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FEATURED Q&A

How Are Colombia's Political Dynamics Taking Shape?



Colombians went to the polls earlier this month to select presidential contenders and members of Congress, which meets in the National Capitol (pictured). // File Photo: Arturo via Adobe Stock.

Q Colombians went to the polls on March 8 for the country's congressional elections and presidential primaries. Outgoing President Gustavo Petro's left-wing Pacto Histórico won the most seats of any party in both the Senate and lower house, though the Congress will be highly fragmented, with no party having a majority of either chamber. At the same time, Senator Paloma Valencia won the presidential primary for the right-wing coalition, former Senator Roy Barreras won the presidential primary for the left-wing coalition and former Bogotá Mayor Claudia López won the centrist primary. What were the driving factors behind the results of the legislative vote and the presidential primaries? Which candidates are best positioned ahead of Colombia's presidential election in May? How might the makeup of Congress affect the agenda of Colombia's next president?

A Sergio Guzmán, director of Colombia Risk Analysis: "The electoral results confirm Colombia's deepening polarization. While the outcome gives everyone a reason to celebrate, the 'so-what' is a looming governability crisis. The Pacto Histórico consolidated its base, using President Petro's last-minute spending spree—minimum-wage hikes and public-sector expansion—to secure 25 Senate seats. On the right, Paloma Valencia's landslide victory (3.2 million votes) effectively neutralizes Abelardo de la Espriella's 'outsider' momentum, shifting betting markets in her favor. The biggest loser is the political center. Claudia López's weak performance (575,000 votes) proves moderation does not mobilize in this climate. Sergio Fajardo, sitting on

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Cuba Receives 14 Tons of Aid in Humanitarian Shipment

Cuba on Tuesday received 14 tons of humanitarian aid, including food and medicine. The country is experiencing worsening shortages amid a U.S. energy embargo.

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BUSINESS

CK Hutchison Unit Widens Claim Against Panama

A unit of Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison widened its claims against Panama to more than \$2 billion following the cancellation of its concessions to operate two ports along the Panama Canal.

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BUSINESS

MercadoLibre to Invest Nearly \$11 Billion This Year in Brazil

E-commerce giant MercadoLibre, led by CEO Ariel Szarfsztejn, is planning to invest nearly \$11 billion this year in Brazil, a 50 percent increase from this year.

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Szarfsztejn // File Photo: MercadoLibre.

POLITICAL NEWS

Cuba Receives Food, Medicine, Solar Panels in Shipment

Cuba on Tuesday received a shipment of 14 tons of humanitarian aid, including food, medicine, bicycles and solar panels, as the country grapples with severe shortages worsened by U.S. restrictions on fuel shipments to the island, Reuters reported. The aid arrived on a ship that had departed from Mexico's port of Progreso. It was among three ships in a flotilla known as the Nuestra America Convoy, an effort organized by global activists. The other two ships are scheduled to arrive in Cuba in the coming days. "This type of economic warfare shouldn't exist, this attitude of a pirate state that doesn't respect international law," activist Thiago Ávila, one of about 30 activists aboard the ship, told reporters after disembarking, in reference to the U.S. energy blockade, the Associated Press reported. "These ships are a drop in an ocean of need ... at the same time, it's a gesture of solidarity," he added. The ship is called the "Granma 2.0," a nod to the vessel that carried revolutionary leader Fidel Castro to Cuba from Mexico in 1956. The shipment that arrived on Tuesday supplemented six tons of goods that activists transported by air to Cuba over the past week, Reuters reported. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the March 16 issue of the Advisor.]

Colombia Seeks to Arrest Seven in Candidate's Killing

Colombia's attorney general said Tuesday that her office has obtained warrants for the arrest of seven members of the Segunda Marquetalia rebel group in connection with last year's assassination of presidential candidate Miguel Uribe, the Associated Press reported. The senator was shot at a rally in Bogotá last June and died two months later. Uribe's killing was "the

result of a structured criminal operation that involved an urban criminal gang that was hired" to kill the candidate, said Attorney General Luz Adriana Camargo, the AP reported.

ECONOMIC NEWS

U.S. Suppliers Sending Some Fuel to Cuba's Private Sector

U.S.-based suppliers have sent a small quantity of fuel to Cuba's private sector this year, Reuters reported today, citing shipping data and private documents. The shipments suggest that the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump is indeed attempting to prop up certain segments of Cuba's economy amid efforts to choke off the communist-run island's sources of crude oil and refined fuels, which power more than half of the country's electrical grid, the wire service reported. Cuba has not received a large-scale shipment of fuel since Jan. 9, and the country has seen three major power outages this month, The New York Times reported. It's unclear whether the U.S.-based fuel shipments to Cuba's private sector fall under the limited sanctions-waiver license that the U.S. Treasury issued in February. The U.S. fuel shipments have totaled just 30,000 barrels this year, equal to roughly one-tenth of a medium-sized oil tanker's normal capacity, Reuters reported. Cuba's imported fuel demand last year was approximately 100,000 barrels per day, according to the wire service. Meanwhile, a Russia-flagged tanker carrying 730,000 barrels of crude oil is currently transiting the North Atlantic in the direction of Cuba, The New York Times reported. Russia's government has declined to say whether the vessel, the Anatoly Kolodin, will attempt to break the effective U.S. blockade of large-scale oil shipments to Cuba, according to the newspaper. It is on pace to arrive at Cuba's Matanzas oil terminal at the beginning of next week, The New York Times reported. The tanker could provide enough fuel to supply Cuba's power and transportation sectors for a multi-week period.

NEWS BRIEFS

Argentines March in Buenos Aires on 50th Anniversary of Coup

Thousands of people marched through Buenos Aires on Tuesday to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1976 coup that initiated Argentina's period of military dictatorship, the Associated Press reported. Human rights groups and political organizations joined the demonstrations, calling for further efforts to identify people who were abducted by the regime. Some 30,000 people, mostly opponents of the dictatorship, were detained without due process and never seen again, according to the AP.

China Threatens to Retaliate Against Mexico's Tariffs

Beijing could soon take retaliatory countermeasures in response to Mexico's imposition of tariffs last year on most Chinese exports to Mexico, China's commerce ministry said today, Reuters reported. The Mexican tariffs, which can reach as much as 35 percent, could lead to \$9.4 billion in losses to China's manufacturing sector by the end of this year, the commerce ministry said. Nearly all of those losses would come from China's automobile sector, Reuters reported. New Mexican customs inspection requirements could also inhibit Chinese firms' operations in Mexico, the ministry said.

MercadoLibre to Invest Nearly \$11 Billion This Year in Brazil

E-commerce giant MercadoLibre announced Tuesday that it plans to invest 57 billion reais (\$10.9 billion) in Brazil this year, a 50 percent increase from this year, Reuters reported. The company said it plans to spend the money mainly on logistics expansion, strengthening its platform and boosting the credit portfolio of Mercado Pago, its fintech operation.

BUSINESS NEWS

CK Hutchison Unit Widens Panama Claims to \$2 Billion

A subsidiary of Hong Kong-based conglomerate CK Hutchison has expanded its claims against Panama's government to more than \$2 billion following the Central American country's cancellation of the unit's concessions to operate ports at both ends of the Panama Canal, Reuters reported Tuesday. The cancellation followed a Panamanian Supreme Court ruling in late January that struck down the subsidiary's contract, finding that there were irregularities in regulators' decision in 2021 to grant a 25-year extension to its concession. The unit of CK Hutchison, Panama Ports Company, had operated the Balboa and Cristóbal terminals for nearly three decades, Reuters reported. In expanding its claim to more than \$2 billion, Panama Ports Company said it had supplemented its claims under arbitration rules of the International Chamber of Commerce, the wire service reported. It previously said the Panamanian government illegally took control of the two terminals and company property. Panama Ports Company has also accused Panama's government of seizing private and protected documents, denying it access to computers and files after taking over the facilities and pursuing a campaign against the firm, Reuters reported. It has also alleged that Panama's government has failed to coordinate compensation. The company also accused the government of missing a March 13 deadline to provide a response in the arbitration case. Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino has called the accusations over foot-dragging in the arbitration case as "outrageous" and "a lie," Reuters reported. Mulino said his government had appointed international counsel to represent the state's interests. Panama's cancellation of the concessions came amid pressure from the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump to limit Chinese influence at the canal. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Feb. 12 issue of the Advisor.]

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the sidelines, is being ruthlessly squeezed out. He is no longer the 'viable' alternative; instead, voters are gravitating toward Juan Daniel Oviedo, whose impressive 1.2 million votes signal a shift toward a more pragmatic, technical right-center that Fajardo can't replicate. Strategic voting is now the rule; centrists are fleeing toward the extremes to ensure their 'least favorite' candidate loses in May. Iván Cepeda and Paloma Valencia are currently best positioned for the June 21 runoff. While Roy Barreras won a left-wing primary, his low turnout makes a moderate 'Petrismo-lite' candidacy a flop. For the next president, governability will be transactional. With a fragmented Congress, radical reforms are dead. Expect the next president to follow the Petro handbook: ruling by decree and clashing with the courts to bypass a blocked legislature."

A **Gwen Burnyeat, lecturer in social anthropology at the University of Edinburgh:** "The legislative elections returned an impressive result for the leftist coalition of President Gustavo Petro, Pacto Histórico, giving it the largest share of seats in both Senate and Chamber of Representatives, though no party holds a majority. The right-wing party of former President Álvaro Uribe, Centro Democrático, took the second greatest portion in the Senate, centralizing the opposition to Pacto Histórico. Alongside the congressional elections were the 'consultation' votes, in which different coalitions of parties put forward candidates for the public to choose from for the forthcoming May/June presidential elections. The resounding winner of these was Paloma Valencia, Uribe's candidate from Centro Democrático, who attracted more than three million votes. Yet three key figures did not participate in the consultations. First is the main leftist candidate, Iván Cepeda, who was elected as Petro's successor in a separate consultation for Pacto Histórico in October 2025 with 1.5 million votes and has consistently performed

well in polls. Second is outsider right-wing candidate Abelardo de la Espriella, a lawyer who professes admiration for other far-right leaders in the Americas like Javier Milei, Nayib Bukele and Donald Trump. Third is centrist contender Sergio Fajardo, who has run in the past two presidential elections. The other players in the consultation, like Claudia López and Roy Barreras, suggest the center is diluted; they received too few votes to put them in good stead for the presidential elections, which look set to be a runoff between the left (Cepeda) and the right, which may divide between De la Espriella and Valencia."

A **Jennapher Lunde Seefeldt, associate professor of government and international affairs at Augustana University:**

"No matter who becomes president, the makeup of Congress ensures a fragmented government. At publication, Petro's Pacto Histórico looks to hold plurality in Congress. This demonstrates that the left has staying power in Colombian politics and doesn't give the conservative bloc overwhelming power. However, both chambers will be composed of coalitions and alliances. How amenable or contentious the legislative branch becomes depends on the makeup of these alliances and on who becomes president. Voters' concerns remain focused on security and economic troubles. As such, presidential candidates need to simultaneously convince voters they have viable solutions to these problems while distinguishing themselves among the top contenders for the presidency. While center-right Paloma Valencia secured a massive voter turnout for the primary, she will have to contend with far-right candidate Abelardo de la Espriella. De la Espriella has been polling highly and may be able to capture right-leaning voters with his security-first platform. This would ultimately split the right-leaning vote. But Valencia's win signals that voters favor less polarization and more moderation, so she

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could successfully secure many centrist votes. At the same time, Iván Cepeda, from Petro's party, currently sits atop the polls and would benefit from the potential split in the conservative bloc. Whoever wins will be tasked with addressing growing security concerns, inflation and an unsettled international environment, all while navigating a divided Congress at every turn."

A **Adam Isacson, director for defense oversight at the Washington Office on Latin America:** "The most significant story may be the recovery of Gustavo Petro's popularity and that of his Pacto Histórico, the largest single bloc in both houses. This may owe to a better economic outlook among poorer Colombians amid the Petro government's spending and a minimum wage hike. The Pacto Histórico has less than a quarter of seats, though. Colombian outlet La Silla Vacía estimates that 24 percent of elected legislators are allied with Gustavo Petro, 26 percent are opposed, 19 percent are independent and the rest are unknown. Whoever wins the presidency this year will have to build a diverse governing coalition, finding common ground on thorny issues like how to reduce violence, how to relate to the Trump administration and Venezuela, how to reform the health care system and whether to negotiate with armed groups. The left's

candidate, Iván Cepeda, had won his coalition's primary months ago and continues to lead polls. The March 8 vote gave more hints about who might challenge him. Sen. Paloma Valencia of the Centro Democrático, the party founded by former President Álvaro Uribe, won a right-of-center primary handily,

“**The most significant story may be the recovery of Gustavo Petro's popularity and that of his Pacto Histórico...**”

— Adam Isacson

and her profile has increased. It remains to be seen whether she can edge out social media-savvy far-right populist Abelardo de la Espriella, whom polls have been placing second to Cepeda. Former Bogotá mayor Claudia López won her primary, and polls may be pointing to her as the main centrist contender; even if she doesn't make it to a runoff, hers will be a very sought-after endorsement."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.

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