conflict through dialogue.
Responding to Citizen Security

A second explanation for government negotiations with rebels provides insight on that impetus, by arguing that national security policies are a response to citizen security. To achieve citizen security and combat the guerrillas, President Uribe used highly coercive tactics. However, it is possible that Uribe’s military efforts precipitated the very peace negotiations he now strongly opposes: an improving security climate in Colombia may well have eroded the urgency of the military campaign against the FARC, and therefore caused the alternative of peace talks to be far more palatable. On a theoretical level, this logic is founded in the work of Claudio Véliz, who in 1980 authored *The Centralist Tradition of Latin America*. One of Véliz’s core contentions is that citizen insecurity in Latin America engendered public demands for more centralist, even authoritarian, governments, which practiced the iron-fisted security policies of *mano dura* (Véliz, 296). While it is unfair to compare Uribe to the region’s military dictators of the 1970s, it is possible to comprehend popular support for his administration’s *seguridad democrática* policies on the basis of that argument. The inversion of Véliz’s thesis could possibly explain Santos’s actions: increasing citizen security reduces the desire of the public to see the government expend blood and treasure on a military conflict that has a decreasing impact on their lives. This phenomenon is ironic insofar as Uribe’s *seguridad democrática* policies struggle to perpetuate themselves: ultimately they were so successful that they reduced popular support for their prolongation, and provoked a backlash due to heavy reliance on state-sponsored violence.
Elite Schisms

A third group of scholars contends that governments negotiate with rebels because of schisms within the political elite. This theory is substantiated by the scholarship of a number of leading political scientists. Writing in *The Third Wave of Democratization in Latin America*, Ana María Bejarano and Eduardo Pizarro note that Colombian political history is punctuated with cases of such fracturing, particularly oriented around the debate over whether to negotiate with the FARC, or to seek the guerrillas’ annihilation through military means. “Starting with the Betancur government (1982-86), and because of the negotiation policy advocated by the president, a deep division among the elites became evident: While some sectors insisted on a negotiated settlement of the armed conflict, others preferred to privatize and decentralize the counterinsurgency effort by supporting paramilitary groups and bypassing the role of the state in keeping order within its borders” (Bejarano and Pizarro, 250). Granted, the *uribista* opposition to Santos’s negotiations no longer (publicly) seeks paramilitary operations as the alternative to peace talks – indeed, the strength acquired by the Colombian armed forces under the Uribe Administration has made the military a potent instrument of national power. By showcasing these elite divisions, Bejarano and Pizarro establish an historical and theoretical framework with which to decipher the current phenomenon of Santos’s rupture with Uribe’s security policies. According to their analysis, Santos’s policies are the product of the *santista* bloc seeking to consolidate its electoral gains and secure the autonomy of its political profile. The competition between *uribista* and *santista* visions of conflict resolution and counterinsurgency policy is consistent with this model of elite divisions.
Uribe’s own judgment of his successor’s peace plans has been relentlessly harsh. In his eyes, Santos is usurping the security gains made during his presidency – gains aided significantly by Santos’s own efforts as Minister of Defense – and sentencing Colombia to relive its unstable past. In Uribe’s 2012 memoir, *No Lost Causes*, the ex-president appraises the situation: “While I believe that President Santos has a strong determination to defeat the terrorists, I fear that some individuals within his administration have taken the progress of the last decade for granted. They are changing direction and creating new and greater risks. For the sake of our democracy, we must remain resolute. We cannot try to appease the terrorists or those who shelter them. If we fail, there is a possibility that a dark era may yet return to Colombia” (Uribe, 322). With the benefit of an editorial filter, this statement seems diplomatic, particularly when contrasted with the strident rhetoric Uribe has used to excoriate the current administration. Yet his understanding of the government’s movement towards peace is predicated on the notion that politics inspires Santos’s maneuvering. The ex-president makes implicit criticisms of his successor throughout the book: “In Colombia, there was a long tradition of people with smart ideas and grand agendas, but who did not properly use the tools of state that would allow for their implementation” (Uribe, 149). Uribe sees jockeying within the political elite as the primary cause of this abrupt change in policy, as Santos has sought to distance himself from Uribe’s legacy by forging a distinct path on the most salient public issue in Colombia: citizen security.

Steven Levitsky adds the perspective of elite electoral maneuvering in his article, “Inside the Black Box: Recent Studies in Latin American Party Organizations.” While analyzing Michael Coppedge’s recent work on party systems in Latin America, Levitsky
highlights the case of Venezuela’s Acción Democrática (AD) party as an avatar of elite jockeying in Latin American politics. He observes “that factions do not differ along programmatic or ideological lines. Rather, they are a product of internal power struggles between ‘ins,’ or leaders with ties to the sitting president, and ‘outs,’ or those who were excluded from top positions in the government and rally around a prospective candidate in order to regain power” (Levitsky, 98-9). This phenomenon of “non-principled factionalism” ultimately consumed AD, and offers a strong logic to apply to Colombia (Levitsky, 99). Though Uribe is not likely a future candidate for office, his mantle extends to a broader political coalition that is fiercely loyal to him and protective of his administration’s accomplishments. If Coppedge’s analysis of AD in Venezuela is correct, then it is highly plausible that such political gamesmanship was equally impactful in Santos’s decision to break with Uribe’s policies in Colombia.

**Political Parties**

A fourth reason why governments negotiate with rebels rests on understanding political institutions. In “Juan Linz, Presidentialism, and Democracy: A Critical Appraisal,” Scott Mainwaring and Matthew Shugart highlight the difficulty of stabilizing relations between a president, a national legislature, and political parties: “Parties in presidential systems need not be extremely disciplined, but indiscipline makes it more difficult to establish stable relationships among the government, the parties and the legislature… Presidents are sometimes forced to rely on ad hoc bases of support, frequently needing to work out deals with individual legislators and faction leaders rather than negotiating primarily with party leaders who deliver the votes of their copartisans” (Mainwaring and Shugart, 465). In the case of modern Colombia, this complexity is
muddled further by the presence of an antagonistic ex-president who wields considerable influence both in government institutions and public opinion. Consequently, Santos’s schism with Uribe and resulting loss of the support of many hardcore uribistas may have driven him leftward in order to recuperate legislative support, a goal made all the more palpable by spearheading the left’s darling initiative of negotiated conflict resolution.

Mainwaring and Shugart are not alone in their focus on these institutional obstacles. In fact, a deeper level of analysis introduces an additional level of complexity to the equation: within a political party, power struggles are key to posturing. One better understands why governments might negotiate with rebels, even if that means a contradiction with politicians’ past positions, by examining political institutions through the lens of intra-party competition. Royce Carroll, Gary W. Cox, and Mónica Pachón argue as much in their contribution to Legislative Studies Quarterly in 2006, “How Parties Create Electoral Democracy.” According to their analysis, a party’s victory at the polls is half the battle. At that point, contests for “mega-seats” (e.g. cabinet positions, committee chairmanships, caucus leadership) take precedence in a “second round” of democracy (Carroll, Cox, and Pachón, 153). Therefore, as their article’s title states, political parties are the “creators” of a functioning electoral democracy. While Santos’s Partido de la U, the party he helped found as a custodian of uribismo, is a seemingly united front for the promulgation of the politics of the Colombian center-right, it in fact features internal power struggles, chiefly between the uribista and santista blocs.

Matthew Shugart explicitly links this focus on party structures to Colombian politics in his essay, “The Inverse Relationship Between Party Strength and Executive Strength: A Theory of Politicians’ Constitutional Choices,” which appeared in the British
Journal of Political Science in 1998. Shugart contends that Colombia historically has featured weak parties and strong, proactive presidencies (Shugart, 27). As explanation, he writes: “Party strength refers to the extent to which legislators campaign on the basis of their parties’ reputations as providers of public policy as opposed to personal reputations as providers of more narrowly targeted services. Executive strength refers to the constitutional authority of the executive to influence policy independent of partisan support in the legislature” (Shugart, 1). Modern Colombia indeed seems host to weak parties and a strong executive. The aforementioned internal divisions of the Partido de la U have effectively facilitated the erosion of the party’s reputation as a guarantor of goods and services (such as citizen security), instead shifting that onus onto individual politicians, such as Uribe and Santos. At the same time, the Uribe presidency ushered in a new era of executive strength, wherein an individual president, as opposed to a legislative caucus, became the primary shaper of public opinion by taking initiative on major public policy proposals. That trend only has developed further under Santos, as evidenced by his leadership on peace negotiations with the FARC. The relatively strong executive and weak political parties in Colombia therefore satisfy Shugart’s “inverse relationship.”

Regime Transitions

A fifth academic viewpoint explains the motivation for FARC negotiations with a basis in the concept of regime transitions. Samuel Huntington treats the processes that produce such transitions in his book, The Third Wave. In an appropriately-titled chapter, “How? Processes of Democratization,” Huntington outlines the rules for actors under negotiated regime changes (Huntington, 162-3). His emphasis on evolution from anti-democratic to democratic systems does not necessarily conform to Santos’s succession of
Uribe as president (though many would ascribe authoritarian characteristics to the Uribe presidency), but the characteristics he highlights of systemic transitions resonate well with Colombia’s most recent passing of the presidential sash.

Huntington suggests that processes of democratization take one of three forms: “transformation” under which elites bring about democracy, “replacement” wherein an opposition leads democratization, or “transplacement” due to joint actions of elites and opposition (Huntington, 114). Santos is not democratizing Colombia from an authoritarian regime, yet there are connections to be made between Huntington’s theoretical processes of Latin American democratization and the Uribe-Santos transition. Arguably, a type of Huntingtonian “transformation” occurs. Uribista elites by and large constituted the vanguard of santismo in the vessel of the Partido de la U. Furthermore, Santos largely has adhered to Huntington’s prescriptions for reforming an authoritarian regime: “secure your political base... maintain backward legitimacy... gradually shift your own constituency so as to reduce your dependence on government groups opposing change... be prepared for the standpatters to take some extreme action to stop change... seize and keep control of the initiative... [and] create a sense of inevitability about the process” (Huntington, 141-2). Without attempting to replace political institutions, Santos follows Huntington’s template for transformation of a regime by working to enact policy changes that galvanize, rather than ostracize, the majority of Uribe’s functionaries.

Mainwaring and Shugart add that presidential systems necessarily complicate Huntingtonian “transformations.” They write that, “presidentialism is less likely than parliamentarism to sustain stable democratic regimes” (Mainwaring and Shugart, 449). Though Colombia’s democratic foundations have stood resolute for nearly two centuries,
this angle does expose ways in which Colombia’s presidential system is highly conducive to fractious partisanship and political gridlock. Central to the article is an understanding of “competing legitimacies,” that is, the conflict arising from a faceoff between an ideologically opposed president and national legislature, both of whom can claim a popular mandate (Mainwaring and Shugart, 450). By extension, it is possible to consider competing legitimacies as existing between a current and former president. With Uribe and Santos each having received overwhelming popular support in their respective presidential campaigns, the conflict between the two men could be fueled by perceptions of each having a mandate from the Colombian people.

An Incomplete Picture

When integrated, the competing interpretations of government decisions to negotiate with rebels produce intellectual currents that only partially resolve the stated puzzle of this investigation. On the one hand, President Santos explicitly has conformed to Walter’s belief that states will negotiate when military conditions have changed. Coupled with Véliz’s analysis that variance in citizen security can influence a government’s military policy, this school of thought shows how strategic policymaking can be applied to conflict resolution. On the other hand, when applied to Colombia, it fails to reveal why state policy towards the FARC should shift from armed combat to peace talks. Only by integrating electoral politics does the picture become clearer. Elite schisms, often found in regime transitions, can lead to policy actors pursuing divergent paths, such as peace negotiations for a civil war. When these schisms enjoy the mechanisms of intra-party competition, political institutions can amplify discord between leading policymakers. Unfortunately, the literature largely ignores the impact of resource
constraints on negotiating a peace settlement, versus prolonged prosecution of an armed conflict. As the data will demonstrate, the complementarity of national security strategy, sensitivity to electoral politics, and effective use of state resources offers the most complete understanding of President Santos’s decision to negotiate with the FARC.
THE COLOMBIAN CONTEXT

Colombia’s 20th Century Struggles

In order to effectively analyze the theme of this investigation, it is critical to examine the political context. The story of Colombia throughout the 20th century is tragically violent. The 1948 assassination of populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán sparked a vicious armed conflict between the Liberal and Conservative political parties, which left no village untouched. Political discord gave way to vengeance killing, and eventually military dictatorship (under General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, who held power from 1953 to 1957 in the only case of military intervention in Colombia since the mid-19th century) (Bushnell, 202). In the hopes of stanching the nation’s flow of blood, elites of the respective parties issued the 1957 Declaration of Sitges, establishing coalition governments and a rotation in each party’s control of the presidency from term to term, during the period from 1958 to 1974. Though it represented an erosion of democratic integrity, due to the preordainment of election results, this “National Front” pacified much of Colombia in the short term (Bushnell, 222).

In many ways, however, the National Front system engendered as much violence as it stopped. With a wide chasm between rich and poor, urban and rural, many Colombians interpreted the elite’s machinations as a form of further political exclusion. Seizing on opposition to the National Front, a “rural-based agrarian movement” rose up and in 1964 began guerrilla operations in the countryside (LaRosa and Mejía, 88). This movement adopted the name of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC),
and in a twisted form of auto-legitimation began waging a war on the Colombian state and citizenry (Pizarro, 180). Rapidly, the FARC shed its idealistic political mission and values, and turned to “kidnapping, extortion, and protection of the illegal narcotics industry as a means to finance its operations” (La Rosa and Mejía, 88). Less an idealistic vanguard than a criminal syndicate, the FARC murdered far more peasants than it ever championed, and emerged as an internationally condemned terrorist organization.

By the end of the 20th century, violence in Colombia was rampant, and the reasons for it were complex. Instead of clearly demarcated confrontation between two opposing camps, Colombian civil strife featured no less than four principal actors: the Colombian government and armed forces, left-wing guerrilla groups (most prominently, the FARC), right-wing paramilitary armies (which eventually merged into the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC), and drug trafficking organizations (or DTOs, once mostly large groups like Pablo Escobar’s Medellín Cartel and the Cali Cartel, but later devolved into micro-DTOs). Alliances and enmities between the various groups were constantly shifting, and a level of internal discord characterized each group as well. The consequence was seemingly intractable citizen insecurity: by the 1980s and 1990s, Colombia had some of the highest kidnapping and homicide rates in the world (Bushnell, 265).

Numerous government efforts were made to reduce the violence and defeat the FARC. In his term as president from 1978 to 1982, Liberal Júlio César Turbay attempted a “get tough” strategy, with methods that proved counterproductive by bolstering the resolve of the rebels (Bushnell, 257). Turbay’s successor, Conservative President Belisario Betancur made an unpopular effort to negotiate with different guerrilla armies.
While he succeeded with the M-19 group, the FARC and left-wing National Liberation Army (ELN) largely ignored Betancur’s gestures (Bushnell, 258). Only later did the FARC hazard to establish the Patriotic Union (UP) political party in conjunction with the Colombian Communist Party. However, the UP was persecuted from the start, and its candidates systematically targeted for murder by paramilitaries and DTOs. These failed negotiations had the effect of antagonizing the FARC and the voting public, both of whom were left with extreme skepticism of ever being able to arrive at a negotiated peace settlement (Bushnell, 259). By the 1990s, DTO violence reigned supreme, with sensational acts like Escobar’s assassination of 1990 Liberal presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán, and the government’s subsequent 1993 killing of Escobar. Colombia’s alliance with the U.S. was severely tarnished by the administration of Liberal President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998), whose campaign received millions of dollars in illegal funds from the Cali Cartel. Samper’s visa to travel to the U.S. was revoked, and Colombia teetered perilously close to becoming a failed state (LaRosa and Mejía, 212).

The administration of Conservative President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) renewed the government’s efforts to achieve the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) of the FARC. President Pastrana enjoyed an advantage none of his predecessors had: through intense personal lobbying efforts towards the U.S. Congress and President Bill Clinton, he secured passage of Plan Colombia, an unprecedented multi-billion dollar bilateral military aid package, which sought to equip the Colombian government with the resources to defeat the FARC militarily (LaRosa and Mejía, 213). Ironically, between 1999 and 2002, Pastrana made a simultaneous effort at negotiating an end to the armed conflict with the FARC. The hallmark of these negotiations was the
granting of a despeje, or demilitarized zone, in which the FARC could operate undisturbed by the government (see Fig. 1). The Switzerland-sized (42,000 square kilometers) zone anchored in the rural southern municipality of San Vicente del Caguán, ultimately allowed the FARC a safe haven from which to stockpile weapons, and launch further killing and kidnapping sprees (LaRosa and Mejía, 92). The FARC’s undermining of the peace talks forced an embarrassed President Pastrana to launch a military campaign to seize back El Caguán, leaving both sides embittered and disinclined to pursue peace talks in the future (LaRosa and Mejía, 92).

Uribe and “Seguridad Democrática”

Popular frustration with Pastrana’s conduct led to the unthinkable happening in the 2002 presidential election. For virtually all of Colombia’s independent history, the country had been governed by a partisan diarchy. However, a wave of discontent over the government’s handling of the guerrillas propelled the maverick independent candidacy of former Antioquia governor Álvaro Uribe Vélez to victory, with 53% of the vote in the first round, against five other candidates (Forero). Running under the slogan of mano dura, corazón grande (“firm hand, big heart”), Uribe railed against the Pastrana Administration’s pivot towards peace, and offered an ironclad commitment to crush the country’s violent non-state actors at any cost, be they guerrillas, paramilitaries, or DTOs. He harbored special intention to uproot the FARC, whose guerrillas had murdered his

Under the banner of *seguridad democrática* (“democratic security”), President Uribe advanced a policy agenda designed to debilitate the rebels. As Fernando Cepeda Ulloa of the Inter-American Dialogue noted at the time: “The president’s democratic security strategy is multi-pronged and includes several policies that aim to strengthen the military and police force, dismantle the production of illegal drugs, modernize the justice system, and attend to economically depressed and conflict-ridden areas” (Cepeda Ulloa, 4). Plan Colombia’s billions in military aid, and the levying of a “security tax” on high-income earners in Colombia subsidized Uribe’s heavy-handed tactics. The empirical gains of *seguridad democrática* policies are unquestionable. Kidnapping, extortion, violent crime, drug trafficking, acts of terrorism, and murder rates all plummeted (Pardo, 9). Paramilitaries underwent DDR, while the FARC watched as many of its top commanders were killed. In U.S. President George W. Bush, Uribe found a brother in arms: in a post-9/11 world, they jointly championed counterterror measures, and invested heavily in the U.S.-Colombia relationship.

Uribe’s tenure did not escape criticism, though. Colombian and international critics alleged violations of civil liberties and human rights, highlighting disturbing scandals such as that over “false positives” (where innocent peasants were massacred by government troops). Relations with neighboring Ecuador and Venezuela sank to historic lows, particularly when, in March 2008, Uribe ordered his armed forces to cross the Ecuadorean border without permission to kill FARC commander Raúl Reyes and seize
computer files, which ultimately demonstrated financial linkage between the left-wing
governments of Ecuador and Venezuela and the FARC (only escalating tensions further) (Walser, 1). Despite the price Colombians paid for realization of the Uribe vision, polling
data and qualitative evidence consistently demonstrated that a strong majority approved
of his administration (Pardo, 1).

**Santos and “Prosperidad Democrática”**

President Uribe orchestrated a constitutional amendment whereby he could stand
for reelection to a second term in 2006. When he was indeed reelected, with 62% of the
vote, he became the first president in Colombian history to serve two terms in office
(Uribe, 204). Nevertheless, the Colombian high court refused his entreaties to seek a third
term in 2010, forcing the popular leader to pass the baton to his Minister of Defense, Juan
Manuel Santos. For years, the political identity of Santos had been inextricably fused
with that of Uribe. The reserved *bogotano* Santos and the blunt *paisa* Uribe were friends,
allies, and the vanguard of Colombia’s center-right politics. Their political fortunes rose
and fell together, and their back-to-back presidencies surprised few observers. With
citizen security the overwhelming priority of the Uribe Administration, his decision to
empower Santos as the all-important Minister of Defense was a testament to the strength
of their political partnership. The relationship was mutually beneficial: Uribe gained a
smart and loyal foot soldier, while Santos rode Uribe’s popular coattails. The
Constitutional Court’s 2010 decision to bar Uribe’s candidacy from a third term
effectively opened the door for Santos to seize the mantle of *uribismo*, which he did with
gusto.
Santos’s 2010 election was seen by almost every observer as a popular stamp of approval on the *seguridad democrática* policies of President Uribe. As Defense Minister, he had been the public face for many of the president’s most successful counterinsurgency initiatives, namely Operation Jaque – the daring 2008 rescue of fifteen FARC-held hostages. As president though, Santos began to exhibit an independent streak. This can be traced to a small but significant difference with Uribe, highlighted by *The Economist* in an analysis of the new president in 2010: “Juan Manuel Santos has his own priorities. Where Mr. Uribe dedicated his eight years in office to ‘democratic security,’ to beating back left-wing guerrillas and demobilizing right-wing paramilitaries, at his inauguration on August 7th, Mr. Santos promised ‘democratic prosperity.’ It is already clear that his government will be more technocratic and more centrist than Mr. Uribe’s populist conservatism” (*The Economist*, 8/12/10). Later in that same piece, Santos is quoted as wanting to cut poverty “with the same intensity and commitment with which we have fought – and will continue to fight – terrorism” (*The Economist*, 8/12/10). The sum of these statements reveals that President Santos values citizen security, but not at the expense of increasing socioeconomic opportunity. This belief represented a marked departure from politics under Uribe. Santos’s maverick behavior culminated in his announcement of peace talks with the FARC, a decision that enraged Uribe and destroyed their relationship, thereby engendering internal discord inconsistent with the general national security solidarity witnessed in the previous decade of Colombian politics. With Colombia’s political context established, it becomes especially important to test the various hypotheses addressing President Santos’s decision to seek negotiations with the FARC.
THE ELECTORAL POLITICS HYPOTHESIS

“This government has shown that it is a government that doesn’t know where it’s going. The greatest long-term danger to a country is a government, or a political class, which swerves sharply according to the polls, and that lacks a clear course, defined by convictions. Therefore, you don’t know today where the government will take you tomorrow as a result of the polls. You are left governed by unpredictable governments, which would lead the country into an abyss.”

—Former President Álvaro Uribe (Vanguardia Liberal, 2/25/13)

Electoral Politics and Democratic Governance

This chapter explores the extent to which President Santos’s decision to negotiate with the FARC was a response to changed attitudes among the electorate. It argues that the president pursued peace talks out of concern for his political profile and viability as a candidate for reelection in 2014. This should make sense in the context of democratic governance. In a democracy, politicians face a choice when citizens’ expressed sentiments diverge from the politicians’ preexisting priorities and plans. Responsiveness to the volition of the electorate is more than cheap pandering; it is the foundation of the political contract between a people and their elected officials.

A purely programmatic view of policymaking interprets a leader as logically weighing costs and benefits, and marshaling policy instruments to meet an objective. Yet

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4 Author’s translation from original Spanish: “Porque el gobierno ha mostrado que sea un gobierno en que no sabe para donde va. El mayor peligro a un país en lo largo es un gobierno, una clase política que giren bruscamente a la esquina de las encuestas. Que no tiene un rumbo claro definido por las convicciones, entonces uno no sabe hoy a donde los va a llevar el gobierno mañana en función de las encuestas y están gobernados por unos gobiernos impredecibles, en deponernos a que llevar a un país a cualquier abismo.”
electoral politics often factors into a leader’s positioning. This is especially the case when a political leader harbors further electoral ambitions, or has an interest in the future of his coalition and allies. Therefore, voter attitudes expressed through public opinion polling can incentivize a democratic leader to diverge from an initially expected policy agenda. When answering the questions of why politicians change course on policy, and why states negotiate to end civil wars, electoral politics can offer a compelling answer.

Santos’s pivot away from Uribe upon taking office was swift and surprising to many – the pièce de résistance of which was his decision to pursue peace talks with the FARC. What explains this behavior? In the Colombian press and academic treatments of this question, no theory is more widely supported than the notion that Santos was motivated by electoral politics to execute this dramatic policy break with Uribe. This hypothesis can be validated if data on the president and the political climate in Colombia follow three trends. First, the data should show voters growing disinclined towards Uribe and his signature anti-FARC seguridad democrática policies – insofar as that conclusion leads them to support non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms as an alternative. Second, polling needs to show explicitly that voters are simultaneously growing positively inclined towards a negotiated settlement with the FARC, and consequently the reallocation of state resources formerly devoted to seguridad democrática to social development. Third, there must be evidence that President Santos could be responding to these changing voter attitudes out of concern for his electoral future by seeking negotiations with the FARC. With the presence of these conditions, it is reasonable to conclude that electoral politics is a plausible explanation for the president’s decision to conduct peace talks with the rebels.
Changing Voter Attitudes: Opinions on Uribe

Public opinion polling shows a shift in the preferences of Colombian voters during the first half of President Santos’s term. President Uribe left office with strong approval ratings, of over 80% (*El Tiempo*, 1/24/08). Uribe’s popularity resulted from the success of his pugnacious *seguridad democrática* policies (discussed in a later chapter), which enhanced citizen security in Colombia, at least temporarily. The political cachet of *uribismo* had, under the guidance of Santos, translated into the formation of the Social Party of National Unity, otherwise known as the *Partido de la U* – an almost tongue-in-cheek conflation of the “u” of unity and of Uribe. This institutional vessel for the promulgation of *uribismo* seized control of Colombia’s political landscape, claiming over 90% of the Congress of the Republic (Howlett, 7/8/12). Santos rode Uribe’s coattails to victory over rival Antanas Mockus in both rounds of the 2010 presidential election (see *Fig. 2*). Elected on a staunchly *uribista* platform, Santos wasted no time lauding Uribe and *seguridad democrática* in his victory remarks: “I want to pay tribute to a remarkable man who positively transformed our country. I want to pay tribute to the best president...

*Fig. 2: 2010 Presidential Election Results*

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that we have had in two centuries of republican history. This is your victory too, President Uribe” (Jiménez).

Since that point in 2010, though, voter opinions and preferences have altered measurably. By September 2012, when the peace negotiations were first announced, Uribe’s approval had sunk to 53%, its lowest recorded level (Howlett, 9/12/12). His reputation has eroded as scandals over abuses of human rights and civil liberties have come to the fore of the consciousness of Colombia and the international community; by the summer of 2012, approximately 40% of the negative international press coverage on Colombia was related to Uribe’s conduct as president (Howlett, 7/8/12). Furthermore, polling in 2012 found that 11.6% of Colombians believed Uribe to be the worst president in Colombian history – a record high (La W, 4/27/12).

*Changing Voter Attitudes: Opinions on Santos*

*Fig. 3: Polling on Santos (August 25, 2012)*

![Polling on Santos](source: El Tiempo, 8/25/12)

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5 Author’s translation from original Spanish: "Quiero rendir un homenaje a un hombre excepcional que transformó positivamente a nuestro país, quiero rendir tributo al mejor presidente que hemos tenido en dos siglos de historia republicana. Este también es su triunfo presidente Uribe."
Santos suffered for having embraced Uribe. Upon his inauguration, his support among Colombians hovered at approximately 80%, but by the summer of 2012 that figure had plummeted to under 50% – at least 15% less than the lowest approval rating ever earned by Uribe during his two terms (Howlett, 7/6/12).

The bad news for Santos kept coming as summer turned to fall. The nation’s most reputable news source, the *El Tiempo* newspaper (which incidentally has been owned and operated by the Santos family for the last century) published a series of public opinion polls in the days leading up to the president’s September 4 announcement of negotiations with the FARC. The results were highly disheartening for President Santos, evincing pervasive voter pessimism and disaffection with his conduct as president (see Fig. 3).

*Changing Voter Attitudes: Citizen Security and Peace Negotiations*

![Fig. 4: Polling on Santos and Security (April 27, 2012)](source: La W, 4/27/12)

To better understand how voter preference changes could have led President Santos to pursue peace talks with the FARC, it is not enough to show general dissatisfaction with his job performance. Instead, the data regarding citizen security and the FARC reveals the most salient points. Polling data from the *La W* radio and
telecommunications company from April 2012 gives more color, revealing voters’ unease towards security and lack of confidence in the president’s strategy against the FARC (see Fig. 4). By July 2012, the percentage of Colombians believing that security had worsened under Santos had risen to 62% (El Tiempo, 7/6/12).

Most interesting out of all of this negativity was the evolving attitude of voters towards the prospect of the government pursuing a negotiated settlement with the FARC. When queried in April 2012, 54% of Colombians supported such talks (La W, 4/27/12). By late August, 74.2% of voters backed peace negotiations, just ten days before the president made his announcement (El Tiempo, 8/25/12). One week after the September 4 speech, that support had increased to 77% (Howlett, 9/12/12). The combination of negativity towards President Santos and his management of national security, with the growth in support for negotiations with the FARC, established incentives for the president to break with seguridad democrática and pursue talks with the guerrillas. By the end of September, data from the respected international polling firm Datexco vindicated this course of action. As a consequence of announcing the government’s decision to negotiate with the FARC, the poll found Santos’s approval shot up from 43.9% to 62.9%. Santos’s favorability expanded to 64.2%, with 67.3% strongly supporting his announcement regarding the peace process. Lastly, the number of citizens who felt Colombia was on the right path underwent a dramatic transformation: a month prior to Santos’s announcement it was at 37%, while a month after the announcement it rose to 57%. In the words of Datexco director César Valderrama: “Santos fundamentally
reversed the [polling] trend by initiating the peace process with the FARC” *(El Comercio)*.  

**Changing Voter Attitudes: Social Development**

In addition to concerns over citizen security, voters articulated a desire for the reallocation of limited state resources from the armed conflict, and costly *seguridad democrática* policies, to social and economic development programs. In April 2012, 65% of voters expressed displeasure with Santos’s attention to unemployment. In the same poll, only 46% believed that Colombia’s economy had improved under Santos, and just 54% believed he would follow through on promises to address housing and poverty (*La W*, 4/27/12). Colombia is the most unequal country in Latin America, and the third most unequal country in the world: its Gini coefficient, which measures inequality of wealth between the richest and poorest, grew from 53.8 to 58.5 between 1998 and 2008 (LaRosa and Mejía, 131). According to Colombian government statistics, 64.3% of citizens live in poverty (85.3% of rural inhabitants are impoverished), and 31% live in extreme poverty, defined as surviving on less than two U.S. dollars per day (Bouvier, 368).

In the past decade, poverty and inequality have grown in Colombia, offering one explanation as to why voters are increasingly demanding that the government devote resources to social and economic challenges. Studies have also shown that the billions of dollars in U.S. bilateral aid through Plan Colombia had the effect of artificially boosting the Colombian economy; the diminishment of Plan Colombia aid (as discussed in the following chapter) therefore has fomented economic anxieties (LaRosa and Mejía, 131).

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6 Author’s translation from original Spanish: “Santos logró revertir la tendencia fundamentalmente por el proceso de paz que inició con las FARC.”
Additionally, the relative improvement in citizen security appears to have rearranged voter priorities for government spending and attention: citizen security has become less of a priority than the economy. As a later chapter explains, it is dubious that citizen security is directly motivating the government to negotiate with the FARC. Rather, voters interpret the security climate and respond by participating in public opinion surveys and elections.

As the subsequent examination of citizen security will reveal, it is not entirely clear whether security in Colombia is getting better or worse right now. While citizen security appears consolidated relative to a decade ago, it seems to be backsliding over the past three years. Regardless, the electoral politics hypothesis remains compelling: If voters perceive security as improving (which in many ways it has since Uribe’s ascension to the presidency), they find the state in a position of strength from which negotiations are an appropriate means of conflict resolution. Alternatively, if voters perceive security as deteriorating (as more recent polling suggests), they blame seguridad democrática, and therefore prefer a different course: negotiations. Either way, empirical security data is far less important than voter perceptions, in terms of influencing President Santos.

**Santos Stands to Gain**

The preceding data presents a clear set of incentives to influence a politically savvy leader to pursue peace negotiations. These electoral incentives were persuasive enough to incite President Santos to defect from uribismo. To establish that his decision to negotiate is a response to this incentive structure, it is critical to recognize that Santos has concrete electoral goals, like any politician. Foremost among these is his reelection to the presidency in 2014, a feat that would make him only the second Colombian leader
ever to be elected to a second four-year term, after Uribe, who amended the constitution to permit reelection. Particularly as a dissident uribista faction has coalesced in opposition to Santos in 2014, the president is more determined than ever to win the confidence of Colombia’s voters. Victory would not only mean a validation of his leadership, but a mandate for his policy priorities, namely the FARC negotiations.

Beyond the presidential race, Santos has a stake in the composition of the congress and his ability to secure positions of power, such as governorships, for his political allies.

The hypothesis that Santos is making a political calculation in his negotiations with the FARC is corroborated by numerous accounts of the president’s challenges and opportunities. The April 23, 2012 international edition of Time featured a cover with a close-up of Santos’s face and the caption, “The Colombian Comeback.” In a wide-ranging feature (“Colombia Rising”) by Tim Padgett and John Otis, an intensely political, almost Machiavellian, image of Santos emerges from the piece’s first words: “Juan Manuel Santos, a leader known for a shrewd sense of political timing…” (Padgett and Otis). Rather than attribute the maverick politics of the Santos Administration to a cadre of bureaucrats, the authors squarely identify its origin as the ambitions, aspirations and skills of the president himself. Such an argument is manifest in the president’s comments throughout the piece. However, examination of the president’s psychology is risky and virtually impossible to argue beyond reproach. Rather, electoral politics emerges as the most salient factor.

It is difficult to ignore the self-aggrandizing undertones of Santos’s responses. Santos repeatedly refers to himself as, “the most successful Defense Minister this country has had in its last fifty years,” to bolster his “tough guy” credentials (Santos). In all, he is
fixated on his image, and contrasts with the singularly militaristic policies of Uribe. President Santos not only puts distance between himself and his predecessor for the sake of political expediency and autonomy, but also is going well beyond that in the hopes of securing an historical legacy for himself as an exceptional and transformational president. The data has shown Colombian voters are tired of the militaristic policies of Uribe (and the corruption and abuses of power that all too frequently accompanied them), and in turn yearn for the government to focus on remedying the country’s structural social and economic challenges. The logical extension of this argument is that Santos is a shrewd political actor who capitalizes on these sentiments and pursues a negotiated settlement in the hopes of ingratiating himself with the public. The need for a domestic development agenda also happens to be electorally advantageous.

**Stumping for Votes from the Negotiating Table**

Based on the qualitative and quantitative evidence presented, it seems reasonable to conclude that electoral politics incentivized Santos to break with the *seguridad democrática* policies of his predecessor, despite having played a major role in designing and implementing those very policies himself. By applying the president’s own statements on the matter, one can assume that politics has driven Santos to the negotiating table with the FARC. However, the plausibility of the electoral politics hypothesis does not negate other explanations for the president’s maneuvering. It might well require them.

The data considered offers a number of noteworthy takeaways. First, it shows voters rewarding politicians who move away from hardline *uribista* security policies, and who simultaneously shift their focus towards socioeconomic development. Santos has
seemingly bent to this popular opinion in two ways: he has pursued peace negotiations with the FARC to achieve a negotiated settlement to a half-century of violent conflict, and he has orchestrated initiatives to address the socioeconomic challenges confronting Colombia, namely the *Ley de Víctimas* and the *Ley de Tierras* (White House, 4/15/12). With supportive public opinion polling on these measures existent prior to Santos’s decision to pursue them, it is likely that the polls caused the president to deliberately act in a manner benefitting his political ambitions. At the risk of being reductionist, one could classify this style of leadership as following public opinion more so than shaping it.

Second, the evidence indicates that Santos takes electoral politics into account in considerations of security policy. Consequently, the Santos Administration has devoted keen attention to socioeconomic issues in response to popular political pressures in ways that Uribe never did, and in ways only possible by pursuing a negotiated settlement with the FARC. By negotiating with the FARC, while emphasizing his security credentials and focusing on issues of socioeconomic importance, Santos confirms the contention that he is responding to the influence of electoral politics.

Policymaking is a game of setting a goal and utilizing a selection of policy instruments in the hopes of piloting the ship of state to that endpoint. In this instance, it appears that Santos’s goal is personal and political, as normally expected for all politicians. Peace negotiations with the FARC, in combination with a sustained military campaign under the favorable conditions of the General Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and laws designed to combat poverty and inequality, are in this scenario the policy instruments the president is manipulating to arrive at his desired outcome. Yet electoral politics alone cannot sufficiently explain President Santos’s move towards the
negotiating table. No examination of modern Colombian national security policy is complete without consideration of the greatest external influence on the country: the United States.
“We were about to be considered a failed state. And today, thanks to Plan Colombia and thanks to the U.S. and many others, and thanks to you, President Obama, for your permanent support that you have always given us, today we have a very strong democracy that is producing specific results for our people, and has been recognized by the world as a whole.”

—President Juan Manuel Santos, at a joint press conference with President Barack Obama during the 2012 Summit of the Americas in Cartagena (White House, 4/15/12)

**International Influences over Domestic Policymaking**

This chapter advances the explanation that international actors have influenced President Santos’s negotiations with the FARC, especially the U.S., in light of recent reductions in bilateral military aid. Colombia has not battled the FARC in a vacuum; rather, it has relied heavily on the assistance of the international community to execute military operations against the guerrillas. No country has provided Colombia with more financial and logistical support than the U.S. Therefore, as that bilateral relationship evolves, it is necessary to evaluate its potential influence on President Santos’s decision to pursue negotiations with the FARC.

On a theoretical level, it is understandable that the domestic political decisions of a leader would be a function of international relations. Particularly when said leader’s country has a demonstrated record of reliance on the largesse of an ally, one can expect the leader to carefully consider the repercussions of his domestic policymaking on relations with that country. Should a donor country decrease its financial commitments to
the country in question, one can assume that such a development would force the recipient country’s leader to advance a more politically autonomous agenda, should he be unable to win back the aid.

In order to prove that President Santos’s FARC negotiations were a product of international relations, data must demonstrate a change in Colombia’s international relations as described above. Yet the arena of Colombian international relations is exceptionally broad. Therefore, the units of analysis must be better specified, in order to isolate the features of Colombian international relations that would most impact President Santos’s choice to pursue peace talks with the FARC. The U.S. is the most influential foreign actor in Colombian security policymaking (while neighbors like Venezuela and Ecuador certainly influence Colombian foreign policy, their impact on the government’s decisions is dwarfed by that of the U.S., whose bilateral aid to Colombia is unrivaled). Even so, the entirety of U.S.-Colombia relations constitutes a large body of evidence. Because Plan Colombia, the U.S. aid package for Colombian counterinsurgency and security operations since 2000, is the most substantive feature of the U.S.-Colombia relationship with regard to security, it emerges as the most attractive case study for an argument that international relations influenced the initiation of talks with the FARC.

On that basis, a hypothesis is generated: Recent U.S. reductions of bilateral security aid to Colombia have caused President Santos to negotiate with the FARC. Four trends in the evidence support this hypothesis. First, U.S. military aid through Plan Colombia was critical to the success of the *seguridad democrática* policies of former President Uribe. Second, military-oriented Plan Colombia aid has diminished under President Santos. Third, this reduction has forced Santos to change course regarding his
national security policies. Fourth, this need to shift Colombian national security policy has resulted in the president opting to negotiate with the FARC, as in his estimation, that action best reflects the capacities of the Colombian state. Demonstration of these four phenomena will substantiate the argument that Plan Colombia greatly influenced Santos’s move towards a negotiated settlement with the FARC.

*Plan Colombia: Past, Present, and Future*

The U.S. Congress overwhelmingly approved a bilateral aid package for Colombia in the summer of 2000. Called Plan Colombia, it was the result of sustained lobbying by Colombian President Andrés Pastrana, who implored President Bill Clinton and congressional leaders to intervene with increased assistance in Colombia, where violence on the part of paramilitary groups, guerrillas, and DTOs had exploded to catastrophic levels in the previous decade (LaRosa and Mejía, 213). The package’s initial funding of $1.35 billion in aid to the Colombian military instantly transformed Colombia into the recipient of the third largest amount of U.S. foreign aid, after Israel and Egypt (LaRosa and Mejía, 92). Shortly afterwards, the U.S. Congress approved an additional $1 billion in funding for Plan Colombia II, 80% of which was directed to the Colombian armed forces (Bouvier, 356). Three years into the plan’s implementation, the outlays had risen to $7.5 billion, with the vast majority allocated to the Colombian military (Bouvier, 355). By Plan Colombia’s tenth anniversary (roughly consistent with the end of President Uribe’s eight years in office), the project’s costs totaled over $8 billion (LaRosa and Mejía, 93).

Two characteristics of Plan Colombia merit special attention here. First, Plan Colombia represented an enormous financial boon to the Colombian government. The
influx of billions of dollars from the international community (but overwhelmingly from the U.S.) allowed the state to pay for thousands of new soldiers and police officers, state of the art intelligence technology, and a new arsenal of military hardware. Governed by the crusading spirit of Uribe’s seguridad democrática, the purchases made possible through Plan Colombia funding transformed the capacity of the Colombian state to prosecute a sustained armed campaign against the FARC. Second, the qualitative emphasis of Plan Colombia cannot be ignored. A massive proportion of funding was directed towards the Colombian military. While auxiliary projects for human rights and economic development accompanied bilateral military assistance, they were heavily overshadowed. In particular, this phenomenon was realized after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which altered the template for U.S.-Colombia relations: counternarcotics aid to Colombia adopted more counterterrorism characteristics. The priorities of U.S. President George W. Bush and Colombian President Uribe were highly compatible. As Uribe recalls in his memoir: “I believed that in order to be effective, Plan Colombia needed to change in the context of Colombia’s security policy. The United States, with President Bush at its helm, agreed that fighting drug trafficking without facing cartels such as the FARC and ELN was pointless” (Uribe, 176). Therefore, Plan Colombia can be understood as a major contributor to Uribe’s military campaign against the FARC.

The Bush-Uribe relationship no longer governs U.S.-Colombia relations, however. Where those two leaders shared a common emphasis on extirpating terrorist insurgencies through crushing military blows, as reflected in Plan Colombia funding priorities, the spirit of U.S.-Colombia relations since has changed dramatically. In the
U.S., President Barack Obama faces tremendous pressure to cut government spending. Traditionally, the American public has determined foreign aid to be the first expenditure worthy of reduction, despite its relatively minor role in the vast U.S. budget. With Colombia having made undeniable progress in guaranteeing citizen security since Plan Colombia’s initial promulgation in 2000, it is only fitting that the Obama Administration would seek to reduce its military aid to Colombia.

At a 2012 Summit of the Americas joint press conference, Obama and Santos consistently emphasized the strength of the U.S.-Colombia partnership, particularly in light of the October 2011 approval of the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. Yet President Obama’s remarks referenced the need for Colombia to wean itself from dependence on U.S. military aid. Obama described the U.S.-Colombia relationship as a partnership of equality, stating his commitment to support Colombian membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). He noted that drug violence had shifted noticeably to Mexico and Central America in recent years, and announced that the U.S. and Colombia jointly would provide logistical and financial resources there. Finally, President Obama explicitly lauded President Santos’s signing of the Ley de Víctimas and Ley de Tierras, both of which represented a substantial commitment of the Colombian government to addressing the atrocious human rights violations caused by decades of violent conflict. Overall, President Obama appeared to "graduate" Colombia from dependency on Plan Colombia military funding, by showcasing Colombia’s improving security climate, ability to exercise domestic and regional leadership, and transitional focus from killing guerrillas to caring for the
conflict’s victims. In short, the American president made the case for substantial reductions in Plan Colombia aid (White House, 4/15/12).

U.S. budget figures prove President Obama is backing up his words with actions. According to the U.S. Department of State, “As Colombia takes more responsibility for counternarcotics and security efforts, we are reducing our support levels to below those of the 2012 federal budget” (Department of State, vi). That position translated into steep decreases in aid recently (see Fig. 5). This year’s Plan Colombia funding reductions are part of a larger trend. Bilateral military aid fell 20% between 2009 and 2011, and is expected to continue decreasing in coming budgeting cycles (Begg). To date, the U.S. has expended $9 billion on Colombian national security efforts (excluding tangential human development projects), but that figure is not expected to increase by a substantial degree in the second term of the Obama Administration (Ricks).

**Fig. 5: U.S. Bilateral Aid to Colombia (millions USD)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Non-Security Aid</th>
<th>Security Aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FY 2008</td>
<td>$111.8</td>
<td>$391.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 2009</td>
<td>$104.1</td>
<td>$361.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 2010</td>
<td>$113.2</td>
<td>$403.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>FY 2011</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 2012</td>
<td>$89.4</td>
<td>$353.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 2013</td>
<td>$69.7</td>
<td>$262.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ForeignAssistance.gov

**Reductions in Military Aid**

While the Uribe Administration enjoyed the opportunity to wage an expensive military campaign against the FARC thanks to billions of dollars from the U.S., President Santos now no longer has that option. Reductions in U.S. bilateral aid have caused the
Colombian president to reevaluate his security policies, considering that the roughly $9 billion in U.S. contributions since 2000 represents a sizeable portion of the $6.9 billion Colombia appropriated to its own Ministry of Defense for 2013 (*Portafolio*). However, it is likely that President Santos is most influenced by expectations for the future. U.S. domestic political gridlock makes Colombian reliance on long-term military assistance far more precarious. Santos has over a year remaining in his current term, and plans to seek reelection in 2014; therefore it is of importance to him to begin navigating a security strategy more independent from the U.S. (*El Tiempo*, 3/13/13).

Today, the FARC represents the largest organized threat to the Colombian state and people. With paramilitary groups having undergone significant demobilization under the Uribe Administration, DTOs shifting operations north into Central America and Mexico, and smaller guerrilla groups having turned in their arms or been destroyed by *seguridad democrática*, the FARC stands out as one of the last institutional obstacles to the state’s consolidation of citizen security. President Uribe battered the FARC into a shell of its former self, yet its operational core remains functional. While President Santos could have opted to continue Uribe’s *seguridad democrática* campaign against the FARC, that avenue has narrowed in light of constrained state capacity due to reduced Plan Colombia aid (and the expiration of Uribe’s temporary “security tax,” levied on high income earners to finance the Colombian military). Unable to ignore the FARC, the prospect of negotiating with the rebels then becomes most attractive. Not only are the guerrillas in a weak negotiating position due to the blows they suffered under Uribe and Santos, but the Colombian public seemed more disposed to embrace this option than it had historically.
Shifting the International Relations Paradigm

For all of Obama and Santos’s diplomatic rhetoric on the U.S. and Colombia entering the 21st century as equal partners, the two countries’ relationship is fundamentally one of dependence. Despite the protocol of international relations, the nature of that relationship grants the U.S. considerable influence over Colombian policymaking, thereby constraining the autonomy of Colombian government officials. Billions of dollars in U.S. aid to Colombia equates to considerable leverage over Colombian affairs. The reduction of that aid then precipitates a proportionate decrease in U.S. leverage over Colombian policymakers, and an increase in those functionaries’ autonomy. Observers have noted a resulting break between Uribe and Santos: “[Santos’s] foreign policy has been more balanced and nuanced than that of Uribe, whose foreign policy focused almost exclusively on a sort of obsequious collaboration with the United States” (LaRosa and Mejía, 215). Thus, Santos has used peace talks with the FARC to diversify Colombia’s international relations from merely a reliance on the U.S.

Historically, the U.S. strongly opposed the efforts by previous Colombian presidents to pursue peace negotiations with rebel groups (Bouvier, 34). Even today, the Obama Administration has exercised great caution with regard to the talks between the Colombian government and the FARC (White House, 9/4/2012). Yet, if international relations can be understood as a type of quid pro quo, President Obama now is in less of a position than his predecessors to dissuade his Colombian counterpart from undertaking negotiations. Therefore, it is likely that the recent changes to the U.S.-Colombian relationship have contributed in a meaningful way to Santos’s desire for negotiations.
Santos surprised almost all observers by calling the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, Uribe’s nemesis, “my new best friend,” and seeking to repair relations with leftist regimes across the hemisphere. Simultaneously, the American-educated Santos has reinforced the invaluable nature of Colombia’s partnership with the U.S., while gently navigating geopolitical autonomy for his nation. As he commented in 2011: “I consider myself very pro-American; I want to continue and even strengthen our relationship, but it’s common sense and common logic to diversify your international relations, especially in a world that is changing” (Romero, 3/5/11). With much of the international community’s consternation regarding Colombia oriented around Uribe’s heavy-handed tactics against the FARC, it is reasonable to conclude that Colombia’s neighbors will favorably interpret movement towards conciliation. Indeed, there has been an international outpouring of support for the Santos Administration since the unveiling of the General Agreement with the FARC.

As conveyed in Time’s profile of the president, “Santos’s desire [is] to make Colombia the elusive ‘bridge’ between the U.S. and the world across the Caribbean.” His tenet: “The more they look south, the more we’ll look north” (Padgett and Otis). Yet the argument that this newfound maverick spirit in Colombian diplomacy is merely the result of Santos seeking to engage partners other than the U.S. is deceptively reductionist. Instead, more factors are at play, such as the frustration of many in the Colombian government over the “steady reduction in American counterinsurgency aid.” The president’s exasperation was marked by the New York Times in a 2011 article entitled “Colombia Leader Seeks Wide-Ranging Changes, and Looks Beyond the U.S.”: “I ask myself, ‘What is the real strategic interest of the U.S. in Afghanistan?’” he said, while
regretting cuts in Washington’s $350 million aid package to Colombia, which ‘is peanuts compared to what you’re spending’ elsewhere” (Romero, 3/5/11).

Less Money, Less Problems?

The hypothesis that diminishing Plan Colombia funding to Colombia has caused President Santos to pursue peace talks with the FARC is compelling, yet falsifiable. The principal challenge to this argument extends from the fact that unlike with past attempts at a negotiated settlement, in this iteration the government has refused to cease hostilities against the FARC, and has ruled out the granting of a demilitarized despeje, as had proved so disastrous when President Pastrana ceded the rebels a fiefdom the size of Switzerland at El Caguán (LaRosa and Mejia, 92). Instead, the government will continue its hostilities against the FARC until successful conclusion of the negotiations (Presidencia de la República). This behavior would appear consonant with U.S. desires, and a reflection of the Colombian government’s belief that it possesses the resources to persist in its war with the FARC. Such a phenomenon would seem to disprove the aforementioned hypothesis.

However, the hypothesis remains valid. To begin with, the government has established a limited time frame for these talks. This action not only recognizes the inability of the state to commit limitless resources to battling the FARC, but also has the benefit of amplifying pressure on the FARC to arrive at a mutually acceptable settlement as rapidly as possible. Rather than interpreting the president’s actions as a concession to U.S. will (which they may well be), it is most plausible to consider them a response to the previous experiences of Colombian presidents who sought negotiations with the FARC. Not only did cessation of the military’s hostilities cause the FARC to abuse the détente, it
had the additional consequence of engendering widespread disapproval of the talks, and deterioration of public opinion towards the president and his administration. President Santos therefore is shrewdly attempting to navigate a middle ground: learning from the mistakes of his predecessors while simultaneously recognizing the increased necessity of Colombian policy autonomy from the U.S.

Data trends lend credibility to the hypothesis that the changing nature of Colombia’s international relationships led President Santos to negotiate with the FARC. Plan Colombia constituted a major contribution to Colombian national security, but is now significantly reduced. Its downsizing has limited President Santos’s security policy options, leading him to reevaluate them, and negotiate with the FARC as the optimal reflection of the capacities and interests of the Colombian state. The preceding analysis has demonstrated these points, and validated the hypothesis in question. Therefore, one can conclude that President Santos’s decision to chance a negotiated settlement with the FARC was indeed a function of international relations, particularly the bilateral security partnership with the U.S. It is important to recognize that the plausibility of this hypothesis does not come at the expense of other hypotheses. In fact, it is likely that the complementarity of different hypotheses results in the most compelling explanation for the embrace of negotiations. In order for this evaluation to be complete though, it is necessary to question the degree to which data on citizen security gains has allowed the president the latitude to negotiate with the FARC, as he claimed.
THE CITIZEN SECURITY HYPOTHESIS

“There was a time not so long ago when few could have imagined holding a summit like this in Colombia. That we have, and that the summit was such a success is a tribute to the remarkable transformation that’s occurred in this nation. There’s a level of security that’s not been seen in decades. Citizens are reclaiming their communities... In Colombia today, there is hope.”

—President Barack Obama, at the 2012 Summit of the Americas in Cartagena (White House, 4/15/12)

The Making of National Security Policy

This chapter evaluates the hypothesis that Colombia’s government is negotiating with the FARC, having determined it to be the most palatable and appropriate course of action due to improvements in citizen security, as noted above by President Obama. Colombia has been feted worldwide as a remarkable success story. In less than a generation, it has transitioned from a country in violent quasi-anarchy to one that is relatively stable and secure. The most effective metric for measuring these gains is citizen security: the ability of law-abiding citizens to live unmolested by violence, abuse, fear, and death. Colombia today hosts a radically different citizen security climate than it did for much of its recent past.

Appreciation of the impact of citizen security on domestic policymaking need not rely on the Colombian case study to be understood. Instead, a logical flow can be determined. A leader responds with whatever policy instruments he can summon to combat threats to citizen security. When the security landscape in his country improves,
the leader then has more latitude to deal with the remaining threat. Changes in citizen security therefore are likely to yield a commensurate shift in policy.

President Santos’s surprising decision to negotiate with the FARC is an outcome in search of an explanation. Based on the logic outlined above, it is worth considering the hypothesis that negotiations are the consequence of citizen security consolidation. Validation of this argument will result from proof of the existence and interrelatedness of three trends. First, that substantial progress has been made in the field of citizen security in the past decade. Second, that the government consequently has responded to this development by recalibrating its allocation of resources to deal with the FARC. Third, that in the course of that recalibration, President Santos decided that pursuit of a negotiated settlement to the conflict was the most appropriate way to deal with the FARC. Data will need to bolster this logical continuum for the hypothesis to be verified.

This argument is easily falsifiable if any one of the conditions cannot be upheld. For example, lack of clarity with regard to the current status of citizen security in Colombia will call into question the degree to which one can unimpeachably conclude that an improving citizen security climate caused Santos to seek peace talks with the FARC. Analysis is further complicated by two additional factors, which will be separately considered. First, any consideration of the Colombian state’s responsiveness to citizen security cannot assume the logistical feasibility of any and all policy options. Rather, policymakers are constrained by the limited resources of the state. Evidence that limits in state resources could influence Santos’s decision to negotiate will erode the argument that he is acting in an exclusively logical response to a changing security climate. Second, this analysis is predicated on a programmatic model of policymaking.
Implicit in this is an assumption that the president is applying a positivist approach: he identifies a policy objective, then marshals a collection of policy instruments to achieve it, weighing costs and benefits along the way. However, the line between political calculations and policy calculations is too often blurred. If evidence demonstrates that President Santos is responding out of concern for electoral politics, rather than dispassionate evaluation of policy options, it will be difficult to conclude that citizen security data played a direct role in his decision. There is a heavy burden of proof on this hypothesis.

*The Gains of “Seguridad Democrática”*

Prior to Uribe’s inauguration as president in 2002, Colombia was on the cusp of becoming a failed state. The civil war of the mid-20th century, simply called *La Violencia*, yielded to an even more intractable multiparty armed conflict between the government, DTOs, right-wing paramilitaries, and left-wing guerrillas (most prominently, the FARC). Some of the most sensational contributions to citizen insecurity came from the FARC, which evolved from an agrarian insurgency to a full-fledged terrorist organization. Colombia in the late 20th century was riddled with extraordinary acts of FARC violence, such as the targeting of government officials for kidnapping and assassination. Yet more disturbing was the constant and horrifying impact on average citizens. From 1978 to 1996, FARC guerrilla units grew from less than 20 to over 700, while the homicide rate doubled during that same time (even tripling from 1976 to 1990) (Policía Nacional). In 1984, kidnappings and terrorist attacks by the guerrillas numbered less than 200; by 1999 Colombia suffered from over 3,000 terrorist attacks and nearly 4,000 kidnappings, overwhelmingly carried out by the FARC (Sánchez, Díaz, and
Record low levels of citizen security heralded Uribe’s ascension to the Casa de Nariño.

Elected on a platform of blunt aggression towards armed non-state actors, especially the FARC, Uribe’s *seguridad democrática* programs utilized increased state resources (from the U.S., as discussed in the previous chapter, and from domestic taxation, as discussed shortly) to support a military-centric campaign against the FARC. Military and police forces were strengthened in terms of manpower, weaponry, logistics, and intelligence. Their new prowess was channeled towards the FARC in a series of devastating blows, resulting in the rescue of numerous high-profile hostages and the killing of top FARC commanders (Cepeda, 4).

![Fig. 6: Homicides in Colombia, 2000-2012](chart)

Hard data demonstrates the success of *seguridad democrática* before, during, and after Uribe’s eight years in office, 2002-2010 (see *Fig. 6* and *Fig. 7*). By the end of Uribe’s second term in 2010, the improvements were noteworthy: the homicide rate had been halved, while kidnappings had been reduced by 90%, to only 282 in 2010 (Verdad Abierta). *Seguridad democrática* generated other tangible improvements: Uribe extradited 1,140 drug traffickers to the U.S. and other countries as president (Uribe, 311).
Paramilitary demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) reached an all-time high under Uribe, meaning a reduction in the possibility of an eventual spoiled negotiated settlement with the FARC (who otherwise would fear laying down arms only to fall prey to these right-wing private armies, as had occurred with the ELN in the late 1990s) (Bouvier, 57). Furthermore, he oversaw a decimation of the FARC’s ranks. At its peak in membership during the 1990s, the FARC claimed 17,000 fighters, but it had less than 9,000 by the end of Uribe’s administration (Neuman, 10/17/12). Even more damaging to the FARC was the killing of its top leaders like Alfonso Cano, Raúl Reyes, and Mono Jojoy (in each case, a nom de guerre) (LaRosa and Mejía, 88). With the FARC reeling from eight years of blistering military offensives under the orders of Uribe, Santos inherited a substantially more secure Colombia upon taking office than did his predecessor.

**Fig. 7: Kidnappings in Colombia, 2000-2012**

*Source: Verdad Abierta*

*The Santos Response: Reallocation of Resources*

The making of public policy is characterized by two phases. First, leaders must identify a public policy objective, which they seek to realize. Second, they must
determine the appropriate nature and degree of application of various public policy instruments in order to achieve that objective. This dual calculation is incumbent on the policymaker’s ability to observe and interpret the environment that his policies aim to address. President Santos’s inauguration in August 2010 forced him to undertake these policymaking deliberations with regards to security. As Minister of Defense in the Uribe Administration, Santos had worked with his predecessor to conceive and execute seguridad democrática in response to the fundamental lack of citizen security in Colombia at the time. Circumstances in 2010 were different from those in 2002, though.

A change in the conditions dictating a public policy should result in a recalibration of the policy itself. Like all democratic leaders, Santos enjoys finite capacity as president. Therefore, the improved security climate has led him to devote a relatively lesser portion of his government’s attention and resources to waging war on the debilitated FARC than did Uribe. In this way, seguridad democrática can be interpreted as self-defeating. Uribe’s ability to summon tremendous financial resources and government focus to battling the FARC hinged on the overbearing threat of citizen insecurity. As the phantoms of war faded into the Andean mist, the Santos Administration maintained the same ultimate policy objective as the Uribe Administration: the DDR of the FARC, so as to consolidate citizen security (Bouvier, 134). The changing levels of violence and insecurity have thus caused a change in the policymaking instruments used to pursue that same objective.

President Santos’s announcement that his government would seek a negotiated settlement with the FARC, delivered in the Casa de Nariño on September 4, 2012, alluded to improved citizen security as being one of the principal justifications for FARC
negotiations. The president highlighted Colombia’s newly strengthened military and police forces, and spoke broadly of Colombian culture as “moving away from violence” (Presidencia de la República). Colombia, he noted, has changed profoundly in the security gains it has made since the previous failed peace talks during the Pastrana Administration. These security gains have allowed the state to obtain an advantageous negotiating position over the FARC, as evidenced by its ability to avoid the FARC’s traditional demand of a demilitarized despeje as a precondition for dialogue.

At the commencement of the negotiations in Oslo in October 2012, President Santos discussed his hopes for the talks with a group from Georgetown University, which had the opportunity to have lunch with him in Bogotá. In the course of the conversation, Santos repeatedly emphasized the weakness of the FARC, the recent consolidation of citizen security by the government, and the desire of his administration to conclude the armed conflict with the guerrillas as efficiently as possible (El Tiempo, 10/20/12). His remarks drew attention to a key difference between ends and means. Santos stated his commitment to FARC DDR and conflict resolution, but proved flexible (he would say “pragmatic”) with regards to the means applied to achieve that end. Out of the context of improved citizen security, a negotiated settlement emerged as the government’s best option.

In a February 2013 interview with Colombian Senator Juan Manuel Galán, scion of the prominent Galán political family, the senator echoed the president’s reasoning that an improved citizen security climate in Colombia had made negotiations an attractive policy option. A staunch ally of Santos, and a fierce critic of Uribe, he recognized the FARC’s ability to continue perpetrating acts of violence against Colombians, but cast the
guerrillas as having been weakened to the extent to which they no longer posed a significant threat to the peace and stability of Colombia. Galán argued that the demilitarized despeje in El Caguán doomed the negotiations between the FARC and the Pastrana Administration, but that improved citizen security had emboldened the government to refuse the cession of a despeje in these current talks. Conversely, the relative weakness of the FARC this time around consigned them to talks without a despeje. Santos and Galán both largely ruled out any hypothesis that electoral politics drove the government to the negotiating table, and instead anchored the decision in programmatic policymaking, wherein a negotiated settlement with the FARC became a thoroughly reasonable alternative to seguridad democrática based on the consolidation of citizen security (Galán).

**How Constrained was Santos?**

The argument propagated by President Santos and his political allies, that the peace talks are the result of improvements in citizen security, relies on the assumption that the administration enjoyed perfect liberty of choice with regard towards which policy instruments it could choose to apply in seeking the guerrillas’ DDR. That assumption is not consonant with reality. All policy instruments are not created equally, and indeed, they come with substantially varied price tags. A successful negotiated settlement, even with monitoring and enforcement costs taken into consideration, will cost the government significantly less compared to the price of the military technology and manpower required to perpetuate seguridad democrática. As the previous chapter discussed, downsizing of U.S. bilateral military aid through Plan Colombia is a plausible explanation for Santos’s movement towards negotiations. At this point in evaluating
citizen security’s impact on Santos’s decision, an important detour must be made: Does
the decrease in domestic revenue for seguridad democrática falsify the hypothesis that
Santos was simply gauging improvements in citizen security and responding as he saw
most appropriate?

One of President Uribe’s first initiatives in office was the implementation of what
he describes in his memoir as, “a new, one-time-only ‘security tax.’ A 1.2 percent tax on
liquid assets that would be paid by high-income individuals only… [with] revenues used
exclusively for the expansion of our army and police forces” (Uribe, 167). The impact of
this tax was significant. Uribe continues: “In all, the security tax raised some $800
million in revenues, a windfall that made possible many of the successes that followed”
(Uribe, 169). The $800 million raised by the tax alone is close enough to the initial Plan
Colombia allocation of $1.35 billion in 2000 that it is safe to categorize the security tax
as a substantial contributor to the consolidation of citizen security in Colombia.

Santos does not enjoy the revenue from such a tax. Consequently, even if he were
to be as ideologically committed to seguridad democrática as was Uribe, he would not be
able to fund similar military operations (at the very least, they would be in the red by
$800 million, and actually by much more, thanks to decreasing U.S. military assistance).
With that in mind, Santos’s claim that he is merely pursuing talks as a response to
improved citizen security becomes less credible. Rather, his agency appears constrained
by limited state resources, calling into question the validity of this hypothesis altogether.

Security Backsliding

Unfortunately, this hypothesis is further undermined by questionable
consolidation of citizen security in Colombia. The security gains of the Uribe years
appear to be backsliding. Homicides rose by 16% in 2009 (Romero, 5/7/10). In May 2012, bombings across downtown Bogotá targeted Uribe’s former Minister of the Interior and vocal supporter, Fernando Londoño (Glickhouse and Keller). While the FARC declared a unilateral ceasefire between November 20, 2012 and January 20, 2013, they elected not to renew it, and have followed its expiration with a new wave of attacks: the kidnapping of a soldier in Nariño, the bombing of a school in Caquetá, the murder of three policemen in La Guajira, and the explosion of two car bombs and the kidnapping of police officers in Cauca (Economist, 2/9/13). With public opinion polls just months before the announcement of the peace negotiations showing 62% of Colombians saying that the state’s struggle against the FARC is worsening, that lack of confidence in security gains has only been exacerbated by these recent flare-ups (El Tiempo, 7/6/12). In fact, only 29% of Colombians believe their security situation has improved since 2010 (the year of the transition in power between Uribe and Santos), while 49% believe that citizen security has worsened since then (La W, 4/27/12).

Nevertheless, the government has not flinched. As promised, Santos has continued the military’s campaign against the FARC during the talks, but he has not expressed any inclination to table the negotiations due to eroding citizen security. If indeed policymakers alter their behavior on the basis of their environment, Santos is bucking this trend. Rather, the security backsliding and the government’s perseverance in negotiating effectively falsifies the contention that the Santos’s pursuit of a negotiated settlement is a direct function of consolidated citizen security in Colombia.
Ruling Out the Hypothesis

Citizen security by itself cannot explain President Santos’s choice to negotiate with the FARC. Proof of this hypothesis was contingent upon the data’s meeting of three conditions. First, it needed to show that seguridad democrática’s gains were consolidated, and not just temporary progress. Second, it had to demonstrate that a consequence of this consolidation was the government’s recalibration of resources to deal with the FARC. Third, this recalibration needed to lead the government to determine that a negotiated settlement was the most appropriate course of action. The hypothesis fails in its inability to meet the first condition: citizen security has improved drastically in Colombia, but it is far from consolidated. Additionally, it fails to meet the second condition: security gains do not appear to be the primary contributor to the state’s recalibration of resource allocation; instead, the absence of an ad hoc revenue generator, like President Uribe’s security tax, provides a stronger reason for the administration’s actions. Finally, Colombian policymaking does not occur in a vacuum – it is undeniably impacted by electoral politics. The fact that the FARC has kidnapped a soldier or a policeman in different rural corners of Colombia is far less important than the resulting public opinion on the success of the government’s war on the FARC. Perception of citizen security is therefore just as important as the reality of citizen security, if not more so.

General improvements in citizen security certainly contributed to the government’s ability to join the FARC at the negotiating table from a position of strength. However, it is an indefensible overreach to argue that the Santos Administration decided to negotiate with the FARC due to a scientific analysis of consolidated citizen
security. If anything, evaluation of this hypothesis further bolsters the case that instead, the primary rationale was rooted in electoral politics and constraints of state resources, whether through evaporated tax revenue or diminished international military aid.
Data Summary

This investigation sought to better understand the causes of Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos’s recent decision to negotiate with the FARC. The president’s posturing appeared divergent from his prior political and policy orientation, therefore motivating an exploration of the causes behind the dependent variable of state treatment of the guerrillas. The three most compelling prospective independent variables have been evaluated, so as to determine the extent to which they could have impacted President Santos’s decision. The first hypothesis contended that Santos’s choice was the product of calculated electoral politics. The second hypothesis advanced the notion that international relations, particularly as expressed through the changing nature of Plan Colombia, constrained the state’s capacity to prosecute a sustained armed campaign against the FARC, and therefore led Santos to seek negotiations. The third hypothesis argued that consolidation of citizen security had facilitated Santos’s determination that negotiations were the most appropriate form of conflict resolution. Treatment of each hypothesis was rooted in qualitative and quantitative data on modern Colombia.

The data revealed a number of notable trends. To begin with, attractive electoral incentives existed to entice the president to seek peace talks with the FARC. While Santos’s strong affiliation with the brand and practices of his predecessor, Álvaro Uribe, had once produced lucrative political dividends for him, that phenomenon deteriorated. The rising unpopularity of Uribe, due to revelations of scandals and abuse during his
administration, incentivized Santos to break with the former president in a significant way. Uribe’s signature policy was *seguridad democrática*, which Santos helped shape as Minister of Defense; a break with that policy by negotiating with the FARC would unquestionably establish Santos’s political autonomy. Furthermore, voters displayed pessimism towards pre-negotiation conduct towards the FARC, and overwhelmingly supported peace talks. Finally, voters appeared to recognize a macro trend in improvement of citizen security, which displaced violent treatment of the guerrillas as a priority in their minds, instead cultivating a preference to redirect those resources to social and economic development.

Data from a different sphere also appeared to influence the president’s thought process. Waging constant war on the FARC is costly, and the resources of the Colombian state faced two major constraints. The recent decrease in Plan Colombia bilateral military assistance from the U.S., along with the expiration of Uribe’s security tax, severely decreased the monies the state once used to fight the FARC. In evaluating the challenges of President Uribe’s second term, Rodrigo Pardo of the Inter-American Dialogue adds that Colombia faces a serious revenue crisis on top of that: “Tax experts and business sectors have demanded comprehensive, substantive reform of the tax system for years. Following a number of specific ‘reforms’ designed to increase short-term revenue flows through quick revenue generation measures, the system has several flaws. Revenue is insufficient, much of the population pays no taxes, and the system is complex, opaque, and unfair” (Pardo, 7). As evidenced by the data, these revenue constraints have factored into President Santos’s analysis of how Colombia can most cost-effectively deal with the FARC moving forward.
Finally, data showed a lack of clarity with regard to consolidation of citizen security in Colombia. That the macro trends in citizen security and public violence have improved in Colombia since Uribe took power in 2002 is not up for debate. However, the Santos years have witnessed unmistakable examples of backsliding. Violence has ticked up, and the FARC has been responsible for a flare-up of brazen activities in the past few months and years. To the extent that citizen security impacted President Santos’s choice to negotiate with the FARC, it seems to have been channeled through the perceptions of voters, rather than by exercising a direct influence on the evaluation of the president.

**Assessing the Hypotheses**

In summary, the findings of this thesis are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Primary Evidence</th>
<th>Plausible?</th>
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<td>More voter support increases likelihood of negotiations</td>
<td>Public opinion polling</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>International Relations</strong></td>
<td>Plan Colombia decreases likelihood of negotiations</td>
<td>Plan Colombia aid figures</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizen Security</strong></td>
<td>Security consolidation increases likelihood of negotiations</td>
<td>Data on public violence, and perceptions of security</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first two of the three chief hypotheses emerge relatively validated. However, the data demonstrates that consolidation of citizen security in Colombia is nebulous, at best. Therefore, the hypothesis that President Santos is observing a permanently improved citizen security climate in Colombia, and responding to it by negotiating with
the FARC is discredited. Still, elements of the citizen security hypothesis can be salvaged in a few key ways. First, a major element of *seguridad democrática* was the achievement of paramilitary demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR), to a degree outpacing DDR by the guerrillas. In past attempts by the government to negotiate with the guerrillas, settlements were spoiled by the intervention of paramilitary groups, who exploited the vulnerability of their guerrilla enemies through violent attacks. Now, with citizen security gains occurring thanks to paramilitary DDR, President Santos is able to negotiate with the FARC with a greater ability to guarantee their safety, should they elect to undergo DDR themselves. This fact alone would influence the president to pursue peace talks, knowing their probability of success is now heightened.

Second, analysis of Colombia’s citizen security climate is confronted with the following conundrum: How can macro gains in citizen security (between 2002 and the present) be reconciled with more recent backsliding (between 2010 and the present)? The answer actually corroborates the electoral politics hypothesis. Long-term gains in citizen security orchestrated by *seguridad democrática* have conditioned Colombians to raise their expectations of the level of security their government should provide for them. Even if the long-term trend of improving security is maintained, any isolated instances of security backsliding will be interpreted by citizens with an elevated degree of sensitivity, due to an increased void between the positive and the normative – what the public observes versus what it thinks it is owed. Thus, popular anxiety is stirred up, and expressed through public opinion polling, as the data has shown. Electoral politics therefore can be considered a surrogate for citizen security’s impact on the calculations of President Santos.
The data, however, has largely validated the remaining two hypotheses. International relations did exert influence on the deliberations of the president. Not only did pressures from the international community persuade Santos to negotiate with the FARC, but more significantly, sharp decreases in U.S. bilateral military assistance have constrained the capacity of the Colombian state to the degree that negotiations, and not prolonged military operations, emerged as the most cost-effective means of concluding the decades-old armed conflict between the government and the FARC. Even more interestingly is the extent to which Plan Colombia funding reductions affected electoral politics. Colombia’s 2012 GDP is estimated to have been $365.4 billion (Central Intelligence Agency). The downsizing of a $9 billion bilateral aid package therefore has a not insignificant effect on the overall Colombian economy.

This fact is critical to evaluating a question central to the electoral politics hypothesis. Colombia is characterized by extreme levels of inequality and poverty. As the data displays, voters increasingly demanded that government divert its attention and resources from military operations against the FARC, and towards social and economic development. Five reasons explain why this phenomenon is emerging now, as opposed to in the past. First, decreasing U.S. bilateral aid to Colombia has exacerbated economic anxieties among citizens. Second, poverty and inequality have visibly increased in the past decade. Third, the global financial crisis stoked the public’s desire for the government to create more and better jobs. Fourth, security gains due to seguridad democrática have displaced citizen security as the primary concern of many voters, who now instead place the highest premium on social development. Fifth, the 2011 approval of the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement has been met with concern by many
Colombians, who fear the negative externalities that could result from national adjustment to a new commercial regime with the country’s largest trading partner (Uribe, 231). These contributions to citizens’ desire for increased governmental focus on socioeconomic development were manifested through the findings of opinion surveys; President Santos then operated within that electoral incentive structure.

The strength of the electoral politics hypothesis rests in its breadth. The data produces four salient takeaways, which influenced Santos’s decision. First, as discussed above, voters began to prioritize social and economic development over military operations. Second, the reputation of Uribe and seguridad democrática was tarnished. Third, President Santos’s approval was plummeting, especially with regard to security and conduct towards the guerrillas. Fourth, most significantly, a commanding and growing majority of Colombians expressed support for a negotiated peace process between the FARC and the state. The combination of these trends produced an enticing set of electoral incentives. Given President Santos’s personal and political ambitions, it is logically sound that the existence of those incentives motivated him to negotiate with the FARC.

**Beyond Colombia**

This conclusion transcends Colombia. This investigation commenced with a treatment of two theoretical questions of political science. First, what causes states to negotiate a settlement to an internal armed conflict? Second, what causes a leader to change course from a previously expressed or assumed political agenda? The results of this case study on the Colombian peace process have supplied answers to both questions. States will negotiate a settlement to a civil war when they no longer enjoy the resources
to continue striving for the military annihilation of their enemy. Whether those resources come from foreign donors or internal revenue generation is inconsequential; what matters is a state’s recognition that, no matter how much an advantage it enjoys over a rebel group, prolonged armed conflict will eventually yield diminishing returns. When this condition is satisfied, a government will seek a negotiated settlement. A complementary or alternative reason exists when leaders are sensitive to electoral politics, as is usually the case in a representative democracy. The following expressions of popular opinion can facilitate a course correction: discontent with status quo policies, support for reallocation of resources from the military to a social and economic development agenda, and approval for a potential negotiated settlement to the armed conflict in question. If popular opinion behaves in these ways, it will create an electoral incentive structure, which possesses the capacity to persuade a government to negotiate.

This final point is applicable to the question of why political leaders change course more broadly. Changes in policy direction by a democratic leader can often be the product of rational evaluation of policy instruments, meaning state capacity and constraints maintain as much influence over an individual political actor as they do over a government deciding to pursue a negotiated settlement. More compelling is the consonance between an individual’s political aspirations and electoral incentives. Democracies condition leaders to be responsive to public opinion, both for the integrity of the political system and for the leaders’ own electoral ambitions. Consequently, electoral politics is a potent explanation for why politicians change policymaking behavior.
Implications for Colombia

Colombia is a largely consolidated democracy. Therefore, the conditions described above in a theoretical context are applicable to this country’s political and policy developments. The U.S. will exercise a progressively lesser influence on Colombian policymaking. Reductions in Plan Colombia assistance dilute the ability of U.S. lawmakers to coopt Colombian behavior. The establishment of a bilateral free trade regime between the two countries also eliminates the ability of the U.S. to manipulate trade with Colombia so as to orchestrate a desired policy outcome.

At the same time, the nature of competitive campaigns and elections in Colombia should continue to force politicians to place a high premium on responsiveness to public opinion. With the trend lines strongly favoring a negotiated settlement with the FARC at this time, it is likely that this will generate the political will to support the peace talks in the short term. However, the empirical volatility of the Colombian electorate makes it challenging to extrapolate to 2014, when President Santos will stand for reelection, and his Partido de la U will seek to maintain congressional dominance. Unlike in 2010, when a united right and center defeated a marginalized left, 2014 has the potential to feature a tripartite electoral dynamic, wherein the right’s uribismo, the center’s santismo, and the Colombian left battle for a plurality (Oppenheimer). This phenomenon would complicate tremendously the impact of public opinion on electoral calculations. That said, it is likely that the success or failure of the ongoing peace negotiations with the FARC will be the most determinative influence on the future of Colombian politics.
Writing in April 2013, it is not clear what the outcome of the ongoing talks, which began in Oslo and now have shifted to Havana, will be. Press reports offer alternating pessimism and optimism as to the ability of the negotiators to achieve a workable resolution to Colombia’s armed conflict. In the past few weeks, the FARC has made, and then broken, a unilateral ceasefire, while the government has faced sustained pressure from various parties. Colombian voters eagerly hailed the initiation of the peace talks, but public opinion in Colombia is notoriously fickle. It remains to be seen just how much citizens will trust President Santos and de la Calle’s negotiating team, and for how long.

The 2014 election cycle will feature extraordinarily high stakes for those involved. If FARC DDR ultimately yields the production of a legitimate political party, it will be incumbent on the ex-guerrillas to avoid the debacle of the UP over two decades earlier. The new party will also have to prove a commitment to the integrity of democratic processes, and policy debate that is fierce, but never violent. President Santos’s political legacy is on the line when he stands for reelection. A successful conflict resolution would almost certainly secure him fame and reverence in the history books, not to mention a reputation that could well eclipse Uribe’s. Failed negotiations, especially ones resulting in a revival of harsh FARC terrorist activities would instead group Santos with the likes of Pastrana, today reviled as the worst president in Colombian history by 41.22% of respondents in a recent poll (La W, 4/27/12).

Uribe also has a great deal at stake. Success in the negotiations and in Santos’s reelection bid could further marginalize the ex-president, and trivialize his opinions.
Worse, it could open the door to even more serious prosecutorial action against Uribe for alleged abuses of civil liberties and human rights. Uribe is leaving nothing to chance, fighting back through the creation of a new political party, Pure Democratic Center, which is currently saber-rattling about unseating President Santos in the 2014 election (Uribe, 322). The outcome of the peace negotiations will leave an indelible imprint on Colombian government and politics for generations to come.

I believe that the ultimate product of the peace talks is irrelevant to the findings of my thesis. While success in the negotiations would validate the president’s decision to engage in the first place, the viability of the talks was never the focus of my research. Rather, I am interested in the factors that influenced President Santos’s announcement of the talks on September 4, 2012. Those factors are not malleable or contingent on the success of the negotiations. In fact, the argument that electoral politics led Santos to pursue talks has already borne fruit, as evidenced by his dramatic polling upswing in the aftermath of his announcement, representing a stunning reversal of the prior trend lines in public opinion towards the president. For now, I hope to have offered a cogent explanation of why President Santos has behaved this way, and how this behavior could be applicable to other contexts via political theory. Other than that, all one can do is wait and hope that some day peace in Colombia will be the rule, and not the exception.
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