

Gender identity, and other reasons Colombians rejected their peace deal that had nothing to do with the peace deal

Colombians were asked a simple yes or no question during a historic plebiscite on Oct. 2: Do you approve the peace deal negotiated between the government and FARC, the country's largest guerrilla organization, to end their 50-year conflict?

The outcome, by the thinnest of margins: no.

Many Colombians opposed some of the provisions of the 297-page peace accord (link in Spanish, pdf)—namely a transitional justice system that would have allowed rebel fighters who cooperated to avoid jail time and a concession of political power to FARC. They saw these as undeserved rewards for a group that killed, kidnapped, and enlisted child soldiers for its cause

But with such a narrow win—by barely more than 50,000 votes (Spanish) out of nearly 13 million—issues not directly related to the deal could have easily swayed the result. Other factors weighed on naysayers' decision, from pure politics, to the negotiating parties' attitude and the seemingly unrelated issue of gender identity.

The best salesman

The final tally speaks to which side was best at selling their point of view. President Juan Manuel Santos and the "yes" side were playing with house money to some extent, since they were promoting peace, something that all Colombians want. But their campaign was disjointed and unfocused, says Diego Corrales, a political analyst.

In contrast, the "no" side's most outspoken supporter, former president Alvaro Uribe, adroitly turned Santos's pitch of "peace or war" into a choice between a terrible deal and a better one to be struck later. Although a new deal was never a guarantee, Uribe was able to convince many Colombians that it was a real possibility.

It didn't help Santos that his approval ratings are way worse (Spanish) than Uribe's, 35% vs. 50%.

Premature victory song

Santos also hurt himself by acting as if a "yes" victory was a done deal. He, like everyone else, believed in polls (Spanish) that showed his faction winning by an overwhelming margin. So last week, fully clad in crisp white, he signed the agreement with the FARC before international dignitaries in the Caribbean city of Cartagena.

That irked many Colombians and left them wondering why they were being asked to vote at all if the papers were already signed.

"It was in some ways a defiance vote," says Virginia Bouvier, an expert at the US Institute of Peace who acted as an advisor on Colombia's peace negotiations. "It was a reminder that there's a need for humility, that the Colombian people need to be part of this process." The false sense of victory may have also convinced some "yes" supporters to stay at home; overall, more than 60% of eligible voters didn't show up at the polls.

Not enough contrition

FARC made the same mistake. Earlier this month, it assembled its members for a week-long conference. The purpose was to vote on the peace deal, but its most memorable

images—shot by international media invited to the event—are of guerrillas cheering and dancing. In other words, a party.

Although FARC has asked for forgiveness, sending representatives to communities where they killed dozens of people (Spanish) to personally deliver the message in recent days, for many Colombians the apology came too late and wasn't contrite enough, analysts say. FARC also seem to have miscalculated the effect of having their leader give a long-winded speech on national television during the Cartagena signing, as if he were already a mainstream political figure rather than the head of armed rebel group.

"That might have been too much for folks to swallow," said Gimena Sánchez, a Colombia expert at the Washington Office on Latin America, pointing out the long-standing hatred for FARC among many Colombians.

What's gender got to do with it?

On the surface, nothing. But a series of coincidental events and political gaffes put gender at the center of the plebiscite for some conservative voters.

It all started with a controversy (Spanish) this summer over an Education Ministry manual to prevent discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation in schools. The manual had been published in response to a 2015 court order (Spanish) mandating the agency to address bullying in schools after the 2014 suicide of a gay student. The religious right fiercely opposed the manual, saying it went against traditional family values. A false copy of the document that included images of a gay couple in bed further fueled the movement. Activists summoned at least 35,000 street protesters for marches in several cities (Spanish) on August 10.

The leaders of that same group took on the plebiscite just a few weeks later, presenting the peace deal as a veiled attempt to officially promote "confused gender ideology." (Spanish) Their arguments are based on what the agreement's authors called a "focus on gender"—which mainly refers to redressing abuses against women during the conflict. The peace agreement also mentions the LGBTI community, along with other minorities, acknowledging their rights and advocating for their inclusion in society. But that's as far as the document goes in terms of gender identity.

Santos might have made matters worse for his cause by naming education minister Gina Parody (Spanish) to lead the "yes" campaign. Parody, who took special leave from her job for the special assignment, was not only associated with the much-maligned booklet but is also a lesbian.

So even if they were just on the fringes of the actual peace agreement, gender issues "did push a very decided group of voters to participate," says Sergio Guzmán, an analyst with Control Risks, a global risk consulting firm.

An urgent matter postponed

In the end, the voters with the luxury to ponder these political issues were the ones who determined the plebiscite's result. The voting map of Colombia (Spanish) shows that the "no" vote was concentrated in cities and in the country's interior—areas that did not see much direct fighting over the decades of conflict between FARC and the government's forces.

Meanwhile, the "yes" side won by an overwhelming margin in many of the areas that have been most ravaged by the war. These are the places where people still worry "that there may be anti-personnel mines on the way to school for my kids," says Guzmán. For these

<http://qz.com/799116/why-colombians-voted-no-on-the-farc-peace-deal/>

people, ending the conflict was an urgent matter because they suffered it first hand. With the “no” victory, the resolution to their plight has been indefinitely postponed.