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**POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND WAR IN
COLOMBIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
2002 ELECTIONS**

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Political Participation and War in Colombia

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Despite the chronic violence that has characterized the Colombian political system during the second half of the twentieth century through to the present, the electoral process has unfolded in a context of open competition between parties and candidates, a relative absence of fraud, and the legitimacy of winning candidates. Clearly, elections represent a fundamental component of any democratic system, and without them no system can be labelled democratic.¹ Yet as Guillermo O'Donnell has argued persuasively, Latin American democracies manifest their own idiosyncrasies despite their having emerged from an accepted electoral process.² Consequently, elections and their repercussions represent key topics of any research agenda focusing upon democratic political systems.

However, the literature on electoral behaviour, with a few exceptions, has emerged from studies of democracies characterized by a high degree of political stability. Likewise, electoral analyses in countries under stress or crisis usually subscribe to the same theoretical and methodological tendencies without examining the impact of political crises upon electoral outcomes and their impact on electoral behaviour. Political systems confronting crises (“...a situation where the political or economic system is confronted with challenges with which existing institutions and organisations are potentially unable to cope”),³ represent a distinct context in which elections assume additional consequences for the survival or collapse of existing democratic institutions.

Although the Colombian polity seemingly is in a perpetual state of crisis, its democratic institutions and economic growth rates have been relatively impressive in comparison to other Latin American countries. However, that scenario began to change in the 1990s with mounting pressure for political reform and the onset of unfavourable economic indicators – per capita income, the gini index of inequality, employment rates, and the GDP (in 1999 economic growth was a negative 4.5%) deteriorated markedly. These negative indicators were accompanied by an incomplete and contentious shift in Colombia's development model toward a more open economy and an increased reliance upon the market as outlined in the Washington consensus.

A considerable portion of the stress confronting the political system relates to the ongoing violence perpetuated by guerrilla groups, principally the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), right-wing paramilitary groups, and common criminals devoted to narcotrafficking, kidnapping, and armed attacks on civilians. From its inception in 1998, the Pastrana government promoted a peace process with the FARC, yet those negotiations were terminated abruptly by the government in February, 2002, giving rise to a period of conflict escalation that pervaded the congressional (March) and presidential (May) elections. In part because of his hard line stance toward the guerrillas and criticism of Pastrana's peace process, Álvaro Uribe Vélez won an overwhelming victory in the first round of the presidential election.⁴

¹ Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.

² Guillermo O'Donnell, 'Delegative Democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, 5 (1994).

³ Crisis States Programme, 'Concepts and Research Agenda', *Working Paper* No. 1, London: Development Research Centre (LSE), April 2001.

⁴ Gary Hoskin, Miguel García & Rodolfo Masías, 'La decisión de voto en las elecciones presidenciales de 2002', in Gary Hoskin, Miguel García, and Rodolfo Masías (eds), *Colombia 2002: Elecciones, comportamiento electoral, y democracia*, Bogotá: Department of Political Science, University of the Andes and Editorial Corcas, 2003.

The war in Colombia has been intensifying, and it is increasingly apparent that the State is encountering difficulty in maintaining its presence and preserving the state of law in many parts of the country. At the same time, non-institutional groups (the guerrillas, paramilitary and narco-organizations) have been consolidating their control over wide areas, in ways that have gone beyond mere military domination. In this context, it is worth analysing the democratic process in a country where it is constantly under siege from the effects of war. For more than ten years now, the influence of that war has manifested itself in regional and local governments, as governors and mayors have been the leading victims of the conflict. The non-traditional parties have been affected most severely, the classical case being the physical elimination of many members of the *Unión Patriótica* (UP).⁵ But in recent years the impact of the war has reached the national level, especially affecting congress people.

This study analyses the impact of the war on political participation in the March 2002 elections to the lower house of the Colombian Congress. The specific research question is whether the dynamics of violence in Colombia has affected the way voters behaved in those elections. In order to provide some answers, this article seeks to pinpoint the relationship between war and democracy by focusing upon a key component of democratic regimes, namely political participation.

The article is organized in five sections. The first consists of a theoretical overview of democracy and political participation. The second section, drawn principally from the press, provides evidence of the impact of the war upon the congressional and presidential campaigns. The third part discusses the evolution of political participation in Colombia. The fourth section is a quantitative analysis of the relationship between violence and political participation. Finally, the last section offers some conclusions about political participation and violence in Colombia.

Democracy and Political Participation

The impact of political participation in democratic regimes is ambiguous, in part because of differing conceptualisations not only of political participation but democracy as well. To oversimplify, most definitions of democracy fall within three broad categories: (1) a formal definition that focuses upon the mechanics of liberal democracy, (2) a substantive definition that not only includes the first but also emphasizes a socio-economic component, and (3) an approach that underscores the creation of and an emphasis upon an active citizenry.⁶ The formal definition, generally associated with the Anglo-American tradition, generally includes such variables as competitive elections involving two or more political parties, regularly elected leaders, a relatively unrestricted adult franchise, secret ballots that are not coerced, and citizens and leaders who enjoy basic freedom of speech, press, assembly, and organisation.⁷ In this literature, linked to the theories of Joseph Schumpeter, Giovanni Sartori, and Robert Dahl, democratic participation revolves around periodic election of leaders who represent interests of the citizenry. In contrast, the substantive conceptualisation underscores the responsibility of the leaders to provide citizens with the basic necessities of life; if a democratic regime fails to do so, then it does not merit the label democratic.⁸ The third approach to defining democracy focuses upon the educative role of the regime in promoting active citizen involvement in democratic politics. This tradition, rooted in the writings of Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, and G.D.H. Cole, has experienced a rebirth in the form of participatory

⁵ Unión Patriótica was a political movement supported by FARC during the negotiations between the guerrillas and the Betancur Administration.

⁶ See David Held, *Models of Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987.

⁷ G. Bingham Powell, Jr., *Contemporary Democracies: Participation, Stability, and Violence*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 3.

⁸ John Peeler, *Latin American Democracies: Colombia, Costa Rica, Venezuela*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985, Chapter 1.

democracy as expressed in contemporary constitutional engineering in several Latin American countries.

Each of these models of democracy is an 'ideal type' in Weberian terms, not corresponding perfectly to empirical realities; that is, any democratic regime involves a mixture of the components of the three conceptualisations. As Seymour Martin Lipset argued in his classic study, a democratic regime is not likely to enjoy a long life if it does not elicit a high degree of legitimacy from its citizens, which, almost inevitably, involves some attention on the part of the regime to socio-economic problems of the society, as well as to educating citizens for democratic participation.⁹

Nonetheless, each of these conceptualisations of democracy carries with it very different implications as to the significance of political participation for promoting democratic consolidation. The so-called realists of the formal tradition maintain that viable democratic regimes are not dependent upon high levels of participation. In fact, the opposite may be the case in the sense that "excessive" participation may undermine regime stability. This thesis is expressed in terms of "governmental overload" or sometimes as a "crisis of governability".¹⁰ Western democracies, according to the realists, are being undermined by high levels of participation that place demands on governments that they cannot fulfil. Although the appropriate forms and levels of participation remain somewhat ambiguous, clearly the focus is upon electoral participation rather than other forms of citizen involvement. In contrast, the substantive and participatory traditions bring to the foreground the direct and active participation of citizens in democratic systems that goes beyond the electoral dimension. Emphasis is placed upon the creation of a democratic political culture and a vibrant civil society that not only promotes a politically active citizenry but also holds governmental leaders accountable. In summary, the realists are relatively content with moderate levels of electoral participation, thereby insulating governmental elites from excessive citizen demands, while those promoting direct democracy extol the virtues of extensive and intensive citizen participation on a variety of dimensions.

The act of political participation may serve multiple functions in a democratic system. At the macro level, participation is conducive to the election of political leaders, the expression of individual and group interests, and the generation of regime legitimacy. At the micro level, participation offers individuals an opportunity to develop and express civic virtues, to identify with the democratic rules of the game, to manifest their satisfaction or disgruntlement with political leaders and, in some cases, participate directly in decision-making. For those groups of people who are relatively dispossessed, political participation may offer an avenue of socio-economic advancement. Likewise, those who enjoy economic and political status may further augment their advantageous positions through political participation. That is to say, those who are highly educated and economically powerful may increase their benefits by means of participating in politics.¹¹

People participate in politics for diverse reasons. Some become involved for *instrumental* reasons; that is, their participation is intended to promote or defend their goals with the minimum of costs and the maximum of effect. This type of participation may be altruistic or self-interested or a mixture of both.¹² This is the predominant research orientation in political science to explain why people participate in politics. There are two major variants of the *instrumental* explanation. The first argues that there are a number of social forces that have an impact on the general outlook people have on politics that can be captured by a socio-economic status model, which effectively predicts

⁹ Seymour Martín Lipset, *Political Man*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1960.

¹⁰ Michael Crozier, Samuel Huntington & Joji Watanuki, *Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, New York: New York University Press, 1975.

¹¹ Alessandro Pizzorno, cited in Geraint Parry, George Moyser & Neil Day, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 6.

¹² Parry *et al.* (1992), p. 9.

participation.¹³ A second involves the formulation of formal or rational models to analyse the motives behind participation at the micro level, which is also concerned with macro level effects.¹⁴

Another motivation for participation in politics has been labelled *communitarian*, in which actors express a concern, in a non-instrumental manner, for the community of which they are a part. This form of participation is not limited to a geographical context; it may occur in academic, religious or business communities.¹⁵ A third constellation of variables centres on *educative* factors; participation is viewed as an educational experience, leading to self-development of citizens.¹⁶ It is not only the results but also the process of participation that is conducive to the development of an active, involved citizenry. Finally, the act of participation may be an *expressive* experience; that is, people may participate in order to display their feelings without any expectation of having an impact on policy. Examples might include singing the national anthem, attending the funeral of a prominent political figure, appearing in a rally for victims of a catastrophe.¹⁷

The extent of political participation is dependent upon a combination of four factors: (1) the opportunity structure associated with the political system; (2) the strength and development of civil society; (3) micro level attitudinal syndromes; and (4) the incidence and salience of issues in specific contexts. If a political system offers extensive opportunities for participation – frequent elections at all levels with meaningful choices, accessible and responsible politicians, and direct citizen participation in decision-making through referenda, recall, and plebiscites – then the level of citizen involvement will be considerably higher than in those systems without such opportunities. Likewise, participation is likely to be more pronounced in those political systems where civil society is highly structured, facilitating the formation of interest groups and civic associations that seek to have an impact on policy formation. Micro level factors also have a heavy impact on participation – individuals who are apathetic, alienated, and lacking in efficacy tend not to participate in politics. The costs of individual participation – material, such as transportation and information, as well as psychological – likewise influence the decision to vote, attend a protest march, or visit representatives. In short, participation in politics depends upon a complex, interdependent set of variables ranging from characteristics of the political system, the structure of civil society, individual level factors, and issue generation.

Political participation assumes distinctive forms that tend to cluster together, often involving little overlap between activities in the different clusters. Researchers have identified four *conventional* modes of participation: voting, campaign activity, communal activity, and contacting officials on personal matters.¹⁸

Separate participation modes exist because political activities differ systematically in the requirements they place on the citizen and how the activities relate the individual to government. Some activities are very demanding and may require a high level of political sophistication; other forms of political participation are fairly routine.¹⁹

Thus voting, generally the most common form of democratic participation, is relatively easy, while communal and campaign activities tend to be more demanding. Variables that explain conventional

¹³ For a classic statement of the socio-economic model, see Sidney Verba & Norman Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*, New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

¹⁴ For an excellent analysis that relies upon a rational model to explain democratic behaviour, see Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, Chapter 1.

¹⁵ Parry *et al.* (1992).

¹⁶ For a classic statement of this treatment of participation, see Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

¹⁷ Parry *et al.* (1992).

¹⁸ Russell Dalton, *Citizen Politics in Western Democracies*, Chatham: Chatham House Publishers, 1988, p.36.

¹⁹ Dalton (1988).

participation vary in intensity not only according to the cluster but also the context in which they occur.

Non-conventional modes of participation are assuming greater significance in democratic regimes – activities such as signing petitions, participating in demonstrations, joining boycotts, participating in unofficial strikes, occupying buildings, damaging property, and personal violence.²⁰ These forms of participation reflect an increasing disillusionment with traditional politics – political parties, governmental leaders, corruption, nepotism, and bureaucratic inefficiency – along with an increasing sophistication of the citizenry not content with solely relying upon traditional mechanisms of representative democracy to express their political preferences. This new style of politics often implies a direct confrontation of citizens with political elites rather than working within the confines of the established rules of the game, perhaps leading to undermining the status quo. The structure of representative democracy that evolved during the nineteenth century has not adapted overly well to the dramatic changes that characterize contemporary Western democracies. No longer are all citizens content with casting a vote for elected public officials – many want to participate more directly in policy decisions and expect considerably more from government. Thus democratic systems are in the throes of transition from representative to more participatory forms of democracy, accompanied by the formidable tensions and anxieties associated therewith. But as Dalton argues, “...change may be threatening to some, and it does present a risk – but change is necessary”.²¹

Irrespective of the form of political participation, be it conventional or non-conventional, it should be emphasized that most people do not participate in politics for a variety of reasons.

A Mounting Siege upon Colombia's Democracy

Although it is true that the actions of the armed groups, guerrillas and paramilitaries, against political representatives are nothing new, until a few years ago their focus was basically on local officials and politicians. Only recently the list of political victims of the war has been extended to contain more congressmen. The murder of representative and Peace Commission Chairman Diego Turbay-Cote in January 2001²² was the beginning of a tragic period for congressmen, whose situation during the last election campaign was in some cases that of direct persecution by armed groups. Turbay's death was followed by three others in 2001: Jorge Rojas, also Chairman of the Representatives' Peace Commission, and two representatives of Arauca, Octavio Sarmiento and Luis Alfredo Colmenares. The paramilitaries claimed responsibility for the Arauca murders. This strategy of assassinating regional leaders was linked to an initiation of their activities in the department, as had transpired previously in other areas of the country.

Persecution and murder of congressmen has been complemented during the last year and a half by another form of aggression, namely selective kidnappings. Although in June 2001 the government and FARC implemented an agreement to exchange kidnapped policemen and soldiers for a group of guerrillas, it was obvious that the guerrillas wanted to promote a second exchange that would allow a larger number of guerrillas to be released from prisons. In addition to a group of police and army officers it held in custody, the FARC expanded the list of kidnapped victims eligible for exchange in 2001 by including senators and representatives in order to increase pressure on the government. Toward the end of the year, the FARC had in their possession the following congresspersons: Luis Eladio Perez, Orlando Beltran, Consuelo Gonzalez and Oscar Tulio Lizcano. The list of captives

²⁰ Dalton (1988), p.65.

²¹ Dalton (1988), p.244.

²² The murder of Turbay marked the end of a Liberal dynasty in the southern department of Caquetá, an area with a strong presence of the FARC. Some years before, Diego Turbay's brother died in the hands of his FARC kidnappers. Turbay's mother, also an active member of the political clan, was killed at the same time as Diego.

expanded in 2001 to include Jorge Eduardo Gechem-Turbay, a representative and candidate for the Senate,²³ presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, her campaign manager, twelve departmental assemblymen from Valle, and Guillermo Gaviria, Governor of Antioquia, and his Peace Adviser Gilberto Echeverri (FARC assassinated both during the military's failed rescue attempt in May, 2003).

The impact of violence on the normal course of the election campaigns was reflected in the numerous complaints lodged by congressional candidates that they had been vetoed by one or another armed group and enjoyed no access to certain parts of the country. Indeed, for many candidates their campaigns were restricted to the major cities, which have so far been left more or less on the sidelines of the war. Conservative candidate Francisco Murgueíto, for example, said that he could not campaign in Jamundi or Dagua in Valle del Cauca because of the presence of drug-traffickers and guerrillas.

Indigenous Senator Jesus Piñacue was threatened by paramilitaries and declared a military target by the FARC. Left-wing candidate Gloria Cuartas complained of pressure from both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries on her campaigns²⁴. Senator Miguel Pinedo related that campaigning in Magdalena was restricted because of the presence of armed groups, and that only seven of its municipalities were "democratic territory". Finally, Liberal José Renán Trujillo reacted to the insecurity by asking the Electoral Council for protection to enable candidates to campaign freely.²⁵ Activities of the guerrillas and paramilitaries directed against politicians clearly show that the 2002 elections were under siege. But this picture should be complemented by an account of the most important actions taken by the armed groups to hamper candidates' movements, frustrate their campaigns and obstruct voter participation.

Between January and May 2002, the national and regional press reported a series of events designed to prevent the normal evolution of the campaigns and the electoral process in general. During the pre-election period campaign headquarters of presidential candidates and some congressional candidates were attacked or threatened. Álvaro Uribe's headquarters in Villavicencio was closed because of threats, and his offices in Medellín, Eastern Antioquia and Northern Caldas also were threatened. A few days before the presidential elections, Uribe's offices in Valledupar and Medellín were bombed. The Popayán office of left-wing candidate Luis Eduardo Garzón received a bomb threat.²⁶ Álvaro Uribe experienced the largest number of attacks, the most serious occurring in Barranquilla on 15 April.

In a different form of action, dissemination of propaganda and information about candidates for the presidency and Congress attracted the censorship of the armed groups. The best-known instances of this were the bans on radio broadcasts and promotion of candidates opposed to the interests of the armed groups. One of the most dramatic of these was that of radio announcer Juan Carlos Gomez in Aguachia (Cesar), who was murdered, supposedly for having read a communiqué from Liberal candidate Horacio Serpa, after the paramilitaries had forbidden the broadcasting of any material about that candidate.²⁷

Actions of the guerrillas and paramilitaries directed against candidates and their campaign organisations were complemented by large-scale voter intimidation. These actions were of two

²³ This kidnapping was one of the factors that led the Pastrana government to break off the peace talks with FARC.

²⁴ 'Cuartas promete trabajo por las mujeres y la paz', *El Tiempo*, 28 January 2002, pp. 1-12.

²⁵ 'Piden garantías electorales', *El País*, 23 January 2002, p. A-5.

²⁶ During the campaign authorities uncovered plots to murder presidential candidates Álvaro Uribe and Horacio Serpa, along with Serpa's running-mate, Jose Gregorio Hernández. Authorities also reported that there had been attempts to murder congressmen Gustavo Petro and Jimmy Chamorro.

²⁷ The ELN forbade radio stations in Ocaña, Norte de Santander to broadcast any messages from the Uribe campaign. As Uribe himself noted during his campaign, thirty-three stations refused to receive his radio spots.

kinds: one forced people to vote for a specific candidate and the other simply prevented them from casting a vote.

The first type of pressure, apparently promoted by the paramilitaries, produced express instructions not to vote for specific candidates, especially Horacio Serpa.²⁸ The FARC and ELN encouraged people not to vote for Uribe. An *El Tiempo* report said that the paramilitaries had obliged people to vote for Uribe in Magdalena, César, Casanare, southern Bolívar and the Middle Magdalena Valley, while FARC “encouraged” them not to vote for Uribe in Meta, Caquetá, Cauca, Nariño, Putumayo, Huila and Guaviare. This pressure from paramilitaries resulted from attempts to promote candidates at the national level sympathetic to their cause. The same report related that according to government sources thirteen senators and twenty representatives elected on 10 March 2003 were directly related to the interests of the paramilitaries.²⁹

On the other hand, instead of sponsoring specific candidates, the FARC started a campaign to sabotage the elections and the candidacy of Álvaro Uribe. They not only promoted abstention from congressional and presidential elections,³⁰ the FARC actively hampered the process by staging a number of armed blockades of highways and committing acts of terrorism. Highways in the departments of Arauca, Putumayo and Caquetá were blocked a few days before the elections, as a result of actions that prevented people from travelling, complemented by dynamiting transmission towers. To combat the Uribe campaign the guerrillas mounted a campaign to intimidate voters. In some parts of the country they expressly ordered people not to vote for that candidate³¹.

The scenario presented thus far reveals an obvious assault upon Colombia’s democracy, especially with reference to the opportunity for free and open elections. The foregoing represents the context in which political participation unfolded during the 2002 Colombian elections that will be analysed in subsequent sections of this paper. However, a qualification is in order before beginning the analysis, namely the number of municipalities and potential voters affected directly by the violence

²⁸ The Liberal Party’s Electoral Monitoring Committee denounced the fact that due to pressures from the guerrillas and paramilitaries, party militants were unable to canvass for support in 205 municipalities. The departments most affected were Antioquia, Magdalena, Cauca, Cundinamarca, César, Santander and Tolima. See ‘Veto a liberals en 205 municipios’, *El Tiempo*, 16 May 2002, pp. 1-15.

²⁹ ‘El veredicto de los violentos’, *El Tiempo*, 21 April 2002, pp.1-18. These accusations were confirmed by the Minister of the Interior Armando Estrada, who revealed that “The paramilitaries took advantage of the March elections to establish a lobby for them in Congress (...) the fact is that they organised no sabotages against the elections but tried to use them for their benefit and for their own candidates, and this means that they now manifest a more political than military or anti-guerrilla orientation. Piedad Córdoba and Julio César Guerra, both members of Congress, lodged a protest, specifying names of individuals, their trajectories and voting records, and the places they were elected to represent, as being places under paramilitary influence. This leads to the conclusion that the paramilitaries ordered people to vote for them or they made agreements so that the paramilitaries would exert pressure for them in the community to vote for certain names”. See ‘AUC acomodaron puntales en el Congreso: Mininterior’, *El Colombiano*, 4 April 2002, p.8-A. But paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño emphasised that his organisation had not tried to exert pressure on voters, saying, “Out of conviction, we in the AUC undertake to respect the free exercise of democracy in next Sunday’s presidential elections. He invited “...all Colombians, especially inhabitants of places where we have a social and political presence, to enjoy their right to exercise their vote and to take part in this spectacle of democracy”. See, ‘Guerrilla llama a no votar y ‘paras’ instan a sufragar’, *Vanguardia Liberal*, 23 May 2002, p. 2 A.

³⁰ A guerrilla communiqué published in a regional newspaper said that, “We call on our people not to vote, not to take part in the electoral farce on May 26, and to utilize abstention as an instrument of the struggle against economic, social, and cultural exclusion of the present regime”. See ‘Guerrilla llama a no votar y ‘paras’ instan a sufragar’, *Vanguardia Liberal*, 23 May 2002, p. 2-A. One day before the congressional elections, there were accusations that FARC had retained peoples’ identity cards in the department of Nariño, so that they would be unable to vote. ‘Ataques de las FARC antes de las elecciones’, *El Tiempo*, 10 March 2002, pp.1-17.

³¹ In a few of Cundinamarca’s municipalities (San Juanito, El Calvario, Villeta, Une, Chaguani, Viani, San Juan de Rioseco and La Mesa), the 22nd and 53rd FARC fronts publicly announced that people should not support Uribe’s candidacy and, if they did, they would face reprisals. ‘Si votan nos volvemos a ver’, *El Tiempo*, 10 April 2002, pp.1-10.

from the right and left represent a relatively small proportion of the total vote, which tends to be concentrated in urban areas.

Political Participation in Colombia

Electoral participation in Colombia historically has been low in comparison to other Latin American countries. The average turnout for presidential elections between the 1940s and the end of the last century was 40.74%, the lowest of twelve countries in the region, which averaged 56.9% (Table 1). Colombia's relatively low participation rate may be attributed in part to the fact that the vote is not compulsory, whereas the vote is obligatory in many of the countries listed in Table 1. Participation levels have not changed much since the 1950s, and constitute a part of the country's political culture. In 1974 Latorre observed that abstention is a tradition in Colombia and suggested that this was neither a rational decision on the part of citizens nor an expression of civil protest against the system.³²

Table 1 - Percentage of Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections in Latin America (1940s-1990s)

(Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (Idea), *Voter Turnout from 1945 to date*, A *Global Report on Political Participation*, obtained on 20 April 2001 from http://www.int-idea.se/voter_turnout/index.html)

| Country | Turnout |
|-----------------|---------------|
| Argentina | 69.29% |
| Bolivia | 65.30% |
| Brazil | 44.93% |
| Chile | 50.26% |
| Colombia | 40.74% |
| Costa Rica | 68.91% |
| Ecuador | 50.59% |
| México | 51.62% |
| Paraguay | 55.15% |
| Perú | 45.25% |
| Uruguay | 68.40% |
| Venezuela | 72.42% |
| Average | 56.90% |

Voter turnout in the 1990s shows a series of fluctuations, which are small, but worth underscoring. First, at the local level (mayoral elections) the turnout in 1988 and 1990 was quite high and then steadily declined until reaching the levels experienced in national elections (Presidency and Congress). This mounting abstention in local elections is interesting, considering that the first two mayoral elections were characterized by high turnout. Following Gutierrez' argument, local level elections may reflect voters' perceptions of the utility of the new representative local government organisations, along with the new leaders, but interest quickly diminished because of a recognition that local government organisations failed to offer solutions to key problems for the public.³³ From another perspective, maybe the new organisations became more absorbed in routine matters, to the point that they lost their power to attract new groups of citizens, and initial participatory enthusiasm waned as the new organisations and their leaders became just another part of the political system.

³² Mario Latorre, *Elecciones y partidos políticos en Colombia*, Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 1974, p.278.

³³ Francisco Gutiérrez, 'Dilemas y paradojas de la transición participativa', *Análisis Político*, 29 (September-December 1996), pp. 39 & 45.

A different explanation of local-level abstention might be related to an intensification of political violence. In other words, low turnout at the polls may be linked to pressures from armed groups on the political system.³⁴ In the 2000 local and regional elections, for example, armed groups reportedly attempted to intimidate voters and impose their own candidates. This situation prompted the Federation of Municipalities to ask for a suspension of the elections in some places. The combination of attempts to stifle competition and participation led the government to transfer 576 polling booths from rural to urban areas, but this affected only 0.5% of potential electors.³⁵

Table 2 - Abstention Rates in three types of Elections, 1988 – 2002

(Sources: President and senators, Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil (Civil Records Office), ‘Elecciones 2002’, at <http://www.registraduria.gov.co/>; mayors (except 2000) Cristina Querubín, María Fernanda Sánchez and Ileana Kure, ‘Dinamica de las elecciones populares de alcaldes 1988-1997’, in Andrés Dávila and Ana María Bejarano (eds.), *Elecciones y democracia en Colombia 1997-1998*, Bogotá: Uniandes, Fundación Social, 1998)

| | President | | Senate | Mayors |
|-------------|-----------|----------|---------|---------|
| | Round 1. | Round 2* | | |
| 1988 | i.e. ** | | i.e. ** | 33.2 |
| 1990 | 56.1 | | n.d. | 42.3 |
| 1991 | i.e. ** | | 64.9 | I.e. ** |
| 1992 | n.e. ** | | n.e. ** | 56.6 |
| 1994 | 66.0 | 56.68 | 67.2 | 54.5 |
| 1997 | n.e. ** | | n.e. ** | 55.4 |
| 1998 | 48.4 | 40.99 | 57.4 | n.e. ** |
| 2000 | i.e. ** | | n.e. ** | 47.3*** |
| 2002 | 53.5 | | 58.1 | n.e. |

*The second round was introduced in the 1991 Constitution and first applied for the 1994 presidential elections. There was no second round in 2002 because Álvaro Uribe won in the first round, with more than 50% of the total vote.

**No elections held for this post/collegiate body.

***This information was reported by the Civil Records Office and, unlike the other measures of abstention, is calculated on the total number of votes cast (including those for candidates, blank, null, and unmarked ballots) and not just on the total vote cast for candidates and on blank ballots. Inclusion of the larger number of votes reduces the percentage of abstention.

The five departments that reported the highest levels of abstention in the 2002 elections for the Senate suggest that in some cases a relationship exists between a low turnout and the activities and presence of armed groups. As Table 2 shows, the overall abstention rate for 2002 was 58.06%. But in the five departments with the highest abstention rates (Atlántico, Guaviare, Caquetá, Chocó and Putumayo) each registered a rate of over 64%. In two of them, Caquetá and Putumayo, there was a strong and active presence of the guerrillas, but not of the paramilitaries. In contrast, the paramilitaries are strong in some departments with below average abstention, and the guerrillas are relatively weak there. For example, Córdoba reported an abstention rate of 49.06% and Sucre 47.19%, both around 10% below the national average. In guerrilla-dominated areas restrictions on participation are more evident than in those areas in which the paramilitaries have consolidated their position, suggesting that armed groups adopt different strategies of relating to the political system. As some of the events described earlier suggest, the guerrillas were more interested in undermining the elections and promoting abstention, while the paramilitaries developed a strategy of influencing the results of the elections rather than frustrating them. This apparent relationship between the presence and actions of an armed group and levels of abstention will be examined empirically later in this paper.

³⁴ Eduardo Pizarro & Ana Maria Bejarano, ‘De la democracia “restringida” a la democracia “asediada”’. Para entender la crisis de la democracia en Colombia’, unpublished paper, 2001.

³⁵ Ruben Sánchez, ‘Vision global del proceso electoral del 29 de octubre de 2000’, in *Colombia elecciones 2000*, Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil and Fundación Konrad Adenauer, 2001, p. 15.

A second factor regarding fluctuations in turnout rates is related to the lower levels of abstention for the 1998 presidential and senatorial elections compared to both 1990 and 1994. In 1998, abstention for the senate elections fell by 10 points, and by more than 10 points for the presidential election. The 2002 results show that, although abstention was slightly higher (especially in the presidential election) than in 1998, the trend continued, perhaps resulting from an increase in voters' perceptions of the credibility of and satisfaction with the democratic system. Indeed, between 1996 and 2001 the percentage of those *very satisfied* and *substantially satisfied* with democracy reached its maximum in 1997 (35.5%) and then fell to its low point in 2000 (8.5%).³⁶

Another explanation for this increase in voter participation in the 1998 congressional and presidential elections might well not constitute a trend but rather a response to specific events in the political system. Thus the scandal surrounding the entry of drug money in Ernesto Samper's presidential campaign might well have converted the elections into a plebiscite on the country's future. By April 1998, two months before the first round of the presidential elections, the climate of opinion regarding the future of the country was quite negative – 80% of those interviewed in a nation-wide survey thought that the country was moving in the wrong direction.³⁷ A similar scenario prevailed in the period immediately preceding the 2002 presidential elections, when 86% of a nation-wide sample believed that the country was going in the wrong direction.³⁸ In contrast, when President Gaviria left office in 1994, a survey revealed that 66% of those questioned thought that his administration would be evaluated favourably in the history books, signifying that the climate of opinion regarding the outgoing Gaviria administration was considerably more favourable than that at the end of the next two governments.³⁹

A decline in abstention rates may be linked to Law 403 of August 1997, which introduced a series of incentives to voters. The year in which abstention in presidential and congressional elections was lowest, 1998, voters were eligible to receive several benefits for casting a vote: (a) preference in obtaining employment in the public sector; (b) half a day's paid leave; (c) a discount of 10% in fees for public universities; (d) reductions in time for mandatory military service; and (e) preferences in awards of scholarships, housing subsidies and rural land. Implementation of these incentives could, therefore, be regarded as factors that encouraged people to vote. A survey conducted by Universidad de los Andes and the National Planning Department asked what motivated respondents to vote in the 2002 presidential and congressional elections – thirteen percent replied that the certificate that entitled them to benefits was a factor in their casting a ballot.

Finally, abstention levels appear to reflect the relative importance for the voter of the office or collegiate body for which the election is being conducted. Data thus show that the Senate is the government organisation that matters least to the voter, while the offices of president and mayors generate higher levels of mobilisation. The underlying reason for this difference of approach may be that the executive posts define public policy, while the collegiate bodies are seen as organisations of lesser political importance.⁴⁰ In the case of local government posts, it is possible that the closer relationship between citizen and elected mayor is a stimulus to participation. Beyond that, the low

³⁶ Daniel Zovatto, 'Valores, percepciones y actitudes hacia la democracia. Una visión comparada latinoamericana, 1996-2001', in *Observatorio electoral latinoamericano*, at <http://www.observatorioelectoral.org/biblioteca/?bookID=8&page=3>.

³⁷ Napoleón Franco, 'Estudio presidencial intención de voto y mapas preceptuales', survey commissioned by *EL Tiempo*, *Noticiero de la 7*, *RCN Bogotá*, 21 April 1998, p. 9.

³⁸ Napoleón Franco, 'La Gran Encuesta 4', commissioned by *El Tiempo*, *RCN Radio/TV* and *Semana*, Bogotá, April 2002, p. 11.

³⁹ 'El adios', *Semana*, 2-9 August 1998, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Regarding the difference of perceptions between executive posts and collegiate bodies see Lariza Pizano, 'Reflexiones sobre las decisiones electorales de los Bogotanos', *Análisis Político*, 45 (January-April 2002).

percentage of people who say that they have confidence in the legislature (the average for the 1990s was just 23.5%)⁴¹ may be another reason for the low level of electoral interest in the Senate.

Additional data on electoral participation stems from a recent national survey commissioned by the Universidad de los Andes and the National Planning Department.⁴² First, the survey shows that there is a group that always votes: 46% in presidential elections and 39% in congressional elections. This shows that the presidency attracts more votes than the Senate or Chamber of Representatives. These percentages are thus the minimum that can be expected, and fluctuations above those levels depend on fringe voters who vote occasionally. Fringe voters constitute 29% of the sample for the presidential elections and 28% for congressional elections.

Drawing upon the survey data, if we compare the percentage of people who always vote and the abstention figures for Congress and the presidency in 1990 and 1994, the proportion of people who always votes increased during the 1990s. Abstention was high in those two years: 54% for the presidency and 61% for Congress. The survey data suggest that these are maximum abstention rates. The figures are calculated by adding the occasional voters (29% and 28%) to the permanent non-voters (20% and 29%). Thus 1998 was the year in which abstention fell because of a greater presence of occasional voters and growth in the number of people who always vote. But what the survey data reveal regarding the 2002 elections is that occasional voters did not surface (the highest expected abstention is 54% and the actual figure was 53.5%) while for congressional elections they are only marginally present (expected abstention is 61% and actual abstention was 58.1%).

A second finding of the survey relevant to the study of electoral participation relates to the reasons given by the sample for voting or for abstaining. Among those who voted, the five most common answers were:⁴³ “I vote so that things will change” (57%); “I vote to do my duty as a citizen” (43%); “I vote to exercise the right to express an opinion and protest” (38%); “I vote to protest against corruption” (28%); and “I vote to save this country” (28%). Answers related to political militancy, “I vote to support a party” (12%) or “I vote because they gave me something in exchange/because I don’t want to lose my job” (4%), were not common responses.

For those who did not vote, the reasons offered related to distance from politics and politicians or disenchantment with them, along with structural factors: “I don’t vote because the candidates make promises they don’t keep” (34%); “I don’t vote because politics is corrupt” (34%); “I don’t vote because politics does nothing for me” (20%); “I don’t vote because I don’t understand politics” (14%).⁴⁴ Some people did not vote for ‘structural’ reasons; that is, for reasons beyond their control. For example, 15% said that they had not voted because they had lost their ID card, another 15% because they had not registered to vote in their city of residence; and 4% said that the polling station was too far away.⁴⁵

Although the percentage is not very high, six percent indicated that they had not voted for fear of violence or violent reprisals, suggesting that the war has an impact on abstention rates, even if minimally.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Rodolfo Masias & Marcela Ceballos, ‘Confianza en las instituciones: principales rasgos y algunos determinantes: Una aproximación a la década de los noventa en Colombia’, in *Documentos del CESO*. No. 2, Uniandes-CESO, 2001.

⁴² Napoleón Franco, *Estudio post-electoral. Elecciones, democracia y violencia. Informe*, Bogotá, 2002.

⁴³ Interviewees were allowed to give more than one reason.

⁴⁴ Questions on reasons for voting or abstaining allowed more than one answer, and percentages therefore total more than 100.

⁴⁵ These ‘structural’ factors encourage abstention; but those who could not vote for reasons beyond their control might have voted under other circumstances.

⁴⁶ Because of technical and logistical limitations of survey firms in Colombia, some related to the armed conflict, parts of the country are not included in national surveys. Samples therefore do not include people from departments with a

Finally, the regularity of the election cycle in Colombia underscores the importance of elections as a mechanism of political participation. Presidential elections have been staged without interruption since 1958, as have congressional elections except at the beginning of the 1990s when the Congress elected in that year was revoked and replaced temporarily with a Constituent Assembly. Local and regional elections (mayors, municipal councils, governors and departmental assemblymen) have not been quite as regular. Most municipalities have held their elections on scheduled dates, but some have been postponed because of public order problems, and others staged elections not on the electoral cycle for reasons of resignations or removal from office.

Violence and Political Participation: An Empirical Analysis.

Thus far this study has revealed how the 2002 electoral process was affected by formidable pressures from armed groups. Additionally, we presented an overview of the fluctuations in voter participation, along with alternative explanations of abstention rates. This section offers an empirical analysis of the impact of political violence linked to armed conflict upon voter participation, based upon the 2002 elections for the lower house of Congress. The methodology involves the utilization of two regression models that permit an assessment of the impact of violence variables on the dependent variable, abstention. The incidence of violence on the dependent variable is analyzed for all of Colombia's municipalities for which data were available (The number of municipalities in the following analyses ranges between 903 and 1044). In addition, we shall examine the relationship between political violence and abstention in each of the thirty-two departments and the special electoral district for Bogotá. The second part of the empirical analysis evaluates the significance of dependent variables other than those related to violence on electoral abstention. This will involve the utilization of logistical regressions of variables from the data base constructed for the project which was financed by the National Planning Agency (DNP).

The dependent variable abstention (ABSTEN) is operationalised by dividing the total number of votes cast for Chamber candidates for the lower chamber in each municipality by the potential electorate in each, and subtracting that figure from 100.⁴⁷ Then the abstention rates were correlated with eleven independent variables, seven of which correspond to different measurements of violence.

The first group of independent variables corresponds to the presence or absence of armed groups in a given territory. Here, there are three variables: (1) GUERRILL, which corresponds to the presence of one of four guerrilla groups in a municipality; (2) PARAS, the presence of paramilitary groups; and (3) TODACARM, a variable that identifies municipalities in which both guerrillas and paramilitaries are present simultaneously.⁴⁸

The second constellation of variables measures the incidence of different actions that armed groups stage in each municipality or department. The variable ACCIOGUE measures guerrilla actions in each municipality or department for the period 2000-2001, as a percentage of total actions reported in Colombia during the same period. The variable MASACRES is employed as a measure of

strong guerrilla presence (Arauca, Caquetá and Putumayo). It is therefore highly likely that the effect of the war on political participation is understated in the study.

⁴⁷ Abstention was not calculated as a percentage of valid votes because the information on blank votes was not available for municipalities.

⁴⁸ For the analysis that takes the municipality as the unit of analysis, these variables are treated as dichotomous or dummy variables. Where the department is the unit of analysis, the presence of armed groups is used as a continuous variable, more specifically presence is measured as a percentage (i.e., percentage of municipalities in the department with the presence of one or the other type of armed group, or both). Measurements are calculated with information supplied by National Planning Department.

paramilitary actions.⁴⁹ MASACRES, calculated similarly to ACCIOGUE, is defined as a percentage of the massacres in each municipality or department divided by the national totals for 2000.⁵⁰

The third group of variables measures the incidence of violent homicides at municipal or departmental level. HPCH is the murder rate per 100,000 population in 2001, and MPCH is the death-rate in massacres per 100,000 population in 2000.⁵¹

The final set of variables is composed of POLICIA, a variable which identifies the municipalities which do or do not enjoy the presence of the National Police;⁵² ESTADO, which is an indicator of State presence;⁵³ ECONOMIA which is a measure of the standard of living in the municipalities and departments;⁵⁴ and POBLACIO, which is a measurement of the number of inhabitants in a municipality or department.⁵⁵ This final group of variables acts as a set of control variables that are incorporated into the analysis to evaluate a few classical hypotheses appearing in the Colombian literature to explain electoral abstention. More specifically, we shall examine the relationship between abstention and population density, socio-economic development, and State and police presence.⁵⁶

The following consists of a set of hypotheses that we shall evaluate through statistical analyses:

H1. Higher levels of electoral abstention are linked to guerrilla presence in a municipality or to a major presence of guerrillas in a department;

H 2. Lower levels of abstention are linked to the presence of paramilitary groups in a municipality, or a greater presence of the paramilitaries in a department.

H 3. Lower levels of abstention are associated with the simultaneous presence of guerrillas and paramilitaries;

H 4. Levels of abstention increase if there is a greater incidence of military action on the part of guerrillas in a municipality or a department;

⁴⁹ Massacres are used as a measure of paramilitary activity because throughout the 1990s this was their principal strategy. This does not signify that other armed groups do or do not use that form of action.

⁵⁰ Information on massacres and murders was provided by the Office of the Public Defender and the Judicial Police, DIJIN.

⁵¹ The HPCH variable was calculated from information supplied by DIJIN, and the figures for municipal population are from the National Statistical Institute, DANE. MPCH is calculated on the basis of massacre information supplied by the Office of the Public Defender.

⁵² Like the variables which measure the presence of armed groups, the variable police presence is used as a dummy when the unit of analysis is the municipality. When the unit of analysis is the department, the variable becomes a percentage (municipalities with police presence divided by the total number of municipalities in the department). Data were supplied by the Ministry of Defense.

⁵³ This index considers indicators of (1) State presence; (2) State spending; (3) municipal/departmental financial capacity; and (4) physical presence of institutions in the towns. Luis Sandoval & Constanza Téllez, 'La presencia territorial y la capacidad institucional y de gestión del Estado', in Fundación Social (ed.), *Municipios y Regiones, Una mirada desde la sociedad civil*, Bogotá: Fundación Social, 1998, pp.146-163.

⁵⁴ This index consists of a measurement of "12 variables which measure potential of access to and enjoyment of goods and services in the medium-term," The indicators are related to (a) "human capital resources available in the context of the market," (b) "potential generated by access to physical goods represented in a lifestyle," and (c) "the structure and size of the family" (Libardo Sarmiento & Clara Ramírez, 'Tipología municipal con base en las condiciones de vida', in Fundación Social (1998), pp. 247-261).

⁵⁵ Population data taken from DANE.

⁵⁶ In the Colombian literature, it has been suggested that the higher the social and economic standards of individuals, the more likely they are to vote (Elsa Gómez, *La elección presidencial de 1982 en Bogotá: dinámica de la opinión electoral*, Bogotá: ANIF, 1982, p. 61). In the context of the statistical analysis in this section, socio-economic conditions are analysed at the macro level (departmental and municipal) by means of the developmental indicator.

- H 5. Levels of abstention increase where there is a higher incidence of massacres in a municipality or department;
- H 6. Higher levels of abstention are associated with higher murder rates per 100,000 population;
- H 7. Higher abstention is associated with higher death rates resulting from massacres per 100,000 population;
- H 8. Lower levels of abstention are linked to higher levels of State presence;
- H 9. Lower levels of abstention are associated with police presence;
- H 10. Lower levels of abstention are linked to better living conditions; and
- H 11. Higher levels of abstention are associated with higher population densities.

In order to evaluate the above hypotheses, a number of regression models were applied that included four variable sets discussed above. Then a regression model was developed using the method of variable selection in successive steps. This method allowed for the construction of a robust regression model that generated the selection of variables that best explained the behaviour of the dependent variable, abstention. As mentioned above, this regression strategy was applied to all the country's municipalities for which data existed. Also, the strategy of running several regression models by variable sets was applied in the analyses using departments as units of analysis. The departmental runs were undertaken to offer a more extensive interpretation of the impact of violence on Colombia's voting population. In both cases, returns for the 2002 Chamber of Representatives are utilized.

The first model employed for municipalities (Table 3) offers empirical evidence supporting Hypothesis 1. This reveals that areas dominated by the guerrillas display higher levels of abstention than in those where guerrillas are not present or have not consolidated their hegemony. As mentioned earlier, FARC guerrillas promoted a strategy to boycott the elections during the presidential and congressional election campaigns, a strategy that enjoyed some success, as revealed by the statistical model. On the other hand, for Hypothesis 2, the postulated relationship between paramilitary presence and lower abstention rates is not sustained, thereby requiring the rejection of Hypothesis 2. In fact, paramilitary presence slightly increases electoral abstention at the municipal level. See Table 3. However, the data are insufficient to assess the success of the paramilitaries' strategy of penetrating the political system through promotion of specific candidates for elective office and opposition to others. Finally, the first model offers evidence unfavourable to Hypothesis 3, which states that in areas where both paramilitaries and guerrillas are present abstention rates are lower than in areas under the territorial control of the guerrilla. The relationship between the variable TODACARM and abstention is quite weak and not in the predicted direction. Thus Hypothesis 3 is rejected because the significance level is minimal.⁵⁷ This contradicts Kalyvas' assertion that where sovereignty has not been consolidated by one or other of the armed groups, this prevents them from successful attempts to influence or thwart political participation.⁵⁸ Indeed, most of these disputed areas remain under the sovereignty of the State, thereby offering an explanation as to why abstention is not affected drastically in those sites.

Table 3 - Model 1

⁵⁷ Of course, there are documented cases of disputes between armed groups of the same type, i.e., guerrillas have fought guerrillas for territory (Arauca) and paramilitaries have engaged in combat with paramilitaries (Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta).

⁵⁸ Sthatis Kalyvas, 'La violencia en medio de la guerra civil. Esbozo de una teoría', *Análisis Político*, 42 (January-April 2001), p.22.

| Dependent Variable Abstention | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| | Coefficients (St Err.) | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
| (Constant) | 59.198 (0.663) | | 0.000 |
| GUERRILL | 6.18 (0.938) | 0.242 | 0.000 |
| PARAS | 1.126 (1.182) | 0.039 | 0.536 |
| TODACARM | .050 (2.133) | 0.002 | 0.981 |
| | | | |
| N | 918 | | |
| R ² | 0.065 | | |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.062 | | |

The second regression model for municipalities (Table 4) offers empirical support for Hypothesis 4 that guerrilla actions affect participation by increasing abstention levels. This finding reinforces results of the first regression model – guerrilla presence negatively affects participation. Again, what this reflects is the effect of the strategy to sabotage the 2002 elections. With regard to Hypothesis 5, the regression model fails to offer statistical support for its acceptance. Thus, we cannot conclude that massacres as a form of paramilitary action affect political participation. The massacre strategy basically seeks to discourage people from supporting the guerrillas rather than impeding electoral participation.

Table 4 - Model 2

| Dependent Variable Abstention | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| | Coefficients (St Err.) | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
| (Constant) | 61.351 (0.458) | | 0.000 |
| MASACRES | 1.221 (1.428) | 0.027 | 0.410 |
| ACCIOGUE | 13.622 (2.146) | 0.206 | 0.000 |
| | | | |
| N | 1044 | | |
| R ² | 0.047 | | |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.045 | | |

The third model (Table 5) offers statistical support for the hypotheses regarding the incidence of both homicides (H6) and deaths from massacres (H7). The relationship between murder rates, both homicides and massacres, and abstention rates shown in the model supports both hypotheses in a statistically significant manner. This finding reveals that political as well as non-political violence

affects political participation. Thus municipalities affected by high levels of criminal activity and political violence represent contexts in which participation in public life is thwarted.

Table 5 - Model 3

| Dependent Variable Abstention | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| | Coefficients (St Err.) | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
| (Constant) | 60.402 (0.507) | | 0.000 |
| HPCH | 0.029 0.005 | 0.192 | 0.000 |
| MPCH | 0.065 0.019 | 0.115 | 0.001 |
| | | | |
| N | 964 | | |
| R ² | 0.066 | | |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.064 | | |

The fourth model for municipalities (Table 6) includes socio-economic variables, which, though not statistically significant (except ECONOM at the .045 level), sustain the direction of Hypotheses 8, 9, 10 and 11. That is, State and police presence, along with higher standards of living, promote political participation in the sense that the signs of the predicted relationships are in the right direction. The sign of the coefficient obtained for the variable population indicates that higher population densities coincide with higher abstention levels.

Table 6 - Model 4

| Dependent Variable Abstention | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| | Coefficients (St Err.) | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
| (Constant) | 68.804 (6.454) | | 0.000 |
| POLICÍA | -1.060 (1.268) | -0.028 | 0.403 |
| ESTADO | -0.197 (0.469) | -0.047 | 0.675 |
| ECONOMÍA | -0.120 (0.060) | -0.078 | 0.045 |
| POBLACIO | 1.082E-05 (0.000) | -0.091 | 0.432 |
| N | 979 | | |
| R ² | 0.006 | | |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.002 | | |

Table 7 - Model 5

| Dependent Variable Abstention |
|----------------------------------|
|----------------------------------|

| | Coefficients (St Err.) | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| (Constant) | 60.256 (1.092) | | 0.000 |
| GUERRILL | 4.848 (0.815) | 0.192 | 0.000 |
| HPCH | 0.020 (0.005) | 0.141 | 0.000 |
| ACCIOGUE | 8.601 (1.918) | 0.149 | 0.000 |
| MPCH | 0.052 (0.018) | 0.096 | 0.004 |
| ECONOM | -0.131 0.047 | -0.089 | 0.005 |
| N | 903 | | |
| R² | 0.138 | | |
| Adjusted R² | 0.133 | | |

Finally, the fifth regression model based on municipalities (Table 7) employs the method of variable selection by successive steps, allowing for the incorporation of all the independent variables in the statistical analysis. With this procedure, a model emerged that included the five independent variables most closely related to the dependent variable, electoral abstention: guerrilla presence, homicides, guerrilla actions, massacres, and living conditions.

In general terms, the coefficient obtained for each variable in the regression model sustains the proposed hypotheses, along with results of the foregoing models. Thus presence of guerrillas is a variable associated with higher levels of abstention. Likewise, higher rates of homicide, guerrilla actions, and massacres decrease political participation, while higher living standards in a municipality are associated with higher rates of electoral participation. Where the guerrillas have consolidated their control, electoral participation is affected negatively because abstention represents a political strategy of the guerrilla. According to Ferro and Uribe, members of FARC's Secretariat maintain that FARC formulated a strategy of sabotaging elections for the first time in 1997 as a reaction to the massacre of UP members.⁵⁹ Testimony of a guerrilla commander reflects the development of that strategy in areas controlled by that armed group:

In the 1997 elections, perhaps for the first time, we began to talk about abstention. There were a number of reasons for this, one of which reacted to the Establishment's annihilation of the opposition, especially the UP although that is not the only case... we said that democracy in Colombia was severely restricted because at that time there was no possibility that other sectors not in some way related to the Establishment could take part. It is the reason why we call on people to abstain as a way of discrediting the system, and Colombia's form of democracy, which is simply the exercise of casting a vote, and no more than that.⁶⁰

We could not say, we're going to boycott these elections. We have no capacity to do so. What we did say was that in the areas in which we control, we are not going to allow the traditional parties to make hay...Therefore we said we are going to control some areas, not all, because coalitions were negotiated in some places.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Juan Guillermo Ferro & Graciela Uribe, *El orden de la guerra. Las FARC entre la organización y la política*, Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, 2002.

⁶⁰ Ferro & Uribe (2002), p.139.

⁶¹ Ferro & Uribe (2002), p.140.

Another result of the statistical analysis that is quite relevant to this point is that in areas where paramilitaries and guerrillas are both present, levels of abstention tend not to be affected significantly. In areas where armed groups are struggling to establish territorial control, military confrontation between guerrillas and paramilitaries prevents the FARC from implementing its actions to undermine elections. Thus restrictions on participation are associated with the establishment of military control that allows an armed group to implement strategies of political control over the local population. In cases where military disputes between armed groups exist, they are interested more in the consolidation of military and territorial control than political control, which represents a second phase of local penetration.

Inclusion of variables measuring living standards and police presence, shown in Model 5, suggest that abstention is lower in municipalities where the forces of law and order are conspicuous. It is less likely that guerrillas will be successful in implementing their strategy of thwarting elections.⁶² Finally, areas characterized by high levels of economic development manifest the lowest degrees of abstention. Thus a variable not associated with armed conflict represents a relevant explanation of electoral abstention.

The next stage of the analysis consists of utilizing the same variables as in the previous portion of the paper based upon municipalities, but shifting the units of analysis to the departments. Because of the diversity in political violence manifested at the municipal level within departments, the expectation is that results of the departmental level analyses will be less robust than at the municipal level.

The first model (Table 7) reflects an impact of the variables guerrilla and paramilitary presence, similar to the results presented in Model 1 for municipalities (Table 3). A guerrilla presence encourages higher levels of abstention, while paramilitary presence operates in the reverse direction. However, neither relationship is significant at the .05 level. The sign of the coefficient of the variable simultaneous presence of guerrillas and paramilitaries is positive, thus suggesting that abstention mounts in those sites. However, Hypothesis 3 is not sustained statistically (abstention tends to decrease in areas disputed by guerrillas and paramilitaries). To the contrary, the sign of the coefficient in Model 1 by departments is that the presence of both guerrillas and paramilitaries at the same time encourages high levels of abstention. The significance levels of the results for variables included in Model 1 by departments are not robust.

Table 8 - Model 1

| Dependent Variable Abstention | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| | Coefficients (St Err.) | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
| (Constant) | 55.686 (2.560) | | 0.000 |
| GUERRILL | 9.490 (5338) | 0.400 | 0.086 |
| PARAS | -11.717 (10.403) | -0.345 | 0.270 |
| TODACARM | 9.891 (12.755) | 0.281 | 0.445 |
| | | | |
| N | 32* | | |

⁶² In two of the four municipalities in the sample where there was no police presence, some of the highest abstention figures were recorded.

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|--|--|
| R² | 0.223 | | |
| Adjusted R² | 0.140 | | |

*For this Table, data on guerrilla presence is not available for one department, leaving thirty-two electoral districts for analysis.

The second model (Table 8) shows results similar to those of the municipal Model 2 (Table 4). Departments with high levels of guerrilla activity tend to register higher levels of abstention. Also, the variable massacres, an approximation of paramilitary action, is inversely related to abstention. In this Model only the variable guerrilla actions displays a coefficient with a relatively high degree of significance.

Table 8 - Model 2

| Dependent Variable Abstention | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| | Coefficients (St Err.) | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
| (Constant) | 57.006 (1.509) | | 0.000 |
| ACCIOGUE | 98.476 (35.201) | 0.490 | 0.009 |
| MASACRES | -9.228 (23.468) | -0.069 | 0.697 |
| | | | |
| N | 33 | | |
| R² | 0.219 | | |
| Adjusted R² | 0.167 | | |

Similar to Model 3 of the municipal analysis, Table 9 includes the independent variables of homicides and deaths by massacres, revealing a positive relationship between homicides and electoral abstention. This finding shows that expressions of violence, political or otherwise, stifle voter interest in elections. Results obtained in this regression model for deaths by massacre were not statistically significant.

Table 9 - Model 3

| Dependent Variable Abstention | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| | Coefficients (St Err.) | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
| (Constant) | 54.987 (2.053) | | 0.000 |
| HPCH | 0.101 (0.028) | 0.576 | 0.001 |
| MPCH | 0.214 (0.220) | -0.153 | 0.339 |
| | | | |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|--|--|
| N | 33 | | |
| R² | 0.307 | | |
| Adjusted R² | 0.261 | | |

The fourth regression model (Table 10), based upon socio-economic variables, reveals that none of these factors impacted on abstention at the departmental level.

Table 10 - Model 4

| Dependent Variable Abstention | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| | Coefficients (St Err.) | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
| (Constant) | 70.319 (8.401) | | 0.000 |
| ECONOMÍA | -0.159 (0.243) | -0.365 | 0.519 |
| POLICÍA | -11.703 (10.374) | -0.225 | 0.269 |
| ESTADO | 0.191 (0.231) | 0.441 | 0.416 |
| POBLACIO | 1.815E-07 (0.000) | 0.038 | 0.921 |
| | | | |
| N | 33 | | |
| R² | 0.084 | | |
| Adjusted R² | -0.052 | | |

Finally, the last departmental model (Table 11), constructed by the method of successive steps, selected only one independent variable included in that analysis, namely homicides. What this model underscores is that murder rates dramatically affect electoral abstention. This model indicates that guerrilla presence is not the only factor that affects political participation; exclusion of this variable from the model had no impact at the departmental level, only in those areas the FARC controls. Thus while the guerrillas have succeeded in staging military operations in many parts of the country, this has not resulted in territorial control, which carries with it lower abstention rates. Moreover, guerrilla domination is concentrated in areas with low population densities, areas largely on the periphery, not in urban areas where the population tends to be concentrated. Finally, as noted above, because of the heterogeneity of Colombia's departments in terms of guerrilla and paramilitary actions, municipalities are more appropriate units of analysis than departments.

Table 11 - Model 5

| Dependent Variable Abstention | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| | Coefficients (St Err.) | Standardized Coefficients | Significance |
| (Constant) | 53.453 (1.997) | | 0.000 |
| HPCH | 0.102 (0.028) | 0.563 | 0.001 |
| | | | |
| N | 33 | | |
| R ² | 0.317 | | |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.294 | | |

Conclusions

The third wave of democracy and institutional engineering that swept Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s underscored an active citizen involvement in the “new” democracies. Particular emphasis was placed upon the sovereignty of the people and mechanisms of direct democracy, such as referenda, recall, and plebiscites. Yet, as argued in this paper, the extent of political participation in democratic regimes remains inconclusive in part because of differing conceptualisations not only of political participation but democracy as well. What is an appropriate level of electoral participation for the promotion of democratic consolidation? What is the relationship between political participation and governability? To what extent are mechanisms of direct democracy compatible with representative democracy? These are tough questions that cannot be answered satisfactorily in the abstract. Additional factors or variables necessarily must be included in the analysis as well, such as the institutionalisation of political organizations and governmental entities, leadership characteristics, historical and political trajectories, the strength of civil society, economic performance, and contextual challenges confronting the political system.

Nonetheless, political participation constitutes a fundamental pillar of both direct and representative democracy despite the empirical and theoretical ambiguities surrounding the concept. This paper has focused upon two fundamental components of electoral participation in Colombia: (1) the opportunity structure associated with the political system and (2) the incidence and salience of specific contextual issues in the 2002 electoral campaigns. With respect to the first, the constitutional foundations of the Colombian political system offer ample opportunities for Colombians to participate actively in the electoral process. Yet contextual factors associated with elevated levels of political violence stemming from guerrilla, paramilitary, narco and common criminal activities contributed to higher abstention rates during the 2002 elections than otherwise would have been the case. Moreover, a tradition of electoral abstention, related in part to the non-obligatory vote, represented another factor that elevated the abstention rate.

This article has evaluated the impact of political violence on the dynamics of Colombian elections, more specifically the 2002 elections to the lower house of Congress. After discussing some theoretical and methodological tenets associated with the concepts of democracy and political participation, the next section presented an overview of the assaults upon Colombian democracy during the 2002 electoral campaigns, emphasizing activities of guerrilla and paramilitary groups that had an impact on the campaign, especially the intimidation of candidates, the kidnapping of politicians, deaths associated with political violence, and FARC’s strategy of boycotting the elections. Obviously, the context in which the elections unfolded was not ideal in terms of democratic consolidation, but nonetheless failed to undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process. In the following section, the emphasis shifted to the major focus of this study, namely electoral participation. Electoral abstention in Colombia traditionally has exceeded that of

European and Latin American countries, in part for reasons of the non-obligatory nature of the vote in Colombia.

Subsequent sections of the article consisted of quantitative analyses of the impact of violence upon electoral abstention. The dynamics of violence that plague Colombian society are generating negative effects upon the electoral process, especially in areas controlled by the FARC guerrillas. Despite that strategy, the data reveal, and the guerrillas acknowledge, that its success was limited largely to areas where they enjoy territorial domination. The impact of political violence upon electoral participation suggests a growing challenge to democratic institutions and organizations in the country, but not to the extent of undermining the legitimacy associated with the electoral process. To this point, the capacity of political institutions to resist assaults of armed groups is rather remarkable, reflecting a long tradition of institutionalized elections upon which Colombian democracy rests.

The municipal-level analyses suggest that abstention rates increase with guerrilla presence, high rates of homicides and massacres, and high incidences of guerrilla activity. In contrast, abstention tends to decrease in those municipalities with higher living standards. At the departmental level, only homicide rates and guerrilla activity impact negatively on participation rates. One of the significant findings of this study suggests that non-political as well as political violence affects the involvement of Colombian citizens in the electoral process. Unlike the guerrillas, non-political agents of violence have not formulated a strategy to undercut the electoral process, but their actions discourage active citizen involvement. Thus public policy designed to reduce homicidal violence not only would defend life, but the robustness of Colombia's democracy as well. Linkages between violence and electoral abstention established in this study pose questions yet unanswered as to the differential impact of political and non-political violence upon electoral abstention.

In summary, although Colombian democracy is under assault from armed actors and undermined by socio-economic factors, its viability has not been contested to the point of regime collapse, nor is that likely to occur in the near future. While it is appropriate to label Colombia a crisis state, neither the parameters nor the intensity of the crisis permit either theoretical or empirical conclusions as to the calibre or endurance of its democratic regime. For the past fifty or so years, the Colombian State has been characterized by perpetual crisis, and that is not likely to change in the foreseeable future.

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Research Objectives

- 1 We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- 2 We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- 3 We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- 4 We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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