The Origin, Impact and Demise of the 1989–1990 Colombian Student Movement: Insights from Social Movement Theory

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Abstract. The 1989–1990 Colombian student movement played a key role in bringing about a constituent assembly to draft a new national constitution. This article utilises contemporary social movement theory, secondary sources and interviews with student activists to examine the trajectory of this movement. Key explanatory variables of social movement theory — political opportunity structure, organisational form, the framing process and the repertoire of collective action — provide useful insights into the origins, impact and ultimate demise of the Colombian student movement. Judicious use of such variables could benefit research on other social movements in Latin America.

I. Introduction

The 1999–2000 student strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) has revived interest in student movements across Latin America. As in the Mexican case, many of these student movements focus their demands on reforming higher education. However, one of the most influential student movements in recent Latin American history had a much broader focus, seeking to enact sweeping change in a national political regime. In 1989–1990, a student movement emerged in Colombia that played a key role in bringing about a constituent assembly to draft a new national constitution. Although the resultant 1991 Constitution has been the focus of significant scholarly examination, far less attention has been paid to the student movement that was instrumental in establishing the national constituent assembly.1 This article draws upon recent social

1 To my knowledge, there are only three published pieces of scholarship that have dealt at any length with the 1989–1990 Colombian student movement: F. Carrillo, ‘La historia de la séptima papeleta o la victoria sobre la apatía electoral’, in De una agenda con futuro: testimonios del cuatrienio Gaviria. (Bogotá, 1994), pp. 171–98; J. A. Orjuela and V. H. Rodríguez, Semilla en tierra seca – La Constituyente: del sueno juvenil al negocio político (Bogotá, 1993); and C. Lleras de la Fuente and M. Tangarife Torres, Constitución política de Colombia: origen, evolución y vigencia (Medellín, 1996), pp. 13–42. While each of these contributes to our knowledge of the student movement, none provides a comprehensive overview. Moreover, each reflects the particular (and limited) perspective of an active participant in only one sector of the movement.
movement theory, as well as secondary sources and interviews with student movement activists, in an attempt to shed light on the origin, the impact, and the ultimate demise of the Colombian student movement.

The article begins by briefly sketching the history of the 1989–1990 Colombian student movement. The next section presents an overview of recent social movement theory, highlighting four key explanatory factors: (1) political opportunity structure; (2) organisational form; (3) the framing process; and (4) the repertoire of collective action. These factors are then used to structure a more rigorous analysis of the Colombian student movement in the remainder of the article. It argues that by directing our attention to the examination of these key explanatory factors, contemporary social movement theory provides an enhanced understanding of the origin, impact, and demise of the Colombian student movement.

II. Overview of the Colombian Student Movement

The origins of the 1989–1990 Colombian student movement lie in the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán on 18 August 1989. Galán was a popular Liberal senator, a firm opponent of drug trafficking, and the clear favourite to become president of Colombia in the 1990 elections. One week after Galán’s assassination, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 students from Bogotá universities took part in a silent march to his grave. At the cemetery the students proclaimed their rejection of all types of violence, demanded respect for human rights, and issued a call to reform those institutions that contributed to the perceived political crisis. In addition, they announced the creation of a united student movement that was to work to provide answers to the country’s crisis.2

Despite the student leaders’ pretensions to establish a strong, unified student movement, the multitude of students who protested Galán’s murder quickly shrank to a few dozen students who met in roundtable sessions to discuss the causes and the possible solutions to the country’s political crisis. In October 1989 the students published a manifesto in the country’s principal newspaper, El Tiempo, to generate public support for their proposals. The manifesto called upon the President to hold a plebiscite to allow Colombians to vote on the convocation of a National Constituent Assembly to reform the country’s constitution. It closed with the ringing phrase, ‘We Can Still Save Colombia’ (Todavía podemos salvar a Colombia). The press soon attached this phrase to the student organisation itself, which became known as Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia.

2 Lleras de la Fuente and Tangarife Torres, Constitución política de Colombia, pp. 13–14.
Although the student movement received some positive reaction (approximately 35,000 citizens signed and mailed in the manifesto), its proposals were soon eclipsed by other national events. In particular, the increasing violence of the war between the drug cartels and the state, along with the congressional debate over President Barco’s own proposed constitutional reform drew attention away from the students’ proposal. Nonetheless, the failure of Barco’s constitutional reform in congress in December 1989 provided them with a new opportunity to press their cause. Beginning in January 1990 the student movement began to consider a new tactic – using the local and congressional elections of 11 March 1990 as a way to mobilise popular support for constitutional reform by the summoning of a National Constituent Assembly. Specifically, the students urged Colombians to cast an extra ballot in favour of a National Constituent Assembly during the March elections. This ballot became known as the ‘seventh ballot’ (septima papeleta), given that voters were already scheduled to cast ballots for six elective offices.

The campaign for the seventh ballot revived the student movement in both spirit and numbers. It quickly attracted hundreds of students who were enthusiastic about distributing ballots and campaigning for a National Constituent Assembly. However, the growth in the student movement also produced a serious fissure. Many students now advocated the formation of a broader organisation. Unlike the originators of the seventh ballot proposition, who were focused primarily upon the issue of constitutional reform, these students were equally interested in the possibility of creating a nationwide, democratic student movement.

This fissure resulted in a split in the student movement when a new organisation was created – the Student Movement for the Constituent Assembly (Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente). This organisation quickly eclipsed the original one in terms of numbers, attracting and mobilising several thousand students around the country. Meanwhile, the core of the original group continued to identify itself as Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia, and remained limited to a few dozen dedicated students. Despite their organisational division, the two branches of the student movement worked together to pull off a successful seventh ballot campaign. In the final tally, the students estimated that approximately two million Colombians had cast extra-legal ballots in favour of summoning a National Constituent Assembly. Although the ‘seventh ballot’ had no legal standing it served as a striking indicator of public discontent with the existing political regime.

In the aftermath of the March elections the proposal to establish a National Constituent Assembly gained momentum as all four major presidential candidates declared their support for this extra-constitutional
mechanism. Meanwhile, the divisions within the student movement deepened. The smaller Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia focused its considerable energy on trying to influence decisions regarding the creation, composition and powers of a potential National Constituent Assembly. The larger Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente also sought to exert influence on these decisions, but in addition struggled to broaden and institutionalise the student movement through the convening of several national forums. Although relations between the two branches were often strained, they joined forces whenever the possibility of the Assembly itself came under threat.

On 27 May 1990 the Barco administration held an official plebiscite, in conjunction with the presidential elections, on the possibility of a National Constituent Assembly. The results demonstrated the extraordinary popularity of the student proposal. The Registrar officially tabulated 5,236,863 votes in favour of convoking a National Constituent Assembly. This represented 86.6 per cent of all votes cast.\(^3\) Nevertheless, as a ‘sounding’ of public opinion, the vote did not oblige government officials to hold an assembly. Thus, the task of the student movement then became one of influencing the newly elected government of César Gaviria.

The May 1990 plebiscite marked the greatest victory of the student movement. But it was also the beginning of a period of rapid decline. Once elected Gaviria paid little attention to the student movement, preferring instead to negotiate the specifics of the upcoming Assembly with the major political parties and movements. Effectively sidelined, the student movement began to self-destruct as debate within each branch increasingly centred on whether or not to run a student list in the elections for the National Constituent Assembly, and what the composition of such an electoral list should be.

Elections for the National Constituent Assembly were held on 9 December 1990. Fernando Carrillo, a young law professor who had served as an advisor to the students, was elected to the Assembly as the head of the ticket authorised by Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia. However, once in the Assembly, Carrillo dropped all pretensions of being the ‘student candidate’. The only real student elected to the Assembly was Fabio Villa, a student activist who had played a leading role in the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente. After this organisation had disintegrated in a bitter dispute over electoral politics Villa cast his lot with the electoral list of the M–19 Democratic Alliance. Once in the Assembly Villa remained a sensitive advocate of students and their concerns.

\(^3\) Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, Estadísticas electorales 1990, Tomo I (Bogotá, 1990), p. 16.
The student movement itself had dissolved by the time the National Constituent Assembly convened in February 1991. Although various student activists who participated in the movement found positions as advisors to delegates in the Assembly, the movement per se was dead. There was no organised student effort to assess, criticise, or provide guidance to the Assembly. Indeed, the student movement—so instrumental in bringing about the National Constituent Assembly—had little notable impact upon the content of the 1991 Constitution that was drafted therein.

Thus the trajectory of the Colombian student movement was relatively brief. It existed in some form or another from August 1989 to December 1990, with the height of its influence occurring between January and May 1990. It was instrumental in promoting the idea of a specially-elected National Constituent Assembly to reform the country’s old constitution, but had relatively little influence on the content of the new 1991 Constitution. Its transitory existence and its achievement call for greater analysis. What explains the emergence of this student movement? What accounts for its impact? What factors determined its ultimate demise? Satisfactory answers to these questions require going beyond the historical sketch presented above to examine those factors that theoretically influence the trajectory of all social movements, regardless of place or time.

III. Insights from Contemporary Social Movement Theory

Contemporary social movement theorists argue that four factors are key in explaining the emergence, development, and impact of a social movement: 1) the structure of political opportunities that confronts the movement; 2) the organisational form of the movement; 3) the process of ‘framing’ reality engaged in by the movement; and 4) the repertoire of collective action utilised by the movement.†

A. Political Opportunity Structure

Under ordinary circumstances, excluded groups usually encounter enormous obstacles in attempting to further their interests.‡ This is because they are relatively weak in relation to established political actors

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† S. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge, 1994), and D. McAdam, J. D. McCarthy, and M. N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge, 1996).

and institutions. However, the structure of the political environment is not immutable. Indeed, an event or a process that undermines the stability of the political environment can expand the opportunities available for excluded groups to engage in collective action to advance their cause. Such a shift in the political opportunity structure can facilitate the emergence and/or the development of a social movement.

Political opportunity structure may be defined broadly as ‘consistent … dimensions of the political environment which either encourage or discourage people from using collective action’. More precisely, Tarrow identifies four concrete dimensions of political opportunity structure: (1) the openness of the institutionalised political system to participation by outsiders; (2) the stability of political alignments (in liberal democracies, reflected in electoral stability); (3) the availability of influential elite allies; and (4) the existence of divisions among elites. A change in one or more of these dimensions can open opportunities for collective action on the part of challengers to the status quo. Indeed, one of the principal arguments of recent social movement theory is that social movements emerge during periods of expanding political opportunities.

Once a social movement takes shape in response to a shift in political opportunities, the movement can directly impact the political opportunity structure itself. However, while shifts in the political opportunity structure allow for the emergence and development of social movements, ‘opportunity structure is a fickle friend to movements’ since it can close opportunities as well as expand them. Because of this, the survival and development of a social movement is dependent upon other key resources – organisation, the ability to frame meanings, and the repertoire of collective action.

B. Organisational Form

Social movement theorists generally agree that organisation makes a difference in the likelihood that a movement will be successful. The form of organisation that a social movement takes can vary widely, ranging from informal networks of family and friends to permanent national (or international) social movement organisations. Dieter Rucht has usefully categorised social movement structures into three basic types: 1) the grassroots model, characterised by a relatively loose, informal and

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9 For an exception to this general consensus, see F. F. Piven and R. A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movement: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York, 1977).

decentralised organisational structure, an emphasis on unruly protest politics, and a reliance on committed adherents; 2) the interest-group model, characterised by an emphasis on influencing policies (via lobbying, for instance) and a reliance on formal organisation; and 3) the party-oriented model, characterised by an emphasis on the electoral process, party politics, and a reliance on formal organisation.11

Although the establishment of a formal organisation may enhance the probability that a social movement will endure it can also result in negative processes such as oligarchisation, co-optation, and the loss of indigenous support.12 Recognising these potential weaknesses, some theorists have argued that in order to be effective a movement does not need to create a permanent organisation, but can develop and be sustained by maintaining contact with autonomous social networks. Social networks have the advantage of encouraging local autonomy and creating spaces for democratic participation. Nevertheless, social networks have their disadvantages – they may lack the coordination and continuity necessary to promote movement goals. In short, organisation is a central dilemma for social movement leaders seeking to advance their cause effectively.

C. The Framing Process

The third factor that social theorists have deemed to be crucial for the fate of social movements is the process it undertakes of interpreting (or ‘framing’) reality. The framing process can be defined briefly as ‘the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action’.13 The ability of organisers convincingly to frame reality can considerably effect the success of a social movement.

Movement organisers face three principal challenges in the framing process. The first is an internal one – to construct ‘frames’ that resonate deeply with the population they have chosen to target for support. ‘At a minimum people need to feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem’.14 Thus, movement organisers must mobilise consensus around particular frames that will identify an injustice, attribute the responsibility for it to others, and propose solutions for it.15 The second challenge in the

11 D. Rucht, ‘The impact of national contexts on social movement structures: A cross-movement and cross-national comparison’, in D. McAdam, J. D. McCarthy and M. N. Zald (eds.), Comparative Perspectives, p. 188.
12 McAdam, Political Process, p. 55.
13 McAdam, McCarthy, Zald, (eds.), Comparative Perspectives, p. 6.
14 Ibid., p. 5.
15 Tarrow, Power in Movement, p. 123.
framing process is external—to promote their frames of meaning effectively to a broader public while countering those frames proffered by the dominant institutions of society. The final challenge organisers face is once again internal to their movement—to adapt ‘frames’ continually so as to maintain their resonance with the group. In other words, the framing process is an ongoing task of debate and dialogue that seeks to interpret reality and shape meanings for group members. Debates over the ideas, symbols, goals, and tactics that comprise a movement’s frames can be energising or, to the contrary, can undermine the bases of support for a social movement. In sum, the framing process is a key factor in determining the fate of a social movement. Skilled framing is no guarantee of success, but certainly enhances its possibility.

D. The Repertoire of Collective Action

When social movements act to address a grievance their actions are drawn from a ‘repertoire’ of forms of collective action. Tilly defines the repertoire of a social movement as ‘the whole set of means it has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups’. The repertoire consists of ‘not only what people do when they are engaged in conflict with others; it is what they know how to do and what others expect them to do.’ The repertoire of collective action has changed slowly over time, usually in response to changes associated with capitalism and the power of the state. The modern repertoire of collective action includes such activities as the petition, the public meeting, the mass demonstration, the strike, the march, the boycott, the barricade, the teach-in, and the urban insurrection.

The repertoire provides movement activists with a ready toolbox of known actions that can be undertaken to pursue the redress of a grievance. At the same time, however, the repertoire can be seen as a constraint in that ‘people generally turn to familiar routines and innovate within them, even when in principle some unfamiliar form of action would serve their interests much better.’ Social movement leaders thus face the challenge of selecting (and innovating with) the most appropriate forms of collective action in order to achieve their goals. As with the framing process, skilled use of the repertoire does not guarantee success, but it can certainly have an impact upon the fate of a movement.

This brief overview of social movement theory allows us to re-examine the 1989–1990 Colombian student movement with greater analytical rigour. The following sections examine the role played by the political

opportunity structure, organisational form, the framing process and the repertoire of collective action. The aim is to achieve fresh insight into the origin, impact, and ultimate demise of the Colombian student movement.

IV. Political Opportunity Structure and the Development of the Student Movement

A shifting political opportunity structure clearly contributed to the emergence, impact, and subsequent demise of the 1989–1990 Colombian student movement. How the four key elements of political opportunity structure did so is examined below.

A. Openness of the Political System to Participation by Outsiders

Social movement theorists propose that in a closed political system a shift toward greater openness is likely to lead to higher levels of movement mobilisation and organisation. The degree of openness of the Colombian political system has long been debated by social scientists. Most analysts have shared the view that the Colombian political system, almost completely dominated by the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties, has been at best restricted in its openness. Indeed, the primary motivation of the student movement was to create a more open and democratic political system by means of a thorough revision of the country’s constitution.

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that although the political system may have been restrictive in character it was not a completely closed system. An elected government exercised political power and the fundamental rights of association, freedom of speech and freedom of the press were formally respected. Nonetheless, this formal recognition of democratic rights was severely compromised by the reality of a growing ‘dirty war’: the disappearance, kidnapping, assassination, and torture of thousands of politicians, labour organisers, human rights workers, peasant leaders, and social activists by guerrilla movements, paramilitary organisations or state security forces. At best, then, the

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Colombian political system at the time of the 1989–1990 student movement can be characterised as ‘partially open.’

It is not unusual that a social movement would emerge in a partially open political system. Indeed, Peter Eisinger has argued that protest is most likely to occur in systems that are neither fully open nor tightly closed, but ‘in systems characterised by a mix of open and closed factors’. However, the question that must be asked with regard to the Colombian student movement is whether there was a significant move toward greater openness in the political system that could account for its emergence. The answer is that no notable changes occurred in the openness of the political system that could account for the emergence of the Colombian student movement in August 1989. Although the Barco administration had engaged in serious peace negotiations with the M–19 guerrilla movement, at the same time the ‘dirty war’ continued unabated. Moreover, while the popular election of mayors was instituted for the first time in 1988, this political opening at the municipal level had little impact on the processing of demands at the national level. Thus, while the partially open political system in Colombia provided a favourable atmosphere for the emergence of the student movement, it cannot by itself account for the movement’s origins.

B. Stability of Political Alignments

A second aspect of political opportunity structure is the relative stability of political alignments, wherein an uncertain political situation may encourage the emergence or activity of social movements. At the origin of the student movement, the Liberal and Conservative parties controlled 96.0% of the seats in the Chamber of Representatives and 96.5% of the seats in the Senate. Politicians from the traditional parties were not fearful of losing their political dominance, nor were they eagerly seeking new allies. Moreover, the Liberal and Conservative parties actually increased their control of Congress in the March 1990 elections. Thus, from August 1989 to March 1990, political alignments were stable and had no effect upon the emergence or development of the student movement.

Nevertheless, the stability of political alignments did have an affect in the period from March to May 1990 as the campaign for the presidency got into full swing. Four major candidates were contesting the presidency: César Gaviria (Liberal), Rodrigo Lloreda (Social Conservative), Alvaro Gómez (Movement of National Salvation), and Antonio Navarro (M–19 Democratic Alliance). Although there was little doubt that the winner would be Gaviria, given the traditional dominance of the Liberal party

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and the split of the Conservative vote between Lloreda and Gómez, other significant questions would be decided by the electoral results. How strong a mandate would Gaviria receive? Which of the two Conservative candidates would garner the most votes? How well would the former M–19 guerrilla Antonio Navarro do in the election? Thus each presidential candidate had a strong incentive to appeal to the greatest number of voters possible. One attractive position to take was to embrace the student initiative for reforming the constitution. Not surprisingly, then, all four major candidates came out strongly in favour of a National Constituent Assembly.\(^{21}\) Thus, the student movement benefited from a period of instability in the political alignment that led each candidate to seek the broadest possible support by embracing a popular student-led initiative.

Nonetheless, the flip side of this shift in the political opportunity structure was that the election results themselves removed the political uncertainty that had benefited the student movement. The results of the presidential election reestablished the political alignment, thus representing a closing of the structure of political opportunities for the student movement. No longer did politicians see the need to embrace the student movement or listen attentively to its pronouncements. Indeed, it was in the aftermath of the presidential election that the student movement began its rapid decline.

\(C.\ \text{Availability of Elite Allies}\)

Of all the elements of the structure of political opportunity, the availability of influential elite allies was the most important for the Colombian student movement. Four key allies gave support to the movement — former Colombian presidents, candidates for political office, the mass media, and the Barco administration. Lacking these allies, the student movement would have had little, if any, impact on Colombian politics.

The support that several former presidents gave to the student movement was particularly significant in the campaign for the seventh ballot in the March 1989 elections. In the last few weeks leading up to the election, former Liberal presidents Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966–1970), Alfonso López Michelson (1974–1978), and Julio César Turbay (1978–1982), as well as former Conservative president Misael Pastrana (1970–1974) all announced their support for the seventh ballot. Although

in some cases the support was tepid (notably that given by López Michelson and Turbay) their approval gave the student initiative an imprimatur of legitimacy.

As with the former presidents, the support given to the student movement by candidates for political office was more important during the campaign for the seventh ballot than for the official plebiscite on the National Constituent Assembly. In the March 1990 campaign the students desperately needed not only the publicity of candidate endorsements, but also the logistical support that candidates could provide. For example, both César Gaviria and Ernesto Samper, candidates for the Liberal Party presidential primary, instructed their election observers to count all the seventh ballots cast, an important task given that the Registrar refused to tabulate these unofficial votes. Likewise, congressional candidates such as Diego Pardo Koppel and Fernando Botero assisted the student movement by printing up copies of the seventh ballot to be distributed to voters and by ordering the printing of street banners to promote the student cause.22

The third key ally of the student movement was the mass media. Support for the student movement came from a variety of sources. Early on in the process the respected author and television journalist Germán Castro Caicedo broadcast two interviews with members of the student movement in his programme ‘Enviado Especial’. These interviews, aired in November 1989, helped to give publicity to the campaign for the National Constituent Assembly that the students had initiated with their October 22 advertisement in El Tiempo.23 The role of the print media was even more important. The two major national newspapers, El Tiempo and El Espectador aided the student movement through favourable reporting, editorial support, and ultimately by printing the seventh ballot in the pages of their newspapers so that voters could clip them and deposit them in the ballot box. El Tiempo columnist Roberto Posada was an early supporter of the student initiative, and featured activities of the student movement in his column long before the proposal of the seventh ballot was even conceived. Juan Manuel Santos opened the editorial pages of El Tiempo to Fernando Carrillo, who launched the seventh ballot proposal in an op-ed piece published on 6 February 1990. Several editorials in both El Tiempo and El Espectador subsequently gave strong support to the seventh ballot proposal. The students themselves clearly recognised their dependence on the mass media, and assiduously courted the press throughout the process.24

The fourth key ally of the student movement was the Barco

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22 ‘Sí, a la séptima papeleta’ in El Tiempo, 1 March 1990.
23 Orjuela and Rodríguez, Semilla en tierra seca, pp. 44–7.
administration itself, which largely agreed with the goals proposed by the students. On 8 February 1990, Barco met with leaders from the student movement who presented him with the 35,000 signed petitions that they had collected as a result of their October ad in El Tiempo. Although Barco did not personally comment immediately on the petition, the very act of meeting with the students two days after Carrillo had launched the idea of the seventh ballot gave the movement much-needed publicity. Of decisive significance, after the impressive results of the seventh ballot in the March elections, Barco decided to issue a presidential decree (Decree 927) that authorised an official plebiscite on the possibility of a National Constituent Assembly, a plebiscite that would take place at the same time as the May 1990 presidential election.

The seeming alliance between the student movement and the Barco administration has raised the question of whether the student movement was manipulated by the Barco administration as a tool to further its own political agenda. Instead of describing this as ‘manipulation’, however, it seems more accurate to understand the relationship between the student movement and the Barco administration as one of a strong coincidence of interests. The student movement launched its proposal for a national constituent assembly to reform the constitution in October 1989, even as the president’s own constitutional reform package was wending its way through congress, so it was clearly not a puppet of the Barco administration. While Barco did subsequently capitalise upon the student’s campaign for the seventh ballot to continue to seek constitutional reform, the students themselves eagerly sought the support of the Barco administration, realising that only the president had the power to call an official plebiscite on the issue. In short, the administration and the student movement coincided in their desire for constitutional reform and each benefited from the other’s strengths.

D. Existence of Divisions Among Elites

The final element of the political opportunity structure is the existence of divisions among elites. In the Colombian case there were clearly divisions among elites. The principal division was that which developed between those politicians who sought a thorough reform of the Colombian

25 The text of the plebiscite read as follows: ‘In order to strengthen participatory democracy, do you vote in favor of the convocation of a constitutional assembly with representation of the social, political, and regional forces of the nation, formed democratically and popularly, in order to reform the Political Constitution of Colombia? Yes – No’.

26 For example, Ahumada has argued that ‘the governments of Barco and Gaviria presented the student movement as the first proponent of the Assembly, when in reality the regime had been planning its convocation for some time back’. See C. Ahumada, El modelo neoliberal y su impacto en la sociedad colombiana (Bogotá, 1996), p. 179.
political system and those who opposed such a reform. Reformists believed that it was necessary to eliminate the existing system of broker clientelism that provided political insiders with exclusive access to state patronage resources, while traditional Liberal and Conservative politicians sought to maintain this system. At the time of the emergence of the student movement, this division was relatively unimportant. The division only became significant during the National Constituent Assembly itself. The elections for the Assembly resulted in the majority of seats being held by political ‘outsiders,’ who eventually succeeding in dissolving Congress and holding new congressional elections. Although the debate over the dissolution of Congress reflected a sharp division among political elites, it had no effect on the student movement itself, which had long since ceased to exist.

The division among elites that had a more significant impact on the student movement was that which existed between an illegal drug-trafficking elite and Colombian state officials. Under the Barco administration, (1986–1990), the violence perpetuated by the cartels and the repression of the drug trade on the part of the state escalated in an increasingly vicious cycle. In 1989, the violent activities of the drug traffickers, particularly the Medellín Cartel, reached a critical threshold, highlighted by the assassination of several prominent political figures. The most respected of these was Luis Carlos Galán, a popular Liberal senator and the favourite to become President of Colombia in the 1990 elections. Galán was unique among the presidential candidates in his strong support for the extradition of drug traffickers to the United States, a stance that had earned him the enmity of the drug cartels.

Interviews with student activists reveal that many students had already been deeply concerned about previous violence associated with drug traffickers. The assassination of Galán was the final straw for them. Middle class student activists identified with the figure of Galán in a way that they had not identified with any of the other myriad political killings that had plagued the country in previous years. Moreover, Galán’s death became emblematic for the students of the profound breakdown in Colombian society that the existing political regime had proven unable to remedy. In short, it was the violent division between drug traffickers and state officials which provided the catalyst (Galán’s assassination) for the emergence of the 1989–1990 Colombian student movement.

To summarise, the political opportunity structure clearly affected the fate of the 1989–1990 Colombian student movement. Most importantly, the student movement benefited from the support of several key elite allies: former presidents, candidates for political office, the mass media, Dugas, Explaining Democratic Reform, 318–76.
and the Barco administration. Without this elite support their initiative would have remained mired in obscurity and doomed to failure. Students also profited from the temporary uncertainty of the political alignment that led the major presidential candidates to embrace their popular proposal. Nonetheless, the restoration of a stable political alignment in the aftermath of the presidential elections robbed the student movement of much of their influence. The student movement subsequently declined in importance and had ceased to exist by the time deep divisions surfaced among political elites that could have served to renew it. Finally, it must be noted that the catalyst for the emergence of the student movement (Galán’s assassination) was the product of a violent division between two sets of powerful elites: drug traffickers and state officials. Spurred by anger at this assassination and the more profound breakdown in society that it represented, a number of students took advantage of the existing partial openness of the political system and began to organise.

V. Organisational Characteristics of the Student Movement

In August 1989 students were essentially starting from scratch in terms of building a national student movement. Although Colombian students had engaged in periods of pronounced politicisation and organisation in the past (particularly during the 1960s and early 1970s), by the late 1980s there was little in the way of a strong national student organisation that movement leaders could draw upon. While the lack of such an organisation gave student leaders significant leeway in the construction of their movement organisations, it also contributed to the rapid demise of the student movement once internal framing disputes came into play.

The 1989–1990 student movement may be described as a loosely organised campaign that revolved around two rival student organisations – Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia and the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente. Although the two organisations often competed with each other to exert influence in the political arena, they joined forces during critical moments to push for their common goals. Despite their loose organisation, each group was characterised by traits that set it apart from the other. In brief, the two student groups differed in terms of their primary resources, the type of organisational structure that they adopted, and their principal weaknesses.

A. Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia

Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia could count upon several key resources. Foremost among these were the dedication and preparation of its members. This small group was full of with highly motivated students,
the majority of whom were law students. Their energy, creativity, and persistence helped to compensate for their reduced numbers. Although participants in the group came from both public and private universities most were students at a handful of highly prestigious private universities in Bogotá – the Universidad del Rosario, the Universidad Javeriana, the Universidad del Externado, and the Universidad de los Andes. The prestige of these universities, along with the middle- and upper middle-class socio-economic background of the students, undoubtedly helped to open doors as the students attempted to contact potential allies.

Another key resource enjoyed by Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia was the institutional support that they received from the faculty and administration at the Universidad del Rosario. Several younger law professors, particularly Fernando Carrillo and Camilo Ospina Bernal, actively supported and encouraged the students, meeting with them frequently in the capacity of advisors. Carrillo himself was largely responsible for suggesting the tactic of the seventh ballot as a means of mobilising public opinion in favour of a National Constituent Assembly. Another highly respected law professor, Guillermo Salah, originally planted the idea of the National Constituent Assembly in the minds of several of the students. The Dean of the Law School, Marcela Monroy, gave unrestricted support to the students throughout their activities. Moreover, Monroy was married to the influential columnist Roberto Posada of El Tiempo, a tie that opened the door for the students in their search for allies in the mass media. Finally, the President of the university, Roberto Arias Pérez, also gave full support to the students, cancelling classes the day of the Silent March and joining the students in their walk to the Central Cemetery.

In addition to the moral support and legal advice provided by the faculty and the administration, the Universidad del Rosario also provided logistical support. For example, during the campaign for the seventh ballot, the university provided the students with office space and the use of telephones, fax machines, and computers in their effort to tally the vote. This unswerving institutional support proved to be an invaluable resource for the students of Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia. It also helps to explain why the student movement germinated at the Universidad del Rosario rather than at another public or private university in Bogotá.

Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia lacked a rigid organisational structure. Interviews with participants indicate that the movement functioned more or less informally, with irregular meetings conducted in a collegial fashion among equals. The small size of the group and the presence of trusted advisors like Carrillo and Ospina allowed this informal organisational style to work relatively well. This is not to imply that there
were no student leaders. On the contrary, a small number of students achieved prominence within the organisation as a result of their energy, organisational skills, and legal knowledge. These students essentially led the organisation by virtue of the respect they enjoyed among their fellow students. The student leaders included, most prominently, Oscar Ortiz, Oscar Guardiola, Alexandra Torres, Jorge Orjuela, Diego López, and Juan Carlos Cortés.28

The student organisation functioned closely in accordance with the ‘Interest Group Model’ of movements described by Rucht.29 That is, Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia primarily advanced its cause by lobbying potential elite allies in the mass media and in the political arena, rather than by conducting mass protests or organising a broad-based student movement. Although the campaign for the seventh ballot did involve coordinating a large number of students to distribute and subsequently count the ballots, most of the organisation’s efforts were directed toward key political and media elites, convincing them to support and publicise the student initiative. Lobbying, not mass mobilisation, was the strength of Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia.

The fundamental weakness of Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia was the lack of broad-based student support. Its size remained relatively small, with committed participants never numbering more than a few dozen. Even though it was able to mobilise hundreds of students for the activities of the seventh ballot campaign, it quickly dwindled to the core group of activists in the months following the election. Indeed, by the time the vote for the seventh ballot arrived, the rival Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente had eclipsed the organisation in terms of numbers. The very emergence of a rival student organisation was due, in part, to the unwillingness or inability of Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia to engage in the task of building a broader student movement. The result was a divided movement that weakened the potential influence of Colombian students.

A second fundamental weakness of the organisation lay in the transformation of the student group into an electoral vehicle. This occurred in the fall of 1990, after the Gaviria administration had set forth the framework of the national constituent assembly. The student movement as a whole began to discuss the possibility of launching a student list for the Assembly, but confronted the difficulty that none of the students had the name recognition necessary to win an election. The

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28 These individuals were repeatedly mentioned in the 1997 interviews I conducted in Bogotá with former members of Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia.
29 Rucht, ‘The Impact of National Contexts’, p. 188.
students of Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia ultimately decided to support Fernando Carrillo as the head of a student list for the National Constituent Assembly. The students hoped that Carrillo’s greater name recognition and ties with the political establishment would enhance the possibility that students would be elected to the Assembly. Nevertheless, once the campaign began, Carrillo increasingly exhibited his independence from the student movement as well as his strong allegiance to President Gaviria.\(^{30}\) In the halls of the Assembly itself, Carrillo gave up any pretence of acting as the leader of a student movement, believing that the responsibility of an Assembly delegate required transcending the representation of student interests.\(^{31}\) Many students came to perceive Carrillo as merely another Liberal Party representative, although one who was unusually loyal to President Gaviria. Soon after the Assembly concluded, Gaviria repaid Carrillo’s loyalty with his appointment as Minister of Justice.

In the end the transition to electoral politics spelled the demise of Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia. Although Fernando Carrillo was elected to the Assembly, many students subsequently felt ignored by him and came to believe that Carrillo had co-opted the student movement, using it to further his own political ambitions.\(^{32}\) Most student members turned their attention to other pursuits, notably finishing their education. Given its remarkable energy and lobbying skills, the student group could potentially have served as a ‘watchdog’ group over the Assembly. Instead, the decision to move from an ‘Interest Group Model’ to a ‘Political Party Model’ robbed it of its primary strengths. Because Carrillo chose to rely largely on the mass media and established politicians for his electoral support, the student organisation was marginalised. Indeed, by the time the National Constituent Assembly commenced in February 1991, Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia had ceased to exist as an organised student group.

\textbf{B. Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente}

The strengths and weaknesses of the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente were nearly the mirror opposite of those of Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia. The key resource of the group was a broad national base of student support. Unlike its rival, the Movimiento

\(^{30}\) Carrillo had begun to work for Gaviria’s presidential campaign immediately after the success of the ‘seventh ballot’ in March 1990. He continued to work in the Gaviria administration until he declared his candidacy for the National Constituent Assembly in October 1990. Interview, Fernando Carrillo, 18 July 2000, Washington DC.

\(^{31}\) \textit{Ibid.}

\(^{32}\) Interviews in Bogotá, Oscar Ortiz, 6 November 1997, and Jorge Orjuela, 20 November 1997.
The Colombian Student Movement

Estudiantil por la Constituyente actively sought to create a representative student movement. It organised several national conferences, each bringing together several hundred students from universities throughout the country. It was also much more representative of students than Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia, given that it incorporated participation from the large public universities in the country, as well as from the private institutions. Far more than its rival, the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente could legitimately claim to speak for Colombian students.

A second key resource of the organisation was its democratic leadership. The student leaders of the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente were deeply committed to a democratic process. Indeed, the process of democratic decision-making was viewed as a worthy goal to be pursued, in and of itself. The Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente reflected the entire gamut of student experiences in Colombia, ranging from elite private institutions to undistinguished regional universities. Even more striking was the ideological variation within the movement, which ranged from anarchists, the Communist Youth (Juventud Comunista, JUCO), and militants of the former M-19 guerrilla movement on the left of the spectrum to political independents and traditional party members on the right. Moreover, the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente incorporated students from a range of disciplines, many of whom had little, if any, knowledge of the Colombian constitution. The tremendous diversity of the student organisation, in combination with its sheer size (the 4–5 May 1990 Congress brought together some 2,000 students from 105 universities and 20 secondary schools), made adherence to democratic procedures a real challenge to student leaders. To their credit the leaders of the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente were inclusive of all students, allowing the full gamut of views to be aired and striving for a broad consensus within the movement when key decisions were to be made.

Given its size it is not surprising that the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente exhibited greater formal organisation than its counterpart. An elected board of approximately ten students led the student organisation, and each board member was given specific responsibilities. Despite this formality of structure, the Movimiento Estudiantil por la

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33 The most significant of these conferences were the ‘Student Forum’ at the Universidad Libre (Bogotá) on 16 March 1990 to discuss the convocation and composition of a National Constituent Assembly; the ‘First Student Congress for the Constituent Assembly’ at the Universidad de la Salle (Bogotá) on 4–5 May 1990, which debated Barco’s Decree 927; and the ‘Second Student Congress for the Constituent Assembly’ which took place at the Universidad de Medellín on 15–16 September 1990.

Constituyente most closely approximated Rucht’s ‘Grassroots Model’ of social movement organisation. It was almost completely dependent for its influence on the committed activism of student groups based at dozens of universities across the country. For the most part these groups acted with great autonomy and were only loosely coordinated by the elected board. In addition, the strength of this student organisation resided in the large number of students that it could mobilise. Although student leaders did engage in lobbying activities, the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente received its greatest publicity during its large national conferences. Moreover, despite the fact that Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia had originated the strategy of the seventh ballot, it seems clear that the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente was the organisation that mobilised the greatest student support for this initiative throughout the country.

Like its counterpart, however, the organisational strengths of the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente were also the source of its principal weaknesses. One weakness of the student organisation appeared to be ‘oligarchisation’ – that is, a tendency for leaders increasingly to direct energy towards the movement organisation itself, rather than to the ultimate goals it sought to achieve. Student leaders justly prided themselves on the creation of democratically structured, broad-based, nationwide student organisation. For some, this achievement was paramount. As one student leader subsequently remarked, ‘For us the important thing was not the Constitution, it was the process that could lead to making this Constitution.’ Nevertheless, the energy dedicated to holding the large national student conferences, the primary outcome of which were carefully negotiated position statements, could easily have been directed toward marches, rallies, or other publicity events that could have made better use of the organisation’s principal resource – a huge number of university students.

That this was not done reflects a second weakness of the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente: the lack of consensus that led to an inordinate amount of time dedicated to deliberation instead of action. This, of course, was the result of the extreme plurality of the movement organisation and the dedication of the leadership to democratic decision-making. The divisions within their student organisation grew increasingly difficult to manage, especially as students who were members of other political movements attempted to gain influence. This process culminated in the disastrous Second Student Congress for the Constituent Assembly held in Medellín on 15–16 September 1990. One of the primary goals of

35 Rucht, ‘The Impact of National Contexts’, p. 188.
36 Interview, Alexandra Barrios, Bogotá, 5 Nov. 1997.
this conference was to arrive at a consensus on a student list for the elections to the National Constituent Assembly. This became impossible to achieve, however, as various factions of students associated with leftist movements (in particular, the JUCO, A Luchar, and the adherents of M–19) refused to compromise with independent students on the composition of the electoral list. The conference spiralled downward in acrimonious debate. The end result was that no official student list from the movement was agreed upon, and the student organisation essentially self-destructed. No further conferences, forums, marches, or other activities were ever held.

What is clear in retrospect is that the transition from a ‘Grassroots Model’ to a ‘Political Party Model’ dealt a deathblow to the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente. The resources that were of benefit to it as a grassroots organisation (extreme pluralism, democratic decision-making) proved to be counterproductive in trying to establish a student presence in the electoral realm.

In summary, the organisational form of the 1989–1990 student movement did play a role in its impact and ultimate demise. The movement as a whole can be described as a loosely organised campaign that revolved around the activities of two rival student organisations. Each enjoyed resources that contributed to the overall success of the movement. Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia could count on highly motivated, well-trained law students, firm institutional support, and a shared perspective. For its part, the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente could boast of a large, nationwide, pluralistic student organisation that was enhanced by democratic leadership. These resources helped the students to get their constitutional initiative on the political agenda, gain the backing of key elite allies, and rally broad public support for it. However, in the aftermath of the plebiscite, the weaknesses of each student organisation contributed to their disintegration as they attempted to shift toward a ‘Political Party Model’ of organisation. Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia broke down as the student group was transformed into an electoral vehicle for Fernando Carrillo. Although Carrillo was victorious, the organisation itself ceased to exist. The Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente fell victim to its lack of ideological consensus, disintegrating in bitter debate as it failed to agree upon a unified list for the Assembly elections. Finally, it should be noted that the lack of strong, pre-existing student organisations facilitated the demise of the student movement. Had the student movement been rooted in more informal student networks it is more likely that it would have

survived the electoral process and influenced the substantive debates of the National Constituent Assembly.\(^{38}\)

\textit{VI. Framing and the Use of the Repertoire by the Student Movement}

As in all social movements, the leaders of the 1989–1990 Colombian student movement confronted the three-fold challenge of constructing frames that resonated with students, promoting those frames to a broader public, and adapting them to changing contexts. In doing so, the students drew from and innovated with the existing repertoire of collective action. The students were successful in constructing a fundamental frame that most in the movement considered as valid. The students were also successful in promoting their frame to the broader Colombian public, as witnessed by the overwhelming support for the National Constituent Assembly in the May 1990 plebiscite. Nevertheless, internal framing debates weakened the overall movement and contributed to the demise of the two individual student organisations.

\textit{A. Producing a Resonant Frame}

The initial framing and repertoire work of the students began in the days immediately following the assassination of Luis Carlos Galán in August 1989. His death shocked many students out of their traditional political apathy, prompting them toward an activism that sought to provide answers to the crisis of political and societal breakdown symbolised by Galán’s murder. Early movement activity drew upon and innovated with traditional repertoire staples such as the round table discussion, the march, and the public pronouncement. The existence of such actions in the repertoire facilitated the emergence of the student movement and its early framing work.

The week after Galán’s death an entire day of roundtable discussions was held at the Universidad del Rosario. These discussions ranged across the whole gamut of problems besetting the country – lack of justice, the economic situation, drug trafficking, public order, the guerrilla movements, the peace process. They constituted the first groping efforts of the students to frame an understanding of the Colombian crisis and possible solutions to it. That night a group of student activists from several universities met to hammer out the communique that would be read at the Silent March the following day. More than a comprehensive interpretation of the Colombian crisis, the statement was a visceral outcry against the evils besetting the country:

\(^{38}\) See Tarrow, \textit{Power in Movement}, pp. 21–2, 57.
1. We reject all forms of violence, whatever the ideologies or interests that pretend to justify them.
2. We demand the respect for human rights in Colombia.
3. We support our democratic institutions in their struggle against all those forces that seek to destabilise them, whether they are drug traffickers, guerrillas, paramilitary forces or others … .
4. We reject … any type of armed intervention on the part of foreign states.
5. We solicit the convocation of the people that they might reform those institutions that impede the solution of the current crisis.
6. We demand an exhaustive purification of the armed forces, the police, the government, and the political parties’.

This first communique, while not a full-fledged interpretation of the Colombian political crisis, did make reference to many of the institutions commonly viewed as contributing to the crisis: drug traffickers, guerrillas, paramilitary groups, the armed forces, the police, the government, political parties, and foreign states (i.e., the United States). Such a sweeping indictment, however, was far from offering a convincing diagnostic or concrete solutions that could mobilise students, much less the broader public, for a sustained movement. A more developed frame would require much subsequent debate among the students.

The Silent March itself was an early indication of the creativity possessed by the students. Marches had long been a part of the repertoire of collective action available to social movements in Colombia. A silent march, however, was a unique twist on this traditional tool. The students conceived of a silent march precisely for its symbolic value in the eyes of the larger public. Two elements of symbolism were important to student organisers. First, a silent, orderly march was meant to symbolise the responsibility and seriousness of this student movement. Second, a silent march was to symbolise the previous apathy of the students and their decision to reject that apathy. One student leader explained it in this way:

‘What university students had done for many years was to disappear from the public arena and we were silent. What the march signified was that this was the last time that young people and university people would remain silent in the face of what was happening in the country … . From now on we were going to come out with proposals.’

The Silent March was followed by two months of roundtable discussions at the Universidad del Rosario. However, these seemingly endless discussions alienated many students (several of whom would later

return to participate in the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente). Nevertheless, those students who remained were talented and energetic, and several were also law students familiar with the 1886 Constitution and its limitations. After many debates, these students were able to construct an interpretation of the Colombian crisis that identified basic problems, attributed responsibility for them, and proposed solutions. This fundamental work of framing provided the basic interpretation that motivated the subsequent development of the entire student movement.

Broadly speaking, the students asserted that the crux of the political crisis was the vast gulf that separated the country’s political institutions from the grim realities of Colombian life. This gulf was rooted in the deficiencies of the existing 1886 Constitution, which was interpreted as a rigid, out-dated document that had originally been imposed by victors over their political adversaries. What was necessary was a fundamental reform of the constitution, in order to transform the political institutions of the country so that they would be able to address effectively the myriad problems confronting Colombia. Disturbingly, however, political elites, particularly the members of the traditional parties that controlled Congress, had continually failed in their duty to reform the constitution. Rather, these politicians benefited from the existing political order, maintaining themselves in power through clientelistic mechanisms that took advantage of the prevailing institutional structure. However, their resistance to reform had only deepened the crisis in Colombia, as citizens increasingly questioned the legitimacy of the political regime. What was needed, therefore, was a profound constitutional reform. But, given the unwillingness of Congress to enact such a reform, another mechanism had to be found. The students proposed a specially elected ‘national constituent assembly’ whose sole purpose would be to reform the constitution. This new constitution would be the result of a ‘political pact’ among representatives of all Colombians, rather than a document imposed by a limited set of victors. It would reform the existing institutional structure, open up new avenues of citizen participation, and recover political legitimacy, all of which would then allow the country to address effectively its other problems.41

The students first publicly articulated this ‘frame’ of the Colombian crisis in the petition that Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia published in El Tiempo on 22 October 1989. The petition called upon the President to hold a nationwide plebiscite that would allow citizens the chance to vote for the convocation of a ‘National Constituent Assembly’ to undertake a number of reforms to the Constitution. Specifically, the reforms were to

41 This summary of the basic student ‘frame’ is based upon interviews with several former student movement leaders in the fall of 1997.
The 1989–1990 Colombian Student Movement

include: 1) Congress; 2) civil rights and social guarantees; 3) the judicial system; 4) the state of siege measures; 5) economic planning mechanisms; 6) administrative decentralisation; and 7) the introduction of the referendum and the plebiscite as future mechanisms for reforming the constitution. Substance aside, it should be noted that once again the students innovated with the repertoire of collection action, utilising the known tool of the petition but publishing it in the country’s highest-circulation newspaper.

It must be underscored that this fundamental frame adopted by the student movement was in no way original to the students. Indeed, for years prominent Colombian social scientists had been making similar arguments about clientelism, constitutional deficiencies, and the closed nature of the Colombian political regime. The Barco administration itself employed a similar frame of interpretation to justify its 1988 efforts to introduce constitutional reform by means of a referendum. Nor was the idea of a national constituent assembly unique to the students. President Alfonso López Michelson (1974–1978) had sought to use the mechanism of a national constituent assembly to enact judicial reform as well as departmental and municipal reform. Moreover, advisors to President Barco had also considered the possibility of a national constituent assembly in an internal memorandum in January 1988.

Undoubtedly, the presence of these existing frames greatly facilitated the emergence of the Colombian student movement. Indeed, if the students had been confronted with the task of analysing and providing a prescription for the Colombian situation from scratch, it is highly unlikely that they would have ever emerged as a coherent movement.

What the students did, then, was to bring together existing critiques and proposals, debate and analyse them extensively, and so construct their own interpretation of the Colombian political crisis. Their emergent frame

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42 The complete text may be found in Lleras de la Fuente and Tangarife Torres, Constitución política, pp. 15–16. Orjuela and Rodríguez, Semilla en tierra seca, pp. 38–40, also contains a transcript of the text, although the wording is slightly different.

43 See, for example, F. Leal Buitrago, Estado y política en Colombia (Bogotá, 1984) and H. Valencia Villa, Cartas de batalla: una crítica del constitucionalismo colombiano (Bogotá, 1987).

44 V. Barco, ‘Intervención con motivo de la firma del Acuerdo de la Casa de Nariño, febrero 20 de 1988’ in Discursos 1986–1990, Volumen I, Reforma política y cambio democrático – Mensajes de año nuevo a la nación. (Bogotá, 1990), p. 130. This attempt at constitutional reform was suspended on 4 April 1988, when the Council of State declared the process to be openly unconstitutional.

45 This attempt at constitutional reform was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

specified the source of the crisis (institutional failure rooted in an outmoded constitution) attributed responsibility for it (the failure of clientelistic politicians in Congress to enact constitutional reform) and proposed a solution (the convocation of a specially elected National Constituent Assembly to bring about far-reaching reforms). The frame itself may be criticised as inadequate, overly legalistic, and perhaps even naïve. What is important, however, is that the students had coalesced around this frame after intensive discussions and they were convinced of its validity. Moreover, while it was the students from Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia who originally articulated the fundamental frame, it was implicitly accepted by the students of the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente, who never veered far from its basic interpretation.

B. Promoting the Frame

Once the student movement had created a basic frame for interpreting and resolving the Colombian political crisis they faced the challenge of promoting it to the broader public. Their ultimate success is indicated by the fact that in the official May 1990 plebiscite, 86.6 per cent voted in favour of a National Constituent Assembly. This achievement is the result of several factors, many of which have been examined previously. In part, however, the students were successful because they faced very little in the way of a ‘framing contest.’ Taking advantage of their key political opportunity – the support of influential elite allies – the students were able to neutralise any significant opposition. While many traditional politicians in Congress were unhappy about the prospect of a National Constituent Assembly, they largely remained quiet. At the same time, the bulk of the Colombian populace, tired of corruption and clientelism, and increasingly weary of the violence perpetrated by drug cartels, guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and state security forces, were eager to support an alternative.

This is not to imply that the process of promoting the student frame was easy. Much hard work and crucial decisions about tactics were required to achieve this success. Undoubtedly, the key tactical decision was to innovate with a basic tool in the repertoire of collective action: electoral mobilisation. Specifically, the students chose to take advantage of the March 1990 elections to mobilise citizen support for a National Constituent Assembly by depositing a ‘seventh ballot’ in the electoral urn. This decision had a number of important consequences, all of which helped to promote further the student frame. First, it re-energised the student movement. Second, the proposal captured the attention of the news media, which had largely ignored the student movement after the Silent March of August 1989. Third, the eventual success of the seventh
ballot created a political statement that elites could not afford to ignore and ensured a prominent place for the student frame on the political agenda.

Brief mention should be made of the differences between the two student organisations in promoting the student frame. While both engaged in mass mobilisation and lobbying efforts, each had their particular strengths, stemming largely from their organisational characteristics. Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia excelled in its lobbying efforts, holding meetings with former presidents, presidential candidates, and Barco administration officials, while assiduously courting the press. On the other hand, the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente was distinguished by its skill at mass mobilisation, reaching out to student constituencies and the broader public in regions of the country relatively ignored by political elites and the mass media. Obviously, lobbying and mass mobilisation were complementary ways of promoting the student frame.

Finally, the role of the news media in promoting the student frame needs to be assessed. There is no doubt that in the absence of media support, the student frame would have languished indefinitely in relative obscurity. However, dependency on the news media proved to be a double-edged sword for the student movement. On the one hand, the media could take credit for publicising the seventh ballot initiative and introducing the students and their frame to a broad national public. On the other hand, the movement’s dependence on the news media left it isolated when the media turned its attention elsewhere. This is essentially what happened after the official May 1990 plebiscite on the National Constituent Assembly. The media increasingly focused its attention on the incoming Gaviria administration. Neither student organisation had much success in recapturing media attention, with the result being that the student movement had largely faded from public consciousness by the time of Gaviria’s inauguration in August 1990.

C. Debating the Frame

Although the student’s fundamental frame was maintained throughout the existence of the student movement this did not signify the absence of strong debate over new developments in the larger political context. This debate occurred both between the two student organisations and within each one. Although debate can often be healthy for a social movement, much of the debate in the Colombian student movement was destructive.

Relations between Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia and the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente were never smooth. Even several years after the fact, interviews with former student leaders of both organi-
sations revealed a continuing dislike for their erstwhile counterparts. The students of Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia tended to regard the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente as a Johnny-come-lately, free-riding upon their own hard work and efforts. Moreover, they tended to dismiss this larger student organisation as lacking in seriousness and academic preparation, and as being overly leftist in orientation. For their part, the students of the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente regarded Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia as an elitist organisation, caught up in a narrow legalistic view of the world, overly conservative in orientation, and apt to be co-opted by political elites. Given these prevalent views, it is little wonder that the two student organisations clashed.

The point of greatest tension between the two organisations came in early May 1990, after the Barco administration had emitted the decree authorising an official plebiscite on the National Constituent Assembly. Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia immediately embraced the decree, viewing it as a vindication of its hard work. However, the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente roundly criticised the wording of the plebiscite, fearing that it would sanction an assembly that could only enact limited reforms of the existing constitution, rather than draft a completely new constitution. After extensive debate, the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente voted to give only conditional approval to Barco’s plebiscite. This decision was strongly opposed by the students of Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia, who believed that the student movement should give clear and unconditional support to Barco’s planned plebiscite. In retrospect, this internal debate over the student frame had little impact on subsequent events. Indeed, only a week and a half later the two student organisations joined together in defence of Barco’s decree when Procurator General Alfonso Gómez urged the Supreme Court to declare it unconstitutional. Nonetheless, the debate deepened the feelings of antagonism already felt by student leaders on both sides.

Just as the broader student movement experienced a framing debate, so too did each of the student organisations that comprised the movement. While debate and dialogue common to any group characterised both organisations, each also confronted a more fundamental framing debate over whether or not the organisation should make a transition to a ‘Political Party Model.’

For Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia, the debate revolved around

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37 This observation is based upon interviews with sixteen former student activists from both organisations in October and November, 1997.

38 Orjuela and Rodríguez, Semilla en tierra seca, is an extreme example of this attitude. The authors purport to tell the history of the student movement with barely a mention of the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente. When they do mention them (never by name) they use adjectives like ‘second-rate,’ ‘pseudo-student,’ and ‘extremist.’
whether or not the organisation should give its support to Fernando Carrillo as head of a student electoral list for the Assembly. A minority believed that to support Carrillo would go directly against the non-partisan principle that the organisation had maintained since its inception. The majority of students, however, believed that the organisation would be more likely to influence the new constitution if they achieved a direct presence in the Assembly. Moreover, Carrillo’s leadership of an electoral ticket provided their best chance of being elected. Unfortunately, the practical result of this decision was the disintegration of the organisation as it was transformed into an electoral vehicle for Carrillo.

For the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente the internal debate was probably even more bruising, and its consequences equally devastating. At the Second Student Congress for the Constituent Assembly, in September 1990, ideological divisions doomed the construction of a unified student ticket that could command the allegiance of all factions of the student organisation in the Assembly elections. The extraordinarily difficult negotiations led nowhere, as the various leftist and independent factions were unable to agree upon the satisfactory ranking of their candidates in a single unified list. The Congress broke up without an electoral list, and the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente disintegrated as groups of students soon joined or supported other partisan lists.

To sum up, the Colombian student movement successfully produced a frame that resonated with a broad swathe of student activists. This frame signalled the source of the country’s crisis (institutional failure rooted in an outmoded constitution), pointed to its cause (the failure of Congress to reform the constitution), and suggested a solution (a specially elected National Constituent Assembly). The students were creative in using the repertoire of collective action to promote their frame through activities such as the Silent March, the newspaper petition, and the ‘seventh ballot’. Moreover, the frame was appealing to the broader public, as evidenced by the tremendous support for the National Constituent Assembly in the May 1990 plebiscite. Nevertheless, the student movement was much less successful in dealing with its internal framing debates. Debate over the wording of Barco’s plebiscite embittered relations between the two student organisations. Of even greater consequence, internal disagreements over the electoral stance of each organisation contributed to their ultimate demise.

VII. Conclusion

Social movement theory draws our attention to a number of factors that help to explain the emergence of the Colombian student movement. The partial openness of the political system provided a favourable setting for
the creation of a national student movement. Of even greater significance, the violent division between drug trafficking elites and state officials produced the catalyst (the assassination of Galán) that energised students and inspired some of them to begin to organise. The emergence of the student movement was also greatly facilitated by existing frames of understanding that students could draw upon, as well as by the repertoire of collective action, which enabled students to promote their own frame effectively.

Social movement theory also contributes to our understanding of the significant impact that the Colombian student movement had through achieving its goal of a specially elected National Constituent Assembly. A favourable political opportunity structure contributed to this success in two ways. First, it provided a number of key elite allies to the student movement – former presidents, candidates for political office, the news media, and the Barco administration. Second, a temporary uncertainty in political alignment led all four major presidential candidates to embrace the student proposal. The organisational strengths of the two student organisations also contributed to their success. Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia benefited from highly motivated and skillful law students, firm institutional support, and an organisational form that lent itself well to lobbying activities. The Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente had a large nationwide student network, a committed democratic leadership, and an organisational form well suited for mass mobilisation. Finally, the student movement successfully addressed the challenge of constructing a frame of meaning that not only resonated with student activists, but also appealed to the larger public. It was able to do this in part through the creative use of the repertoire of collective action.

Finally, social movement theory helps to explain the demise of the student movement. Changes in political opportunity structure undermined the student movement in two ways. First, the restoration of a stable political alignment in the aftermath of the May presidential elections robbed the students of much of their influence with key political elites. This was accompanied by the ‘loss’ of another ally, the news media, which paid increasingly less attention to the student movement after the May elections. Organisational factors also played a part in the movement’s demise, as neither student organisation was able to survive an attempt to transform it into a ‘political party model’ geared toward winning elections. Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia broke up even as Fernando Carrillo’s campaign was victorious, while the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente disintegrated as a result of its extreme ideological diversity. Neither organisation proved capable of handling these internal ‘framing’ debates in a way that could salvage the student movement. The lack of
The pre-existing student networks ensured the demise of the movement in the presence of such harsh debates.

In conclusion, contemporary social movement theory provides numerous insights into the origin, impact, and demise of the 1989–1990 Colombian student by directing our attention to crucial explanatory factors. Researchers of other social movements in Latin America — student or otherwise — could well benefit from judicious use of the key variables of contemporary social movement theory: political opportunity structure, organisational form, the framing process, and the repertoire of collective action.