



OCTOBER 2016

## “The voters answered the wrong question”

Questions and answers with [Quintin Oliver](#) and [Ryan Gawn](#) on the Colombian referendum

**1) You have worked on the Yes campaign in Colombia. Although it is still early days, could you briefly say what went wrong in Colombia that led to the rejection of the peace agreement?**

First, the voters may have answered the wrong question. For example voters used the referendum to express discontent with President Santos, who is in the mid-term doldrums, presiding over a stagnant economy and polling badly. The regions voting in favor of YES were very much the same who voted President Santos into office in a tightly fought 2014 Presidential contest. These were also the rural areas which in general were much harder hit by the war, but could see and feel the benefits, as could the more advanced Bogota, Cali and Barranquilla.

Furthermore the No campaign successfully appropriated the YES campaign's peace discourse by proposing a “better peace”. What this peace would actually look like and whether this “better peace” is achievable in the short term is very much an open-ended question. This kind of negative assault advantage is typical in referendums, which are very different from elections. It made it easier for the NO camp to trap the YES side in detail and a defensive attitude. The YES side was unable to formulate its change proposition coherently, cogently and above all, consistently. The many diverse voices, promoted creatively and colorfully by YES, were trumped by fear and negativity.

Third, the two campaigns were clearly very differently organized. The YES campaign was largely built on multiple civil society campaigns, with many political parties in favour, versus the single cohesive, tub-thumping, assertive NO voice led by ex-President Uribe. He did not have obvious civil society or celebrity support – but he did enjoy total consistency in his harsh messages of impunity for terrorists, caused what Uribe calls Santos's betrayal of democracy.

Finally, even the weather seems to have had an impact. Hurricane Matthew just before Sunday's poll left certain rural and coastal areas dealing with floods and damaged roads. Considering the very slim margin the vote could have easily have turned out differently.

**2) The agreement was the result of a long and painful process with many difficult choices and trade-offs. The long and detailed agreement is than put to popular vote which is simply yes or no. Do you believe that the results of negotiations such as these – which largely happen behind closed doors and confidentially – can and should be put to a vote?**

Yes – the successful implementation of commitments made in peace agreements requires political nerve and political capital from leaders. Putting a peace agreement to a popular vote can provide that, as well as providing accountability mechanisms for civil society and the media to hold leaders to account for the

agreement's implementation. A popular endorsement of an agreement can also silence detractors and spoilers who may wish to see the agreement fail at implementation stage. But that popular endorsement naturally only really exists with a high voter turnout. This was the case in the referendum that followed the Good Friday Agreement in N. Ireland, in which we participated. Without that 72% endorsement, implementation would have been so much harder. The reasons to go to referendum remain.

The last all-white referendum in South Africa, was run by de Klerk, *pre-negotiation*, seeking a mandate to talk to the ANC and end apartheid – that gave him a huge mandate to proceed successfully; compare that to Scotland's independence vote in 2014, which was also pre-negotiation, but attempted to resolve the question, before the details of currency, borders, funding and EU membership had been settled; it fell.

That said, the limitations of referendums have become increasingly clear. Research conducted into referendums tends to show that the comment above, originally coined by President Charles de Gaulle, after his final plebiscite defeat, about voters answering the wrong question, is quite common. Also the framing of the referendum is crucial, which we have now seen in Colombia, but which also played a vital role in the UK's Brexit referendum.

### 3) What are lessons that we can learn on campaigning on referendums like these?

Some of these lessons are referenced above, such as framing the terms of the referendum as quickly as possible, not being bogged down in detail, and differentiating the campaigning in a referendum from electoral campaigns for posts and people. There must also be better responses from the media, who tend to seek personality-based gladiatorial conflict, rather than textured dialogue.

Other lessons come forth out of the general tips on how to run a referendum:

- emotion vs rationality. Voters think of the past, of crimes committed, of raw hurt and might be driven by *fear* instead of rational choice focused on the future – *hope*;
- top down vs bottom up campaigning. As mentioned above, the YES campaign was rich and diverse – a strength – but also varied and divergent – a weakness in winning votes! The unpopular President Santos insisted on leading the YES efforts, which both attracted, like a magnet, the Santos vs Uribe gladiatorial imagery, and mitigated against a 'people to people' discourse.
- Referendums allow for many voices. Voters especially like to see traditionally opposing politicians putting aside their differences in the national interest and sharing platforms to promote their unified case. This did not happen enough in Colombia, causing mixed messages and divergence (the 'blunderbuss' effect), rather than the coherence and simplicity of the No (the rapier approach).
- 'change' vs *status quo*. Advocating change tends to be harder, especially if the negotiated text is complicated, lengthy, recently published and full of tough concessions. This also can explain the difference between the urban and rural vote in Colombia; the violence was not recently so prevalent in the cities, so voters were already more immunized from violence – why then change? Bogota, Cali and Barranquilla did vote Yes, nevertheless.

In the end the most important lesson might lie in the increasing unpredictability of voters and the inability of pollsters and pundits to provide accurate information leading to a surprise outcome.

We saw similar problems with the Brexit referendum. A solution might be to demand a high voter turnout (as in the

## Clingendael Opinion

same day Hungarian case) and a premium percentage recording either yes or no, say 60% or two-thirds.

Even if the referendum had passed narrowly in Colombia, by the same few thousand votes as it lost, it would hardly have been with broad popular support and the political legitimacy needed. It almost certainly would have meant a very difficult implementation phase.

*Quintin Oliver and Ryan Gawn run political consultancy Stratagem International and have advised the YES campaign in Colombia. Quintin was the director of the YES campaign on the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland.*