

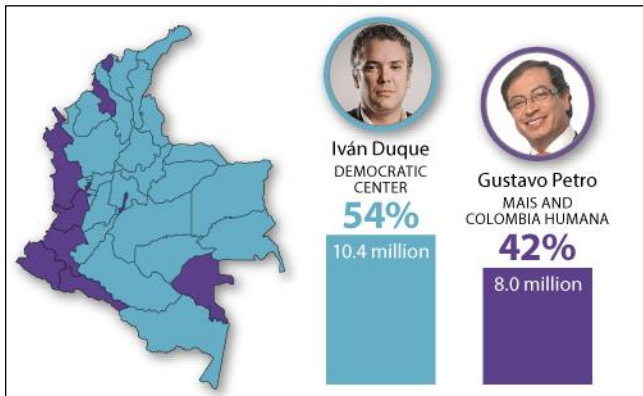


July 12, 2018

## Colombia’s 2018 Elections

Colombians elected a new congress in March 2018 and a new president in June 2018. Because no presidential candidate won more than 50% of the vote on May 27, 2018, as required for a victory in the first round, a second-round runoff was held June 17. That contest resulted in a victory for a popular far-right candidate, Iván Duque, who will assume office on August 7, 2018.

**Figure 1. Presidential Second-Round Vote Results**



Source: CRS.

Notes: Drawn from data in <http://www.eltiempo.com/elecciones-colombia-2018/presidenciales/mapa-de-resultados-de-la-segunda-vuelta-presidencial-en-colombia-232010>.

Representing the Democratic Center (CD) party, which had gained seats in the March congressional elections and won the most seats in the Colombian Senate (see **Figure 2**), Duque was carried to victory with almost 54% of the vote. Runner-up Gustavo Petro, a leftist former mayor of Bogotá, a former Colombian Senator, and once a member of the M-19 guerilla insurgency, nevertheless did better than any leftist candidate in a presidential race in the past century; Petro won 8 million votes and nearly 42% of the votes cast. Around 4.2% were protest votes, signifying Colombian voters who cast blank ballots.

### Looking Ahead to a Duque Presidency

Duque, who will become president at the age of 42, served a single term in the Colombian Senate. Duque was partially educated in the United States and worked for the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, DC, for several years. He was the handpicked candidate of former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe, who served for two terms, ending in 2010. Uribe, who opposed many of the policies of his successor, Juan Manuel Santos, is the leader of the CD party (a party he founded in opposition to the policies of two-term President Santos) and a prominent CD senator who was reelected in March 2018.

Duque will inherit an economy that is projected to grow by 2.5% in 2018 but may be strained by the costs associated with implementing a peace accord signed with the

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a leftist guerrilla organization that had engaged in a violent insurgency against the Colombian government since the mid-1960s. Initiatives to enact the peace accord, if fully implemented, are projected to cost \$45 billion over the next 15 years.

Colombian voters did not consider peace a key electoral issue. Polls taken throughout the year leading up to the elections revealed that corruption, citizen security, health care, unemployment, poverty, and, increasingly, concerns about the growing flood of refugees from Venezuela were bigger voter priorities. Peace, including negotiations with the country’s second-oldest and now largest insurgent group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), ranked near the bottom. Some observers maintain that support for peace programs in Colombia is important not to benefit former FARC or other demobilized combatants but to fulfill promises the government made in the peace accords to the country’s 8.6 million victims of the five-decade conflict.

Duque won the backing of the Wake Up Coalition, consisting of some voters who had opposed an earlier version of the Santos-backed peace accord in an October 2016 referendum, along with others who viewed the ratified accord with the FARC as too lenient; wanted to see some more business-friendly, orthodox economic policies, including reductions in taxes; and supported the commitment by President-elect Duque to take steps to contain the government of Nicolás Maduro in neighboring Venezuela. In the runoff campaign, some parties that had backed the peace accord with the FARC, such as the Liberal Party, announced their support for Duque because Petro was deemed too far left.

Several milestones in peace implementation have been achieved, including disarming the FARC and ratifying the Special Jurisdiction for Peace—the transitional justice regime for judicial proceedings against those who committed gross human rights violations and war crimes. Nevertheless, key sections of the agreement remain unaddressed, leaving completion of its implementation to the incoming president and new congress. Duque has pledged to alter some elements of the accord that remain controversial, even though the Colombian Congress ratified the accord in November 2016 and the Colombian Constitutional Court has ruled that it must be implemented over the next three terms, or 12 years.

In 2016 and 2017, Colombia’s coca cultivation and cocaine production exceeded previous records. In 2016, according to the U.S. government, Colombia cultivated 188,000 hectares of coca; in 2017, it cultivated an unprecedented 209,000 hectares of coca. Even with Colombia’s economic stability and improving security, cocaine exports, primarily to the U.S. market, are a major concern. In September 2017,

President Trump considered making a determination that Colombia was not cooperating with the U.S. government in its counter-drug efforts. Although that determination was never finalized, the Trump Administration seemed to welcome Duque's approach to combatting illicit drugs, which appears to be a more traditional approach than that of the Santos government.

Duque and his vice president, Marta Lucía Ramírez, who initially ran as the Conservative Party candidate in the presidential first round, have recommended that drug policy shift back to a stricter counter-drug approach rather than a model endorsed in the peace accord that focuses on voluntary eradication and economic support to peasant farmers to transition away from illicit drug crop cultivation. Duque campaigned on returning to spraying coca crops with the herbicide glyphosate. This policy would reverse Colombia's decision in mid-2015 to end aerial spraying, which had been a central—albeit controversial—feature of U.S.-Colombian counter-drug cooperation for two decades.

Other security issues also are prominent. Social leaders and human rights activists have been murdered in record numbers since the peace accord was finalized. Both Santos and Duque have expressed dismay at the jump in these attacks, although Santos attributes the sharp uptick to not providing adequate protections for rural activists, as required in the peace accord, and continues to push for the accord's full implementation.

## Legislative Election Results

The new congress to be seated on July 20, 2018, expanded in each chamber by 6 seats; the result is a combined congress of 280 seats (see **Figure 2**). Typically, 102 Senators and 166 members of the lower chamber, or House of Representatives, are elected every four years. Senators are elected at the same four-year intervals from a single nationwide party list, with two chosen by Colombia's indigenous population.

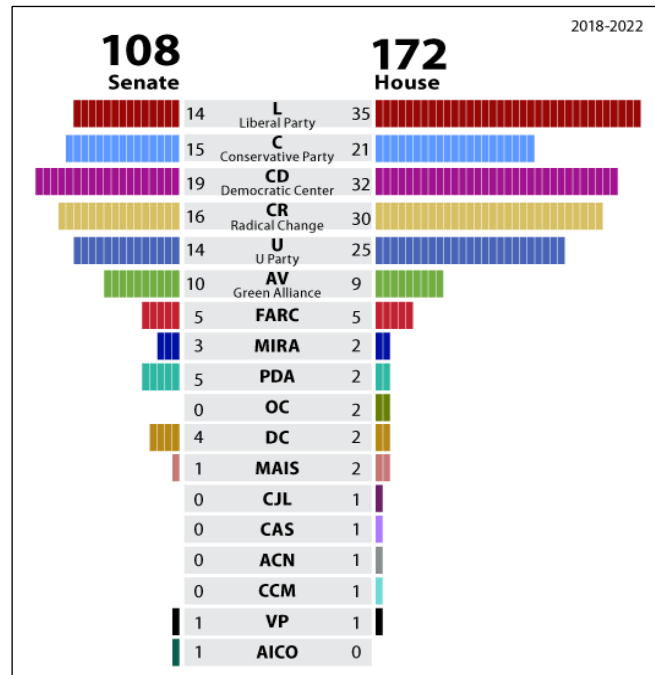
In the new Congress, two extra seats, for the presidential and vice presidential runners up, have been added as automatic seats in the Senate and House, due to a constitutional change in 2015, allowing presidential candidate Gustavo Petro to return to the Senate. He is likely to become a leader of the opposition to the incoming Duque government. Five seats in each house are reserved for former (demobilized) FARC members; those seats will endure for two election cycles, ending in 2026, as required by the peace accord. The FARC Party—which uses the same acronym as the insurgent organization, although the acronym now signifies the Revolutionary Alternative Common Force—did not win in any additional congressional race for which it competed in March, so the automatic seats are all that it shall fill.

## Some Considerations for U.S. Policy

Colombia is one of the United States' closest political partners in the region. The U.S. government has invested in Colombia's security for almost two decades through Plan Colombia and its successor strategy, Peace Colombia. Key concerns in the U.S. Congress remain the peace accord's implementation and Colombia's stability in light of a

number of corruption scandals, continued assassinations of human rights defenders and other social activists, and record coca crops.

**Figure 2. Legislative Election Results**  
(March 11, 2018, results and the 12 automatic seats shown)



**Source:** "Nueva Composición del Senado a Partir del 20 Julio", *Senado de Colombia*, March 14, 2018, at <http://www.senado.gov.co/noticiero-del-senado/item/27756-nueva-composicion-del-senado-a-partir-del-20-julio>; <http://especiales.semana.com/big-data-electoral/distribucion-camara-representantes/index.html>.

**Notes:** FARC=Revolutionary Alternative Common Force; MIRA=Absolute Renovation Independent Movement; PDA=Alternative Democratic Pole; OC=Citizens' Option; DC=Decentes; MAIS=Alternative Indigenous and Social Movement; CJL=Colombia Justa Libres; CAS=Alternate Santander Coalition; ACN=Ancestral Afro-Colombian Communal Council of Playa Renaciente; CCM=La Mamuncia Communal Council; VP (Second Place Presidential in the Senate; Second Place Vice Presidential in House); AICO=Indigenous Authorities of Colombia.

As the Duque government takes office, some considerations for Congress may include the following:

- How will counternarcotics strategies and security cooperation with the United States change?
- Will the end of a half century of internal conflict leave Colombia open to focus on its economic advancement, or will the peace deal's implementation and potential benefits become imperiled?

For more background, see CRS Report R43813, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations* and CRS Report R44779, *Colombia's Changing Approach to Drug Policy*.

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