

When Voters Leave: Demand-Driven Dealignment and Populism in Colombia

Rodrigo Barrenechea and Silvia Otero-Bahamon

Abstract

Why do populist candidates rise to prominence in a country? One common explanation focuses on supply-side politics. Mainstream parties converge on similar programmatic positions, leaving an electoral void that populists then exploit to outflank them. Left-wing populism results when convergence happens around liberalizing policies, whereas right-wing populism occurs when convergence centers around cultural universalism and cosmopolitanism. This article looks into the Colombian case to illustrate alternative paths for populism to rise, centered on demand-side politics. It argues that voters can collectively shift the axis of conflict in politics by changing their preferences. If this happens rapidly enough, and parties remain entrenched in their programmatic offers, the result will be a representation void. This is best illustrated by the demand-driven rise of populism with the case of Colombia's 2022 elections, when, for the first time in the country's history, a left-wing candidate was elected president and the two frontrunners were populists.

Keywords: Colombia, dealignment, elections, populism.

Introduction

Why do populist candidates rise to prominence in a country? This article addresses this question by using the case of Colombia to illustrate a demand-driven path to the emergence of populism in Latin America. The 2022 elections in Colombia saw two outsiders with populist traits reach the runoff: Gustavo

Rodrigo Barrenechea is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social and Political Sciences, and a member of the Research Center of the Universidad del Pacífico. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from Northwestern University. <r.barrenechea@up.edu.pe>

Silvia Otero-Bahamon is an Associate Professor in the School of International, Political, and Urban Studies, Universidad del Rosario, Bogotá, Colombia. She has a Ph.D. and a M.A. in political science from Northwestern University. <silvia.otero@urosario.edu.co>

Petro, representing the left-wing Pacto Histórico, and Rodolfo Hernández of Liga de Gobernantes Anticorrupción. Their surprising performance displaced establishment candidates such as Federico Gutiérrez (running for the right-wing coalition) and Sergio Fajardo from Partido Verde. Why did this happen?

Voter—party dealignment has been identified as a cause for the rise of populist challengers in a polity. The literature has emphasized that the convergence of parties toward similar programmatic positions is a key path to dealignment. Populist parties emerge when established parties move toward one another programmatically, creating a representational void that populist candidates then occupy, effectively outflanking them.¹ In line with this argument, left-wing populism emerges when programmatic convergence occurs on the left—right axis, particularly regarding issues of redistribution and economic liberalization. Conversely, right-wing populism emerges when convergence occurs around the cultural axis, on issues related to universalism and cosmopolitan values versus ethno-nationalism and religious particularism.²

However, there is more than one way in which politicians and voters can experience dealignment. As outlined above, current explanations equate dealignment processes with choices made by parties that move collectively away from voters' fixed preferences. This view understands dealignment as a result of supply-side changes. In this article, the Colombian experience illustrates how dealignment can occur through a sudden displacement of voters' concerns, leaving established parties struggling to meet voters where they are. When dealignment occurs as a result of demand-side changes, demand-driven dealignment takes place. This type of dealignment is hypothesized to precede the emergence of two populists, Gustavo Petro and Rodolfo Hernández, in the 2022 Colombian presidential election.

For decades, Colombia's bipartisan system structured both politicians' political careers and voters' choices. The stability of this game coexisted with the instability and violence of civil war.³ Left-wing guerrillas, such as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), and paramilitary groups, like the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, controlled vast sections of the countryside. However, in the 1990s, the war and its consequences began to

¹ Kenneth M. Roberts, "Market Reform, Programmatic (De)alignment, and Party System Stability in Latin America," *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 11 (2013): 1422-1452, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012453449>; Kenneth M. Roberts, *Changing Course in Latin America: Party Systems in the Neoliberal Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

² Kenneth M. Roberts, "Bipolar Disorders: Varieties of Capitalism and Populist Out-Flanking on the Left and Right," *Polity* 51, no. 4 (2019): 641-653, <https://doi.org/10.1086/705377>; Kenneth M. Roberts, "Populism and Polarization in Comparative Perspective: Constitutive, Spatial and Institutional Dimensions," *Government and Opposition* 57, no. 4 (2022): 680-702, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.14>.

³ Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, *El orangután con sacoleva: Cien años de democracia y represión en Colombia (1910–2010)* [The orangutan in a tailcoat: One hundred years of democracy and repression in Colombia (1910–2010)] (Bogotá: IEPRI, 2014).

spill over into the cities, making the issue more salient to voters. The collective failure of the Liberal and Conservative parties to put an end to violence led to the emergence of Álvaro Uribe. A politician nurtured within the Liberal Party, Uribe ran for the presidency as a maverick in 2002, denouncing established parties as ineffective and promising a “mano dura” approach to the guerrillas. Uribe won, and for the next twenty years, Colombian politics were structured around the war and his approach to it—or around Uribismo and anti-Uribismo.⁴

However, this axis of conflict and political competition was shaken by President Santos’s decision to sign a peace agreement with the FARC in November 2016. Santos, a hand-picked successor to Uribe who refused to continue with his “mano dura” policies, pushed for the agreement against all odds and even against the will of Colombian voters in a referendum held in 2016. The electoral outcome was a slight majority of Colombians rejecting both the peace agreement and the transitional justice process.⁵ This decision prolonged the relevance of the peace-conflict axis for an additional election cycle but also marked its decline.⁶ In 2018, Iván Duque, Uribe’s new protégé, won the election by capitalizing on citizen discontent with the incumbent policies and promising a critical stance toward the implementation of the Peace Accord. Nevertheless, much of the agenda reshuffling and the changes set in motion by the peace agreement persisted despite the new Uribista administration.

In the years following the peace agreement, public opinion began to shift its attention away from war and toward corruption and distributional issues. The 2018 Anti-Corruption Consultation, which drew 11 million voters,

⁴ Laura Gamboa Gutiérrez, “El reajuste de la derecha colombiana: El éxito electoral del uribismo” [The readjustment of the Colombian right: The electoral success of Uribism], *Colombia Internacional* 99 (2019): 187-214, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spr.12280>; Felipe Botero, Rodrigo Losada, and Laura Wills-Otero, “Sistema de partidos en Colombia (1974-2014): ¿La evolución hacia el multipartidismo?” [Party system in Colombia (1974-2014): The evolution towards multipartism?], in *Los sistemas de partidos en América Latina 1978-2015—Cono Sur y Países Andinos TOMO 2* ed. Flavia Freidenberg (Ciudad de México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2016), 339-400; Laura Wills-Otero, “Colombia: Analyzing the Strategies for Political Action of Álvaro Uribe’s Government, 2002-10,” in *The Resilience of the Latin American Right*, eds. Juan Pablo Luna and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 194-201; Juan Albarracín, Laura Gamboa, and Scott Mainwaring, “Deinstitutionalization without Collapse: Colombia’s Party System,” in *Party Systems in Latin America: Institutionalization, Decay, and Collapse*, ed. Scott Mainwaring (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 227-254.

⁵ María P. Saffon Sanín and Diana I. Güiza Gómez, “Colombia en 2018: Entre el fracaso de la paz y el inicio de la política programática” [Colombia in 2018: Between the failure of peace and the beginning of programmatic politics], *Revista de Ciencia Política (Santiago)* 39, no. 2 (2019): 217-237, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>.

⁶ Sandra Botero, Laura García-Montoya, Silvia Otero-Bahamón, and Sebastián Londoño-Mendez, “Colombia 2022: Del fin de la guerra al gobierno del cambio” [Colombia 2022: From the end of the war to the government of change], *Revista de Ciencia Política (Santiago)* 43, no. 3 (2023): 223-254, <https://doi.org/10.4067/s0718-090x2023005000114>; Saffon Sanín and Güiza Gómez, “Colombia en 2018.”

signaled the shift in public concerns. The 2019 Paro Nacional evidenced the collective unease with the government and the status quo, as people flooded the streets with a wide range of demands.⁷ While poverty and inequality have long been central to Latin American politics—a region known for its vast disparities among individuals and groups—Colombian politics, engulfed by decades of civil war, had long neglected to give these issues similar salience.⁸

This article advances a twofold argument. First, and aligned with existing accounts, the peace agreement led to a rapid shift in voters' concerns toward distributional issues and corruption among established parties.⁹ Second, established political parties and politicians remained anchored in conflict, leading to an erosion of programmatic linkages, as they did not offer clear cues to voters about their stances on emerging issues. This article labels this situation as “Demand-Driven Dealignment.” To advance this argument, several observable implications are derived from this theory and then tested with different kinds of evidence.

A likely consequence of demand-driven dealignment—and its associated representational void—is that vast numbers of voters became available to be mobilized by different candidates: those who could credibly claim to be outsiders to the corruption of established parties and who could appeal to voters' concerns about resource distribution. These candidates were Gustavo Petro and Rodolfo Hernández, the two outsiders with populist traits who made it to the runoff, turning the second round into a confrontation of populist alternatives.¹⁰

Existing accounts of the Colombian 2022 elections provide complementary interpretations. Botero and others also highlight the displacement of policy concerns as one of three key explanations for the success of Gustavo Petro.¹¹ The other two are the organizational transformation of the left under the new

⁷ Sandra Botero and Silvia Otero Bahamón, “El dividendo agridulce de la paz truncada” [The bittersweet dividend of a broken peace], *CIPER Chile* (November 25, 2019), <https://www.ciperchile.cl/2019/11/25/el-dividendo-agridulce-de-la-paz-truncada/> (accessed March 3, 2025).

⁸ Gabriel Kessler, Gabriel Vommaro, and Gonzalo Assusa, “El proceso de polarización en América Latina: Entre la secularización y el conflicto distributivo” [The process of polarization in Latin America: Between secularization and distributive conflict], *Mecila Working Papers*, no. 53 (2023), https://publications.iai.spk-berlin.de/receive/iai_mods_00000174 (accessed March 3, 2025); Gabriel Kessler, Gabriel Vommaro, Juan Carlos Rodríguez-Raga, and Juan A. C. Herrera, “La sociedad contra las élites: Aproximación a las bases sociales del apoyo electoral a Petro en Colombia” [Society versus the elites: An approach to the social bases of electoral support for Petro in Colombia], *Colombia Internacional*, no. 117 (2024): 3-32, <https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint117.2024.0>.

⁹ Saffon Sanín and Güiza Gómez, “Colombia en 2018,” 217-237; Botero, García-Montoya, Otero-Bahamón, and Londoño-Mendez, “Colombia 2022.”

¹⁰ Rodrigo Barrenechea et al., *Gustavo Petro vs. Rodolfo Hernández: ¿Dos populismos encontrados?* [Gustavo Petro vs. Rodolfo Hernández: Two opposing populisms?] (Bogotá: Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2023), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.5699293> (accessed February 10, 2025).

Pacto Histórico and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Kessler and others, in turn, established that in 2021 the Colombian electorate was not polarized around any issue and that voters did not interpret distributive or moral issues according to the traditional framings used by left or right parties in Colombia or Latin America.¹² This finding resonates with the theory advanced here by affirming that when voters left the peace-conflict axis, they entered an unstructured political arena in which they did not have strongly differing views. Bitar et al. found that Petro voters have similar preferences around a more interventionist role of the state in the economy and that in that economic domain they align with Petro's own views. Finally, the different chapters of Barrenechea et al. provided several accounts of the rise of populism in Colombian elections.¹³ While some of these works highlight the existence of a demand-side shift in preferences, they do not link it with a voter-party dealignment and representational void that fuels the appeal of populist and outsider parties.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 1 outlines the literature on populism and voter—party dealignment as contributing factors to the vote for populist parties. Section 2 introduces a typology of voter—party positioning, presenting our concept of “Demand-Driven Dealignment” to account for the Colombian situation in the years leading up to the 2022 presidential election. Section 3 introduces descriptive evidence of voters moving and parties staying. Section 4 expands on our theory by testing additional observable implications of our hypotheses using survey data. Finally, the last section offers our conclusions.

The Literature on Populism and Voter-party Dealignment in Latin America

Populism is a famously contested concept. Definitions have changed over time and they range from thick ones considering a particular support coalition, a style of leadership, and a specific economic policy orientation, to thin ones labeling it as a type of discourse or ideology.¹⁴ In all definitions, however, anti-establishment appeals are central to understanding the phenomenon. These tell us that, wherever populism is successful, a significant share of voters is

¹¹ Botero, García-Montoya, Otero-Bahamón, and Londoño-Mendez, “Colombia 2022.”

¹² Kessler, Vommaro, Rodríguez-Raga, and Herrera, “La sociedad contra las élites.”

¹³ Sebastián Bitar, Santiago C. Tolosa Bello, and Yuli J. Tolosa Bello, “Gustavo Petro y el triunfo de la izquierda en Colombia: Análisis de las preferencias de voto en la primera vuelta presidencial de 2022” [Gustavo Petro and the triumph of the left in Colombia: Analysis of voting preferences in the first round of the 2022 presidential election.], *Colombia Internacional*, no. 116 (2023): 103-132; Barrenechea et al., *Gustavo Petro vs. Rodolfo Hernández*.

¹⁴ Carlos De La Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America*, 2nd ed. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010); Alan Knight, “Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30, no. 2 (1998): 223-248; Cas Mudde, “The Populist

dissatisfied with political elites. They perceive them to be part of a single entity: the establishment, la partidocracia, la casta, and la oligarquía. For populism to succeed, political elites must be seen as colluding or indistinguishable from each other, and distant from voters' preferences.

As for the causes of populism's appeal, scholarship points to issues such as psychological traits among populist voters, economic insecurity, cultural polarization, and feelings of anger by voters against political elites.¹⁵ But in line with this article's previous assertion about the importance of anti-establishment appeal, a portion of the literature on the rise of populism has paid particular attention to the role political elites and representation gaps play in laying the ground for the emergence of populism around the world.¹⁶

According to one branch of this latter scholarship, populism arises when there is a political dealignment between voters and political elites, such that the former's preferences are not matched with the latter's policy stances. This political dealignment feeds the impressions of disconnect that voters blame on elites. In Latin America, Roberts explained the success of figures like Chávez, Morales, and Correa by showing how this dealignment process took place in the years prior to their ascent.¹⁷ In the context of the 1980s lost decade and the austerity measures that international financial organizations advocated for in Latin America, political parties with a left-from-center constituency came to power on platforms rejecting these policies. But in many cases, these same parties ended up enacting these same policies they had once denounced. Furthermore, on occasions, this meant forming coalitions in parliament with

Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>; Kenneth M. Roberts, "Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America: The Peruvian Case," *World Politics* 48, no. 1 (1995): 82-116; Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>.

¹⁵ Bruno Castanho Silva, Federico Vegetti, and Levente Littvay, "The Elite Is Up to Something: Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Swiss Political Science Review* 23, no. 4 (2017): 423-443; Matthijs Rooduijn, "What Unites the Voter Bases of Populist Parties? Comparing the Electorates of 15 Populist Parties," *European Political Science Review* 10, no. 3 (2017): 351-368; Yotam Margalit, "Economic Insecurity and the Causes of Populism, Reconsidered," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, no. 4 (2019): 152-170; Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jason Seawright, *Party-System Collapse: The Roots of Crisis in Peru and Venezuela* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Robert A. Huber and Saskia P. Ruth, "Mind the Gap! Populism, Participation, and Representation in Europe," *Swiss Political Science Review* 23, no. 4 (2017): 462-484, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spr.12280>; Hanspeter Kriesi, "The Populist Challenge," *West European Politics* 37, no. 2 (2014): 361-378, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.887879>; Peter Mair, "Representative versus Responsible Government," in *On Parties, Party Systems and Democracy*, ed. Ingrid Van Biezen (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2014), 581-596; Paul Taggart, "Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics," in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, ed. Yves Mény and Yves Surel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 62-80, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403920072_4.

¹⁷ Roberts, "Market Reform, Programmatic (De)alignment, and Party System Stability in Latin America," 1422-1452; Roberts, *Changing Course in Latin America*.

parties on the right in power-sharing arrangements that ignored profound and meaningful cleavages at the voter level dividing them. These actions led to a process of “brand dilution” that made parties lose their identity among voters, leaving them vulnerable to breakdown and to be challenged by populist outsiders.¹⁸

The same line of reasoning has been used to explain the allure of populism in Western Europe. This time, however, it is not dealignments along the left/right or economic matters axis that is at play, but a cultural axis. Political elites have kept their differences when it comes to matters of economic liberalization and state intervention in the economy. But at the same time, they have become less distinguishable when it comes to matters related to cultural globalization and immigration.¹⁹

The process just described perfectly aligns with populist appeals. When political elites converge in their programmatic preferences, they indeed become less distinguishable and seem to embody the uniform block that populists denounce as uninterested in people’s preferences and potentially colluding to favor interests that are at odds with them. Whereas populists can use these kinds of appeals at any point in time and space, their causal power magnifies when reality aligns with their depiction of politics.

However, this is an incomplete picture. Whereas the theory of populist emergence claims it is party-voter dealignment that leaves space open for populist challengers, the description above represents a more specific phenomenon. Namely, the process by which political elites produce a dealignment. The next section discusses how this form of dealignment does not account for the process of populist emergence in other cases, particularly in Colombia. It provides a typology of party-voter positioning that presents different kinds of dealignment and pay attention to one particular kind called “demand-driven dealignment.”

Demand-driven Dealignment and Populist Emergence

In this article, the Colombian case illustrates an instance of voter-party dealignment, but one driven by shifts in the demand side of the equation. The previous section outlined how scholarship on the emergence of populism has paid most of its attention to situations where elites change their programmatic stances. To complete this picture, this section shows that dealignment can also follow from voters moving away from parties.

¹⁸ Dan Slater and Erica Simmons, “Coping by Colluding: Political Uncertainty and Promiscuous Powersharing in Indonesia and Bolivia,” *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 11 (2013): 1366-1393, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012453447>; Noam Lupu, *Party Brands in Crisis: Partisanship, Brand Dilution, and the Breakdown of Political Parties in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Roberts, “Bipolar Disorders.”

The terms “aligned” and “dealigned” have been used in the past to describe the extent to which groups of voters express their support for parties in a stable manner over time.²⁰ This analysis focuses on the programmatic linkages between voters and parties, which can structure their behavior in the ballot box and in office, respectively. In those terms, parties and voters can be programmatically aligned or dealigned. The first label refers to situations where party elites and voters’ programmatic preferences broadly match with each other, whereas the second refers to situations when the opposite happens. Both are situations of relative stability, where parties and voters have stable preferences. In between those two stable situations, parties and voters can experience dealignment as parties and voters’ preferences move away from each other, or they can experience realignment if they move closer to each other after a period of dealignment.

These distinctions are meant to capture the dynamic character of party-voter relationships. Parties have programmatic stances that are not merely reflections of voters’ preferences, but have a logic of their own. Parties may give salience to certain issues more than others, and may change their stance (for or against) on those issues as time passes. The same goes for voters. These are, of course, not monolithic. Different sectors of society can have different preferences or give salience to some issues over others. This is why some sectors of society can be aligned with parties’ policy supply, whereas others can be dealigned.²¹ Just like parties, voters can have stable preferences or change them over time. Those changes can be about how voters stand on a given subject (for or against) or they can be about the salience of a certain subject. These changes can also be gradual or abrupt. In the latter case, the chances of party-voter dealignment increase, as parties need to adapt rather quickly.

Table 1 summarizes how voters’ preferences and parties’ stances can interact with each other, producing different situations. While this typology shows them as discrete and clearly separable categories, it is important to remember that voter-party relationships are dynamic and complex. As with all typologies, this is a useful simplification rather than a precise description of reality.

The cells in the lower left corner and the upper right corner represent situations when voters’ preferences and parties’ stances match each other. When both are stable, they are in alignment. Stable party systems rely on a stable alignment of this sort. When voters’ preferences and parties’ stances move, they are in realignment. Realignment processes can result from voters switching to new parties that better represent their new preferences. This is the

²⁰ Russell Dalton, Scott Flanagan, Paul Beck, and James Alt, *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies: Realignment or Dealignment?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

²¹ Miguel Carreras, Scott Morgenstern, and Yen-Pin Su, “Refining the Theory of Partisan Alignments: Evidence from Latin America,” *Party Politics* 21, no. 5 (2015): 671-685.

kind of situation that results in party system change, like the Uruguayan party system with the incorporation of the Frente Amplio in recent decades to what used to be a bipartisan system. But realignment could also happen in stable party systems if old parties switch constituencies, as in the American parties’ realignment following Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency. Finally, it could also result from old parties and their constituents matching again after a period of dealignment. In any case, the final result is a matching between parties and voters.

The upper-left and lower-right cells are the ones that interest us the most, for they represent instances of voter-party dealignment. The archetypal situation of dealignment is represented in the lower-right cell labeled as supply-driven dealignment. Here parties move their programmatic stances, whereas voters’ preferences remain in place, generating a representational void. Accounts of the rise of populist challengers in Latin America broadly fit in this space, as outlined in the previous section. Chávez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, and Correa in Ecuador emerged as a result of left-from-center parties’ assuming right-from-center stances in economic policy. Either by supporting or enacting market reforms themselves, these parties alienated their base, which had still left-from-center preferences. This opened space for populist challenges to outflank parties from the left.

Table 1. A Typology of Voter-party Positioning

		<i>Parties' programmatic stances</i>	
		<i>Stay</i>	<i>Move</i>
<i>Voters' programmatic preferences</i>	<i>Move</i>	Demand-Driven Dealignment	Realignment
	<i>Stay</i>	Alignment	Supply-Driven Dealignment

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The upper-left cell in the framework represents the situation in Colombia leading up to the 2022 election. This demand-driven dealignment occurs when parties’ programmatic stances remain unchanged, but voters’ programmatic preferences shift. Colombian voters’ concerns and demands had been centered around the problem of armed conflict, given the prolonged confrontation between the state, rebel groups, narcotraffickers and paramilitary forces. With the signing of peace agreements in 2016, however, this scenario began to change. Voters’ concerns shifted toward issues regarding economic and distributional issues, something that accelerated in the context of the pandemic. Furthermore, a malaise over corruption became more salient, paving the way for the emergence of anti-establishment challengers.

In the following sections, evidence will be presented to show that demand-driven dealignment took place in the years and months leading up to the 2022

presidential election. The first section presents some contextual information of Colombian politics prior to 2022. Next, the article presents descriptive evidence of the emergence of a demand-driven dealignment by assembling two key pieces of evidence. First, public opinion data shows that voters shifted their policy preferences. Second, quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that established political parties largely maintained their traditional appeals and failed to adapt their programmatic platforms to newly salient issues.

After evaluating the descriptive evidence suggesting that voters shifted their preferences while parties remained static, the article further tests the existence of a representational void due to demand-driven dealignment. If voters moved away and parties stayed put, then the new policy arenas that increasingly attract voters should be ideologically unstructured. This means that identifying as leftist or rightist would carry little significance and both positions would converge on similar programmatic and policy choices. This contrasts with the traditional peace—conflict axis of political conflict, where politicians of different ideological positions represent distinct policy choices and voters align with preferences that correspond to those differences.

This empirical approach has inherent limitations. While multiple pieces of evidence support the occurrence of demand-driven dealignment, the causal link between this dealignment and the election of two populist candidates is not empirically tested. A unit of analysis mismatch explains this limitation. While individual-level, cross-sectional survey data can reveal programmatic demands and the likelihood of voting for populist candidates, it cannot, in the absence of panel data, determine whether an individual has actually changed their position over time. Additionally, it cannot assess the correlation between the degree of ideological change and the increased likelihood of selecting populist candidates. Furthermore, voter shifts are only part of the explanation. The other key factor is party stasis—that is, the failure of parties to adjust their programmatic positions—which cannot be measured at the individual level.

The Populist Election of 2022

The starting point of this article asserts that two populist candidates made it to the run-off in the Colombian 2022 election. To understand this, it is helpful to consider the significant changes in Colombia's party system since the 1990s. The country was among the most stable in Latin America. The coexistence of democratic institutions and very high levels of violence and repression was the defining feature of the Colombian political system for decades.²²

The Liberal and Conservative parties, among the oldest in Latin America, were the protagonists of this stability until the early 2000s. In 2002, Colombia

²² Botero, Losada, and Wills-Otero, "Sistema de partidos en Colombia, 1974-2014"; Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully, eds., *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995); Gutiérrez Sanín, El orangután con sacoleva.

elected its first anti-establishment challenger, Álvaro Uribe. Uribe, a former mayor of Medellín and Senator for the province of Antioquia with the Liberal Party, ran and won as an independent that year. The collective failure of established parties to put an end to the civil war with the FARC gave Uribe an opening to run on a *mano dura* platform that eventually won him the presidency. From then on, Colombian politics was structured around the support or rejection of this approach to the war, and around *Uribismo* and *Anti-Uribismo*. Liberal and Conservative parties continued to exist and dispute power at the national level, and they were joined by *Uribista* parties (Primero Colombia first, and then Centro Democrático and Partido de la U), right-from-center parties (Cambio Radical, Partido de la U, Partido de Integración Nacional, Partido Alas Equipo Colombia, among others) and left-from-center parties and coalitions like the Polo Democrático and Alianza Verde.

The 2022 elections broke with the order established 20 years prior. Gustavo Petro from the Pacto Histórico and Rodolfo Hernández from the Liga de Gobernantes Anticorrupción made it to the run-off that year, with Petro ultimately winning the presidency. Neither Petro nor Hernández was complete outsiders to Colombian electoral politics. Petro, a former leftist guerrilla member, had been elected congressman with the M-19 party in 1991, a senator in 2006 with the Polo Democrático Alternativo party, and then mayor of Bogotá in 2011 with the Colombia Humana party. In 2018, he ran for the presidency and came second to Iván Duque, which granted him a position in the senate for the 2018-2022 period. For his part, Hernández had been elected mayor of Bucaramanga in 2016 with a local organization called *Lógica, Ética y Estética*, an independent organization created for that election. Then, for the 2022 election, he ran with the Liga de Gobernantes Anticorrupción party, a group with no prior political participation at the national level. Both candidates, then, had been elected officials before, but neither had been at the center of national power or belonged to the parties that had shared power at the national stage before 2018.

The relative outsider status of both candidates allowed them to use anti-establishment rhetoric. Both presented themselves as alternatives to established politics, which was portrayed by both candidates as corrupt and antagonistic to the interests of the Colombian people. Their discourse was not, of course, the same. Coming from a long left-wing tradition, Petro's had a distinctive emphasis on matters of peace, poverty and inequality, touching on the topics and symbols traditionally associated with the left in Colombia and beyond. Hernández, for his part, was harder to classify in the left-right spectrum, but he anchored his discourse in anti-corruption appeals and a promise to bring back jobs and investment to the country. This is similar to the kind of appeals other populists like Trump used in depressed economies. With all their differences and nuances, the fitting between their discourse and the category of populism has been pointed out by many scholars.²³ Whereas it is clear that voters opted for supporting anti-establishment alternatives, it is unclear why that happened

in Colombia in 2022. The next section turns to that question and shows evidence that demand-driven dealignment was building up in the years leading up to the election.

The Emergence of a Representational Void

Voters Left

A key symptom of supply-driven dealignment is the shift in voters' concerns, since these tend to guide their electoral choices. To support this claim, this section presents survey data coming from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and Invamer asking a representative sample of Colombians what they consider to be the country's main problem.

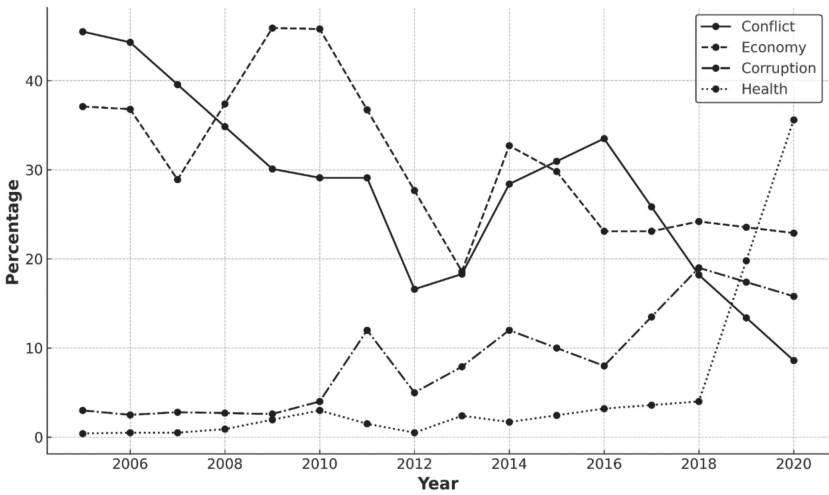
Figure 1 reports LAPOP trends from 2005 to 2020 (see below). As it reveals, for many years conflict was the top concern among Colombians. Towards the end of Álvaro Uribe's presidency (2002–2010), conflict became less salient, likely due to improvements in security indicators. However, the economic recession of 2008–2010 shifted the focus to the economy as the central issue. In 2012, after President Juan Manuel Santos announced peace negotiations with the FARC guerrilla group, conflict regained prominence, peaking in 2016—the year of the peace plebiscite. During this period, the political arena was polarized around the peace talks, with Santos and Uribe defending opposing policy positions. Following the plebiscite, the signing of the accord, and the initiation of its implementation, concerns about conflict rapidly diminished. However, they continued to shape the political arena in the electoral cycle that selected Iván Duque as Colombian president (2018–2022). During his term, the economy remained the top concern until the onset of the pandemic, which made health the most pressing issue.

This trend is corroborated by the Invamer quarterly poll.²⁴ During certain periods of Uribe's administration, security and public order were the top concerns—and again under President Santos. Around the time of the 2016 peace plebiscite, security concerns began a steep decline, rapidly losing

²³ Barrenechea et al., *Gustavo Petro vs. Rodolfo Hernández*; Laura Gamboa, "Latin America's Shifting Politics: The Peace Process and Colombia's Elections," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 54–64; Blendi Kajsio and Yuli T. Grisales, "Neoconservadurismo versus populismo socialdemócrata: Una comparación de los discursos anticorrupción de Iván Duque y Gustavo Petro en la segunda vuelta presidencial de 2018" [Neoconservatism versus social democratic populism: A comparison of the anti-corruption discourses of Iván Duque and Gustavo Petro in the 2018 presidential runoff election], *Estudios Políticos* 59, no. 56 (2019): 123–147, <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.espo.n56a06>; Jennifer McCoy, "Reflections on Populism and Polarization in Latin America, and Consequences for Democracy," *Desafíos* 34, no. 2 (2022): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.12804/revistas.urosario.edu.co/desafios/a.11307>.

²⁴ Invamer S.A.S., *Encuesta Invamer Dic 2024: Medición #164* [Invamer poll Dec 2024: Survey #164], Diciembre (2024), <https://www.valoraanalitik.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Encuesta-Invamer-Dic-2024.pdf> (accessed March 1, 2025).

Figure 1. “What Is the Most Pressing Problem the Country Faces?” LAPOP 2005-2020



Source: Juan Camilo Plata, C. Ávila, and Miguel García, “Colombia, un país en medio de la pandemia” [Colombia: a country in the midst of the pandemic], *Observatorio de la Democracia, Universidad de los Andes* (2020): 23.

prominence at a pace matched by the rising salience of corruption as the most pressing issue. During Iván Duque’s presidency (2018–2022), economic issues became more prevalent.

Descriptive evidence based on nationally representative samples indicates that voters shifted their priorities and preferences, deviating from the major policy platforms that political elites and parties had advanced over previous decades—platforms that had long served as the central axis around which Colombian politics was structured.

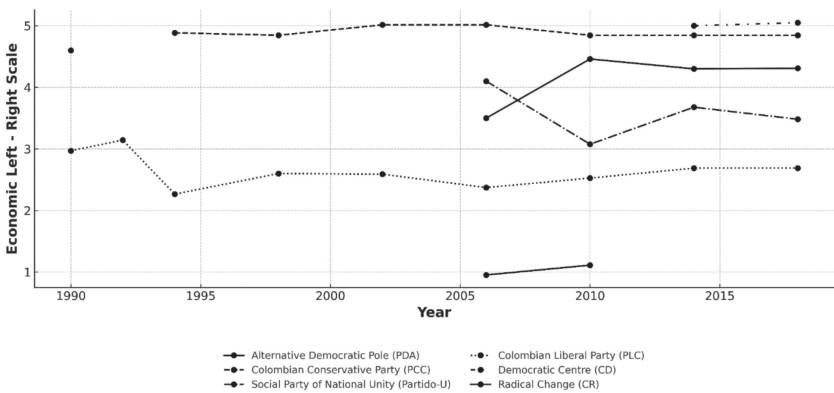
Parties Stayed

To assess the second part of the party–voter relocation typology, it is necessary to determine whether political parties maintained their positions. This is demonstrated using data from the V-Dem Varieties of Party Identity Organization, which surveys country experts about the positions of political parties on various axes of political conflict. As shown in Figure 2, the positions of many political parties in Colombia have remained largely unchanged along the economic left–right scale since 1990. This stasis occurred despite the fact that economic issues were becoming the central topic of concern for citizens and, as Bitar et al. show, began to motivate electoral choices among the electorate.²⁵

The perception of the country experts V-Party consulted coincides with reports and accounts during the electoral period. The pre-candidates assembled around the right-wing coalition “Equipo Colombia” struggled to find a theme that spurred citizen enthusiasm. Their policy offers remained anchored around the inconvenience of the peace agreement, the problem of increasing coca production, and the security challenges of post-agreement organized criminal groups. The coalition’s candidate, Federico Gutiérrez, overly focused his campaign on an “anti-Petro” stance, which diluted his original appeal. Something similar happened with the center coalition “Coalición Centro Esperanza”. As the primary campaign advanced, the pre-candidates became entangled in exhausting quarrels over the rejection of traditional politics, without realizing that their positions were far too pro-establishment to become an alternative on that front. As a result, Sergio Fajardo, the candidate who emerged from the center coalition, finished in a distant fourth position in the first round of the presidential election, while the right-wing candidate, Federico Gutiérrez, placed third.²⁶ Parties and politicians struggled to meet voters where they were, reproducing the policy offers and campaign appeals of the 2018 elections.

Supporting Evidence of Demand-driven Dealignment

Figure 2. V-DEM Varieties of Party Identity and Organization. Economic Left-right Scale



Source: V-Party Online Explorer, “Colombia - Economic Left-Right Scale,” https://v-dem.net/vparty_dash.

²⁵ Bitar, Tolosa Bello, and Tolosa Bello, “Gustavo Petro y el triunfo de la izquierda en Colombia.”
²⁶ Radio Nacional de Colombia, “¿Por qué Federico Gutiérrez no pasó a segunda vuelta?” [Why did Federico Gutiérrez not make it to the second round?], *Radio Nacional de Colombia* (May 30, 2022), <https://www.radionacional.co/actualidad/politica/por-que-fico-gutierrez-no-paso-segunda-vuelta-elecciones-colombia-2022> (accessed on March 5, 2025); Semana, “¿Qué

This section tests additional observable implications of the existence of demand-driven dealignment. If dealignment truly exists, then left–right ideological self-identification should not be correlated with distinct policy preferences along the economic left–right axis among both voters and politicians. This stands in contrast to the peace–conflict axis, where the ideological left–right spectrum does correlate with distinct policy preferences.

In Colombia, the left–right political spectrum was characterized by different stances on the issue of peace and conflict. Left-wing policy preferences highlighted the importance of a negotiated solution (*salida negociada*) to Colombia’s armed conflicts with various groups. In contrast, the right wing advocated for a hardline approach (*mano dura*) that would confront rebels on the battlefield rather than at the negotiating table. Since the 1994 electoral cycle, center or center-left presidential candidates have supported peace agreements (Samper in 1994, Serpa in 2002, Gaviria in 2006, Santos in 2014, and Petro in 2018). There is one notable exception: Andrés Pastrana, the candidate of the conservative party, surprisingly proposed peace talks with the FARC guerrilla group, contrary to the expectations of his party’s stance.

Right-of-center politicians, on the other hand, supported the hardline approach—a trend that was amplified with the arrival of Álvaro Uribe to power in 2002. This means that for the past thirty years, ideological self-identification along the left–right axis in Colombia has been closely tied to policy choices regarding the peace–conflict continuum.

Yet, as conflict lost its status as the key topic of concern and voters shifted their attention toward distributional or corruption issues, self-identifying as leftist or rightist did not carry a distinct meaning. It is hypothesized that in these new programmatic fields, politicians did not meet voters, and left–right self-identification does not automatically entail distinct policy preferences. This is interesting, given that since the 2000s the left–right ideological spectrum in Latin America has typically meant distinct views on the role of the state versus the market in addressing distributional inequalities.²⁷ In Colombia, however, voters abandoned traditional party stances and entered new, unstructured political arenas regarding these emerging issues.²⁸

In contrast to the peace–conflict issue, it is also hypothesized that the distributional issue in Colombia is not associated with distinct policy

pasó con Fico Gutiérrez? Las razones de la derrota del candidato de la centro derecha” [What happened to Fico Gutiérrez? The reasons for the center-right candidate’s defeat], *Semana* (May 10, 2022), <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/que-paso-con-fico-gutierrez-las-razones-de-la-derrota-del-candidato-de-la-centro-derecha/202227/> (accessed on February 27, 2025); Camilo Andrés Garzón y Daniel Pacheco, “Las claves del fracaso de la Centro Esperanza” [The keys to the failure of the Centro Esperanza], *La Silla Vacía* (March 16, 2022), <https://www.lasillavacia.com/silla-nacional/las-claves-del-fracaso-de-la-centro-esperanza/> (accessed on February 27, 2025).

²⁷ Kessler, Vommaro, and Assusa, “El proceso de polarización en América Latina.”

²⁸ Kessler, Vommaro, Rodríguez-Raga, and Herrera, “La sociedad contra las élites.”

preferences tied to political ideology. In other words, as Colombians became preoccupied with new topics such as the economy and corruption, the left–right ideological axis—which had previously demarcated salient and distinct policy preferences regarding peace and conflict—became less meaningful for these emerging issues. This lack of structured policy alternatives on the new salient issues is an observable implication of a representational void produced by demand-driven dealignment, which is argued to facilitate the rise of populist and outsider candidates.

H1: Self-identification along the left-right axis is not a good predictor of policy choices in the economy/redistribution axis, as opposed to the peace/conflict axis.

Dealignment occurred not solely because of shifting voter preferences but also because political parties failed to articulate distinct policy platforms along the new economic—redistributive left—right axis. This suggests that parties were unable to clearly differentiate their policy offers on economic and redistributive matters. This is supported by Botero et al., who argued that:

[W]hile Petro aligned himself with this shift in the redistributive concerns and demands of the citizenry, the right and the center remained anchored in familiar narratives (...). From the right, the discourse and programmatic content failed to completely disengage from the armed conflict and the emphasis on economic growth. As these programmatic offerings were largely unsuccessful in public opinion, the right resorted to “fear of Petro” as its main banner. Meanwhile, the center maintained its focus on rejecting traditional forms of politics, without establishing what vision for the country it would promote if it won the elections. For voters, the center ended up being a stance in favor of the establishment, so its programmatic messages did not resonate with an electorate eager for change.²⁹

Empirically, it can be examined whether politicians from different ideological stances on the left–right axis hold sufficiently distinct opinions on the newly salient economic and redistributive issues compared to the traditional peace–conflict axis.

H2: Elite left–right self-identification is a weaker predictor of policy preferences on the economic—redistributive axis than on the peace—conflict axis.

²⁹ Our translation. Botero, García-Montoya, Otero-Bahamón, and Londoño-Mendez, “Colombia 2022,” 229.

In the previous section, the analysis showed that voters changed their policy priorities. This section derives an additional observable implication of the existence of demand-driven dealignment. When voters shifted from the peace—conflict arena to the economy—corruption arena, they found themselves in an unstructured programmatic field. Voters did not receive clear signals from the politicians they followed regarding which policy options were available and acceptable given their ideological preferences. Voters are loose: their ideological self-identification does not carry much meaning in the arena in which they are now situated. Politicians are missing voters where they are. These are argued to be observable implications of demand-driven dealignment.

Data and Methods

To test H1, this section uses data from the 2020 and 2021 AmericasBarometer surveys conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) to assess whether political ideology is significantly associated with policy preferences on issues of peace—conflict and the economy in Colombia. A series of regression models, using relevant LAPOP survey items as the dependent variables, were employed.

The key independent variable is respondents' self-reported political ideology, measured by the LAPOP question: "Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, people often classify themselves as those who sympathize more with the left or with the right. According to the meaning that the terms 'left' and 'right' have for you when you think about your political stance, would you describe yourself as right, center-right, center, center-left, or left?"

For the peace—conflict issue, the dependent variable is the LAPOP item COLPROPAZ1b: "The government of former president Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC signed a peace agreement in 2016. To what extent do you support this peace agreement?" This variable is measured on a 1–7 scale, ranging from "do not support at all" to "totally support." For this study, it is rescaled to a 0–100 range to ease interpretation.

Regarding economic policy preferences, two dependent variables are used—one for the 2020 survey and another for the 2021 survey. Unfortunately, the questionnaire changed between the two years, making it impossible to use the same question for both. The question ROS4: "On a scale of 1–7, where 1 represents 'completely disagree' and 7 'completely agree,' how do you respond to the statement: 'The Colombian state should implement firm policies to reduce income inequality between the rich and the poor'?" from the 2020 survey was used. The survey questions, recorded on a 1–7 scale, were rescaled to a 0–100 range to facilitate interpretation.

For the 2021 survey, a combined measure of questions CHM1BN and CHM2BN were utilized:

"Which political system do you think is best for Colombia: a system that guarantees access to a basic income and services for all citizens, even

though you cannot elect authorities (questionnaire A) / cannot express political opinions without fear of censorship (questionnaire B)?” Responses were coded as 1 for preferring a system that guarantees basic income and services—even without elections or freedom to express political opinions without fear of censorship—and 0 for preferring a system that prioritizes elections and the freedom to express political opinions, even if some citizens do not have access to basic income and services.

Additional controls included age, gender, income, and level of education. In sum, political ideology is believed to be correlated with support for the peace agreement but will not be associated with (a) the probability of preferring guaranteed basic income over elections, and (b) the preference for firm redistributive policies by the state, even when controlling for a set of demographic covariates.

To test H2, data from the Parliamentary Elites of Latin America (PELA) surveys conducted between 2018 and 2022 were gathered. These surveys questioned seventy members of parliament from various political parties on a range of topics. The focus was on questions ROES101 to ROES105, which measure respondents’ levels of agreement with different statements regarding the role of the state in the economy, using a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The statements are: (1) the state, not the private sector, should own the most important businesses in the country; (2) the state, more than individuals, should guarantee people’s well-being; (3) the state, rather than the private sector, is primarily responsible for creating employment; (4) the state should implement firm policies to reduce income inequality between the poor and the rich; and (5) the state, rather than the private sector, should guarantee old-age pensions.

To capture respondents’ overall stance on the economic and redistributive role of the state, a new variable, *statism*, is created which averages the responses to these five questions and rescaled the values to a range from 0 to 100. A score of 100 indicates that a respondent completely agrees with all five statements, reflecting a strong preference for an active role of the state in the economy and in redistribution.

Questions GUE2 and GUE3, which ask whether congress members would support the political participation of guerrilla members and whether they agree with reduced prison sentences or alternative restorative sentences were also used. The *peace* variable that averages respondents’ answers to GUE2 and GUE3 and rescales it to a range from 0 to 100 is introduced. A score of 100 indicates that a respondent completely agrees with both political participation and alternative justice for former guerrilla members.

As an independent variable, respondents who self-identify on the left–right spectrum, with 0 indicating left and 10 indicating right were considered. In these models, political party membership, age, and gender are used as controls.

Results

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the LAPOP surveys, focusing on the percentage of respondents in each ideological category, their mean support for redistribution (or income over elections), and their mean support for the 2016 peace accord. Respondents who self-identified at the extremes were more numerous than those in the center of the spectrum. The category “No response—Do not know” accounted for 27 percent of respondents in 2020 and 38 percent in 2021. Support for redistribution in the 2020 survey was similar across ideologies, ranging from seventy-three to seventy-nine. In contrast, there were larger discrepancies in the mean response for support for the 2016 peace agreement: the right was the least supportive (mean response of forty-eight), while the center-left was the most supportive (mean response of seventy) on a one to a hundred scale. In 2021, there was a larger variation in the percentage of people who preferred income over elections—or elections over income—across ideological self-identification. The variation in agreement with the peace accord was similar to that described in 2020.

To test whether ideological self-identification correlates with significant differences in positions on redistribution and the peace agreement, a regression analysis is performed. Table 3 reports the results of H1, which posits that self-identification along the left—right axis is not a good predictor of policy choices

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: LAPOP 2020 and 2021.

	Lapop 2020			Lapop 2021			
Ideology	% of Respondents	Mean Support for Redistribution	Mean Support for Peace Accord	% of Respondents	% Prefers Elections over Income	% Prefers Income over Freedom	Mean Support for Peace Accord
Right	21.5	74.2	48.4	18.7	40.4	50.7	47.4
Center-Right	12.4	73.0	53.3	10.9	32.1	61.6	44.6
Center	12.5	76.7	59.2	10.2	28.4	64.9	54.5
Center-Left	10.1	79.3	70.1	6.3	31.9	62.6	71.6
Left	16.2	77.0	60.2	16.0	33.9	57.5	57.8
Don't Know	11.6	77.8	51.1	14.0	33.8	39.7	50.4
No Response	15.7	78.0	49.0	23.8	30.3	46.5	44.2

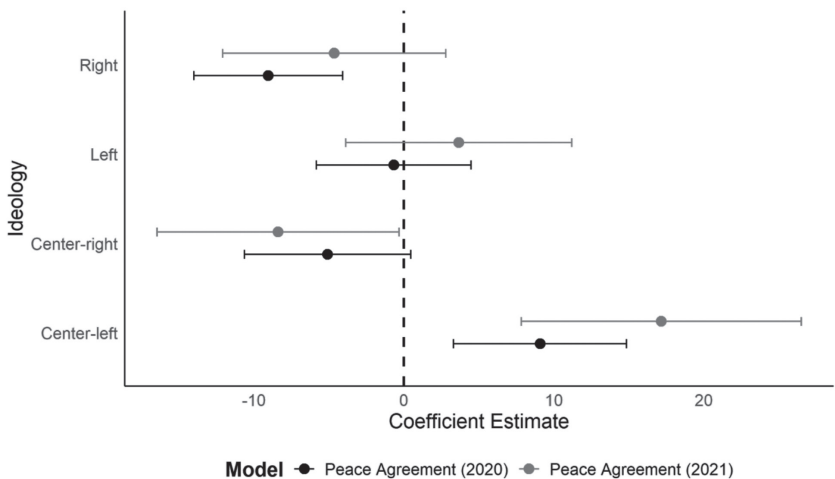
Source: *The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), Colombia, 2020 & 2021 surveys*, Vanderbilt University.

on the economic—redistributive axis, in contrast to the peace—conflict axis.

The regression results indicate that ideological self-identification (from left to right) does not strongly predict policy positions on the redistributive role of the state or preferences regarding universal income versus democracy. In the first and second columns of Table 3, the coefficients for right, center-right, center-left, and left are not statistically significant when compared to the centrist reference category. By contrast, the coefficients for some of these ideological categories in the peace models (columns 3 and 4 of Table 3) are statistically significant. Respondents identifying as right or center-right exhibit lower support than centrists, whereas center-left respondents express higher support. This pattern is consistent across both 2020 and 2021, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, which plot coefficient estimates for each ideological category.

Figure 5 shows the mean values (with standard errors) of ideology, peace, and statism for each major party in the Colombian Congress. The first panel (left) displays how far right or left each party’s members place themselves on the 0–10 ideological spectrum, with higher scores indicating a right-leaning orientation. The results match expectations, with Centro Democrático positioned farther to the right and Partido Liberal positioned farther to the left. The second panel (center) depicts average support for peace-related measures—reduced or alternative sentences for demobilized insurgents and their political participation. This panel shows that ideological positioning clearly corresponds with support for reintegration and transitional justice measures; as parties move further right, they agree less with these provisions. The third panel

Figure 3. Coefficient Plots for Agreement with Peace Accord 2020 and 2021



Source: Authors based on data from *The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)*, Colombia, 2020 & 2021 surveys, Vanderbilt University.

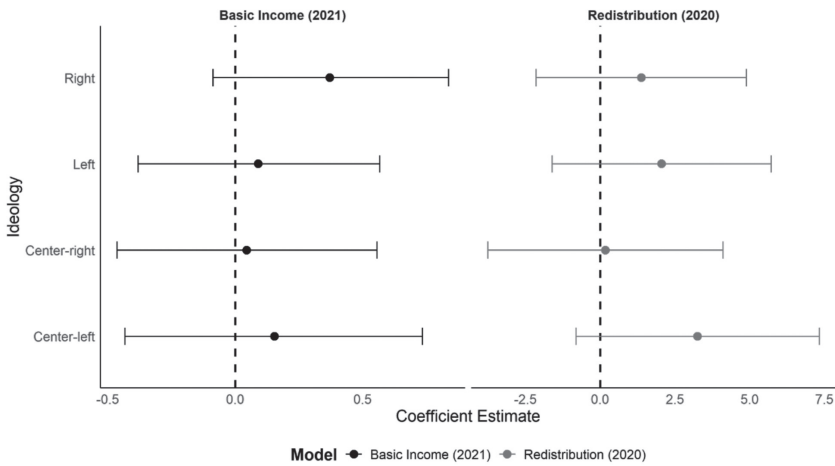
Table 3. Regression Results for H1. Ideological Self-identification as Predictor of Peace Agreement and Redistribution Preferences

	Redistribution Preference (2020)	Basic Income Preference (2021)	Peace Agreement (2020)	Peace Agreement (2021)
Intercept	49.9*** (5.1)	0.7 (0.8)	73.2*** (6.9)	77.6*** (11.9)
Right	1.4 (1.8)	0.4 (0.2)	-9.0*** (2.5)	-4.6 (3.8)
Center-right	0.2 (2.0)	0.0 (0.3)	-5.1+ (2.8)	-8.4* (4.1)
Center-left	3.3 (2.1)	0.2 (0.3)	9.1** (2.9)	17.2*** (4.8)
Left	2.1 (1.9)	0.1 (0.2)	-0.7 (2.6)	3.7 (3.8)
Age	0.0 (0.0)	-0.0 (0.0)	-0.1* (0.1)	-0.3** (0.1)
Female	1.4 (1.2)	0.2 (0.2)	-1.3 (1.6)	-0.4 (2.4)
Elementary	8.6* (4.2)	-1.0 (0.7)	-1.5 (5.7)	-2.1 (10.1)
Secondary	11.0** (4.1)	-1.0 (0.7)	-4.9 (5.6)	-15.9 (9.9)
Undergraduate	9.0* (4.2)	-1.5* (0.7)	1.3 (5.7)	-9.5 (9.8)
Bogotá	-3.7* (1.8)	-0.4 (0.2)	-4.1 (2.6)	3.6 (3.8)
Central	-1.1 (1.8)	-0.3 (0.2)	-7.6** (2.5)	-4.8 (4.0)
Eastern	-2.6 (1.9)	-0.3 (0.2)	-10.9*** (2.7)	-1.2 (3.6)
Pacific	-4.2* (2.0)	-0.2 (0.3)	-5.1 (2.8)	-2.8 (4.7)
National Territories	-4.8 (3.5)	0.2 (0.5)	-3.6 (4.9)	-8.5 (7.8)
Num.Obs.	1922	826	1943	888
R2	0.011		0.0	0.0
RMSE	24.8	0.5	35.3	35.1

p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Source: Authors based on data from *The Americas Barometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)*, Colombia, 2020 & 2021 surveys, Vanderbilt University.

Figure 4. Coefficient Plot for Preferring Income Over Elections/Freedom, Lapop 2021; and Preference for Redistribution, Lapop 2020



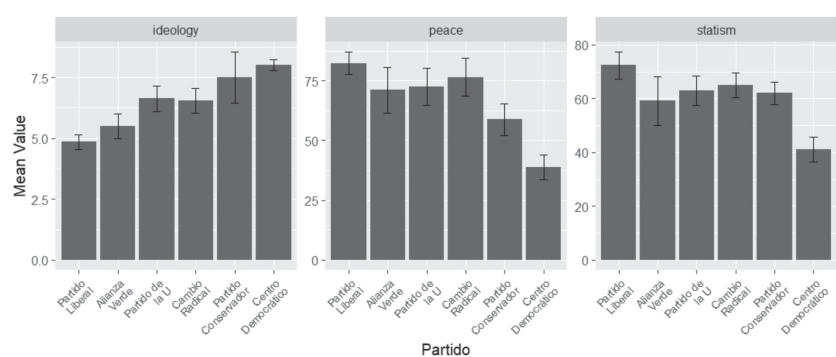
Source: Authors based on data from *The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)*, Colombia, 2020 & 2021 surveys, Vanderbilt University.

(right) shows average preferences for a state-led economy with a strong role for the state in redistribution. Although there is some variation—with Partido Liberal scoring higher and Centro Democrático scoring lower—the differences among parties are somewhat less stark than on the peace dimension.

Using the Parliamentary Elites in Latin America (PELA) survey—which questions congress members on various policy issues—two OLS models were estimated to examine the relationship between ideology and political party on support for the peace agreement and on statism, both controlling for age and gender. Results are displayed in Table 4. In the first model, with peace as the dependent variable, ideology (scaled from 0 = left to 10 = right) emerges as a strong and statistically significant predictor. The negative sign of the coefficient indicates that, as congress members move toward the right on the ideological spectrum, their support for peace measures (e.g., reduced sentences, alternative penalties, and political participation for ex-combatants) decreases—even when controlling for political party, gender, and age. In Model 2, with statism as the dependent variable, the effect of ideology is not statistically significant. Overall, where a politician places themselves on the left–right scale is less pronounced for redistributive or state-intervention attitudes than it is for peace–conflict attitudes.

Political party affiliation is not significant in either policy area. The notable exception is the right-wing Centro Democrático party. Its members exhibit substantially lower average support for negotiated conflict resolution and statism, reflecting a critical stance toward peace negotiations and more market-

Figure 5. Mean Ideology, Statism, and Peace by Party (with Standard Errors)



Source: Authors based on data from *The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)*, Colombia, 2020 & 2021 surveys, Vanderbilt University.

oriented views of the state. Interestingly, Centro Democrático may suffer from even more acute dealignment, as the pool of voters who self-identify as right favors redistributive policy measures that run counter to the views held by politicians in that group, as observed in Table 4.

Discussion

The regression estimates for H1 (Table 3) and H2 (Table 4) suggest that ideological self-identification tends to be correlated with policy preferences on the peace—conflict axis but not with specific policy choices related to redistribution issues, both among voters and elites. The results presented in columns 1 and 2 of Table 3 (LAPOP) provide evidence that ideology is not correlated with support for firm redistribution policies by the state, nor with the probability of preferring guaranteed income over elections. Individuals from the left, center, and right appear similarly inclined toward different policy preferences on issues that have become more salient in recent years, such as income inequality. The results in column 2 of Table 4 show that this pattern replicates among elites: ideology among congress members is not correlated with different policies regarding the role of the state in the economy and redistribution.

Taken together, the findings support the claim that a representational void has opened on the newly salient policy fronts. While ideology remains a strong predictor of attitudes toward the longstanding peace—conflict cleavage among both voters and party elites, it does not appear to be as closely tied to policy attitudes on newly salient topics, such as the economy and redistribution. As

Table 4. Regression Results H2. Ideological Self-identification of Congress Members as Predictor of Support for Peace Agreement and Statism.

	Peace Model	Statism Model
Intercept	115.2*** (18.3)	64.9*** (16.4)
Ideology	-5.4** (1.9)	-2.8 (1.7)
Partido Conservador	-9.9 (13.3)	-3.2 (12.2)
Partido de la U	1.5 (9.6)	-6.4 (8.8)
Cambio Radical	2.8 (9.3)	-2.2 (8.6)
Alianza Verde	-6.5 (10.0)	-8.0 (9.1)
Centro Democrático	-26.1* (10.1)	-20.6* (9.1)
Otros	6.9 (10.8)	-9.0 (9.2)
Age	0.1 (0.2)	0.3 (0.2)
Male	-8.6 (8.6)	6.2 (7.8)
Num.Obs.	68	70
R2	0.5	0.3
RMSE	19.7	18.2

p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Source: Authors based on data from *The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), Colombia. 2020 & 2021 surveys*. Vanderbilt University.

observed in the various panels of Figure 5 and in the OLS regressions reported in Table 4, political parties are not articulating distinct policy offers on these new issues. Although voters have moved away from the peace—conflict axis, they have not been met by parties and politicians in the new redistributive/economic arena of political conflict. Left and right politicians and parties are supporting essentially the same views (with the exception of the right-wing Centro Democrático). This lack of differentiation in what it means to be left or right—or to belong to a particular political party, in the case of elites—on these emerging issues is an observable implication of demand-driven dealignment. These findings are consistent with those of Kessler et al., who show that Colombians do not have significantly divergent views on these emerging

issues, and Bitar et al., who reveal that the majority of Colombians coalesce around statist views, favoring state intervention in the economy.³⁰

Conclusions

This article advances a theory to explain the surge in support for populist candidates in Colombia in the 2022 election. That year, Gustavo Petro and Rodolfo Hernández reached the second round—two candidates who denounced the establishment and had previously held office at the subnational level, yet remained outsiders to the national establishment. This outcome resulted from a process of dealignment between voters' preferences and politicians' programmatic positions. Voters shifted their programmatic preferences due to a sudden change in the political landscape, but established parties did not adjust their stances accordingly. This mismatch, referred to as Demand-Driven Dealignment, created a representational void that was filled by populist candidates who denounced the establishment as corrupt and out of touch, ultimately winning a majority of votes.

The empirical results of this article support this theory. Survey data were used to show the decline of conflict as the main issue of concern and the rise of the economy and corruption as central issues. V-Dem measurements of party positions along the left–right economic scale demonstrated that for the past twenty or more years political parties have not shifted on this axis. Empirical analysis using LAPOP and PELA data provided additional support. Political ideology is not a good predictor of policy preferences on economic–redistributive topics, and most parties do not have distinct views on state intervention in the economy. Overall, the evidence and empirical tests presented offer strong support for the hypotheses: voters abandoned traditional parties, and these parties struggled to realign with voters' shifting preferences, producing a representational void that was eventually filled by two populist candidates.

This article has important implications for the literature on populism in Latin America and beyond. Scholars focusing on dealignment have largely emphasized how political elites converged around similar programmatic positions, leaving them vulnerable to populist outsiders who can outflank them from either the right or the left, capturing voters who no longer identify with the establishment. The Colombian case shows that this is just one way in which dealignment can occur. The typology can be used to classify other cases of dealignment and realignment.

The typology presented, along with the Colombian case, should motivate future research on the types of events that lead to both demand-driven and

³⁰ Kessler, Vommaro, Rodríguez-Raga, and Herrera, “La sociedad contra las elites.”; Bitar, Tolosa Bello, and Tolosa Bello, “Gustavo Petro y el triunfo de la izquierda en Colombia.”

supply-driven dealignment, and on why political elites are more able—or willing—to meet voters’ new demands in some contexts but not in others. Additionally, the Colombian case demonstrates that two populists can fill a void generated by political dealignment, yet it remains unclear why some voters chose a left-wing option while others opted for a right-wing alternative. This is particularly puzzling in the case of Hernández, who does not fit the mold of previous right-wing anti-establishment figures that rose to prominence on promises of “mano dura” in contexts of high criminality (e.g., Bukele in El Salvador) or armed insurgencies (e.g., Fujimori in Peru and Uribe in Colombia). Ultimately, the Colombian experience underscores the dynamic nature of political realignment and the need for a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between voter preferences, party strategies, and the rise of populist alternatives.