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THE COLOMBIAN PRESIDENTIAL  
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**ELTE POL-IR STUDENT PAPER SERIES**

2022/4



## **ELTE POL-IR STUDENT PAPER SERIES**

Series of the ELTE Institute of Political and International Studies

Publisher: Balázs Majtényi

Editor-in-Chief: Alíz Nagy

Editorial Board: Ákos Kopper, Rusudan Margiani, Andrew Ryder, András  
Schweitzer, Anna Sebestyén, Kinga Soós

Published by the ELTE Institute of Political and International Studies

Address: 1117 Budapest, Pázmány Péter sétány 1/A.

URL: <http://polir.elte.hu>

E-mail: [eutud@tatk.elte.hu](mailto:eutud@tatk.elte.hu)

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ISSN 2939-757X



# TWO FRAMES OF *CHANGE*: PETRO AND HERNÁNDEZ IN THE COLOMBIAN PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES, 2022

JUAN CARLOS CORTÉS PIÑEROS<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Gustavo Petro and Rodolfo Hernández became the second-round candidates in the Colombian presidential election in 2022. Both portrayed themselves as proponents of *change* for the country, and the rhetoric of *change* was present in the press, political advertising, comments from members of the state and public opinion in general. How is *change* to be interpreted in the context of the presidential candidacy of Petro and Hernández? To answer this question, this research analyses the political discourse of both candidates in two presidential debates and compares how they framed their ideas of *change* and continuity regarding four issues: economy, relations between the state and the people, environment, and corruption.

**Keywords:** Electoral debate, presidential election, Colombia, discourse, political communication

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## Introduction

On May 29, 2022, Colombia had the first round of presidential elections and the winners to be in the second round were Gustavo Petro and Rodolfo Hernández; the former, openly from the left, former member of the armed group M19 (now non-existent), economist, member of the alternative political movement Historical Pact. The latter, a businessman who had served as the mayor of the city of Bucaramanga, and likes being called "engineer", which is his profession. He is involved, together with some members of his family, in some corruption scandals, and is a member of the political movement founded in 2019 League of Governors Against Corruption. Immediately, the national and international press began to publish headers like "Colombia chose the change, but who offers the real one?"<sup>2</sup> (DW 2022), "Elections in Colombia: the country decides how deep is the change it wants (and who best represents it)" (Pardo 2022) and "Colombia in the second round: a left-wing candidate and a right-wing populist will face each other in June" (Turkewitz 2022).

To the surprise of many, Gustavo Petro was elected president of Colombia to start governing on August 7, 2022. Immediately, the rhetoric of change continued: "Can Colombia's first left-wing president deliver change?" they wondered in *The Guardian* (2022), the Spanish newspaper *El País* affirmed "Change in Colombia" (Vásquez 2022), in the *Washington Post* they posed a challenge by saying that "Colombia took a turn. Now Petro must bring his speech to reality" (Montero 2022).

During the campaign, the televised political debates were a space for candidates to share their views, argue in favor of their projects, differentiate themselves from others' and try to show themselves as the best option; the armed conflict and peace agreements, the inequality, global warming and environmental issues,

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<sup>2</sup> All translations of passages quoted from Spanish language sources are my own.



corruption, international trade, racism, pension systems and political systems were some of the most regular topics in the recent presidential campaign in Colombia. In some way, every candidate mentioned them, argued to support their views or to question the others' positions, characterized and described these problems, and framed his/her position in specific value systems. These rhetorical resources are used as tools for the candidates to explain, strengthen, and simplify their view for the electorate, as well as to attack and delegitimize others' positions.

What exactly did the *change* mean for each candidate according to their speech during the televised electoral debates? To answer this, I first expose the theoretical and methodological assumptions; subsequently, a review of the literature on presidential debates in Colombia is presented; thirdly, I develop the analysis, compare the discursive frame used by each candidate, and present the conclusions.

The methodology used to develop the research is Critical Discourse Analysis. Considering that the focus of this research is on the speech of the candidates during the debates, this work adopts the theoretical framework explained by Asli Çalkivik (2017), who describes an approach dedicated to the question of representation, misrepresentation, how dominant framings of politics provide and reproduce relations of power.

According to her, the language involved in a discourse is relevant in the study of politics because it is a representational practice that normalizes and legitimizes mechanisms of power. The representation produces knowledge and there is no such a thing as a separation between thinking and action, nor between theory and practice, nor between knowledge and power: subjects are produced and reproduced because of these discourses, so the production of knowledge, as she says, is not a simply cognitive, but a normative and political matter (Çalkivik 2017, 1). This approach to politics provides a reconceptualization of the language as a powerful constitutive of subjectivity, as a system of differences, a system of opposites, and a system of identities,

selfhood, and otherness. Based on this theoretical framework, the main concepts used in the work are discourse and frame.

An electoral debate is a television format that, although close, differs from the interview and the face-to-face meeting. For Andreescu (2013, 248) there are the three forms of exchange in the media: The first one is the media interview, the journalist is supposed to challenge the guest using questionnaires, and the interviewee to express and answer, confess, judge, make statements; the relation is of complementarity and perhaps complicity. Second, the “face-to-face” includes two partners who are antagonists or adversaries in ideas, the relation is not complementary and the two are supposed to interact by asking, answering, judging, explaining, and criticizing each other. And third, the “media debate” has several partners involved, more than two, requiring an organizational space to assign the right to speak, present, introduce the guests, ask questions, mimicking naivety, challenge, interest, surprise (Andreescu 2013).

The debates are seen from two perspectives, in general: as a montage, that is, a staging characterized by its artificiality, or as an opportunity to get to know the candidates interacting as they really are, responding to circumstances in real time. Andreescu (2013) is one of the sceptics, who see the debate as a predetermined ritual with elements that had already been calculated.

On the other hand, Proaño (2002) argues that the debates allow to clearly see who the candidate is by subjecting him to difficult situations, but Greenberg (2009) shares Andreescu's perspective when describing the debates as the performances of conventions and acting:

Part of the performance of a presidential (or vice-presidential) debate, after all, consists of following certain conventions. One is that candidates are supposed to act as if they are there to report to the public their positions on prominent policy issues, thereby helping



voters figure out which party better matches their own preferences.  
(Greenberg 2009, 6)

Some of these views could be classified as naive – for assuming the honesty of the image shown in the debate –, while other views can be regarded as critical – those which question the veracity of the images produced. These views are formed according to the assumptions of the different authors who have different opinions about the role of electoral debates. For example, Proaño, who relies on the transparency of the debate to show who the candidate is, considers that the non-transparent process occurs at the moment of reception, in the predetermined mind of the voter, since according to him the voters really listen to those with whom they agree, that they are "emotionally blind", because there are partisan loyalties and previous experiences that lead the person simply to seek a justification for their ideas; although, Proaño sees in the debates an opportunity to overcome that condition (Proaño 2002). Consistent with this, for Proaño “The debate does not serve to convert followers of one candidate into followers of another. It can, on the other hand, influence the undecided and abstainers” (Proaño 2002, 37).

Although Proaño and Greenberg would not agree on the transparency and authenticity of the image shown in the debates, they would agree in rejecting the idea of the passive viewer and the idea that the debates educate. With Proaño, we have already seen the place of predispositions, while Greenberg points out that:

An underlying premise of the discourse about the presidential debates is that they exist to inform viewers, who watch them with open minds to learn about the candidates and decide how to vote. In other words, grandiose as it may sound, our culture assigns the debates a vital democratic role: democratic theory holds that effective self-government depends on an informed citizenry, and the debates, more than any other vehicle, are supposed to teach voters what they still need to know

about the candidates in the fall of a presidential election season.  
(Greenberg 2009, 6)

And that is why he criticizes the idea of the electoral debate as something that fills empty minds, but assures that they do have another democratic function:

(...) not the provision of vital data to blank-slate voters seeking to form a considered judgement about the candidates, but rather the stimulation and engagement of broader public interest in politics. This contribution, while more modest than the grand claims frequently made on the debates' behalf, nonetheless goes some way toward renewing voters' political commitments and enriching democracy. (Greenberg 2009, 7-8)

And adds:

They are, after all, rites like holidays or parades, which gain meaning from the way they figure in our daily experiences. They may not educate but they evoke feelings, bolster sentiments, and provoke action. Debates bring pleasure to following campaigns. They bind us together socially with our compatriots. They can even trigger political involvement. (Greenberg 2009, 16)

Schrott and Lanoue (2013) support with their research the idea that the impact of the electoral debate is limited, since considering a candidate as a winner or loser does not depend mainly on the performance of the candidate in the debate:

(...) we find that (...) debate performance is responsible for only about half of the variance in viewers' assessments of winners and losers; that is possible to be declared the winner in the post-debate polls based entirely on factors exogenous to the debate itself; and that even a highly successful performance might yield only a narrow win in the post-debate polls. (Schrott and Lanoue 2013, 684)



In their study of presidential debates in the United States between 1960 and 2008, they further conclude that:

(...) pre-existing factors having nothing at all to do with the actual performance of the candidates make up more than 50% of the measure that we typically use to identify the winners and losers of presidential debates. (Schrott and Lanoue 2013, 687)

So, without being naive about the scope of an electoral debate, why can it be said that it is relevant to study them? First, it is possible to recognize the ideological base of a candidate that, although a two-hour staging on television is not a sufficient image to understand the ideology, arguments and capacities of a person, it can give clues about the ideal of society he or she seeks to build; therefore, systematizing the ideas reflected in the debates can help organize the information and contribute the readers to decision-making or to gain tools to watch TV or consume media in a more critical way. Third, as social scientists we can recognize forces in tension in the debates that are very surely a representation of the forces in dispute beyond the television studio or beyond the presidential campaign; the debates are spaces for the political, economic and social projects of different groups to meet, defend themselves, and seek to captivate the electorate; to the scientists, then, it helps to understand the current tensions.

Omar Rincón (2015), a Colombian researcher, says “(...) want to know what Peruvians are like, you have to watch television (...) . Colombians, on the other hand, are ‘drug cultured’, and this is part of our identity as a country” (Rincón 2015, 90). This paragraph, which before arriving in Budapest would have seemed prejudiced to me, began to seem relevant when I would tell people that I am from Colombia and they would start making jokes about Pablo Escobar because of the series they had seen, I would try not to show my annoyance, while also trying not to start a fight about how insignificant that character really was in my country and why I shouldn't be associated with him (because that character was just the character to show on TV while more powerful people



were behind). Although what happens on television is not read by empty minds that believe everything, it does create imaginaries and these base ways of acting, relating, of participating in politics. So, in a disinformation campaign as strong as the one that happened in Colombia this year, studying the media is important to organize, systematize and compare the available information and to contribute to the formation of a more critical audience.

On March 13, legislative elections were held in Colombia, but a third ballot was included so that the political parties could voluntarily consult the population about who they wanted to be their presidential candidate. Some pre-candidates were discarded after that consultation and a campaign period formally began with the presidential candidates. That first period of the elections lasts until the first presidential round on May 29, the day on which the second period begins that continues until the final election on June 19. In this research I only include debates from the first period (March 13 to May 29) because in the second period the candidate Hernández refused to attend debates<sup>3</sup>.

During the first campaign period, there were seven debates attended by Rodolfo Hernández and five by Gustavo Petro, who before the first round also cancelled his attendance at some debates as a form of protest for irregularities in the counting of the votes obtained by his political movement in the congressional elections. When the situation was clarified he started attending again. In this analysis I include the first and last debate attended by each

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<sup>3</sup> This refusal to participate in debates was the first of its kind: Hernández accepted invitations, but did not arrive, and a few days before the second presidential round, the Superior Court of Bogotá accepted a demand filed by citizens who claimed their right to vote in an informed manner: the court forced both candidates to organize a presidential debate before the second round: there were legal appeals by Hernández, who also set conditions that it should be held in his city, he chose the journalists-moderators, the topics, the time to reply, Petro accepted everything, but the debate did not happen.

candidate during the first period; that is, in the case of Hernández I include the first debate (organized by the newspaper *El Espectador* on April 20) and the seventh (by the *Caracol Radio* station on May 11); In the case of Petro, I review the first (March 15, newspaper *El Tiempo*) and the fifth debate he attended (May 28, with the television channel *Noticias Caracol*).

## Electoral debates in Colombia

The studies about presidential debates in Colombia can be classified in three groups. First, the works about the production of debates and the socialization of ideas in those spaces; second, research concerned with the reception, interpretation, and interaction of the public with these debates. The third group of works consists of those concerned with explaining conflicts, problems, and social issues, beyond the debate itself, having the debate as a source, that is, there is a relationship between the presidential debate and society. For each group, a comparison between the research design and the results is presented.

### The candidate and his team

The circulation of speeches through presidential debates is the subject of the work of Richard (2011), Bayter (2015), Torres et al. (2018) and Restrepo et al. (2021). These works studied the candidate and his campaign, since it is there that strategies are generated to participate in the presidential campaign in general, and in the presidential debate in particular. This implies that the four authors wonder about the way in which the candidates, as well as their work teams, sought to optimally participate in the respective elections.

Richard (2011) analyses the *storytelling* of the candidates in the 2010 presidential campaign and shows how the articulated story, particularly the speech of the candidate Antanas Mockus, was different from that of the recent former presidents, as well as from their contenders. Richard's concern was for the stories that were told by the candidates (Richard 2011, 130), their content and structure, the author assumes that "(...) stories are more effective than

propaganda because they do not try to change the convictions of people, but they invite to listen and participate in a common experience” (Richard 2011, 131-132).

Meanwhile, Bayter (2015) showed some patterns of discursive structures used by the candidates in the presidential debate on June 9, 2014, broadcasted by the *Caracol* channel, the meeting between the first and second presidential rounds (174). This work interested in the way certain words, expressions, nouns were used, assumes that “(...) the main function of the debate is to win a contest (Benoit et al. 1997) through discursive strategies that are built through from what is implicitly or explicitly said in the exchange” (Bayter 2015, 176). Using a similar discourse analysis methodology, Torres et al. (2018) investigated the change in the discourse of the 2018 presidential candidates under the influence of the intention to vote reflected in the polls from the review of debates and interviews.

Torres et al. (2018) contrasted the polls on voting intentions prior to the first round of the 2018 elections with the candidates' discourse regarding three current issues: economy and development; peace and post-conflict; education, science and technology. The main concept of analysis is political culture, which is defined by the authors as attitudinal orientations that seek to be modified and influenced by the candidates (Torres et al. 2018, 84), that is, the relationship between the candidate and the citizenry, according to the authors, is an attempt to influence the latter:

In a participatory democracy, the candidate tries to represent the ideology of the political culture to be elected. These ideals, on the one hand, are characteristics of a particular social group; and, on the other, they are quick to change, due to the closeness of some groups in society. This proximity of ideologies configures only part of the habitus in this field. Thus, then, the eligible person exercises his power with the discourse to commit his end. (Torres et al. 2018, 85)

On the other hand, for Restrepo et al. (2021) the research problem is broader than the debates and speeches, since their interest is in the *professionalization* of the presidential campaigns in Colombia, so their objective is to measure the level of professionalization of the campaign of the three main presidential candidates in Colombia 2018, to say, Iván Duque, Gustavo Petro and Sergio Fajardo. Their work begins with a historical context of the idea of professionalization of a political campaign, and then explains how it can be measured quantitatively.

Quoting a group of authors (Gibson and Römmele, 2001; LeDuc, Noemi and Norris, 2002) Restrepo et al. reconstruct a chronology of the professionalization of political campaigns divided into pre-modern, modern and postmodern campaigns. The first stage goes from the 19th century to 1950, when political communication was organized by the political parties at the local level and the relationship with the electorate was carried out directly due to a strong partisan link. The means of the campaign were the partisan press, pamphlets, posters, local meetings, and radio. Modern campaigns (1960-1990) were organized at the central level and political parties were advised by external consultants, effective feedback elements such as surveys and focus groups began to be used, television became the main promotion channel, there was a decline in face-to-face politics, and constant loss of partisan loyalties (Restrepo et al. 2021, 51).

Postmodern campaigns (since 1990) are characterized by the influential participation of external consultants, and experts in media, audio-visual production, political marketing, and political communication. The messages become more complex because the electorate is segmented based on the knowledge of their preferences, understood with measurement instruments and the use of new technologies such as text messages, emails and social networks, and now the parties give greater importance to local organizations for their engagement activities (Restrepo et al. 2021, 52). With this historical base, the authors present the elements of their professionalization index.

The professionalization index (INPRO) is made up of two dimensions: organizational (which assigns a numerical value to the internal structure of the campaign: centralized command, external consultants, professional management, permanent campaign, personalization of the campaign in the candidate, professionalization of the campaign group by area, paid militancy of the campaign, financing, electoral monitoring) and the communicative dimension (strategies and communication resources of parties and candidates, discursive, communication processes and technical means, indicators, personalized messages centred on the candidate, use of symbolic referents, message segmentation, emotional use of electoral messages, image construction, storytelling narrative construction, participation in debates and forums, advertising) (Restrepo et al. 2021, 55-77).

The research results are equally interesting. Richard (2011) described the story told by former president Álvaro Uribe in 2002 – his first election – as a story of a hero who came to solve the problem (crisis due to the failure of peace negotiations by the government of Andrés Pastrana and strengthening of the guerrilla), with the structure of an initial situation, a disturbing moment, a crisis, the appearance of the hero, incidents, restoration of the initial situation, and a reward. In 2010, a post-Uribe story was already being told: while Santos spoke of continuity, Petro told a critical story of Uribe’s period, described it as misleading, said that a new story had to be written, with a vision of the future, more equality, social justice and happiness (Richard, 2011). However, the most original story was that of Antanas Mockus, who, as the author says, did not tell a story for children populated by heroes and antiheroes, with dangers and adventures but “[i]t was the story of some citizens determined to build the new rules of coexistence of their community, the symbolic birth of a society through the voluntary and concerted adoption of the social contract” (Richard 2011, 140).

Juan Manuel Santos and Óscar Iván Zuluaga, 2014 presidential candidates, were studied by Bayter (2015): the author reviewed the use of personal

pronouns and the way they use the word “peace”. Santos, who wanted to be re-elected, more frequently used the exclusive first-person plural (he and his work team) to talk about the achievements of his government and to criticize the poor state in which the country was received. He thus presents a policy of change and balance, at a financial and social level (Bayter 2015, 189); while Zuluaga used more the first person singular and the first person plural inclusive (he and the viewers) to oppose the government; Zuluaga's "we" includes him and the Colombians to say, for example, "we have gone back."

Regarding peace, Santos used a semantic field of change and determined peace, "the peace", while Zuluaga used a semantic field around indeterminate peace and with conditions, "a peace", and that is why Bayter speaks of Zuluaga's strategy to redefine peace when he says "a peace based on conditions", "a negotiated peace", "a lasting peace", "a measurable peace", "verifiable", "transparent" (Bayter 2015, 199).

On the other hand, Torres et al. (2018) wondered about the change in each speech throughout the campaign. Regarding Iván Duque, they found that he was first in favour of the exploitation of hydrocarbon and mining resources through reforms, but later he said that he will promote clean energy (Torres et al. 2018); first he said that he will defend "the good people"<sup>4</sup>, he will renegotiate the peace agreements with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and calls for fear towards left ideologies, but later he blames the government for the poor implementation of the agreements and says that he will restructure them. In the same way, he changed his position on the fumigation of illicit crops: from being in favour of fumigating with glyphosate areas with crops considered illegal, to being willing to dialogue with

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<sup>4</sup> “La gente de bien”- which could be translated to English as the “good people” or the “people of good”- has been an expression used by Colombian right wing to describe themselves. They see the “good” as the non-negotiation with armed groups, a racist view of society, the privatization of the State, opposition to the peace agreements signed off in 2016 with guerrilla group FARC, and neoliberal policies, among other characteristics.

communities, industry, and experts (Torres et al. 2018). Petro remained firm in his speech but stopped talking about a possible constituent assembly due to the criticism he received. Fajardo had insisted on raising the pension age but stopped doing so. Finally, the candidate Vargas Lleras approached conservatism affirming that the teaching sectors belong to leftist ideologies, and Humberto de la Calle maintained his firm defense of the peace accords.

Restrepo et al. (2021) concluded that the communicative dimension is more professional, in contrast to the organizational dimension, which shows that the campaign in Colombia is informal in many aspects. The presidential debates were part of the measurement of the communicative dimension in this research, on which Restrepo et al. points out that in Colombia the debates are not regulated in number by the National Electoral Council and the candidate can determine whether to attend or decline the invitation. More than 30 debates were held, in universities, with unions, collective institutions and even YouTubers; only Duque refused to attend the debates in the second round and the one with YouTubers.

When comparing these works, three common elements can be found: first, the interest is on the side of the candidate and his work team, how they seek to meet their objectives. Second, the discourse analysis methodology is constant, even in the work of Restrepo et al. (2021) in which the participation in debates works along with other aspects of campaign, especially in the communicative dimension. Third, a shared assumption in these works is that those who exercise power are the candidates and their teams, they are the ones who seek to influence, shape the political culture, convince, and win. In this first group there are the questions about how stories were told, how certain words and expressions were used with different intentions and meanings, how the discourses changed strategically and the way in which the campaign was structured organizationally and communicatively.



## Interpretation and reception

A debate is observed and the ideas that it puts into circulation are interpreted and reproduced; it generates feelings and new ideas. Those who watch the debates can be communities, journalists, ordinary citizens, and they use the information in different ways. This reception process is of interest to Ramírez-Castro (2014), García-Perdomo (2017) and Cárdenas (2020).

Through focus groups and semi-structured interviews in the city of Manizales, the work of Ramírez-Castro (2014) seeks to recognize the way in which young voters in that city deliberated on the options for the presidency of the republic in 2010, so she studied the process of public opinion formation and deliberation among young people in the age between 18 and 26 years. The intention was to detect experiences and expectations; the experiences generated feelings of either acceptance or rejection and were classified into four types: lived directly; transmitted by means; interpersonal or direct socialization; virtual socialization (Ramírez-Castro 2014, 247).

While Ramírez-Castro studied the youth voting population of the city of Manizales, García-Perdomo (2017) was interested in two other groups: his paper examines how two groups on *Twitter* – the 100 most-followed Colombian journalists and members of the public – framed the 2014 Colombian presidential election. Using the social media analysis platform, this study collected and analyzed all tweets posted by these groups during the electoral campaign, from May 15 to June 20.

To systematize the way, they understood and depicted the elections, the concept of frame is defined: “frames are ‘organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world’” (Reese, 2001, p.11, as cited in García-Perdomo 2017, 58). There are five frames included in the research: game frame, conflict frame, peace frame, issue frame, and hate frame.

The game frame depicts politics as sports, treating political news as sports, commentators prefer drama and personalization of news, and it privileges strategic and tactical aspects of the campaign, alliances, moves, or responses, in this frame winning and losing are the most important aspects. The conflict frame is characterized by the open confrontation between candidates, disagreement between parties, individuals, groups, or countries. The peace frame focuses on non-violent responses to the conflicts; the issue frame mentions relevant issues for the country, highlights proposals for the problems and shows possible consequences of problems and proposals; finally, the hate frame includes negative words, intensify the conflict, hatred, and violence (García-Perdomo 2017).

The way in which journalists interpreted the events of the presidential campaign is the question of Cárdenas (2020): he reviewed 586 television news items in prime time between November 1, 2017, and June 17, 2018: 294 of channel *Caracol Noticias* - 50.2% and 292 news of channel *RCN* - 49.8%. There were three categories of thematic systematization of the news: electoral logistics (debates are here, along with proselytism, alliances, surveys, and advertising, among others); programmatic agenda and electoral transparency; and five types of actors are present in the news: civil society, political parties, state, public force and illegal armed actors.

According to the author, the debates got a special relevance, since “The 2018 campaign was marked by an interesting phenomenon and it was the appearance of debate spaces on regional television channels, which managed to counterbalance the traditional dominance of the two main channels of open television in the country, *Caracol* and *RCN*” (Cárdenas 2020, 48). A few paragraphs later he makes explicit his interest in studying the effects of the media on voters:

There are two informative formats, apart from news, that have aroused the interest of researchers in the effects of the media on voters: debates and surveys (Garrido et al, 2011; Maaek, 2011; Mcnair, 2009; Trent and

Fiedenberg, 2004). The debates that usually appear in the critical moments of the campaign are usually very influential on public opinion and at the same time there are communication challenges for the candidates, whose positions, errors or outbursts become daily news of electoral coverage. (Cárdenas 2020, 51-52)

There are important research contributions; Ramírez-Castro (2014) assures, for example, that the media experience of public debates was one of the most determining experiences for the young population to form their views on education, a topic that includes educational credits, quality, educational policy, professional competitiveness, equality, resources, among others. García-Perdomo (2017) argues that “[r]esults also confirm that journalists continue framing elections extensively as a sport game in which strategy, winning and losing provide meaning to politics”, the general public prefers the conflict game but at the same time support the peace frame (García-Perdomo 2017, 67) and “(...) users are fascinated by the conflict frame as one of the easiest ways to understand the Colombian political race” (García-Perdomo 2014, 66).

It is relevant to see that, talking about presidential debates, “[t]he public's Twitter activity had its peak on June 10, during a televised presidential debate, and on June 15” (65-66. García-Perdomo) and:

(...) most of the journalists’ activity occurred around two political debates broadcasted by national TV channels and a breaking news event. The 100 most-followed journalists reported about who was winning or losing the debates when political candidates answered questions and argued among themselves. (García-Perdomo 2017, 64)

Among the conclusions of Cárdenas (2020) is that most of the news was about electoral logistics but the debates were not well covered (3% of the news in RCN, and 4% in *Caracol*). Likewise, there were three female vice-presidential candidates ignored in the news coverage: the *Caracol* and RCN media organized

debates with female candidates, but they were not relevant in the news coverage (Cárdenas 2020).

So, the debate is used and interpreted in various ways, as an element – among many others – that allows to participate in politics, meet the candidates, form an opinion about politics, create journalistic content. It is noteworthy that the process of active reception has been studied in various dimensions: in individuals, in communities by city and age, in journalists, and in the public of social networks.

### Debate beyond itself: relationships debate and society

Presidential debates could be understood as representations of society; a society whose diversity is not fully represented by its representatives will surely not be properly represented in a televised presidential debate. If there is fear in public opinion, there will be an apology for fear in the debate. If there is polarization, authoritarian tendencies or general concerns, they will be felt in the debate. The investigations that establish a bidirectional relationship between debate and society are characterized by studying beyond the debate itself, beyond the discourse of its participants or the reactions they generate in specific sectors, and also are works that reflect beyond the local and national scales. In this field, the works of Gerstlé and Nai (2019), Kajsiu and Grisales (2019), and Giordano (2020) stand out.

Gerstlé and Nai (2019) did a systematic and comparative assessment of the electoral campaigns of candidates having competed in elections across the world between 2016-2018. They evaluated 97 candidates having competed in 43 elections. The authors characterize their research as a comparative study on how competing candidates communicate with their voters. They structured the analysis along three dimensions: negative campaigning, emotional campaigning, and populist rhetoric. Negative campaigning means attacking their rivals instead of promoting their own program; the use of emotional appeals refer to “[w]hy and how candidates use messages intended to stir anxiety, rage,

enthusiasm and other emotions (...)" (Gerstlé and Nai 2019, 411); and use of a populist rhetoric is "(...) to what extent they promote a vision of politics as a Manichean conflict between the pure people and the corrupt elite, often relying to a simplistic and demagogical language" (Gerstlé and Nai 2019, 411). The information was provided by more than 1400 experts worldwide through a survey that measured seven elements: negative tone, use of personal attacks, fear appeals, enthusiasm appeals, people-centrism, anti-elitism, and simplistic language.

While the main elements for Gerstlé and Nai are negativity, emotionality, and populism, for Kajsio and Grisales (2019) the question is about ideology. The work of Kajsio and Grisales unravels the ideological assumptions in the anti-corruption proposals developed by the candidates Gustavo Petro and Iván Duque in 2018. The authors propose that the anti-corruption discourses of the presidential candidates reflect their respective ideologies: neoconservatism in Duque and social-democratic populism in Gustavo Petro. To review the meaning given to corruption, this phenomenon is observed from an ideological dimension: "the definition of corruption always occurs in relation to certain economic, political or social ideals" thus, "[i]f a political ideal is social justice, then corruption is defined as social injustice, but if the ideal is free competition, then it represents its lack or distortion" (Kajsio and Grisales 2019, 125). In this way it is possible that although there is no consensus on the nature of corruption,

there is unanimity on the need to eradicate it. This unanimity can easily be used to legitimize and stealthily implement a political agenda or ideology under the anti-corruption banner. It is much more convenient to defend or implement a certain political ideal as a cure against corruption than to explicitly justify it on its own merits through public debate. It is easier, for example, to justify the reduction of public spending or an austere state as measures that limit public corruption,

than as policies that improve the economy or society. (Kajsiu and Grisales 2019, 125)

Therefore, “[t]he fight against corruption reflects and serves to articulate different political ideologies” (Kajsiu and Grisales 2019, 125).

The increase in the popularity of presidential debates in Latin America is due to a particular historical situation that is described by Giordano (2020); according to the author, there are three debates of special relevance to understand the relation debate-neoliberalism in 1989 and 1990: on October 9, 1989, in Chile, Hernán Büchi and Patricio Aylwin debated, it was the first election of the transition to democracy after the 1973 coup. Almost a month later, Brazil had a debate in the first and second round of elections. The second one was between Inácio Lula de Silva and Fernando Collor de Melo, it was the first elections in the country since the 1964 coup; Brazil also had a new constitution from 1988. Third, in Peru there was a debate on June 13, 1990, between Mario Vargas Llosa and Alberto Fujimori in the second round (Giordano 2020); before that, between 1960 and 1989 there were only five televised presidential debates in Latin America.

Those two years were characterized by the accelerated entry of neoliberalism into the region, for which Giordano says that “[i]n Latin America, the unrestricted adherence to the recipes imposed by the United States brought with it the neoliberal reforms of deregulation of the internal market, privatization of public companies and external opening, which were applied with different degrees of shock in all the countries” (Giordano 2020, 76).

Giordano argues that the adoption and popularization of the presidential debates in these two years has a close relation with the changes in the economic model and the rise of the right, since “[n]eoliberalism raised an idea of ‘instrumental’ democracy (Hinkelammert, 1998), in which the debates are registered as a propitious tool to put the instrument into operation” (Giordano 2020, 70). The great models for the Latin American debates were, not

coincidentally, in the United States the debate between Nixon and Kennedy in 1960, and in France debate between D'Estaing and Mitterrand in 1974, however, another main thesis of Giordano is that, despite having these models, the debates in Latin America were not a mere copy.

That is the context of the socio-historical analysis, as Giordano calls it, carried out in her paper. The author presents an “analysis on two levels”: “an internal critique of the document that describes the format and subjects involved and a comparative historical analysis that allows identifying the current political conditions of each debate” (Giordano 2020, 71).

In the worldwide research conducted by Gerstlé and Nai (2019), Petro resulted to be more populist and more hateful than Duque, but he also received less media attention than Duque, which contradicts one of the main conclusions of the study:

some illustrious examples exist that support the idea of preferential coverage for more offensive or populist candidates (e.g., Trump, Orbán, Erdogan, Le Pen and Salvini for their high scores in their loathing dimension, and Bahis, Corbys, Erdogan and López Obrador for their higher scores on the populist dimension) (Gerstlé and Nai 2019, 417-418).

So, Petro received fewer media coverage of his populist and hateful campaigns, even when the world tendency is that populist and hate campaigns are more covered. Also,

candidates making a stronger usage of personal attacks and fear appeals were more likely to receive a wider media attention, especially during presidential elections and when the number of competing candidates is lower. (Gerstlé and Nai 2019, 431)

Another interesting conclusion is that “[c]ompared with candidates who use absolutely no emotional appeals, candidates who go ‘full enthusiasts’ score on

average 40% more votes, and candidates who go ‘full fear’ score on average 50% more votes” (Gerstlé 2019, 423-425).

The ideology reflected in the anti-corruption speeches of Iván Duque and Gustavo Petro is clear. Kajsiu and Grisales (2019) argue that Duque

represents a neoconservative political project that combines the conservative approach of maintaining the status quo through the restoration of legality, institutionality and authority with basic concepts of neoliberalism such as competition and the free market, as the main sources of socioeconomic development. For this reason, he locates corruption mainly in the public sector and much less in the private sector, and his anti-corruption proposal is limited to the reform of the state and not of the country's socioeconomic structures. (Kajsiu and Grisales 2019, 126)

While Gustavo Petro

combines a populist ideology that focuses on the people-elite antagonism with central concepts of social democracy that, on the one hand, recognizes the market as a source of development, but at the same time highlights the importance of social justice, equality and work as core values. Consequently, in the Petro discourse, corruption emerges as a characteristic of the political class and of the socioeconomic system in general, the elimination of which implies the transformation of the political, social, and economic structure of Colombia. (Kajsiu and Grisales 2019, 126)

On the other hand, the relationship between neoliberalism and presidential debates in 1989-1990 is shown by Giordano. That liberalization, which, says the author, was represented in Colombia by César Gaviria, created an environment conducive to the televised debates and was reflected in them:



[i]n the three cases studied, three elements stand out that, according to Hinkelammert, define the instrumental democracies supported by the right: the affirmation of the market (the issue of privatization of state companies was a critical issue in all three cases); the control of the media (in the case of Fujimori's denunciation and the manipulation of the image of Lula and Collor, this is evident), the separation between democracy and human rights (this point is evident in the case of Chile, where the right-wing candidate made a closed defense of the Pinochet dictatorship avoiding classifying it as such). (Giordano 2020, 82)

These research projects are not characterized by making a strictly local nor national study, but rather they provide tools to understand problems beyond the debate itself; the relationship between a populist-violent discourse and the media coverage received, the ideology in the use of the “war against corruption” to cover up other interests, the debate as an economic-political tool; all of these are concepts that are not limited to the case study but refer to processes of larger scale and historical significance.

### **Economy, state-society, environment, and corruption; a discursive comparison**

To understand what kind of change the candidates evoked, the analysis of their speeches is structured into four categories: economy, state-citizen relations, environment, and corruption.

#### **Economy**

The look at the economic problems in the eyes of Gustavo Petro and Rodolfo Hernández has convergences and divergences. Petro involves the issue of taxes, social policies to deal with hunger, lack of access to education, and the problem of unequal land ownership. On the other hand, Hernández involves the problem of credit interests, criticism of the traditional political class, and



the availability of labour in the countryside; the common point between both is the protection of the national industry.

For Petro, there is a relationship between the equitable payment of taxes, that is, the higher the income the more the tax, and the possibility that the state offers social programs of education and income for the most vulnerable population:

[w]hat we have as difficulties in the fiscal deficit comes from the richest layer of the Colombian population, the club does not pay taxes; and that way they could pay, if we remove exemptions, tax privileges, 50 billion pesos annually. With that we reduce the fiscal deficit and with that we can finance two great social policies: extending the public university to all the youth that today do not have a university, 2.5 million students; and we can consider paying half the minimum wage to the mother who has children under early childhood, and with this, we can calm hunger in the weakest part of Colombian society, our boys and girls between age zero and seven years. (Gustavo Petro, May 28, 2022, in *Noticias Caracol*. 23:57-24:53)

While he speaks of support from the state for those who have fewer possibilities, Hernández considers that economic development, especially in the countryside, can be achieved by reducing credit interests with private banks:

[w]hat is inflation? That there is more demand than supply. When there is more demand than supply, the price rises. What do we have to do or what has the Bank of the Republic been doing institutionally for 30 years? Raising interest. What happens when interest goes up? That the economy is paralyzed, within that the production of food because people fear they will not be able to pay the obligations that are going to be generated with that rise in interest. So, one looks, and I am not an economist, that this increase in interest only benefits the intermediary banks because the higher the interest rate, the more intermediation



margin the banks have, they are the ones that make the loans. The only way to be able to offer food and be able to program this in the medium and long term, is by strongly lowering the interest rate. How is it done? So that the Bank of the Republic instead of raising it lowers it, so that those credits stimulate the production of the countryside. (Rodolfo Hernández, May 11, 2022, in *Caracol Radio*. 12:48-14:49)

Rodolfo Hernández sees the potential inhabitants of the countryside as labour, but labour that needs to have the necessary conditions so that the rural areas can produce. He criticizes the traditional political class but without detaching himself from his capitalist perspective, in such a way that potential countryside workers are, for Rodolfo, mere workers with credit:

[p]eople who want to work in the countryside is what we have got. What happens is that Dr. César Gaviria Trujillo has been here for 32 years (...) what did he do? He destroyed the countryside with the story that dollars were so cheap that it was a business to import because we were going to enjoy the subsidies they gave abroad here. But that is while dollars are cheap. When the dollar rose, like right now, (...) that story is over. The product of that neoliberal policy: 22 million hungry Colombians (...) If you balance the direct costs of production in the United States, for example in corn, it is worth 500 dollars to produce a ton there and is worth 600 here. You have to give the 100 dollars in money with the commitment that the farmer produces the ton. If he fails, he must return the 100 dollars plus the corresponding interest. What he fulfilled was cancelled. Look, there are 13 million uncultivated hectares, you all get on the plane and see unoccupied, importing almost 20 million tons. What we are doing is absurd. Neoliberal policies that only favour a minority. (Rodolfo Hernández, May 11, 2022, in *Caracol Radio*. 59:03-1:02:09)



However, this point of Hernandez is opposite to the view of Gustavo Petro, who is concerned with the productivity of the land, more than from credit, from the equitable ownership of the land and its correct use:

[w]e should ask ourselves why we are producing, if there are 22 million fertile hectares, we agree on the number, and that we must produce all of them to industrialize the country, we agree, why do we only produce six? Who has the other 22? The other 22 million are from the peasantry? Are those lands where the tertiary roads are or are they where the paved roads are? And then if they are close to paved roads, why don't they produce? Because they are in the hands of landowners who have no interest in producing. And then shouldn't an issue like land tenure and proper land use be part of the discussion if we really want industrial development? Because industry cannot be developed without agriculture in Colombia. (Gustavo Petro, March 15, 2022, in *El Tiempo*. 1:28:34-1:29:30)

Likewise, the inhabitants of the countryside are not seen as “people who want to work” but as peasant families that own the agribusiness, protected, less insecure, more prosperous:

[c]arry out an agrarian reform, ensure that the peasantry has more and more fertile land, not a desert, not in the moors, not in the jungles. Achieve agricultural production processes that make the peasant family the owner of the agroindustry, not that it is separated from the agroindustry, which is where the added value is generated, protecting from imports. That would mean that, as imports grow, which is somewhat agrarian, somewhat industrial, even in those regions, citizenship is strengthened, prosperity appears (...). (Gustavo Petro, May 28, 2022, in *Noticias Caracol*. 1:09:04-1:10:45)

And the great point of agreement between Petro and Hernández is the protection of the national industry by import substitution:



Venezuela does not produce anything except for oil. It is the extreme case of what could happen to Colombia if we continue to insist on depending on oil. It's that simple. You sell oil, import food. What is happening now in Colombia regarding food is the effect of depending on oil. 13 million tons of food. An average Colombian, 4 out of 10, earns less than 3 thousand pesos a day, (...) and a liter of milk costs 3 thousand, 1 egg 471 pesos. If he wants to eat meat, it's 38,000 for beef, 18,000 for pork, 8,000 for chicken. I mean you can't. What is there in Colombia today is a growth of the hunger due to an essential factor, if we want to correct that hunger: the import of fertilizers grew 128% in the last year, more imported products that generate the growth of food prices. That is what happens in Venezuela and is happening in Colombia (...) (Gustavo Petro, May 28, 2022, in *Noticias Caracol*. 22:05-23:45).

The difference is in the language and in the intention; While Petro thinks about what Colombians could buy and how to end poverty, Rodolfo thinks about the profitability of the countryside as a business in a capitalist win-lose system:

[t]he only way, I think, to be able to generate activation in the countryside is for it to be a business. Because we cannot, nor can anyone in capitalism, which is winning or losing knowing the risks (...). I have always said that the only way to really generate work in the countryside, national work, is through import substitution. If there is no substitution of imports, there will be no way to activate the countryside (...). The only way, I repeat, to be able to seriously activate the field is by substituting imports (Rodolfo Hernández, May 11, 2022, in *Caracol Radio*. 19:22-20:32).

## State-society relation

What is the nature of the state-society relationship? How does each candidate observe the inhabitants of the national territory? While Rodolfo Hernández thinks in terms of manipulable citizens, potential workers, and money, Gustavo Petro thinks of this relationship based on negotiation, non-indolence, and social programs to guarantee rights. A point in common is their willingness to negotiate with armed groups to end the armed conflict.

Businessman Hernández sees Colombians from a managerial position; he sees people as manipulable, homogeneously responsive to incentives, and subject to the actions of politicians. He is unaware of the active role of citizens who have widely participated with votes for alternative sectors or protested, to show himself as the solution:

[i]n 30 years, these politicians have given us 19 tax reforms and always with the story that with this reform the fiscal deficit in Colombia will be fixed. Pure lies. When they decree the tax reform for us, it is to cover the gap that is already there. And why bother to cover it up? Because international organizations and domestic banks require a financial balance to continue lending to them. So, they catch all of us Colombians, 25 million useful idiots, to take money to politicians so that they continue spending. That's the truth (...) (Rodolfo Hernández, May 11, 2022, in *Caracol Radio*. 28:27-31:00).

The reduction of the country's problems to a problem of profitability, business and money, already stated in the previous section about economics, is also evident when talking about social problems of gender and ethnic diversity: in a debate, the journalist asked him what he would do to facilitate the access to land ownership and economic autonomy for rural, peasant, indigenous, afro-descendant women, he responded:

[w]ell, I want you to focus on this. To generate work, it is first necessary to have demand, because what do we get out of piling up



inventories of any product if the population is in ruins that they do not have money until the end of the month just by paying the rent, public services? And that's it. So, no one can generate sustained and growing work if there is no demand. So, what do we have to do? What I have been saying, activate the countryside, there are 20 million fertile hectares with irrigation. Of those 20 million hectares, only 7 are exploited. We just must act together, do direct cost analysis to find out which are the 10 or 15 products that we are importing and see how we plant them here. (Rodolfo Hernández, April 20, 2022, in *El Espectador*. 1:59:32-2:00:47)

While Hernández sees the inhabitants of Colombia as “useful idiots” used by the politicians, and as potential workers who move according to the rhythm of supply and demand (forces that can be stimulated by the state), Petro considers that the relationship between the state and citizens should be one of dialogue:

I would not have a finance minister as irresponsible as during the growth of hunger, which we have detected here with data, putting taxes on food, which is what triggered the strike a year ago. That is called an indolence of the government with society, the weakest, they blew up the strike. Now, there will be conflicts, for other reasons, there will always be conflicts in Colombian society, and there are always conflicts in every human society, but how are the conflicts that appear in a society handled? It is not by shooting them with the Esmad<sup>5</sup> in the eyes of the demonstrators or killing them or disappearing them, or taking them by thousands to prisons, nor that they are treated as terrorists in the press. What needs to be located is a social dialogue (...) social dialogue is also a dialogue between the government and those who are

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<sup>5</sup> The Mobile Riot Squad (Esmad- Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios) is a unit of the National Police popularly known for the exaggerated use of force, especially during the protests that began in 2019 in Colombia.



in conflict, the dialogue between the state and youth. That would have ended in what? What is the budget for higher education, for example, what is the possibility of food in the popular neighborhood where they live (Gustavo Petro, May 28, 2022, in *Noticias Caracol*. 1:03:57-1:05:16).

Likewise, contrary to the view of future farm workers, Petro sees them as landowners and owners of agro-industrialization processes:

[t]he Santos plan for voluntary crop substitution continues, which is much better than the forced eradication and fumigation plan. It must be recognized that the anti-drug policy has failed. After 40 years there is more export of cocaine, and two elements are added to the coca leaf substitution plan that I think are missing. One is a voluntary land substitution, that is, being able to deliver more fertile land within the agrarian frontier (...). And two, put it in the value chain as the owner of agro-industrialization. Because the farmer does not sell coca leaf, he sells coca paste, that is, a transformation. To compete with this, the agrarian production that the peasant family does must also be agro-industrial and it must be helped by the state (Gustavo Petro, May 28, 2022, in *Noticias Caracol*. 1:14:54-1:16:13).

How will the state relate to the population? What resources will facilitate the state-society relationship according to each candidate? Rodolfo Hernández was asked about policies to serve the Afro-descendant, Raizal and Palenquera population that has been a victim of structural racism and, despite the particularity of the question, his answer continues to be about the centrality of the flow of capital and the criticism of politicians, added to some incoherent generalities about these populations such as “they generally live in inhospitable, sterile places”:

those are consequences, what all those communities are experiencing. They usually live in inhospitable, sterile places, which are consequences. And what is the cause? Because everyone here says what we are going





to do, that we are going to have a school there, that we are going to bring prosperity, that we are going to introduce agriculture, security. But it turns out that to do that you need an ingredient called money. Without that, it is impossible to develop any activity on planet earth. And what happens with money in Colombia? The money is managed by some people called politicians, and those politicians are the ones who receive the effort of the nation to be able to apply it in the different programs (Rodolfo Hernández, April 20, 2022, in *El Espectador*. 20:41-22:48).

On the other hand, Gustavo Petro considers that the instrument for the State to do its job with the people is through social policies that guarantee rights in terms of health, poverty subsidies and pensions:

[a] preventive model, preventing disease, is not a business, therefore it is not of private utility, of the private world: it must be assumed by a state. Why? Because what is business in health is when the person gets sick, it is around the patient that the business is built, and there can be public and private collaboration, I do not deny it (...) Because we do not have a preventive health model. Why don't we have it? Because it's not business. The Eps<sup>6</sup> do not invest at a loss, that must be done by the State, it must be assumed by the State (Gustavo Petro, March 15, 2022, in *El Tiempo*, 1:12:40-1:14:15).

Unlike Hernández, Gustavo Petro differentiates various population groups in his proposals – children, women, the elderly – instead of having a homogeneous view of people:

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<sup>6</sup> Health Provider Entities (Entidades Prestadoras de Salud- EPS), private institutions, involved in major corruption cases and known for their low quality and inability to provide efficient services.



Therefore, all the people in *Families in Action*, *Solidarity Income*, *Pension Bonus*<sup>7</sup>, etc., should go to a common program called *Basic Vital Income*, half the minimum wage, starting with women who are heads of households, who in Colombia number 5,800,000, the majority poor. Because while you take care of women you take care of children and that is fundamental (Gustavo Petro, March 15, 2022, in *El Tiempo*. 1:48:00- 1:48:52).

Thus, one of the biggest differences between the two candidates is Gustavo Petro's emphasis on rights, the public protection of rights and their relationship to non-violence:

to prevent these rights, which are fundamental rights, from becoming a business. Because a business does not guarantee a universal right, why? Because it sets a price, there is a price, so whoever cannot pay it does not have the right. And if there is someone who cannot pay for a right, it is because there is no right. As simple as that, rights must be guaranteed by the public, not simply by business. If we stay there in neoliberalism, most of the people do not get the right. That is why we are in violence; that is why our system is socially unjust. That is why if we want peace and democracy, we must guarantee the rights of the entire Colombian people (Gustavo Petro, March 15, 2022, in *El Tiempo*. 2:13:19- 2:14:10).

An important similarity is that both candidates said they were willing to negotiate with armed groups to end the war in Colombia, however, the motivation is different. Gustavo Petro said:

[t]hese gangs already have alliances with politicians, they make impunity agreements, politics is mixed with the multi-crime gang and that is why

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<sup>7</sup> Familias en Acción, Ingreso Solidario and Bono Pensional are three current state social programs.

it is strong. The first task to be done is to take political power away from the multi-crime gang. So, we have those two realities. Negotiations with the Eln<sup>8</sup> begin immediately and we quickly seek the dismantling of the Eln (Gustavo Petro, May 28, 2022, in *Noticias Caracol* 59:43-1:01:20).

While Petro is concerned with dismantling the regime of impunity and the link between illegal groups and politics, Hernández would negotiate with great motivation to generate work:

The only way to be able to work in Colombia is with tranquillity, and tranquillity is generated by peace. The government is the dominant one because that of guerrillas is another consequence that the politicians of the time did not attend to the needs of the peasants and it ended up being that my father and my daughter were killed by the ELN, and I would negotiate with them because I cannot transfer my anguish to the anguish and insecurity of the Colombian people (Rodolfo Hernández, April 20, 2022, in *El Espectador*. 42:54-43:30).

## Environment

Although both candidates claim to be interested in protecting the environment, they differ in their motivations and strategies. Petro sees the transition to a decarbonized economy as an opportunity to protect life on the planet:

I have always talked about ending the new contracts from my government, for oil exploration and immediately stopping fracking. That is my proposal. That gives us time (...) but we have 12 years, 12 years of a transition. Why the urgency and why do I speak of the extinction of human life? (...) because the one who says that oil

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<sup>8</sup> The National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional-ELN) is one of the largest leftist guerrilla groups in Colombia.

consumption is going to end (...) is not Petro, it is science. Science in the world has said that if we do not transition to a decarbonized economy in 12 years, we will reach a point of no return where what disappears, after a century, and we will not be able to do anything afterwards, is the life of the planet and the human species (Gustavo Petro, May 28, 2022, in *Noticias Caracol*. 38:21-38:51).

In contrast to safeguarding life, Rodolfo Hernández wants to protect the Amazon Forest by thinking of putting indigenous people to work at low cost, assuming that only “poor” people are living there, although he recognizes that the Amazon Forest is important when calling it ‘the lung of the planet earth’:

and the surveillance contract paying them contains a bonus for stabilizing the jungle, that they don't knock it down, that they really watch over it. We can also link the indigenous to this, so instead of removing the indigenous so that drug traffickers can arrive to cut down, to cultivate, why don't we put the same poor inhabitants who are in the Amazon to work, and monitor them via satellite? that is very cheap, can get paid with carbon bonds and there is money left over if we organize the work well, we design it well, we budget it well, we begin to have a stabilization of the Amazon Rainforest, that is nothing more and nothing less than the lung of planet earth. That would be what I would do (Rodolfo Hernández, April 20, 2022, in *El Espectador*. 1:04:19- 1:06:22).

Gustavo Petro was asked what his relations with the United States would be like. In terms of means or strategies to take care of the forest, and in accordance with his motivation, he said that climate change would be one of the issues that he would like to include in those conversations:

I think that we must talk about two issues that are not on the current agenda. One is climate change, the constitution of a global international fund to save the Amazon Rainforest in Colombia. Mechanism to

finance it? Carbon bonds and state transfers. It seems to me that it is essential if we want to rescue life on the planet and fight against climate change. That must be discussed with the United States. And a second fundamental issue that is not on the agenda is the change in drug policy (...) (Gustavo Petro, March 15, 2022, in *El Tiempo*. 1:17:40-1:20:08).

While Gustavo Petro talks about institutionalizing the protection of the Amazon Forest internationally with the United States as one of the main allies, Rodolfo Hernández describes his idea of dividing the forest and putting the inhabitants of the forest to work as caretakers; while Petro considers that it is the duty of the state to take care of the jungle, Hernández argues that the care of the territory can be outsourced as a paid task of the citizens; while showing a paper with squares he said:

[i]t's a grid, it's the jungle, let's think it's the jungle. What must be done? As there are inhabitants there, they are deforesting and planting coca and sowing violence, and there are the indigenous people, with all the people who live there. But the politicians should not think that they are going to protect the forest for free. All those poor people that inhabit the entire Amazon jungle can be given an area to watch over. (...). (Rodolfo Hernández, April 20, 2022, in *El Espectador*. 1:04:19-1:06:22)

## Corruption

Corruption is clearly a problem according to the discourse of both candidates, they see it as one of the main causes of the country's current conditions; despite that, their diagnosis of the location, solution, and behaviour of the corruption is very different. For Hernández, corruption is in the State, embodied by politicians, and the solution is for him to win the elections to be able to “take away their checkbook”:

[l]ook, I am an enemy of continuing to make reforms and tax reforms. I remind you: these politicians have given us 19 tax reforms in 30 years. That gives like every 15 months one. It is impossible to work like this.

(...) The government is inundated with thieves, administrators with checkbooks of 20, 30, 50 billion. Every day there is an embezzlement in Colombia. The feeling of all Colombians, from the poorest to the richest, is that this is a robbery, first. Second, I want to tell you that if we take the checkbook from the thieves, do you know how much we save? They steal 100 million pesos per minute, day and night without stopping, that's a billion a week, that's 55 billion a year. In total, the issue is not to put more taxes (...) (Rodolfo Hernández, May 11, 2022, in *Caracol Radio*. 39:03-40:45).

At the same time, Petro identifies corruption not only mainly in the public sector but in a network between the public and the private in which the state is robbed by the private with complicity on both sides; likewise, corruption is not seen only as an action - of stealing, as Hernández says - but as a system or a regime:

[f]irst, corruption is not only of the political class. It always has another mirror, another ally, economic power. There is no corruption without private companies that keep the money using corrupt politicians. And so public money goes (...). Now, what we have in Colombia is a corrupt regime. It is a system that is created, among others, when the vote is sold, there it appears, and a political system is built that lavishes corruption in Colombia (Gustavo Petro, May 28, 2022, in *Noticias Caracol*. 1:18:33-1:20:15).

Consistent with this, both candidates give examples of corruption: Rodolfo provides a specific example of an action by current President Duque, questioning the use of money provided by the IMF:

What is it that I want to tell you? President Duque took out a card of 17,500 million dollars in the International Monetary Fund to invest in the pandemic. They have not spent, since I went two months ago, but 5,400 dollars; but I think that between now and August 7 when there



will be a new president, whoever he may be, they will give away that money (Rodolfo Hernández, May 11, 2022, in *Caracol Radio*. 1:21:36-1:22: 44).

And Petro exemplifies the situation as a systemic problem of tax exemptions that have large-scale consequences on the well-being of the population, and not only as an individual action:

[w]hat is corruption? Corruption, if one looks at it from the point of view of finances, is 50 billion pesos that the most powerful sectors of Colombia do not pay in taxes. There they steal the children's food, there they starve the children just for that action (Gustavo Petro, March 15, 2022, in *El Tiempo*. 49:22-50:19).

And his explanation involves various sectors of society such as politicians, youth, state institutions, armed groups, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). So, while for Hernández corruption occurs at a single level - that of politicians -, for Petro it is a multi-level structure and diverse actors get involved. In a debate against Federico Gutiérrez, who was expected to be in the second round with Petro, Gustavo said:

[w]hat I attacked was criminality within the Prosecutor's Office. Did you know that within the Prosecutor's Office there is corruption with rewards for delivering drugs? What we found was the corruption of the prosecution. Did you know that in the Prosecutor's Office there is corruption in the money laundering office? Did you know that the Prosecutor's Office has been taken over for years by criminal organizations that precisely prevent the investigation? Did you know that as a congressman from Colombia I showed in detail the internal corruption of the Prosecutor's Office and how the paramilitary organizations had taken over its leadership? And do you think that I was not able then to develop a debate where I could discover the corruption mechanisms of some DEA officials with some officials

from the Prosecutor's Office to make money? Of course, as you hide everything behind the FARC (...) and on the other hand you hide the great acts of corruption in the country, which is how the Colombian corruption regime has actually worked. Because you are interested in continuing the war, do you know why? Because it is that thanks to following the war you steal the State and that is what has happened in recent decades in Colombia (Gustavo Petro, March 15, 2022, in *El Tiempo*. 26:57 - 28:20).

Despite the differences, both criticize the current right-wing government: Before the elections, several mayors participated in political campaigns in favour of candidates, however, the government exercised different punishments and dismissed the mayor of Medellín for having insinuated in a video his support for Petro, while those who supported Federico Gutiérrez were ignored. Hernandez was asked for his opinion on that:

[t]hey investigated me 200 times and I didn't steal 10 cents, pure politics. I do not give more opinions. It is biased, it is a bias that exists to favour one candidate because the others are not in the good eyes of the government (...) But I go back and repeat, here everyone is involved in politics, the most underhanded ones there are governors and mayors campaigning for some candidates and only have a bias to generate disciplinary resolutions against only one (Rodolfo Hernández, May 11, 2022, in *Caracol Radio*. 45:46-46:33).

Petro also criticizes the current government, not only for their role as politicians but for breaking the boundaries between the public interest and their private interests.:

[w]ell, look, what they did was spend 5 billion pesos from the budget, through inter-administrative contracts in the municipalities, for hiring quotas for elected candidates, for congressional candidates, from public money. That is a crime, corruption in Colombia is an articulation



between politics and crime. Who benefited? All those who got 200,000 that hardly anyone in Colombia knows about, or 100,000, is vote buying. It was money to buy votes. The beneficiary parties were the allies of the Duque government (...) (Gustavo Petro, May 28, 2022, in *Noticias Caracol*. 1:31:07-1:31:55).

## **Conclusion: What did the so-called change mean?**

New elements were found in this presidential election: since the beginning of peace negotiations with the FARC, there have not been two candidates in the second round willing to negotiate with insurgent groups; both determined to take care of the Amazon jungle, to criticize the Colombian political right, and to defend import substitution. Both promised a change, a renewal, but what did that change mean according to the ideas shared in the debates?

Regarding the national economy, Rodolfo Hernández thinks in terms of promoting credit, taking advantage of the labour available in the countryside, and removing a political class that, according to him, is the root of the problem. Gustavo Petro, on the other hand, thinks about economic problems and solutions from tax justice issues, social programs, and sees the inhabitants of the countryside as property-owning families. The great similarity on this point is the protection of the national industry through import substitution, although Petro considers it thinking of eradicating poverty, and Hernández of making the countryside profitable, which could be seen as two sides of the same coin, but they are framed in completely different ways.

Regarding the question about how the state would relate to society, which is related to how the candidates saw the Colombian people, Petro defends a non-violent approach, of negotiation, without indolence through social programs and dialogue; the human rights guaranteed by the State are not part of the ideas presented by Hernández; in Petro's speech, the inhabitants of the countryside are potential owners of the land and industrialization processes; Likewise, the

Colombian population is not seen in a homogeneous way, but different groups are highlighted differently, as more vulnerable, by age or gender.

On the other hand, Hernández sees the entire Colombian population as manipulable citizens, “useful idiots”. If they live in the countryside or in the jungle, he assumes they are poor and projects them as potential employees. His view of the population is indeed homogeneous, it standardizes ethnic and cultural diversity: he reduced the issues to profitability even when asked about particular population groups with such complex problems such as rural, peasant, indigenous and Afro-Colombian women -and the problem of their access to the property of the land-, or as the Afro-descendant, Raizal and Palenquera communities – victims of structural racism. Regarding the state-society relationship, one of the outstanding and novel points is that the two candidates in the second round claimed to be willing to negotiate with the ELN, although Petro puts it in terms of an objective of dismantling corruption and the link between illegality and politics while Hernández would seek peace to generate the profitability of the countryside.

Regarding the environment, Rodolfo Hernández proposes dividing the jungle and putting the citizens who live there to work protecting the territory, that is, outsourcing a basic function of the State, generating cheap employment, ensuring that they do their job, and thus protecting the Amazon jungle. Petro radically distances himself from that idea, since his protection of the environment would be linked to the decarbonization of the economy and an energy transition, entering a dialogue with the United States to institutionalize the care of the forest, and, clearly, the task of caring for the territory is led by the state.

Lastly, corruption. Hernández places it in the State, embodied by politicians; the solution would be for him to win the presidency so that he can take away the checkbook from those characters, he understands corruption as a set of individual actions, which makes it easy to locate; this framework of the corruption makes possible to identify him as a populist, according to the



definition of populism offered by Gerstlé and Nai (2019, 411) who call it a Manichean conflict between the innocent people and the corrupt elite. Gustavo Petro sees it as something much more complex, since he accounts for public-private complicity, uses the notion of a system or regime, and sees corruption that involves various agents: politicians, youth, state institutions, private, the United States, voters and citizens. Also, it is interesting to note that the labels “neoconservatism” and “social-democratic populism” that Kajsíu and Grisales (2019) assigned for Iván Duque and Gustavo Petro in 2018, as we saw in the literature review, does not apply here: Hernández is both neoconservative and populist, while Petro is a social democrat.

So, what change does each candidate represent? Both candidates represent a change also for reasons that go far beyond this paper; Gustavo Petro represents a great change because for the first time in Colombia a left-wing candidate won the presidency, a former member of a left-wing guerrilla who demobilized as part of a peace process; and Rodolfo Hernández has the novelty of moving away from the far-right governments that have governed Colombia under the auspices of former president Álvaro Uribe and his Democratic Center political party for just over 20 years, criticizing that policy and championing the fight against corruption. In addition, Hernández campaigned from home and only through social networks, especially after the first round, to briefly summarize elements that already represent novelty. But in discursive terms there are also notable changes and continuities, which were the object of study in this work.

Petro's change is broad: discursively it refers to a turn from harmful energies for nature to clean energies, from tax injustice to proportional taxation; from farm workers to agribusiness owners; from neoliberal opening to protectionism; from a privatized and austere state to a state that invests in social policies; from state repression to dialogue between the state and citizens; from corruption to investigation and dismantling of crime; from talking with the United States about other issues to proposing talks on climate change and



drug policy; from a limited view of corruption to a complex vision of the regime; all those elements that have not been represented before in the presidency of the republic.

Meanwhile, Hernández represents continuity rather than change: rural dwellers as employees rather than owners is a great historical continuity of government policies; the policy of indebtedness, of seeing the inhabitants as manipulable, too. The state-society distance that Hernández evidence is also constant, reflected in the speeches when he assumes that the indigenous people and inhabitants of the Amazon are poor and will be happy to accept his idea of dividing the jungle and working as caretakers, or when he ignores the needs of rural women and Afro-descendant populations.

So, what is Hernandez's proposed change? Although the general and empty criticism of the political class seen in a homogeneous way is a continuity, proclaimed with such intensity, emotion and insistence, with names of the country's neoconservative elite (such as the names of Iván Duque or César Gaviria) it gives airs of novelty and independence; likewise, support for import substitution is a new element: in a country accustomed to having presidential second rounds completely polarized between progressivism - here clearly embodied by Petro - and neoconservatism, it would not be expected that, at least in the discourse, there would be a firm opposition to import substitution by Gustavo Petro's counterpart. Clearly, the defense of protectionism, the will to negotiate with the ELN and the protection of the jungle are elements of novelty and are framed in Hernández's neoliberal logic as a change, pretending to be shown as liberal.



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