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**An Analysis of Colombian Perceptions: Internal and External
Actors and the Pursuit of Peace**

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Executive Summary

- Florida International University’s Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy (JGI) and the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC), with support from United States Southern Command, conducted a study to understand Colombian perceptions towards internal and external actors and Colombia’s pursuit of peace. The study revolved around the analysis of 14 focus groups conducted in seven Colombian cities.
- In general, focus group participants had high levels of trust in the U.S. government and the U.S. military, largely as a result of the security gains experienced through U.S. assistance to Colombia. Participants viewed U.S.-Colombian military-to-military cooperation as being very positive for the country. However, participants did not favor physical U.S. military presence in Colombian territory—outside of trainers and equipment. Additionally, in some cases, participants failed to accurately distinguish the U.S. military from other U.S. governmental agencies. For example, some of the focus group participants blamed the 2012 Secret Service controversy in Cartagena on the U.S. military.
- Focus group participants in Barranquilla, Bogotá, and Cali stressed the need for greater cooperation and exchanges with the U.S. in the areas of social, economic, and educational development.
- Focus group participants also believed that the country is better off with U.S. security and economic assistance. Inversely, some respondents believed that the country will be worse off if the U.S. is not heavily involved in the implementation of a peace plan. This largely stems from low levels of trust in Colombian institutions combined with high trust in the U.S. government and the U.S. military.
- Results of the focus groups suggest that low levels of trust toward Colombian politicians arise from high levels of impunity and pervasive socio-economic divisions throughout the country. Perceptions of President Santos and former President Uribe varied based on regions; security is the main factor shaping perceptions.
- Participants in the focus groups had very low confidence in the police as they were perceived as corrupt, and often, coercive with the population, particularly in Cúcuta and Pasto. Conversely, high levels of trust in the Colombian military seem to be related to perceptions of the military institutions as well-trained, professional, and far less corrupt than other Colombian institutions.

- Trust in China varied. Respondents who expressed low levels of trust highlight cultural differences between Colombia and China. Participants overwhelmingly cited economic engagement as the most common, and often only, element of Colombia-China relations. Focus group members had low levels of trust in Russia as well, as Russia is not perceived as playing a major role in Colombia. Participants had unfavorable views of Venezuela.
- Participants in the focus groups expressed extremely low levels of trust in the FARC—in all seven cities—and do not have favorable views of the peace negotiations with the FARC. Some people in Colombia are concerned that the re-integration of the FARC into society will lead to higher levels of violence in the country. In general, participants also believed that the U.S. should play a major role in the implementation of the peace accord because Colombia will be worse off without the support of the U.S.

Introduction

Florida International University's Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy (JGI) and Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) conducted a study to understand Colombian perceptions towards internal and external actors and Colombia's pursuit of peace. In order to pulse the diversity of Colombian views, FIU partnered with a local public opinion firm, Centro Nacional de Consultoría (CNC), to conduct focus groups in seven cities across Colombia between January and March 2016. In total, FIU and CNC conducted 14 focus groups, two in each of the following cities: Barranquilla, Bogotá, Cali, Cartagena, Cúcuta, Medellín, and Pasto. FIU's research team explored the following themes in each of the 14 focus groups:

- United States foreign policy towards Colombia, the Barack Obama administration, and the U.S. military.
- Colombian institutions including political parties, the current Juan Manuel Santos government, the former Álvaro Uribe government, the police, the armed forces, and the media.
- Extra-hemispheric actors such as China and Russia and hemispheric actors such as Cuba and Venezuela.
- The peace process and The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*—FARC).
- The perceptions of Colombians five years ago, today, and five years from now. A comparison between the state of Colombia in five years with and without U.S. aid.
- Colombians' perceptions with regard to what the role of the U.S. should be in Colombia.

The results of these focus groups reflect the opinions and perceptions of those who participated in the study. Since this study only examined the views of approximately 150 Colombians, the results do not reflect what Colombians in general think. Instead, the findings help to understand how some Colombians view institutions and social issues in Colombia.

Background

Colombia is the oldest democracy in Latin America and has been a key ally of the U.S. for decades.¹ Bilateral relations between Washington and Bogotá are very close and the U.S. government continues to aid Colombia combating citizen insecurity and improving the rule of law. From 2000 to 2015, the U.S. allocated more than \$10 billion in assistance to the Colombian government in an effort to combat violence, drug trafficking, and violent non-state actors.² Military-to-military relations between the U.S. and Colombia have helped the Colombian military improve its professionalism and institutional capacity, and focus group respondents recognized the U.S.'s role in improving the Colombian military. Furthermore, support from the U.S. government has enabled Colombia to increase the presence of the state throughout the country. Despite China and Russia's increased presence in the region, the U.S. continues to be Colombia's main strategic ally, as perceived by focus group respondents. The U.S. continues to play a key role in the Colombian peace process and has pledged \$450 million through the *Paz Colombia* initiative launched in February 2016.

Colombia has made great strides in decreasing violence and promoting social and economic stability; however, Colombia still faces major challenges as a result of weak institutions. The lack of robust institutions, namely judicial, police, and social institutions, contribute to the high levels of corruption, impunity, and socioeconomic inequality throughout the country. In spite of reforms to the police, this institution struggles with high levels of corruption, as perceived by Colombians. Over the past two decades, the Colombian government, with support of U.S. security assistance, has been able to improve the levels of confidence that citizens have in the armed forces, not only as a result of increases in security but also because of the improved perceptions of the military. Furthermore, the improvements in citizen security in Colombia as a result of U.S. support have made many Colombians reliant on Washington, not only with regard to security-related issues, but also with improving the rule of law and strengthening institutions.

¹ For more, see Russell Crandall, *Driven by Drugs: US Policy Toward Colombia* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008, second edition).

² Ernesto Londoño, "Taking Stock of the \$10 Billion Washington Spent on Colombia's War," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2015.

Existing Public Opinion Data

FIU’s research team analyzed existing public opinion data from Vanderbilt University’s Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), Gallup-Colombia, and Colombia’s Centro Nacional de Consultoría (CNC). The data found in these surveys informed the line of questioning used by FIU’s research team during the focus groups conducted earlier this year. The focus groups conducted by FIU were instrumental in providing qualitative analysis into the considerations shaping Colombians’ views. They also shed light on factors that inform positive or negative views of the U.S. military. For more on the results of existing survey data, see Appendix I.

Research Methodology³

FIU’s research team used the results of LAPOP’s 2014 study, as well as its desire to understand the diversity of opinions, in order to determine the composition of the focus groups used in this findings report. In order to mitigate response bias,⁴ FIU partnered with local public opinion firm CNC to conduct focus groups in seven cities across Colombia between January and March 2016. CNC was responsible for recruiting and interacting with all focus group participants before, during, and after the focus groups. FIU’s research team, working through CNC, conducted 14 focus groups, two in each of the following cities: Barranquilla, Bogotá, Cali, Cartagena, Cúcuta, Medellín, and Pasto. FIU’s technical lead, Dr. Eduardo Gamarra, a native of Bolivia and career pollster, facilitated 10 of the 14 focus groups. Colombian representatives from CNC facilitated four of the 14 focus groups—two in Cúcuta and two in Pasto.

CITY	SAMPLE COMPOSITION
MEDELLÍN	Group A: Professional and business sector; young women and men between 23 and 45 years-old.
	Group B: Retired administrative workers women and men between 50 and 70 years-old.

³ United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) provided the financial resources to conduct the focus groups. However, SOUTHCOM did not influence the study in any way; FIU maintained full academic integrity in the design implementation, and authorship of the study.

⁴ Response bias refers to a wide range of cognitive biases that influence the responses of participants away from accurate or truthful responses.

CALI	Group A: Men without college education between 30 and 45 years-old.
	Group B: Housewives from marginal neighborhoods and slums between 25 and 45 years-old.
CÚCUTA	Group A: Low income women and men without college education between 40 and 56 years-old.
	Group B: Low income young women and men between 25 and 35 years-old.
BARRANQUILLA	Group A: Women without college education between 30 and 45 years-old.
	Group B: Housewives from marginal neighborhoods and slums between 25 and 45 years-old.

CARTAGENA	Group A: Professional and business sector young women and men between 23 and 35 years-old.
	Group B: Men without college education between 30 and 45 years-old.
BOGOTÁ	Group A: Professionals and college students, men and women between 18 and 25 years-old.
	Group B: Women without college education between 30 and 45 years-old.
PASTO	Group A: Low income young men and women between 23 and 35 years-old.

Group B: Low income men and women between 40 and 60 years-old.

Perceptions of the United States

The U.S. Government

Levels of trust in the U.S. government depend heavily on how Colombians perceive the effects of U.S. policies in Colombia. Most participants across the seven cities recognized the importance of the U.S. in terms of Colombia's economic policies as well as the future of the country. In addition, most members of the focus groups believed that the U.S. government has played a major role in helping Colombia improve security in the country. In some cases, participants viewed the U.S. as an example for Colombian institutions and society. People in Medellín argued that Colombia's proximity to the U.S. and its place in South America gives it geostrategic importance to the U.S. This enables Colombia to receive benefits from its northern neighbor and helps explain how the U.S. has taken advantage of the resources and opportunities that Colombia has to offer. Some of the participants from the group of retired adults in Medellín argued that countries do not have friends but rather interests when it comes to politics. During the focus groups, one person talked about Colombia's historic subordination to the U.S. and cited the power and interests of the U.S. In particular, this individual referenced the Monroe Doctrine and the Washington Consensus. Many participants did not trust the U.S. but cited the fact that there are positive things such as academic exchanges and scholarships for education. Focus group members also highlighted economic interests and the power of certain interest groups that control political decisions within the U.S.

Some focus group respondents criticized the U.S. and expressed levels of distrust. Those criticizing the U.S. cited historical experiences as influencing their distrust of the U.S. Members from the group of adults in Pasto echoed the comments of some of the participants in Medellín and highlighted the perception of U.S. intervention in the region throughout history. Despite suspicion, young respondents in Pasto had very high levels of trust in the U.S. government. The key point is that there is a generational gap that determines perceptions of trust. While historical legacies are hard to overcome in older age groups, groups composed of younger people tended to have a more favorable image of current U.S. policies toward Colombia.

Contrary to the perceptions of the groups in Medellín, cities such as Cali, Cartagena, Barranquilla, Bogotá, and Cúcuta emphasized the positive aspects of the relationship between the U.S. and Colombia. The overall perception was that the U.S. helped Colombia improve security by combatting drug trafficking, guerilla groups, and improving the overall quality of life of Colombians. Focus group respondents in Bogotá and Barranquilla, on average, had higher levels of trust in the U.S. government than the other five cities. In Barranquilla, many participants argued that the U.S. helped Colombia greatly and cited the role of the country in the peace process as an example. Participants contended that some of the difficult times in Colombia have been a result of the trade agreement between the two countries. In Bogotá, Medellín, and Cartagena, some people argued that the U.S. is an example for Colombia in terms of education, the rule of law, and institutions.

Various factors impact levels of trust in the U.S. government. The first is levels of respondents' education. Younger and less educated groups tended to express higher levels of trust in the U.S. As a result of globalization and increased access to technology, less educated individuals have access to information through various sources. Members of the focus groups often had a positive perception of the U.S. as a result of the influence of soft power. Many respondents in the focus groups credited U.S. movies and music as being influential to Colombians. Therefore, the soft power of the U.S. may influence the perceptions of Colombians in a positive manner. Despite some criticism, the U.S. is still viewed by some Colombians as the land of opportunity. The focus group findings suggest that there are various engagement opportunities in which Bogotá and Washington can cooperate. Open dialogue and learning from each government is key. It is important to note that the groups from lower socio-economic backgrounds admitted that they did not have extensive knowledge about the U.S., although they were able to express their views.

The Obama Administration

Participants of the focus groups had highly favorable views of Obama across all seven cities, especially in the focus groups held in Barranquilla, Cali, and Medellín. People in Pasto and Cúcuta also had very high perceptions of President Obama. Many participants from these cities mentioned the fact that Obama is the first African-American to become president is a sign of progress. They considered President Obama to be hard working, charismatic, and a strong ally for Colombia, particularly since his administration has supported the peace process. One of the

respondents in Cartagena stated that he has more confidence in President Obama than former President Bush because the latter was too focused on the Middle East. This perception is quite interesting given the fact that the Bush administration provided more aid to Colombia than the Obama administration.⁵ Also, in the group of adults in Cúcuta, there was strong support for President George W. Bush, although they did not agree with the wars that he launched in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, respondents in Bogotá perceived President Obama to be diplomatic and highlighted his positive initiatives and support of Colombia. Hence, Obama had high favorability as a result of his personal image. It is important to stress that group members from lower socio-economic backgrounds had less knowledge about Obama's policies in Colombia. Colombians from lower economic backgrounds in both Barranquilla and Bogotá stated that they did not know much about Obama.

In addition to Obama's personality, a key factor that likely impacted the high levels of trust in Obama is the fact that he has traveled to the region. The physical presence of a sitting U.S. president in one country results in massive media coverage, which in turn can make people believe that the Obama administration is prioritizing Colombia and Latin America. Views of Obama contributed to the level of favorability of the U.S. Some focus group members argued that the November 2016 elections in the U.S. is a critical juncture for bilateral relations between Colombia and the U.S. Focus group respondents, particularly those in Pasto and Cúcuta, believed that a Donald Trump presidency could potentially harm bilateral relations and the reputation of the U.S. in Colombia. Several individuals in Cúcuta, for example, highlighted how Trump has made negative comments about Latinos.

The U.S. Military

Focus group respondents expressed very high levels of confidence in the U.S. military. Participants routinely cited the U.S. training and professionalization efforts that are helping build the institutional capacity of the Colombian military. In Pasto, young people expressed the highest level of trust in the U.S. military of all the focus groups in Colombia. The results may imply that young Colombians in close proximity to conflict have higher levels of trust in the U.S. military than young people in the other major cities. Most focus group participants across all the focus

⁵ For more, see June S. Beittel, *Colombia: Background, U.S. Relations, and Congressional Interest* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2012).

groups noted that U.S.-Colombia military cooperation has resulted in increased levels of security throughout Colombia. In addition, they consistently cited the U.S. military as a trustworthy and professional institution and a role model for the Colombian military. Despite the positive views of the U.S. military, participants stressed apprehension in a physical U.S. military presence in Colombian territory, citing concerns over Colombian sovereignty. Participants viewed the idea of U.S. military bases in Colombia very negatively. Instead, these respondents called for more training and technical assistance to Colombian security forces.

However, there were some criticisms of the U.S. military, especially with respect to its activities outside of Colombia. Groups from lower socio-economic backgrounds with limited knowledge about the specific activities of the U.S. military in Colombia criticized the U.S. military for alleged human rights violations—particularly during the Bush administration. National and international media that covered U.S. military activities outside of Colombia informed much of the participants' criticisms towards the U.S. military. For example, human rights abuses that have occurred in places like Guantanamo Bay appear to have impacted the perceptions of participants about the U.S. military. Additionally, some participants failed to accurately distinguish between U.S. governmental agencies. In Cartagena, some people highlighted the U.S. Secret Service scandal, confusing the Secret Service with the military. Thus, the U.S.'s actions in Colombia, especially the conduct of representatives of the U.S., can impact Colombians' perceptions of the U.S. In addition, the extensive media coverage of such events contributed to moral outrage in Colombia. Conversely, there appears to be very little U.S. strategic communications efforts influencing urban citizens from lower socio-economic households.

Perceptions of Colombian Institutions

In order to introduce the concept of trust among the groups in the different cities, the moderator referenced the level of trust in Colombian institutions and identified five key categories: political parties, the Colombian government—both the current and former governments (Santos and Uribe, respectively)—, the police, the military, and the media. These categories serve as the entry points for understanding the concept of trust used for this research study.

Political Parties and the Colombian Government

Focus group respondents were very critical of Colombian political parties. Many respondents perceived an absence in political will among Colombian politicians, who they believed, make numerous commitments during campaigns to get elected, but fail to deliver on most of the promises made. It is important to emphasize that the majority of participants, with few exceptions, referred to political parties as politicians in the most general sense of the word. Very few respondents referred to the current status of political parties as a whole. In cities such as Medellín and Bogotá, the participants argued that the Colombian people are ignorant about politics. This suggests the lack of knowledge and voters' unwillingness to inform themselves about the candidates during elections, and their preference to receive money, food, and favors in exchange for their votes. As stated in Bogotá, there is an association between corruption and politics. Trust in local politicians is higher than the national government. According to the people interviewed, while there are well intentioned politicians at the national level, the high levels of corruption in the system prohibits these politicians from achieving what they set out to achieve when elected. The level of trust in local politicians in Barranquilla and Medellín was largely centered on the credibility of the mayor. Some people highlighted positive aspects of the administrations of Alejandro Char in Barranquilla and Federico Gutierrez in Medellín, which represented hope for the citizens. Regarding public security, the case of Alejandro Char's policy of militarization of the city was seen as a positive initiative by the two groups in Barranquilla.

Focus group respondents in Pasto and Cúcuta had very low confidence in politicians. Participants in these regions cited similar reasons for high distrust, namely widespread corruption and the unfulfilled promises. Across all focus groups, respondents stressed how politicians have lost their identity.

The Executive Branch (President Santos vs President Uribe)

Levels of trust in the executive branch, specifically the current administration of Juan Manuel Santos and the previous Uribe administration, change depending on the region where both administrations have had greater influence. There are determinant factors that impact levels of trust in the aforementioned presidencies. Security is the principal reason, but other important variables include the economy, international relations, social issues, and institutional accountability. In the case of the Santos government, cities such as Barranquilla and Cartagena, located in the north of

Colombia, have higher levels of trust in the current government. President Santos has focused on providing people with housing during his second term. Such policies help explain why individuals living in the coast have such high levels of trust in the current president. For example, some women in a focus group of housewives from lower economic backgrounds viewed the current government favorably since they received houses from it. Favorable policies for low income families was a recurrent theme among such groups. In Cali, for example, one person argued that if she is doing well, then her perception of the Santos government is favorable. This is an important point because these women were from marginalized communities and like many people judge the presidents and governments depending on how well they are doing. Simultaneously, many members of the group had limited knowledge of politics, but they talked about both the positive and negative things that have happened in the government overtime.

Therefore, the persistent underlying factors that mark distrust in the government highlighted by Colombian participants were: First, the concern about the economic performance of the country. This was one of the most frequent topics that generated discussion when evaluating the Santos administration. Participants emphasized that the country is currently experiencing low economic performance; some participants in Barranquilla stressed the lack of employment and difficult economic conditions. One of the most controversial themes in cities like Medellín, Bogotá, and Cúcuta was the recent selling of Electric Generation and Interconnection Society (*Sociedad de Interconexión y Generación Eléctrica*—ISAGEN). This topic was especially contentious among groups that consisted of young people working in the business sector. Second, participants focused on security and its relationship to the peace process. Several respondents were uncertain about the future of stability in Colombia as the peace process moves forward.

Two individuals in Cartagena argued that they do not trust Santos as they voted for him under the impression that he would continue Uribe's security policies. This is a recurrent trend and helps explain the low levels of trust in President Santos. One individual felt that Santos abandoned Uribe's tough stance against the FARC only to pursue a peace process destined for failure. As a result, this person lost his trust in President Santos. Focus group results in Cúcuta and Pasto had low levels of confidence in the Santos administration. Some people in both Pasto and Cúcuta viewed Santos as untrustworthy because he betrayed Uribe once he was elected into office. In the group of adults in Cúcuta, one individual believed that *plomo* (lead) is the best option since there is no peace anywhere. Such statements imply that the Colombian government should have

continued the offensive against the FARC as opposed to negotiating with them. People in Cúcuta felt that Santos lacks character and thought that insecurity has increased during the Santos administration. The adults in Pasto believed that there is a social crisis in the region since there are no jobs in the city. In sum, lack of employment opportunities, Santos's security strategy, and the negotiations with the FARC contributed to increasing levels of distrust in President Santos in Pasto and Cúcuta. In Medellín, participants did not trust the Santos government mainly because of economic reasons.

In four of the seven major cities, Bogotá, Cali, Cartagena, and Pasto, focus group participants highlighted problems with policies designed to address various social issues. While focus group members who have received benefits from the government such as housing had a positive view of the administration, others focused on social issues and challenges like poverty, child care, healthcare, "Families in Action" (*Familias en Acción*), and various other issues. Finally, institutional accountability was a recurrent concern among participants across all cities. A high number of people interviewed emphasized the inconformity about some decisions of the government related to political appointments (some participants highlighted the "Mermelada," which is a colloquial term for clientelistic practices among the government). Some people in the focus groups questioned the criteria of the government in choosing ministers. In Bogotá, for example, one person asserted that the Minister of Health, an engineer, is not suited for this job. The logic is that this professional background does not make the minister competent for this position.

Álvaro Uribe's administration had mixed results across the different cities. One of the major themes was the importance of security and its relationship to the Uribe administration. People in the focus groups highlighted the differences between the current and former administrations, especially in Cartagena and Cali, where Uribe had higher favorability. In a focus group held in Cartagena with non-college educated men between 30 and 45 years-old, one member of the group with high trust in Uribe emphasized improvements in security during the Uribe government. Some people explained how the country improved a great deal during the Uribe administration and expressed concerns about growing levels of insecurity. Inversely, participants in Barranquilla and Bogotá had low levels of trust in the Uribe administration. For example, in Barranquilla, various individuals argued that Uribe changed many things in a bad way.

Throughout the focus groups, there were slight differences in the views held by residents of the more rural communities of Cúcuta and Pasto and the major five cities of Barranquilla, Bogotá, Cali, Cartagena, and Medellín, particularly with respect to perceptions of the Colombian government. Respondents in Cúcuta and Pasto showed higher confidence in Álvaro Uribe's government than respondents in the five major cities. Participants in Cúcuta and Pasto felt that Uribe's government provided citizens with greater levels of security than the Santos administration. Nevertheless, one person in the group of adults in Cúcuta stressed that Uribe's fights with Hugo Chávez caused more problems for the people living in Cúcuta. In addition, one individual in the group of adults in Pasto did not trust Uribe because this person was a victim of the paramilitaries. Furthermore, some people supported the Santos administration's departure from Uribe's plan of action for security in Colombia. In sum, the results suggest that security in Colombia is the main concern and directly impacts levels of trust in the current and former administrations, as well as attitudes towards the peace process. The character, charisma, and policies of each president were defined by respondents mostly in terms of past, current, and future levels of security in the country.

Media in Colombia

The media is among the lowest institutions in terms of levels of trust among the focus group members. Many participants argued that powerful interest groups seek economic and political benefits through the control and manipulation of media sources. Hence, the majority of people had negative perceptions of the media. It is important to highlight that many individuals preferred to obtain their news from printed newspapers, radio, and television, due to easy access and low cost. Accessibility to social media, the Internet, and alternative sources had higher levels of popularity among cities such as Medellín, Bogotá, and Cartagena, where the group composition included young people and professionals in the business sector whose level of income were significantly higher than other groups. Such results imply that the perceived power of elites, politicians, and the media is a major concern among many Colombians. Finally, the groups in Pasto and Cúcuta also had very little trust in the media. Local newspapers that are low cost were the main sources of news in these two cities. Respondents in these cities believed that the media is controlled by powerful people in Bogotá who manipulate information. The fact that the major national media outlets are centralized in the capital city is another possible explanation for why people did not

trust the media. The national media does not often cover news stories outside of Bogotá. This suggests that people are very interested in knowing what is happening locally because such events impact their daily lives. Channels that cover local events often have less resources than major media outlets. However, these stations were preferred and viewed favorably among people living in these regions.

The Colombian National Police

The police represent one of the most controversial topics in terms of trust in Colombian institutions. In general, the police were perceived by the focus group participants as very untrustworthy. Corruption among police, lack of professionalization and education of the officers, police abuse against citizens, and the mismanagement of the institution represent the main themes across the cities included in the study. Corruption within the police forces was the most recurrent theme across all cities. Some people in the focus groups argued that police officers are always looking to prey on Colombians as a means of supplementing their income. They asserted that corruption levels are very high in the institution and begins with the high ranking officials and continues down to the low-ranking officers. The low levels of trust are based on personal experiences and encounters with the police, where people repeatedly attested to having to bribe police officers. Also, respondents highlighted cases of police force involvement in illicit activities. The lack of professionalization of the police was believed to be one of the underlying causes for police abuse and corruption. They compared the level of professionalization of this institution to that of the military.

Focus group participants expressed significantly more trust in the military than in the police. Respondents in Cali and Barranquilla suggested replacing the police with the military. They felt that the education and instruction that the police receive is very deficient and causes some members to lack the sense of belonging to the institution as well as the patriotic duty and conviction. Many respondents argued that they have been traumatized by the police. Specifically, the officers caused many people to be fearful of the police, which in turn impacts levels of trust. One person in the group of adults in Cúcuta was more scared of the police than the guerrillas in Colombia. One member of the focus group believed that they should kill the police, revealing the level of disdain and lack of trust that some Colombians have in the institution. Some young individuals in Cúcuta thought that there are differences between policemen and policewomen and

that women were perceived to be more professional and less corrupt. Respondents in Pasto asserted that the police today are young people who are more interested in women and cellphones, demonstrating the lack of trust in the institution.

However, some participants emphasized that not all police officers are bad. Respondents in Bogotá had higher levels of trust in the police and some participants argued that the presence of police officers makes them feel more secure, especially in public places. Other individuals admired the police in the U.S. and viewed them as a model for the Colombian institution. Overall, the findings suggest that further reforms to the police are required.

The Colombian Armed Forces

In contrast to the case of the police, focus group participants expressed high levels of respect for the military because the perception was that the institution has higher levels of professionalism, education, and accountability. In addition, they thought that the military has helped increase security in the country. People had higher levels of empathy for the military because of the sacrifices of the soldiers as well as their patriotism. Respondents in cities such as Cali, Bogotá, and Barranquilla noted that the soldiers are better educated and have higher technical capacities. In addition, respondents perceived the soldiers as having more authority and being more committed to maintaining security within the country. Families who had close ties with the military had more empathy for the institution. Media coverage of successful military operations helped increase perceptions of the military. This suggests that the media plays a fundamental role and can positively or negatively impact perceptions of the institutions. Although people interviewed for this study respected the military, it appears that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Cartagena and Barranquilla had limited interaction with the military. This could explain why these individuals have significantly higher opinions of the military.

While participants in the focus groups highlighted the high degree of professionalism of the military, some people emphasized human rights abuses, specifically the False Positives scandal.⁶ Despite such criticism, the high levels of empathy for the military may help explain why many respondents had such high levels of trust. Yet people in Medellín have a different perspective with regard to the military. While young professionals working in the business sector had high

⁶ “Colombia: Top Brass Linked to Extrajudicial Executions,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 24, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/24/colombia-top-brass-linked-extrajudicial-executions>, accessed April 2016.

opinions of the military, they highlighted institutional conflicts between the military and the police. The second group, retired adults between 50 and 70 years-old, had very negative images of the military. One participant had less confidence in the armed forces and argued that they make him nervous. Other individuals declared that the army needs wars to occur as they benefit from conflict. This notion represents a very common point of discussion, and people stressed the military's interests and the need to sustain the war. However, some individuals preferred the military more than the police. The generational differences are likely the reason for such feelings as well as the fact that these individuals have lived through many years of Colombian history, some of which have been characterized by extreme levels of violence.

Extra-Hemispheric Actors: China and Russia

China

Colombians who participated in the focus groups had low levels of trust in China. Many people in the focus groups mentioned China and its cheap goods as well as the hard work and discipline of the Chinese. This suggests that the Colombians have a positive image of the Chinese people for their work ethic. The idea is that such high levels of discipline are required for increasing a country's level of development. In Cúcuta, people stressed China's relationship with Venezuela. Several Colombians across the cities cited the cultural differences between Colombia and China. In addition, some respondents believed that China's economic growth and export practices have either negatively or positively impacted the Colombian economy. Despite China's technical and economic development, most participants across the cities underscored the necessity for Colombia to be close allies with the U.S. In sum, perceptions of trust in China are defined through an economic lens. The cultural differences between China and Colombia represent barriers to cooperation. In spite of various differences, the U.S. and Colombia have more in common in terms of culture, which can help promote strategic cooperation.

Russia

When asked about Russia, participants had low levels of trust. In general terms, many people did not perceive Colombia and Russia as having a close relationship or high levels of interactions. Many respondents argued that Russia has helped left-wing governments in Latin America, such as Venezuela, but the country does not have a direct relationship with Colombia.

Some people viewed Russia as undemocratic. Trust in Russia among focus group participants in Pasto and Cúcuta remained quite low. One individual in Cúcuta argued that trusting Russia is like trusting President Maduro of Venezuela, implying that Russia is not trustworthy. In addition, one person in Pasto contended that Vladimir Putin is crazy. Overall, people across the seven cities had limited knowledge about Russia and did not consider the country to be a major player in Colombia. However, the focus group members had more knowledge about Russia in Pasto and Cúcuta.

Hemispheric Actors: Venezuela and Cuba

Venezuela

Colombians' perceptions of Venezuela are defined by historic episodes that have impacted bilateral relations between Venezuela and Colombia, especially on the border. Despite low levels of trust in the Venezuelan government, many of the participants manifested trust in the Venezuelan people. Some of them highlighted the lack of trust in the Nicolás Maduro government, citing the various border disputes between the two countries. In Bogotá, some respondents argued that Venezuela should not play a role in the peace process and did not perceive this country to be a key player in Colombian affairs. However, people living in Cúcuta have more interactions with Venezuela given the geographic location of the city. In addition, some individuals have family members living in Venezuela. The fact that some of these people have documents from Venezuela could impact their perceptions of the country. Political tensions between the Colombian and Venezuelan governments directly impact the people living in Cúcuta, which in turn can alter their perceptions. The results suggest that tensions and distrust between Colombians and Venezuelans will continue to be present for the foreseeable future and will hinder bilateral relations. In sum, perceptions of respondents in Cúcuta and Pasto appeared to be formed by everyday interactions with border countries, namely Venezuela and Ecuador, while respondents in the five major cities form their opinions based on media and other sources of information.

Cuba

Colombians who participated in the study have mixed levels of trust in Cuba. Many people highlighted Cuba's role in the peace process, viewing this as a negative because of the relationship between the Cuban government and the FARC. In Bogotá, one person compared Cuba to the FARC, highlighting the political affinities for communism of both actors. Yet some people in cities

such as Cartagena admired Cuba because of the medicine and personal experiences, such as relatives that went to Cuba to study medicine. Such examples demonstrate how personal experiences can impact the perceptions of people. Colombians in other cities such as Bogotá and Barranquilla considered Cuba to be a neutral actor in Colombian affairs. Some individuals in Pasto and Cúcuta highlighted the Obama administration's rapprochement with Cuba but argued that things will change only when the Castro brothers die. The younger group in Pasto had higher levels of confidence in Cuba than the other cities. On the other hand, participants of the groups in Cúcuta had very low levels of trust in Cuba.

The Peace Process and the FARC

The FARC

In general, the findings suggest that focus group participants had very low levels of trust in the FARC. Most individuals highlighted the negative connotations and hostility toward the FARC that is present throughout the country. Negative perceptions of the FARC existed for several reasons. First, the FARC's violations of human rights and involvement in criminal activities such as kidnapping, extortion, drug trafficking, and massacres. One individual in Cúcuta argued that the FARC is a mafia and highlighted the organizations illegal business activities. People in the focus groups in Cúcuta claimed that the FARC used to have an ideology but turned into a mafia-like organization. Second, the lack of credibility of the FARC has increased overtime because of the lack of commitment of the guerrillas in several peace process efforts. In addition, respondents did not believe that the FARC will demobilize. Finally, the participants considered the FARC to be a major threat to security. Many people in the study had serious concerns about the FARC and the future of the peace process. The majority of focus group members believed that the demobilization of the FARC as a result of the peace process will fail. Participants also doubted that the FARC will be able to reintegrate into society, which could cause members to return to criminal activities. Overall, a general sense of uncertainty existed among respondents about the reintegration of the FARC into society.

The Peace Process

Focus groups in all of the cities had low levels of trust in the current peace negotiations. The lowest level of trust in the peace process was in the group of adults in Cúcuta. However, the

participants hoped that a peace accord will be signed as they believe that peace would benefit the country. Many people expressed high levels of skepticism regarding the demobilization process, the implementation of the agreement, the high economic and political costs of implementation, and the future of security within the country. Respondents across the seven cities were concerned about insecurity and the fact that the FARC will not be punished for many of the crimes that they have committed. Participants in Cali felt that the peace process does not solve anything if the other guerrilla organization, the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*—ELN), is not included in the negotiations. Other individuals expressed concerns about the hidden interests of the government with regard to the negotiating agenda. All of the participants in one group in Cartagena argued that they will vote against the referendum.

Many people in the focus groups stress the important role that the U.S. plays in the peace process. They considered the U.S. to be trustworthy as a guarantor of the implementation of the peace process. Some individuals in Pasto and Cúcuta argued that the U.S. could be the overseer of the peace process and the “economic godfather.” In Bogotá, some respondents thought that the U.S. should play a role in the post-conflict phase. In particular, the U.S. could assist with social, economic, and educational support as well as continued support for the armed forces.

Conclusion

The focus groups had some common themes. The focus group members were very critical of Colombian politicians. Colombians have very little trust in politicians as they argue that politicians look out for their own interests. Colombians are also very critical of other institutions, particularly the police forces in Colombia. The members had little trust in the police and talked about corruption and lack of training. People have daily interactions with the police and have had many negative experiences, such as officers looking for bribes, which can influence levels of trust in the police. The results suggest further reforms of the police are needed. On the other hand, respondents had higher levels of trust in the Colombian military as this institution was seen as more professional and better trained than the police. People likely have more confidence in the armed forces because they do not interact with them.

While there is some criticism of the U.S., participants have very high opinions of President Obama. The fact that Obama is an African-American represented a sign of hope for Colombians. In addition, many individuals had high levels of trust in the U.S. government. Many Colombians

trust the U.S. Armed Forces. Many people argue that the U.S. Armed Forces have supported Colombia in a positive manner. The perception is that the U.S. Armed Forces are very professional and should continue to help train the Colombian Armed Forces. This is an area for strategic engagement between the U.S. and Colombia.

Colombians also have very negative perceptions of the peace process. Numerous respondents argued that it is not fair that the Colombian government is going to pay the former members of the FARC when so many people are suffering in the country. A major concern is that violence will increase in the cities as the FARC members reintegrate into society. Many participants contended that the U.S. should continue to support the Colombian government, particularly with regard to the peace process. They think that progress in Colombia will be greater with more support. The results suggest participants are expecting financial support from the U.S. government and believe that the U.S. will be the key to the implementation of the peace process. The U.S. has pledged \$450 million toward Colombia under the *Paz Colombia* initiative,⁷ yet the peace process is estimated to cost \$44 billion over the next 10 years.⁸ Overall, the perception was that the U.S. government should continue to help the Colombian government but the Colombians do not want the U.S. military in Colombia. Finally, numerous respondents recommended that the next president of the U.S. address issues of education and health as well as economic support. The presidential elections in the U.S. will likely have a major impact on perceptions and levels of trust. Colombians appear to be very concerned about a Trump presidency as he has made various derogatory comments regarding Latinos.

⁷ Roberta Rampton, "Obama pledges more than \$450 million aid to help Colombia peace plan," *Reuters*, February 5, 2016.

⁸ "Peace will cost Colombia \$44 billion over 10 years, senator says," *Reuters*, October 8, 2014.

Appendix I

AmericasBarometer Data

Despite the high levels of cooperation between the U.S. and Colombian governments, according to Vanderbilt University's AmericasBarometer trust (*confianza* in Spanish) in the U.S. Armed Forces by Colombians decreased from 45.5 in 2012 to 39.02 in 2014 on a scale from 0 to 100.⁹ Colombian trust in the U.S. military is low, especially compared across Latin America and the Caribbean. What are the factors associated with trust in the U.S. military? To determine the demographic and substantive variables behind the Colombian citizens' trust in the armed forces, we ran an ordinary least square (OLS) regression using the data of Vanderbilt University's 2014 AmericasBarometer in Colombia.¹⁰ The results show that young Colombians tend to have higher confidence in the American military than the rest of the population, holding all variables constant. By the same token, trust in the U.S. military is higher among the residents of urban areas than residents of rural zones in Colombia, whereas people with higher family incomes tend to have greater levels of trust in the U.S. military than the rest of the population. According to the data, the higher the income the more confidence in the American Armed Forces.

Table 13. Determinants of Trust in the U.S. Military

Variables	Coeff.	Linearized SE
Female	-2.013	1.76
Age	-0.1362*	0.065
Years of Education	-0.2231	0.280
Urban	6.689*	2.68
Family Income	0.538*	0.227
Left-of-center ideology	-7.809*	2.29
Right-of-center-ideology	4.638*	2.02
Support for System	0.3735**	0.051

⁹ Maria Fernanda Boidi, *Attitudes Towards the U.S. Military in the Americas* (Miami, Florida: Florida International University, 2015); June S. Beittel, *Colombia: Background, U.S. Relations, and Congressional Interest* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2012); Connie Veillette, *Plan Colombia: A Progress Report* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2005).

¹⁰ For more information about the survey's methodology, see: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/colombia.php>, accessed March 2016.

Military should combat crime	2.031**	0.53
Constant	23.41*	6.95
N	1,227	
R-squared	0.12	

*p<0.05; **p<0.001

However, the most important variables predicting trust in the U.S. military are political. People who self-identify as left-of-center show lower levels of trust than any other political group in Colombia. On the contrary, individuals who self-identify as ideologically right-of-center indicate higher levels of trust in the American military than any other ideology-based group in Colombia. Furthermore, Colombians who have high levels of support for the political system and who believe that the military should participate in the fight against crime tend to express high levels of trust in the U.S. military, *ceteris paribus*. In other words, young people, urban dwellers, people with higher income, people who self-identify with right-of-center ideology, and Colombians who have an important degree of trust in the political system tend to trust the U.S. military more than any other population group in this country. Other variables, such as gender, education, and personal history of having been directly affected by the conflict or victimized by crime (not shown in the regression table), did not have statistically-significant results and do not seem to predict levels of trust in the U.S. military.

In addition, a comparison in the levels of trust in the U.S. by region shows that residents of the city of Bogotá have the lowest degree of confidence in comparison with other regions. In this area, the average trust in the American Armed Forces was 32.4, whereas the national average is 39.1, according to the AmericasBarometer data. In contrast, residents of the Atlantic region show the highest levels of trust in the U.S. military with an average score of 46. In the rest of the country, trust in the military roughly approached the national average.

Gallup Polling Data

In a February 2016 Gallup poll, 79 percent of Colombians believed that insecurity was worsening, while only 14 percent thought that the situation was improving. Regarding the guerillas, 61 percent believed that the situation in Colombia was worsening while 21 percent believed that it was improving. The poll also reveals that Colombian's think that corruption is getting worse as only 7

percent of the people surveyed thought that corruption was improving while 84 percent felt that corruption was worsening.¹¹

In addition, 54 percent of Colombians had a favorable view of Álvaro Uribe, yet 37 percent had an unfavorable view. The population also had a very favorable opinion of the military as only 32 percent had an unfavorable view while 66 percent had a favorable opinion. In addition, the majority of Colombians (57 percent) had a favorable view of the media, while 40 percent had an unfavorable view. The populace had less favorable opinions of various other institutions in the country. For example, Colombians had lower opinions of the police as 59 percent had an unfavorable view and 38 percent had a favorable view. People in the country also had a low opinion of political parties as 76 percent had an unfavorable view yet only 16 percent had a favorable view. Finally, only 20 percent of the population had a favorable view of the Colombian Congress while 71 percent had an unfavorable view.¹²

CNC Polling Data

The Centro Nacional de Consultoría (CNC) conducted polls and found that 59 percent of Colombian's had a positive image of President Santos in November 2015. Consequently, such a positive image experienced a decrease when in March 2016, 34 percent of Colombian's had a positive image of President Santos while 62 percent had a negative view of him. The Atlantic Region had the highest regard for President Santos as 49 percent of Colombians in this region had a positive image of the president. However, individuals in other regions in Colombia had a lower opinion of Santos: 30 percent in the Oriental Region; 27 percent in the Central Region; and 26 percent in Bogotá. CNC found that 45 percent of Colombians in March 2016 did not approve of the Santos administration's decision to conduct peace talks with the guerrillas while 53 percent approved. The Atlantic Region had the highest approval rating for Santos' decisions to begin the peace dialogues with the guerrillas as 66 percent of the people in this region approved. Bogotá and the Central Region had the lowest percentage of people agreeing with this decision as only 48 percent agreed with this decision in each region. Yet 63 percent of the individuals in the Oriental

¹¹ See Gallup Poll, "111 Colombia Febrero 2016," *El país*, <http://www.elpais.com.co/elpais/graficos/conozca-resultados-ultima-encuesta-gallup>, accessed March 2016.

¹² *Ibid.*

Region felt optimistic regarding the peace talks compared to 52 percent in the Atlantic Region, 43 percent in Bogotá, 39 percent in the Pacific Region, and 36 percent in the Central Region.¹³

¹³ Centro Nacional de Consultoría (CNC), *Zoom, CNC Opinión Pública: Marzo 2016* (Bogotá, Colombia: CNC, 2016).