

Colombian Foreign Policy and Public Opinion in Electoral Campaigns¹

Política exterior colombiana y opinión pública en campañas electorales

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Abstract

What is the relationship between foreign policy, electoral campaigns, and public opinion? This work analyzes the electoral campaigns in Colombia in 2018 (Iván Duque) and 2022 (Gustavo Petro). The profiles of the candidates and their programmatic agendas are analyzed, identifying the continuity of issues associated with peace, security, borders, and the complex relationship

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with Venezuela. Despite the above, there was a turn to the left that shows changes in the preferences of Colombian public opinion.

Keywords: Colombia, Foreign Policy, Electoral Campaigns, Agenda-Setting, Public Opinion, Post-Conflict.

Resumen

¿Cómo es la relación entre política exterior, campañas electorales y opinión pública? Este trabajo analiza las campañas electorales en Colombia de 2018 (Iván Duque) y 2022 (Gustavo Petro). Se analizan los perfiles de los candidatos y sus agendas programáticas, identificando la continuidad de temas asociados a la paz, la seguridad, las fronteras y la compleja relación con Venezuela. A pesar de lo anterior, se presentó un giro a la izquierda que da cuenta de cambios en las preferencias de la opinión pública colombiana.

Palabras-clave: Colombia, política exterior, campañas electorales, agenda-setting, opinión pública, posconflicto.

Introduction

This article analyzes the role of foreign policy in the discourse and program of the electoral campaigns for the Colombian presidency (2017-2018 and 2021-2022). Historically, the country's foreign agenda had played only a limited role in candidates' programs, although the internationalization of the armed conflict became a relevant issue in recent decades. This was related to the low profile of Colombian foreign policy (CFP) due to historical events unfavorable for the national interest: the loss of Panama at the beginning of the 20th century (Cepeda & Pardo, 2001; Drekonja, 1983; Pardo & Tokatlian, 1988; A. B. Tickner, 2000) and, more recently, the adverse ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2012 regarding the maritime dispute with Nicaragua, finally resolved in 2023 (BBC Mundo, 2014; ICJ, 2012, 2023). Similarly, the long internal conflict captured much of the interest of public opinion (Gutiérrez et al., 2006; Guzmán et al., 2005; G. Sánchez, 1989, 2013, 2014).

The internal conflict even captured the attention and the historiographical focus on the role of Colombia in the Latin American Cold War (Gallardo-Saborido & Ilian, 2021), simplifying it to the mechanics of an internal struggle between irregular military groups against the public force, when the very dynamics of guerrilla warfare and the various political and strategic reactions should have placed Colombia on the chessboard of the Cold War as one of the protagonists in Latin America. Analysis of the conflict has lacked an

international perspective, as a constitutive element of foreign policy during the bipolar world, however, it has only been limited to a domestic interpretation (Ramírez, 2011; Tokatlian, 1996) with allusions to its international character, only from the perspective of the cooperation of “intervention” of the United States (US) (A. B. Tickner, 2007).

Historically, the international aspect of the internal conflict received more attention from the historical mechanics of Colombia throughout the 20th century than with respect to its own international role, beyond the conflict itself, and to a similar extent, the international aspect in presidential campaigns, in the opposite sense, has not been the preferred topic of presidential candidates. Nevertheless, this interest has been increasing recently, as a critical mass is expanding as a result of a more educated middle class (DANE, 2019), and an increase in the student and professional demographics in Colombian universities over the last two decades, where international debate has expanded into more sophisticated spaces for thought and political conversation (Portafolio, 2022; Ruiz et al., 2008)⁴.

Likewise, in recent decades the governments of the day have sought support from the international community to strengthen security, for example, during the negotiation and execution of Plan Colombia, as well as for the peace process undertaken with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (2012-2016). Since the signing of the Peace Agreements with said group, the post-conflict period in Colombia has represented a transcendental scenario of change (Caracol TV.com, 2016; El Tiempo, 2016). Consequently, the electoral campaigns (2017-2018 and 2021-2022) that resulted in the victories of Iván Duque and Gustavo Petro, constitute two case studies that reflect the decline of the Uribista political project and, for the first time in history, the country’s shift to the left, driven by the protests across Latin America in 2019 and the economic consequences of Covid-19 (F. Sánchez & Niño, 2020, 2022). This period is also an example of how foreign policy takes into account the preferences of a middle class that is more enlightened and interested in international issues.

At the same time, the most recent campaign that resulted in the victory of Petro raised a different foreign policy agenda that is being carried out by the new government: to thaw relations with the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro. This same roadmap, announced in Petro’s electoral campaign, connects to the main vector of his candidacy –the transition to the decarbonization of the Colombian productive model– in this sense, a policy of no more oil and gas exploration (Petro & Márquez, 2022) was managed, leading to the controversial project of using Venezuela as a possible gas supplier.

⁴ In this regard is valuable the project *Colombia and the World* that explores the perceptions of Colombians about international issues and the country’s role in the world. The project presents surveys from 2008 (Botero & Tickner, 2009), and 2010, 2012, 2015 (A. Tickner et al., 2015).

The other discursive element within the electoral campaign was “Total Peace”, resuming dialogues with all the armed groups that remain active, starting with the National Liberation Army (ELN) and with Venezuela as interlocutor, meaning that the détente between Bogotá and Caracas was a thematic axis of Petro’s electoral campaign in terms of his recurring arguments during the presidential campaign (2021-2022).

This article is developed as follows. Firstly, a review of literature on foreign policy, the media, and public opinion. Secondly, a study of the profiles of the presidential candidates and the main issues of the “international agenda” consigned in their government programs. Thirdly, a geographical characterization of how the candidates emphasized their foreign policy proposals. And finally, by way of conclusion, an analytical approach is proposed regarding the rise of foreign policy in the presidential campaigns of societies in post-conflict processes.

Foreign Policy, the Media, and Public Opinion

There is a valuable research agenda on the relationship between foreign policy, the media, and public opinion. According to Dalton, international issues have less weight than domestic ones, but some issues like cooperation, conflicts, and attitudes towards international organizations can attract attention in certain periods (2014, p. 122). For Entman, the framing is a common activity in the mass media, depending on the issues and the editorial guidelines (1991, 1993).

According to Neack, political decision-makers can take note of, fear, or manipulate polls and the media in their favor to use them as political resources (2019, p. 119). In this regard, there are three approaches to the relationship between foreign policy and public opinion. The first is known as the “Almond-Lippmann consensus”, in which the public does not have a clear and structured vision of public opinion in general and, therefore, it can be ignored by decision-makers (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017; Neack, 2019). The second posits that the public has a structured and stable vision of foreign policy (Neack, 2019) and that both elites and the public are increasingly polarized (Druckman et al., 2013). The third suggests that public opinion influences foreign policy formulation (Neack, 2019), and that the challenge lies in determining to what extent this is true (Foyle, 2017). The ideas in Graham Allison’s *Essence of Decision* (1971).

More recent studies have found that both experts and the media in the US misjudge the foreign policy perceptions of public opinion in their country because the elites prejudicedly think that the majority of the population disapproves of an active international role for the country and, additionally, because the media present foreign policy from an elite perspective that rarely

considers the perceptions of the general public (Gift & Monten, 2021). Other works have focused on “reputation costs.” Generally, decision-makers must take into account the preferences and concerns of the public about foreign policy: they are sanctioned when they promise one thing and do another. The perception of these costs by audiences relates to pre-existing orientations on foreign policy (Brutger & Kertzer, 2018).

Other recent works have found that high-level diplomatic visits have a positive influence on public opinion regarding international affairs (Goldsmith et al., 2021). Other research confirms that audiences with strong political affiliations can identify the manipulation and concealing of information by their favorite media channels (Broockman et al., 2022). A group that usually followed FOX News was invited to watch CNN, generating “multiple effects” on the beliefs and attitudes of Republican Party members, who identified differences in the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic and the serious race-related issues of the day (Broockman et al., 2022).

The following sections analyze the profiles of the candidates, their political proposals, and the positioning of international issues during the two most recent Colombian presidential elections.

The Campaigns for 2018

The 2017-2018 electoral campaign in Colombia was shaped by the consolidation of the *Centro Democrático* (Democratic Center) party led by Álvaro Uribe, the birth of a moderate center embodied in Sergio Fajardo⁵, and the rise of a leftist movement with the possibility of reaching the presidential palace, the Casa de Nariño, for the first time in history: the *Colombia Humana* (Humane Colombia) coalition led by Gustavo Petro⁶.

The contenders were: Iván Duque, the candidate of Uribe –the former president of the country, and opponent of outgoing President Juan Manuel Santos and the peace process (El País, 2018); Germán Vargas Lleras, former vice-president of Santos and natural heir to the government, supported by the political machine of the Liberal Party; Humberto de la Calle, former Chief Negotiator of the peace process, who had the support of moderate liberals; Fajardo, an academic, former mayor of Medellín, and former governor of Antioquia who had an alternative project; and, finally, Petro, a former M-19 militant and leader of the left-wing progressive movement.

⁵ Fajardo presented himself as candidate for a coalition made up of the *Polo Democrático Alternativo* (Alternative Democratic Pole), the *Alianza Verde* (Green Alliance), and the *Movimiento Compromiso Ciudadano* (Citizen Commitment Movement).

⁶ Despite still are in the political arena, the traditional politic parties *Liberal* and *Conservative* continues in decadence.

In terms of academic training, all the candidates had studied abroad, with the exception of de la Calle, who was the only one who had served as an ambassador (Table 1). For his part, Petro was a diplomatic attaché in Brussels, and Duque had studied International Economic Law and worked at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). Vargas Lleras had the most traditional profile, with only studies abroad, but he also had solid experience as a senator and vice-president of Santos.

Candidate / Theme	Studies abroad ⁷	Training in international relations or diplomacy	Previous diplomatic experience	Previous experience in international organizations
de la Calle			x	
Duque	x	x		x
Fajardo	x			
Petro	x		x	
Vargas Lleras	x			

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The next section will show how the international agenda was positioned in the Colombian electoral debate, within the framework of a society polarized for more than fifty years by an internal conflict, which went from the traditional dispute between the Liberal and Conservative parties to a fight between defenders and detractors of the Peace Agreements with the FARC, signed in 2016, and between those who followed the divergent visions of former presidents Uribe and Santos.

The peace process undertaken in Havana, from 2012 to 2016, eased domestic tension, made internal issues like acute corruption at different levels of the state increasingly visible, and favored the growing importance of some topics on the Colombian international agenda, including: border issues with Ecuador and Venezuela, the relationship with the US during the Trump administration, and the dispute with Nicaragua over the island of San Andrés after the 2012 ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in which Colombia lost 40% of its maritime territory, equivalent to 75,000 km² (El País, 2012; ICJ, 2012).

⁷ Ivan Duque has a Master in Public Policy and Public Management from Georgetown University and a Master in Economic Law from American University. Sergio Fajardo is Ph.D. in Mathematics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison

The presidential debate televised by *Radio Cadena Nacional* (RCN) reflected the importance of the international agenda. In addition to some domestic issues, six points related to the role of Colombia in the world were discussed: i) relations with the government and opposition in Venezuela, ii) San Andrés and the continental shelf, iii) the foreign service: career diplomats or political quotas?, iv) relations with Ecuador, the ELN, and the dissidents crisis, v) relations with the US in the Trump era and, vi) terrorism and transnational organized crime (RCN-NTN24, 2018).

For this work, we have selected the programmatic proposals of the candidates regarding the issues listed in Table 2, since they stood out as the most controversial during the televised debate. It is worth clarifying that Duque won the electoral campaign, obtaining 53.98% of votes in the second round, compared to 41.81% for Petro (RNEC, 2018).

Table 2. Selected Issues 2017-2018
Ecuador
Venezuela
The US – Trump
San Andrés, litigation before the ICJ

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on (de la Calle, 2018b, 2018a; Duque, 2018; Fajardo, 2018; Petro, 2018).

Below, we identify the management by, and relevance of, these issues for the candidates in their programmatic agendas.

Relations with Ecuador, the ELN, and the Dissidents Crisis

De la Calle stated that it was necessary to establish binational cooperation between governments and the military forces of the two countries in order to confront, through the legitimate force of the state, the illegal armed groups located on the border (de la Calle, 2018a; RCN-NTN24, 2018). Fajardo suggested that the Ecuadorian government should provide information on the location of the armed groups to the Colombian authorities, in order to capture those who were responsible for criminal and illegal acts, both on the border between the two countries and in the region generally (Fajardo, 2018).

For his part, Petro argued that the main problems that arose on the border with Ecuador corresponded to the occupation by mafias that produced and commercialized cocaine. Therefore, he argued in favor of a crop substitution

plan, to remove the control that these groups held over the territory and the population. This crop substitution should not include the use of glyphosate, nor should it be mandatory (Petro, 2018). Vargas Lleras (2018) proposed the creation of binational mechanisms to strengthen existing cross-border programs, as well as to establish new ones. Finally, Duque did not make a concrete proposal to deal with the situation on the Colombian-Ecuadorian border.

Relations with the Government and Opposition in Venezuela

De la Calle took this problem to be a “humanitarian crisis” (de la Calle, 2018a), that should be resolved through the creation of a regional strategy and a multilateral alliance that would ensure the rights of Venezuelan citizens and control migration by strengthening border control posts and giving priority to the implementation of a public health policy (de la Calle, 2018a).

For his part, Duque emphasized that foreign policy should be strong in denouncing the abuses committed by the government of Nicolás Maduro to the Inter-American Human Rights System. In this sense, the strategy would be one of non-indifference and defense towards the actions of the neighboring country (Duque, 2018).

Fajardo signaled that “the Venezuelan government is the socialism of the 21st century” (Fajardo, 2018) making it necessary to summon the international community to intervene and avoid a future humanitarian crisis. He pointed out that Colombia should actively participate in the respective opinions or interventions. Likewise, he proposed policies to assist Venezuelan migrants in terms of health and employment. Finally, he stressed that it was necessary to strengthen immigration controls on the border in order to prevent crime (Fajardo, 2018).

Petro considered that Colombia should guarantee the presence of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in Venezuela and ensure that the government comply with the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Likewise, he proposed inviting the Venezuelan regime to an international conference on migration and exodus. On the other hand, he stated that Colombia should establish a policy of opening food supplies to provide assistance to Venezuelan citizens who remain in their country, through a remunerative exchange rate, in which Colombian *campesinos* (small-scale farmers) would actively participate (RCN-NTN24, 2018).

Vargas Lleras proposed a 3-axis migration policy: i) redefining and controlling the phenomenon of Venezuelan migration, ii) demanding compliance with labor standards for Venezuelan nationals in Colombia and, iii) a public policy for the Colombian-Venezuelan population and their families who would

return from Colombia to Venezuela. He also posited a zero tolerance position regarding incursions by the Venezuelan armed forces and, finally, called for an institution focused on prevention and humanitarian care to safeguard the health stability of Colombia and prevent diseases coming from Venezuela (Vargas Lleras, 2018).

Relations with the US during the Trump Administration

Petro proposed a foreign policy independent of Trump's vision of security and anti-drug policy. Firmly in contrast to this, he postulated the formulation of a Colombian anti-drug strategy, in order to put it into operation and make it effective by considering the Colombian context and its normativity. In addition, marking a clear difference to Trump's environmental vision, Petro suggested Colombia could lead the fight against climate change on the continent and would position itself as a regional and global leader in the face of global challenges of human security, especially in terms of climate change, natural hazard risk management, environmental protection, clean energy development and energy transition, by actively participating in cooperation and existing international regimes (Petro, 2018).

Vargas Lleras sought to review each point of the Free Trade Agreement between Colombia and the US, in order to establish what the benefits have been for the country in terms of its trade balance (Vargas Lleras, 2018). De la Calle limited his proposal to the issue of immigration, proposing that, through his Foreign Ministry, mechanisms would be established to guarantee favorable conditions for Colombians in the US regarding educational, labor, pension and health issues (de la Calle, 2018b; RCN-NTN24, 2018). Finally, both Fajardo and Duque lacked concrete proposals in this area.

Border Dispute with Nicaragua over the Island of San Andrés

Although, at first glance, this appears to be a topic of great relevance for Colombian Foreign Policy (CFP), taking into account the legal decisions taken by the ICJ on the matter, the candidates had few concrete proposals to face this situation in an eventual government. Vargas Lleras stated that there should be actions to protect maritime borders, based on the competence of the National Agency for Legal Defense of the State (ANDJE) regarding disputes in international courts (Vargas Lleras, 2018).

Petro expressed his interest in the creation of a state policy that would prevent the successive losses and fragmentation of the territory, developing a proactive approach with which to defend national, territorial, and sovereign interests (Petro, 2018). Duque proposed arguing before the ICJ that Colombia could exercise sovereignty up to the 82nd meridian, but did not specify what

arguments he would use for that purpose (RCN-NTN24, 2018). Fajardo proposed a mechanism for dialogue and consultation, which would guarantee benefits for both states (Fajardo, 2018). Finally, de la Calle did not contemplate specific measures within his government program to deal with this issue.

It is important to note that there were other topics in the candidates' programs that did not come up in the RCN debate. For example, de la Calle prioritized immigration policy in terms of giving Colombians abroad guarantees regarding health, education, employment, and political participation in congress. He also highlighted a sustainable tourism policy and the strengthening of greater control over the Amazonian territory shared with Brazil and Peru, emphasizing the protection of Colombian sovereignty and resources (de la Calle, 2018b).

Fajardo focused on a government program that would make Colombia an international benchmark in education, the fight against corruption, the defense of human rights, the environment, and diversity, and a consolidated migration policy (Fajardo, 2018). For his part, Vargas Lleras raised the need to strengthen international cooperation in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, through a containment policy (Fajardo, 2018).

Finally, Petro argued that, to achieve his objectives in terms of regional and global leadership regarding the global challenges of human security, it would be necessary to “emphasize south-south cooperation in exchanges of knowledge and of human, linguistic, artistic, cultural, and environmental capacities” (Petro, 2018). Likewise, mechanisms for dialogue, cooperation, and multilateral agreement would be used, and “primary importance would be given to the search to overcome structural inequalities in the Pacific, Amazon, Orinoquia and Caribbean regions, especially those border populations and departments that naturally connect Colombia with the Asian, Latin American, Central American, and Caribbean world” (Petro, 2018; RCN-NTN24, 2018).

Another aspect that can be identified in the programs of the candidates is their regional emphasis (Table 3). We find that de la Calle, Fajardo, and Petro prioritized the immediate regional environment of Latin America, while both de la Calle and Petro also emphasized Europe, and de la Calle also included Asia-Oceania. For his part, Duque prioritized the US and Europe, while Vargas Lleras focused exclusively on the US.

	Regional (Latin America)	The US	Europe	Asia, Africa Oceania
de la Calle	x		x	x
Duque		x	x	
Fajardo	x			
Petro	x		x	
Vargas Lleras		x		

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on (de la Calle, 2018b, 2018a; Duque, 2018; Fajardo, 2018; Petro, 2018; Vargas Lleras, 2018).

After winning the election, and even before taking office, Duque made diplomatic visits to the US and Spain that he publicized on his social networks (Semana, 2018).

The Campaigns for 2022

Gustavo Petro resumed the race for the presidency in 2021, in the context of widespread protests in the streets (known as the “21N” phenomenon) that represented an even greater erosion in the representativeness of the Colombian political model, with divisions between the so-called Uribista and militant anti-Uribista movements (Gamboa, 2019; Kajsui, 2022; López, 2022; Ramírez, 2011; Saint-Upéry, 2020). The presidential candidates assumed positions either close to, or openly rejecting, the political paradigm of Álvaro Uribe amid strong pressure against the governments of Uribe and his delegate or heir in the presidency, then president Iván Duque.

Venezuela (diplomatic relations and migration)
The Russian invasion of Ukraine
Relations with Nicaragua following the ICJ ruling

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Clearly, the political treatment of the post-conflict period has been a key feature in electoral campaigns since the signing of the Peace Agreements, leading to debates on international participation from the semantic approaches most interested in assigning either positive or negative meanings within the Colombian political conversation to the US, Venezuela, and Cuba. As Duncan (2022) affirms, once the FARC withdrew and its military apparatus was weakened—first by the public security actions of the state, and then by the signing of the Peace Agreements—this change has made the conflict a narrative means with which to delegitimize the political-electoral opponent.

Hereditary Uribism suffers the weight of “false positives”⁸, while the other ideological wing suffers the weight of its sympathies for, or at the very least critical neutrality, regarding the Venezuelan, Nicaraguan, and Cuban governments. Both issues are inextricably connected to a foreign policy discursive agenda about recognizing, or not, the symbolic president Juan Guaidó, or recognizing and internationally legitimizing the government of Nicolás Maduro (Bolton, 2020). It should be remembered that the economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela was one of the most important factors behind the electoral victory of Duque in 2018 (Duque, 2018).

Likewise, an unavoidable fact was the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in an economic crisis due to the almost total closure of commercial activities, mitigated only by the *Ingreso Solidario* (Solidarity Income) program of subsidies (Gallego et al., 2021). Added to this phenomenon is the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, with a critical exodus of migrants to Colombia in various waves, making its management a sort of national-international hybrid agenda: What to do with the symbolic government of Guaidó? What new measures should be implemented regarding migrants from a country without diplomatic-consular representation in Colombia following the broken relations between Caracas and Bogotá?

The Venezuela Syndrome

Gustavo Petro’s political life has been linked to Hugo Chávez since 1994, when he invited the ex-coup leader to Bogotá in the same year he was released. Their lives intersected at various points. Particularly influential was Petro’s political advice regarding the constituent process in Venezuela in 1999, eight years after that of Colombia, where there was an important exchange

⁸ According to the UN General Assembly Report (A/64/187) related to extrajudicial or arbitrary executions, the so-called “false positives” are: “killings (unlawful killings of civilians made to look like lawful killings in combat) that were carried out in a more or less systematic fashion by significant elements within the military” (UN, 2009, p. 5).

of information and experience between the M-19 and the MVR⁹ of Chávez (Corrales & Penfold, 2011).

Around July 28, 1994, Chávez was invited to Colombia by a militant of the *Alianza Democrática M-19* (M-19 Democratic Alliance), José Cuesta (then an advisor to Petro), on behalf of the Simón Rodríguez Cultural Foundation that he directed. It was a modest invitation, his hosts were concerned about the accommodation: “Compatriot [Chávez responded to his host] don’t worry, I’ve just been in jail” (Serrano, 2018). The time of the Chavista petrostate had not yet arrived. The politician and former Bolivarian coup leader was hosted in a simple building in the La Candelaria neighborhood of Bogotá, at the headquarters of the *Juventud Trabajadora de Colombia* (Working Youth of Colombia) (JTC).

On this trip, Chávez gave Bolivarian lectures and talks on Colombian-Venezuelan integration at the Javeriana, Incca, and Autonomous Universities. Along with six fellow coup members of the MBR-200, he was taken to tour some points of tourist and historical interest in the company of Petro, and they finished on the Boyacá Bridge with some retired soldiers, including Colonel Lora. As Cuesta recalls, Chávez “referred to us as the embryo of a new Latin America” (Cuesta, 2013; El Tiempo, 1999).

Despite the migratory phenomenon of Venezuelans in Colombia, Petro’s government program in 2021-2022 did not include a single mention of Venezuela. It was understood that, among his key ideas, was the reestablishment of relations between the neighboring countries for the challenges that would arise in the future, especially in terms of migration and security on their 2,219-kilometer border.

For Petro, it was a challenge to recognize the phenomenon of Venezuelan migration as a result of the errors inherent in the political administration of Chávez and Maduro –an element that the other candidates did emphasize repeatedly–, and in the Venezuelan socialist model, which essentially reflected part of the postulates of his campaign program, especially in the discursive and programmatic axis revolving around “*buen vivir y el vivir sabroso con todas las diversidades*” (living well and living with flavor with all diversities) (Petro & Márquez, 2022), and “*Colombia potencia mundial de la vida*” (Colombia, a global power of life) which emulates the “saber vivir” and “vivir viviendo” (know how to live, and live living) of the Chavista-Madurista ideology (Santander, 2021).

⁹ *Movimiento Quinta República* (the Fifth Republic Movement), the first Chavista electoral machine, later replaced by the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (the United Socialist Party of Venezuela).

	Regional (Latin America)	The US	Europe	Asia, Africa, Oceania
Hernández	x	x		
Gutiérrez		x	x	
Fajardo	x			
Petro	x	x	x	

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The Electoral Context Focused Attention on the “Venezuela Issue”

The candidates who competed against Petro focused their discourses on the potential relations of the possible president with Venezuela. The tensions between Colombia and Venezuela during the Duque administration simplified the international discursive agenda to the past friendship of Petro with Chávez and his successor Maduro, and those of some members close to his *Pacto Histórico* (Historical Pact) coalition, including the controversial senator, Piedad Córdoba. There was no independent discursive construction on foreign policy that did not contrast this fact with the risks that Colombia could assume with a possible détente and recognition of Maduro's presidency, diplomatically fenced in on the initiative of Duque and his allied instruments Prosur and the Group of Lima, both opposed to UNASUR as a regional scenario acquiescent to Venezuela (Valdivieso et al., 2020). Likewise, the Trump administration's support for this diplomatic siege against Venezuela conditioned the future of Colombian foreign policy into a dichotomy: recognize Maduro as president or not, relax or continue to press, or, the most convenient option for the majority of the candidates, reestablish relations with Caracas.

These factors led to the electoral debate on foreign policy revolving around the ideological and political influence of *Chavismo* on the candidate Petro, as representative of a leftist electoral option in the 2021-2022 elections. This factor repeatedly derived in discussions on the nature of Colombia's foreign relations as an external partner of NATO, a member of the OECD, and its centuries-old doctrine of the “North Star,” or looking to the US, three diplomatic strategies that contravene the Chavista-Madurista doctrine and were, therefore, easily projected onto the candidate Petro in the context of his adversaries' electoral campaigns due to his supposed closeness to that ideological correlate since 1994.

Clearly, even since his pre-campaign, the candidate Petro did not accept this closeness to Chavismo-Madurismo. In fact, he was critical and careful of any material or ideological link with the Venezuelan government, always clarifying two fundamental facts to safeguard his electoral potential without lowering his ideological profile: Maduro is not Chávez, and the Venezuelan economic model is evidently deeply flawed (Valbuena, 2020).

Candidate / Theme	Studies abroad	Training in international relations or diplomacy	Previous diplomatic experience	Previous experience in international organizations
Hernández				
Gutiérrez	x	x		x
Fajardo	x			
Petro	x		x	

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The Dilemmas of Migration

In his government program, Petro (2022) argued for respect for human rights and the dignity of all migrants in Colombia, without specifically mentioning the Venezuelan community, which is the largest migrant group. Likewise, mention is made of the commitment to protect migrant communities in Colombia from acts of xenophobia and discrimination. The difference in Petro's electoral campaign was the announcement of the intention to reestablish dialogue with Venezuela to deal with the migration problem. It was not unquestionable, but it can be deduced that Petro wanted to resume relations with Venezuela to implement minimum measures of action and containment regarding the migration crisis, with the opening of Venezuelan consular missions in Colombia to bridge the deep legal vacuum of the irregular status of the majority of Venezuelans in the country who do not have any official Venezuelan identity document (ID card or passport).

Rodolfo Hernández, a construction businessman, based his entire campaign on attacking the phenomenon of corruption, as an emerging candidate rather than an outsider, although this is not entirely correct, as he was mayor of the city of Bucaramanga (2016-2019). The survivor of the first electoral round, on May 29, 2022, he proposed a series of "solidarity objectives", in which he

simply proposed providing administrative tools to the urban centers dealing with the greatest impacts of Venezuelan migration, to give them the capacity to respond to the phenomenon. He proposed that these should be accompanied and financed by the international community, which would preserve the primary interests of the Colombian population while addressing the needs of migrants. Also, perhaps the most suggestive of his campaign proposals, was that it was necessary to reestablish relations with Caracas so that the Venezuelan government would either finance the maintenance of its citizens in Colombia, or facilitate their return to Venezuela or continued migratory transit to third party countries. He mentioned the role of the United Nations in these programs, emphasizing the return of Colombian migrants in Venezuela, so that they return as taxpayers and with better conditions and economic rights as Colombian citizens (Hernández, 2022).

Federico Gutiérrez, like Petro, included the issue of the Venezuelan migration crisis in Colombia in his foreign policy agenda. His position was to continue the agenda created by the government of Duque, such as the Temporary Statute for the Protection of Venezuelan Migrants, an initiative that had earned former president Duque international recognition from António Guterres, General Secretary of the United Nations (ONU, 2021). Gutiérrez did not announce any kind of détente with the Maduro government, instead, he bet on exploiting one of the weaknesses of his opponent: the possible drift of Colombia towards the socialist economic and political model of Venezuela. In the presidential debate sponsored and televised by *El Tiempo* on May 23 (2022a), regarding his ideological sympathies towards the Chavista-Madurista current, Petro minimized the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela for the rentier oil-energy model, as one of his electoral paradigms was to give up on that rentier ideal and replace it with agricultural and tourism growth in a “new knowledge society”. Gutiérrez reacted by acknowledging the rhetorical turn of his opponent and pointed out that Petro’s historical position had obviously been to sympathize with Chavismo as a political current.

Sergio Fajardo, for his part, recognized in his foreign policy program a new architecture for Latin American regional integration, which should include Venezuela and through which he would eventually resume diplomatic relations between the two countries, to promote the economic and social recovery of the country. According to Fajardo, this would make it possible for Venezuelans to return to their own country. In the meantime, he stated, it would be necessary to establish a comprehensive border policy and remedy the situation of the consular representation of Venezuelans in Colombia and the legal limbo of migrants.

Table 7. Reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Venezuela in the government programs of the 2022 presidential candidates				
Candidate/ Theme	Yes	Did not raise it	Emphatically	With a roadmap
Hernández	x		x	x
Gutiérrez		x		
Fajardo	x		x	x
Petro	x			

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

The war in Ukraine (February 2022 to date) coincided with the height of the campaign for the Colombian presidency, with the first round of elections held three months after the first concrete aggression by Russia, the so-called “special military operation” in Donetsk and Lugansk. The *Centro Esperanza* (Center Hope) coalition, of which Fajardo was a member, urged “respect for the territorial integrity of states, which constitutes a pillar of the international order,” while asking President Duque for diplomatic caution before assuming a public position internationally, to anticipate the shelter and evacuation of Colombians residing in Ukraine.

Fajardo later became critical of Duque when he revealed that he was aware of plans to send a Colombian military force into the conflict, according to sources from the Ministry of Defense. Fajardo argued that “Arauca, Cauca, Bajo Cauca and so many regions without the presence of the state, and Duque thinking of sending troops to Ukraine. I condemn the Russian invasion and I hope that the international community, including Colombia, supports the sovereignty of the Ukrainian people through diplomatic channels” (Infobae, 2022).

Petro assumed an even more critical position and, additionally, took advantage to link two essential international issues on his electoral agenda: peace (domestic, but with international implications) and the environment in the face of the global climate crisis. “There are those who would stupidly like to reproduce the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in our own region of coexistence: South America (...) Europe, choked by the fossil fuel economy, is about to fall into its third European war. A war for gas. Latin America at peace can take advantage to grow” (Infobae, 2022). This was a position that distanced Petro from directly condemning Vladimir Putin, while working to frame the pivots

of his electoral campaign on economic decarbonization and, evidently, pointing out the “stupidity” of warmongering Colombian political factions which, by inference, referred to Duque as president and to Petro’s electoral adversary Gutiérrez, as heirs of the Uribista doctrine. The context of the war was also useful for Petro to refer to the presumed ideological neutrality of his opponent Fajardo, neither Uribista nor anti-Uribista; when the press asked Petro about his position on the European conflict, he exclaimed: “Neither one, nor the other... I am a Fajardista (...) Neither NATO, nor Russia, Latin America needs its own stage to build its own peace and its own progress” (El Tiempo, 2022b).

Gutiérrez rejected the Russian intervention in Ukraine, while showing that the conflict, although distant, would bring consequences for Latin America. Hernández did not touch on the subject, which coincides with Table 6 regarding the experience, or interest, of the candidate in foreign policy: none.

The Case with Nicaragua after the Ruling of the International Court of Justice in The Hague

In 2022, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in favor of Nicaragua in the litigation for the integral continuous area disputed by Managua and Bogotá over the rights of exploration in the water of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The ICJ ruled that Nicaraguan fishing vessels have the right to exploit the EEZ that Colombia considers to be within its jurisdiction. For Petro, this implied a complication in assuming a position that was warmongering-nationalist before the Nicaraguan Sandinista government, if one accepts a certain affinity for Petro’s historical militancy in the M-19, a guerrilla group that paid tribute to Sandinismo (El País-Reuters, 1985; La Prensa, 2006; Semana, 1986). His position, in this regard, was to blame the ICJ’s decision on the government, the Uribista politicians and their experts who dispatched all their functions from an office in Bogotá without taking into account the Raizal people, the population truly affected by the international ruling: “Uribism made Colombia lose sovereignty” (Portafolio, 2022).

Fajardo, in an official declaration published on his social networks, regretted the decision of the ICJ but at the same time understood that Colombia must accept the sentences of the international organizations to which it subscribes, in order to respect and enforce international governance. Gutiérrez took a more critical and contestative line of the ruling by stating that “Colombia cannot cede a millimeter of territory. Our objective will be the territorial defense of Colombia and the Raizal communities of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina” (Portafolio, 2022). Hernández took a position that coincided with some of his adversaries in the campaign and, at the same time, defined his role

as an emerging, anti-system candidate by blaming previous governments: “The bad governments we have had did not even know how to defend our sea, that is why they took seventy thousand miles of the sea from us” (Portafolio, 2022).

Conclusions

Comparing the political proposals during the 2018 and 2022 election campaigns in Colombia demonstrates the positioning of “international” issues relevant to the country: principally, Venezuelan migration and security. The relationship between foreign policy, the media, and public opinion is clear. The peace process with the FARC and the signing of the final agreements in 2016 gave way to a new agenda with new issues gaining ground: borders, migration (Ecuador-Venezuela), the war on drugs (the US), the litigation with Nicaragua before the ICJ, and the war in Ukraine. It is possible that the perception of a “post-conflict” period facilitated the gradual inclusion in the national public debate of topics that, until a few years ago, were exclusive to political elites and the intellectual circles linked to them.

The televised debates became scenarios in which to make the foreign agenda visible to public opinion, made up of issues that survived the years of the Duque administration and that, in addition, were crucial in the 2022 election in which Petro prevailed and became the first left-wing president-elect in the modern history of the country.

This work represents an advance in the research and study of foreign policy, the media, and public opinion. Migration, a product of the Venezuelan crisis, has put the Colombian institutions and people to the test, having been unprepared for this phenomenon. Likewise, the scars of the war on drugs continue to worry various sectors of society, which is directly related to the perception people have of the political handling of the matter by Washington. Similarly, the loss of maritime territory to Nicaragua continues to be perceived as a matter of “national interest”, an aspect that is dull and complex and to define throughout the history of Colombia’s weak and unassertive foreign policy.

The war in Ukraine, given the timing between its development and the end of the first electoral cycle in May 2022, forced the candidates to take a position regarding the possibility that the Duque administration compromised, in some way, the neutral peace of Colombia and, additionally, opened the possibility to criticize any initiative of military support as a NATO strategic ally, a diplomatic achievement of the outgoing president (MRE, 2022).

However, it can be seen that Venezuela appeared in both of the electoral campaign periods (2018 and 2022), although from different approaches. In

2022, the Venezuela issue was an intensified element that was addressed from the consideration of the successes and failures of the outgoing presidency in terms of migration and Venezuelan refugees, and as an ideological obstacle that weighed down on Gustavo Petro's candidacy, as a type of historical mirror given the candidate's previous relationship with both internal and external individuals related to Chavismo-Madurismo or, simply due to the similarity of certain discursive elements to the Bolivarian Revolution and his historical relationship with Hugo Chávez.

Added to this issue was the fact of reestablishing, or not, diplomatic relations with Caracas, with arguments revolving around natural reasons for a neighboring country with potential trade relations, and the fact of normalizing binational diplomacy. If we take into account that the outgoing Duque administration, due to systemic circumstances, had to make the issue of the diplomatic siege of the Maduro government part of its foreign policy axis, and that part of this axis was an exemplary policy of receiving the economic refugees and politically persecuted from Venezuela, their results were considered by the 2022 candidates in their statements and government programs regarding Colombian foreign policy.

Future research on the perceptions of the new generations of voters in Colombia will allow confirmation of the importance, or not, of international issues before, during, and after electoral campaigns.

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Tables

Table 1. Candidate Profiles. Source: Elaborated by the authors

Table 2. Selected Issues 2017-2018. Source: Elaborated by the authors based on (de la Calle, 2018b, 2018a; Duque, 2018; Fajardo, 2018; Petro, 2018).

Table 3. Geographical Emphasis of the Candidates' CFP. Source: Elaborated by the authors based on (de la Calle, 2018b, 2018a; Duque, 2018; Fajardo, 2018; Petro, 2018; Vargas Lleras, 2018).

Table 4. Selected Issues 2021-2022. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 5. Geographical Emphasis of the Candidates' CFP. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 6. Candidate Profiles 2022. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 7. Reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Venezuela in the government programs of the 2022 presidential candidates. Source: Elaborated by the authors

