

The Evolution of Political Power Elites in Colombia: A Comparative Analysis of Three Campaign Personas in the Early 2026 Presidential Race

La evolución de las élites políticas en Colombia: un análisis comparativo de tres perfiles de campaña en la etapa inicial de la contienda presidencial de 2026



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Abstract

This article examines how leading candidates claim political leadership in Colombia's 2026 presidential race, a contest unfolding amid profound transformations in the country's elite structures, media dynamics, and ideological configurations. Building on the November 2025 *Cifras y Conceptos* survey, which identifies Iván Cepeda, Abelardo de la Espriella, and Sergio Fajardo as the leading candidates across the left-right-center spectrum, we analyze how each figure was publicly positioning himself during an early stage of the 2026 electoral cycle. Using an elite-analysis framework composed of four dimensions –persona and narrative, politics and ideology, media and digital performance, and class and background– we document the ways in which these candidates build on biography, symbolic authority, ideological positioning, and social class origins in order to generate legitimacy and appeal. The study draws on contemporary literature in political communication, leadership studies, and political psychology to situate these political profiles within broader scholarly debates on the evolution of elites and the mediatization of politics.

Keywords

Colombian elections; political leadership; narrative construction; media; spectacle.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza cómo los tres principales candidatos presidenciales en Colombia construyen y proyectan su liderazgo político en la etapa inicial de la contienda electoral de 2026. Se trata de una elección que empieza a configurarse en un contexto de cambios profundos en las élites políticas del país, en las dinámicas de comunicación pública y en los alineamientos ideológicos. A partir de la encuesta de noviembre de 2025 de Cifras y Conceptos, que ubica a Iván Cepeda, Abelardo de la Espriella y Sergio Fajardo como figuras líderes dentro del espectro izquierda–derecha–centro, el artículo examina la manera en que cada uno buscó posicionarse públicamente en una fase temprana del ciclo electoral. Para ello, se emplea un marco de análisis de élites organizado en cuatro dimensiones: persona y narrativa, política e ideología, desempeño mediático y digital, y clase y trayectoria social. El análisis muestra cómo estos candidatos recurren a su biografía, a distintas formas de autoridad simbólica, a su ubicación ideológica y a sus orígenes o trayectorias de clase para construir legitimidad y generar conexión con distintos sectores del electorado. El estudio se apoya en literatura reciente sobre comunicación política, liderazgo y psicología política, con el propósito de situar estos perfiles dentro de debates más amplios sobre la transformación de las élites y la creciente mediatización de la política.

Palabras clave

Elecciones colombianas; liderazgo político; construcción narrativa; medios; espectáculo.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Colombian politics has undergone a profound transformation characterized by the rise of charismatic leadership and the gradual erosion of party-centered political mediation (Botero, 2011). This shift reflects a broader reconfiguration of political elites, moving away from “old money” bourgeois traditions grounded in generational privilege, institutional authority, and legacy media power, toward new elite formations shaped by digital capitalism, personalization, and the logic of spectacle –what may be described as forms of “Yo-pitalismo”¹ (Sibilia, 2024). In this context, political attention increasingly responds to visibility, affect, and market-oriented narratives, and not to programmatic coherence and institutionalized democratic practices. While this Colombian transformation aligns with global trends observed in the cases of Javier Milei in Argentina, Donald Trump in the United States, and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, it is rooted in a specific context with a persistent traditionalist cultural framework based on religion, nation, and family.

Until the late twentieth century, Colombia was historically marked by persistent everyday violence and a highly exclusionary political and media system dominated by traditional elites based in its capital, Bogotá. Political power operated through tacit agreements among economic, political, and media elites, whose primary objective was the preservation of the status quo. These elites –largely educated in national and international elite institutions– exercised authority through modernist, technocratic, and media-based forms of legitimacy. However, the transition to the twenty-first century has disrupted this kind of equilibrium. The signing of the peace treaty between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC-EP) in 2016, shifts in class-based power relations, and the expansion of digital platforms have transformed the public sphere, accelerating processes of globalization, post-truth dynamics, and the circulation of disinformation. As a result, traditional media and bourgeois elites have experienced a significant erosion of symbolic authority and political influence (Gómez Buendía, 2026; González, 2026).

This transformation has unfolded unevenly across successive administrations. The government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010), elected under the *Primero Colombia* movement, marked an early rupture by repositioning rural Colombia and land-owning elites at the center of political power.² Uribe’s leadership style foregrounded authoritarian pragmatism, moral conservatism, and a rural ethos centered on discipline, productivity, patriotism, and religious values. While initially perceived by traditional urban elites and mainstream media as vulgar or unsophisticated, this “folksy” performance was ultimately tolerated –and even legitimized– because it safeguarded existing economic privileges and preserved elite interests.

1. A neologism describing a form of subjectivity associated with contemporary capitalism centered on the primacy of the self as a measure of success, happiness, and social value and on the exaltation of individual achievement over notions of collective wellbeing (Rincón, 2025: 12).

2. Álvaro Uribe Vélez’s political trajectory spans multiple party affiliations. He began his career within the Colombian Liberal Party, later ran for the presidency as an independent under the *Primero Colombia* movement (2002-2010), and subsequently founded the Centro Democrático party in 2013, which became the main political vehicle of Uribism after his presidency.

The subsequent administration of Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) represented a partial restoration of traditional elite dominance. Although initially aligned with his predecessor's politics, "Uribismo", Santos's decision to pursue and sign the peace agreement marked a political and symbolic break with the rural-authoritarian bloc. His leadership style reinstated cosmopolitan manners, technocratic governance, and close alignment with traditional media and international elites. This return to aesthetic and cultural distinctions was celebrated by bourgeois sectors as a recovery of elite decorum and global respectability, even as it led to polarization with Uribe's political base.

The administration of Iván Duque (2018-2022) consolidated the rise of a new elite configuration grounded in managerial rationality, digital aesthetics, and consumption-driven legitimacy. Duque's technocratic discourse, corporate style, and emphasis on neutrality appealed to both traditional bourgeois elites and emerging capitalist sectors. His leadership embodied a depoliticized, market-friendly vision of governance in which culture, historical memory, and social conflict were subordinated to efficiency, branding, and capital accumulation –hallmarks of "new money" political power.

The election of Gustavo Petro marked the most disruptive shift in this trajectory. Petro's administration (2022-2026) represents a significant transformation in the symbolic dimensions of political power, particularly in terms of class, race, gender, and aesthetic representation. With the win of the *Pacto Histórico* (Historic Pact), Francia Márquez became the first Afro-Colombian vice-president of the country. Alongside Márquez –a Black, working-class woman– popular, Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and mestizo identities, historically excluded social groups, gained access to national leadership. This symbolic reconfiguration generated fierce resistance among bourgeois sectors, rural landowning elites, and segments of the traditional media aligned with dominant economic interests, contributing to a new phase of national political tension (Cepeda, 2022).³

Public controversies surrounding Petro's leadership style –such as his rejection of formal dress codes, the informal appearance of cabinet members at elite spaces, or the performative cultural expressions of the First Lady, Verónica Alcocer– have been recurrently framed by traditional media as breaches of protocol or threats to Colombia's international image. While often dismissed as superficial, these debates are analytically revealing. They expose deeper struggles over class, taste, legitimacy, and symbolic power, highlighting the destabilization of long-standing aesthetic hierarchies within Colombian political culture.

Importantly, despite campaign promises of structural political transformation, Petro's governance practices largely reproduce conventional patterns of patronage and elite circulation. The most substantive development introduced by his administration lies not in institutional reform, but in the

3. Here the term symbolic is used to refer to changes in political discourse, moral framing, and the public representation of state authority associated with Petro's project, rather than to immediate or fully implemented structural economic reforms. The expression dominant economic interests is understood to denote sectors traditionally associated with financial capital, agro-industrial landownership, extractive industries, and their affiliated media actors.

redefinition of who embodies power and how power is publicly performed. Through symbolic provocation and aesthetic disruption, Petro's government has rendered visible entrenched forms of classism, racism, and gendered scrutiny within Colombian public discourse –particularly in media reactions to the visibility and agency of women such as Francia Márquez, Verónica Alcocer, and former minister, Irene Vélez.

In contemporary Colombia, political power is no longer monopolized by parties and legacy media but is increasingly mediated through digital networks, spectacle-driven communication, and socially marked leadership styles. This is why the guiding question of this work is the following: What kind of class or elite transformations are visible within the narrative and symbolic repertoires displayed by De la Espriella, Cepeda, and Fajardo in the context of the presidential race of 2026? This question does not pretend to establish a prediction about the electoral viability of the candidates, but to analyze three different repertoires of public construction of leadership in an early phase of the presidential campaign. In this sense, the cases should be understood as analytical windows serving to observe the diversification of the Colombian political elites, more than as a definitive or exhaustive sample of the 2026 electoral field.

Within this context, this article examines how the presidential campaign for the 2026-2030 administration is taking shape, with particular attention to the construction of candidate styles in the public sphere. In this sense, the goal of this article is to analyze the construction and legitimization of the political leadership of Abelardo De la Espriella, Iván Cepeda, and Sergio Fajardo in the Colombian presidential election of 2026 in relation to social class and its positioning within the elites, examining how their communicational styles express a class position from which they articulate identity, strategic positioning, and social origin by means of the dimensions of narrative, ideology, digital performance, and class. Specifically, this article tries (1) to identify the way in which each candidate constructs a recognizable persona; (2) to compare the narrative, ideological, media, and class resources they employ in order to claim legitimacy; and (3) to show how these repertoires express greater transformations in the contemporary forms of political elite in Colombia.

2. Academic Framework: Political Elites and Their Transformation in the Society of Spectacle

Two premises make up our starting point. The first one is that social class is the most important historical determinant of power and politics in Colombia. What we have seen in the XXIst century is the transformation of political elites, shifting from private legacy to public actuation. While traditional elites held political significance by means of hereditary criteria such as generation of richness, class, surnames, properties, education, and political parties whose main role was to maintain social privileges and the control of power, in the XXIst century, with the decline of political parties and the personalization of politics (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2021), political power is built up by means

of public exhibition and digital and media visibility. In this way, power is no longer inherited, it is constructed in public (Casas Santamaría, 2024; Garay & Salcedo-Albarrán, 2018).

This lies in sharp contrast with what happened in the XXth century. For example, it was during that period that the so-called National Front (1956-1974) managed to establish an elite agreement in order to maintain power and privileges by means of politics (Henderson, 2026), and it was only with the introduction of drug trafficking, during the government of Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) that the morale of the elite was broken down. It was in that moment that political power opened up to the regional elites of people like Uribe and Duque (Pearce & Velasco, 2026) and to new social leaderships, such as those of Petro and Francia Márquez (Gómez Buendía, 2026).

In the face of this, authors such as Jenny Pearce and Juan David Velasco (2026) have posed the existence of a “constellation of elites” within the country, where power no longer lies in a single group, but in an interconnected network that includes different political, judicial, oligarchic, and technocratic elites. This means that Colombia should be understood less as a paradox than as a singular country where the architecture of power had been shaped until very recently (before the government of Petro) by a class consensus that supported without objection a certain kind of orthodox economy and the efficiency of the private above the public, and that upheld some dominant and unquestionable class principles and agreements.

In this way, it is possible to understand the evolution of the Colombian political elites by means of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “dominant groups” (2007). Bourdieu is clear in affirming that political elites not only hold control of power and resources, they are also capable of configuring the criteria of social value that allow for their reproduction and sustainability. This capacity expresses itself as symbolic violence, as the elites are capable of imposing meanings that are accepted as something “natural”. Gramsci (1975) proposed a similar idea when trying to explain how consensus is constructed, something he calls “cultural hegemony” and which he defines as the capacity of a given class to impose its world view, in such a way that it ends up being assumed as common sense. These ideas allow us to understand how contemporary elites have managed their criteria to operate as common sense and how, as in the Colombian case, those same elites have sealed deals to “maintain the order”.

Our second premise has to do with the transformation of elites within the context of a new kind of society and with the forms of making politics that this society has introduced. In order to understand this transformation we make use of Guy Debord’s concept of “the society of the spectacle” (1967), as politicians have become subjects whose legitimacy and power are at stake within a space made up by media and digital performance and seduction. Politics in the XXIst century has been completely subordinated to this new logic; in our days, political success is no longer determined by programmatic coherence or by class affiliation, but by the capacity of generating a mediatic, digital, and cultural “buzz”. Making politics today means pretty much struggling to become a “digital celebrity”. The truth of this lies in the fact that, within the actual mediatic and fragmented ecosystem, legitimacy is not only established by political parties and traditional power, but also by digital per-

formance. We live in a context in which digital platforms are no longer mere communication tools, but also settings and environments that define who is visible and who is persuasive. In this environment, people that do not belong to the elites have become active agents of novel transformations. More than ever before, digital platforms promote and make visible a plurality of new voices and agendas that are not part of the traditional forms of power. These are voices that carry with them new ideas, identities, and aesthetics that seek to have a say within the conversation and, above all, are trying “to change the order”. This new logic constructs a society of spectacle in which traditional elites are faced with transformation, and it is here where we find new types of political leaders, more mixed up, hybrid, and fluid, that are trying to adapt or readapt to the new political situation.

It is here where another key concept appears in order to acquire a full comprehension of this society of the spectacle we are referring to: the politainment. This concept is the product of postmodernist studies, as well as of the rise of entertainment and consumerism in modern society; it allows us to understand the figure of the politician as a new kind of celebrity (Schultz, 2001; Berrocal *et al.*, 2014). From this point of view, politics and the political are understood under a logic of information entertainment (Baum, 2005), in which complex political ideas are sought to be digestible by ordinary citizens. Under this new logic, candidates are not only trying to expose their proposals or to present an ideological and political agenda; they are trying to assemble themselves as agreeable personae looking to resonate with the cultural mood of the moment. We live in a system where visibility has become the principal source of credibility in a fragmented mediatic ecosystem (Capano *et al.*, 2023).

By adopting this lens, our analysis examines how the candidates in the Colombian political campaign construct a story about who they are, the values they embody, and how narrative coherence—expressed through personal history, emotional tone, and stylistic presentation—enables them to mobilize followers, differentiate themselves from opponents, and generate symbolic credibility within a fragmented media and political landscape. The articulation of these concepts allows to understand how the Colombian political elites are not only communicating their proposals for the year 2026, but how they are becoming mediatic personae in order to survive in a digital ecosystem.

3. Material and Methods

The selection of the political figures analyzed in this article is grounded in one of the most recent public opinion data available.⁴ According to the No-

4. The selection of the three cases responds to the moment of closure of the empirical corpus of this article, fixed on the 30 of November of 2025. In this moment, the polymetric poll of Cifras y Conceptos, published on the 5 of November of the same year, positioned Sergio Fajardo, Iván Cepeda, and Abelardo De la Espriella as prominent figures within the center, left, and right political blocs, respectively. This selection is not trying to predict the electoral results, but rather to analyze three differentiated repertoires of construction of political leadership in an early phase of the campaign. Later on, the competition was reshaped: on March 8 of 2026, Paloma Valencia won the Gran Consulta por Colombia with more than 3.2 million votes and, in later measurings, established herself in a central place within the right-wing vote dispute. This change of the electoral scenario is duly recognized as a temporal limitation of the present study and confirms the shifting character of the political field being analyzed”.

vember 2025 survey conducted by the firm *Cifras y Conceptos*, 45% of Colombian citizens identify themselves as centrist, 32% as right-wing, and 22% as left-wing, while President Gustavo Petro’s approval ratings reach 44%. Within this landscape, the survey identifies a competitive trio representing the ideological spectrum of current presidential candidates: Abelardo de la Espriella for the right, Iván Cepeda for the left, and Sergio Fajardo for the center. These three candidates have positioned themselves and show the highest probability of advancing to the presidency. Therefore, they constitute relevant strategic cases for an analysis of political persona, narrative construction, and communication style in the current electoral cycle.

As it has already been mentioned, this work seeks to answer the question regarding the type of class or elite transformations that are visible in the narrative and symbolic repertoires displayed by De la Espriella, Cepeda, and Fajardo, within the context of the 2026 presidential race. The corpus was constructed as an intentional and comparative sample of the materials produced by the candidates or their campaigns during the period between October 1 and November 30 of 2025. In total, 30 communication pieces were reviewed for each candidate, allowing for a balanced comparison of their campaign narratives, visual strategies, and key messages. Three types of sources were taken into consideration for each candidate: 1) biographies and official profiles published on the campaigns’ web pages or in institutional platforms; 2) official audiovisual material distributed in social media or in the digital channels of the campaigns; and 3) public interventions or interviews used as contextual material helping to interpret a presentation strategy already visible in official sources. The focus of the analysis was not the vote intention of the electorate, but the public construction of a political persona: this is, the ways in which each candidate organizes his biography, his ideological position, his mediatic resources, and his class marks in order to claim legitimacy in the electoral field.

Table I. Analytical Dimensions of the Present Study.

Dimension	Observable Indicators	Minimal Evidence per Candidate
Persona and Narrative	Biographical narration, emotional tone, figure of leadership, personal metaphors, scenes or origin	Official profile + campaign material
Politics and Ideology	Prioritized problems, enemies/allies, vision of the State, moral language, key proposals	Discourses, proposals, or programmatic interviews
Media and Digital Performance	Formats employed, appellation to virality, sense of humor, spectacle, testimonial, use of platforms	Publications, videos, or digital material
Class and Background	Education, family trajectory, cultural capital, public aesthetics, relationship with the elites, marks of distinction or austerity	Official biography + journalist or academic sources

The revision of the material was done by means of four analytical dimensions defined by four different variables: 1) persona and narrative; 2) politics and ideology; 3) media and digital performance, and 4) class and background. These dimensions allow for a multidimensional understanding of political actors, enabling us to move beyond surface-level campaign messaging

toward a structural reading of how candidates articulate identity, meaning, and strategic positioning. By focusing on candidates at the top of the electoral race, the framework is applied to individuals who are simultaneously shaping and reacting to the national political climate.

The revision was conducted by three coders and the analysis was done by means of a directed qualitative codification, following the principles of the qualitative analysis of content, in which the categories were previously defined using the theoretical framework and then were systematically applied to the empirical corpus (Krippendorff, 2019). The four dimensions were theoretically defined before the reading of the corpus, and then textual, visual, and biographical examples were registered in order to compare the three cases.

The category “Persona and Narrative” captures the ways in which political actors construct, perform, and sustain a coherent public identity through biography, symbolic cues, and narrative strategies. Contemporary research in political communication shows that leaders do not simply present policy positions; they embody a story about who they are, the values they represent, and how their personal trajectory legitimizes their political claims (Rincón *et al.*, 2025).

The category “Politics and Ideology” focuses on how candidates position themselves within the ideological landscape and articulate normative visions of society, governance, and the role of the state. Rather than treating ideology as a fixed doctrinal package, this category examines how political ideas are selectively mobilized, simplified, or reframed in order to resonate with specific audiences, tensions, and historical narratives, particularly in contexts where ideological boundaries are fluid and mediated through emotional and symbolic appeals. This category responds to the comprehension of ideology as a communicative resource that helps to mobilize support in specific subjects (Stiller, 2009), where a politician uses discursive materials and ideas in order to legitimize solutions of public policy.

“Media and Digital Performance” details the dynamics of a hybrid media environment in which political identities are continuously produced, contested, and amplified (Ariel & Elishar, 2025). Including this category is essential because hybrid media systems now constitute a central arena for the construction of political leadership. As Ariel and Elishar’s application of the technology hype cycle to political communication demonstrates, digital platforms operate not merely as instruments for political messaging but as evolving socio-technical environments that shape visibility, persuasion, and the production of legitimacy.

Finally, the category “Class and Background” situates candidates within the socio-historical trajectories that shape their political identities and sources of legitimacy. Research by Hoyt & DeShields (2021) demonstrates that cues related to social class origins significantly influence how citizens perceive political leaders’ warmth, ideological positioning, and overall evaluation. From this perspective, class background is not merely a biographical attribute but a central symbolic resource that can either narrow or widen the perceived distance between political elites and the electorate. Accordingly, this category examines how the candidates’ educational trajectories, family

histories, economic origins, and experiences of hardship or privilege are mobilized in their self-presentation, and how these elements are translated into claims of authenticity, representational capacity, and moral authority within the electoral arena.

Taken together, the four dimensions mentioned before provide an integrated and conceptually coherent methodological framework to analyze elite political actors in Colombia's polarized, media-saturated, and ideologically fragmented electoral arena. By applying this multidimensional approach to the leading candidates –De la Espriella, Cepeda, and Fajardo– we seek to develop a comparative portrait that illuminates how each figure constructs a politically resonant persona, locates himself within competing ideological fields, navigates hybrid media ecosystems, and leverages class origins as sources of legitimacy. This design enables us to identify not only the substantive differences among the candidates but also the narrative, symbolic, and strategic repertoires they deploy to mobilize distinct segments of the electorate. Ultimately, this methodological structure facilitates an analysis that is both systematic and interpretively sensitive, capturing the biographical, performative, communicative, and structural elements that collectively define contemporary political leadership in Colombia.

4. Results: The Technocratic Professor, the Calm Revolutionary, the Explosive Celebrity

The following section presents the comparative findings organized by candidate and by analytical dimension. The labels used for each candidate are interpretive categories derived from the corpus and should be read as heuristic descriptions of campaign persona, not as normative judgments about the candidates.

4.1. The Explosive Celebrity: Abelardo de la Espriella

Since the 1960s, it has been argued that we inhabit a society of the spectacle (Debord, 1967). In the 21st century spectacle is no longer an option, but an obligation (Ponce & Rincón, 2020). Success is now determined by whoever most effectively evokes media, digital, and cultural buzz (Rincón, 2018). In this context, engaging in politics means striving to be a digital celebrity. For this reason, we have identified three major models of success: Bukele's invocation of moral authority and bold leadership, Trump's hyper-personalized and confrontational style, and Milei's pop-inflected irreverence. With them, we find three macho figures who only listen to their capitalist selves and proclaim infallible success without regard for rights, ideas, decency, or respect. Their motto is: anything to be the center of attention (the talk of the town) and the digital influencer (building followers mobilized for and against them). In the Colombian context, a candidate has emerged who wants to be the voice of God (Bukele), the patriotic provocateur (Trump), and the audacious animal (not the lion, Milei, but the tiger, as he calls himself). He has become a

possibility due to his ability to entertain journalists and is characterized by displaying his capitalist self.

In the Colombian electoral campaign of 2026, the candidate Abelardo De la Espriella articulates recognizable features of these three models of political performance: he calls himself the tiger in order to imitate the lion of Milei, and assumes the same kind of language and ideas of the Argentinian president (to disembowel the leftists, to close up ministries, to charge against public universities, to award the rich); he combines it with the style and look of Bukele (a hygienic, successful, technological, and well-dressed male with impeccable beard that makes promises about gigantic prisons); and he adds the Trump flavor by making up an ode about his economic wisdom and defending criminals on behalf of capitalism (Oquendo, 2026; Lozano, 2026).

Persona and Narrative: A Google search for Abelardo de la Espriella introduces him as a “musical artist”. On the social media LinkedIn, he describes himself as a Colombian-Italian who possesses equal parts of style and intelligence. He has built a prolific career as a lawyer, marked by resounding victories in high-profile national cases, backed by unparalleled expertise. In 2002, he founded the law firm De la Espriella Lawyers, using an English name to project an international image, with offices in Bogotá, Barranquilla, Medellín, and Miami. He himself proclaims it the number one firm in criminal law in Colombia. Throughout his career, according to his profile, Abelardo de la Espriella has skillfully combined professional development with personal passions, such as art, music, journalism, and enjoying a luxurious life.

Blogger Alexander Velásquez (2025) cites the Reframe-IT study, a firm specializing in the analysis of social and political complexity, to say that De La Espriella reflects “emotional exhaustion, the need for order, weariness with politics, fears about security, and the search for simple narratives in a complex country... the typical impulse of the multi-market: bets generate news, news generates bets”. And he affirms that “above all, he is the colorful character that every presidential campaign needs to shed its stiffness, amidst predictable candidates and more of the same”. His promise is the Bukelist security promise that proclaims himself “Steady for the homeland”, with a military salute.

Politics and Ideology: De La Espriella launched his candidacy with an evangelical church performance at the Movistar Arena, one of Bogotá’s main venues for concerts and large-scale entertainment, demonstrating that he owes his success as a new millionaire to God, and that his vision for the country is capitalist, religious, and patriotic. He promises to defend the “good people” (the well-being of “old money” as well as of “new money”) against the “egalitarian” guerrillas and those with bad taste, represented by the current government of Gustavo Petro and Francia Márquez. That is why he celebrates traditional family values, the homeland, property, and calls for the return of political power to God.

Media and Digital Performance: Highly media-savvy, since his greatest attribute as a lawyer is litigating through the media, this figure seeks the presidency representing the showy right wing, in the Trump-Bukele-Milei style marked by punitive security rhetoric, hyper-personalized leadership,

and media spectacle (Fussell, 1983). La Silla Vacía (2026) describes De la Espriella as a campaign spectacle that repeats symbols and slogans, makes an intensive use of artificial intelligence, legitimizes himself as a personal brand of luxury and authority, and is active by means of a network of followers known as “Abelardists”. All this in order to generate digital virality and appeal for the media.

Class and Background: Although he tries to blend in with the upper class, his Caribbean identity and his studies at Sergio Arboleda University, an institution renowned as a stepping stone towards elite circles, define him as a legitimate representative of 21st-century Colombian society, where success is measured by the public exhibition of wealth. He constructs his mediatic identity on the way in which he has managed to ascend from an upper middle class to the social and economic elite of the country. As Milei or Trump or Bukele, he is proof and evidence that it is possible to achieve capitalist success. In this sense, his symbolic value lies on the way in which he presents himself as an ambitious figure of an emergent economic elite, that transforms the exhibition of his private success into a resource of public legitimization. In a more colloquial jargon: he is the hero of the “new money” (Fussell, 1983).

4.2. The Calm Revolutionary: Iván Cepeda

Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) offers a valuable lens for understanding how Iván Cepeda Castro’s political persona challenges and redefines dominant expectations of leadership in Colombia. The theory argues that prejudice emerges when there is a perceived mismatch between the traits associated with a social group and those expected of a leadership role. In highly masculinized political cultures –such as those shaped by Colombia’s decades-long armed conflict– leadership is often coded through aggression, confrontation, and public displays of force. Cepeda subverts this model. His figure as “the calm revolutionary”, grounded in composure, moral authority, and methodical rigor, constitutes an alternative form of political masculinity that stands in tension with traditional expectations, yet gains credibility precisely because of its difference. In his speeches, Cepeda defines himself as a “defender of human rights and as worker for peace”, something that contrasts with the language of confrontation that is being proposed from the other ideological shores”.

Cepeda centers his family history and grief into a public commitment to truth and justice. The narrative of a young man who publicly mourned his father and then dedicated his life to defending victims reframes calm as courage, dialogue as strength, and persistence as a form of resistance. These biographical pillars replace traditional performances of authority. This insight does not only highlight Cepeda’s distinct political impact but also connects his case to the broader challenges faced by underrepresented groups, who must navigate similar tensions between personal identity and values, and leadership expectations.

Persona and Narrative: Iván Cepeda Castro’s public narrative is shaped by a rare combination of intellectual depth, personal tragedy, and a steadfast commitment to justice and social equity. He is frequently understood as a po-

litical figure who wields serenity and methodical discipline as instruments of social transformation. This narrative finds its emotional anchor in the assassination of his father, Senator Manuel Cepeda Vargas of the Patriotic Union. The event created a permanent fracture in Cepeda's life story, becoming the origin point to which his biography returns.

This rupture shaped the architecture of his political narrative. Cepeda is seen as a left-wing leader candidate with a Stoic character, who has led a political activism against one of the principal political referents of Colombia, the ex-president Álvaro Uribe, in a country that is hostile toward this kind of leadership (CNN, 2025). In fact, the case against ex-president Uribe has given him the notoriety needed to be elected the candidate that will take on the banners of the present government; it is possible to say that the condemnation of Uribe has both given him the mediatic exposition and created a social movement that has led him to become the favorite candidate of the left-wing faction that he represents.

Politics and Ideology: In the often-acrimonious arena of political debate, Cepeda maintains a disposition of remarkable serenity, a trait that starkly contrasts with the prevailing forms of public discourse. It is exceedingly rare to find documented instances of him raising his voice or employing disrespectful language toward an opponent, even when subjected to personal provocations. This disciplined composure is not merely a matter of temperament but appears to be a deliberate ideological choice, positioning him as a figure of reason and stability in a landscape defined by polarization and heightened emotion.

This commitment to a grounded identity is further reflected in a cultivated image of austerity that permeates both his public appearance and private life. Unlike many political leaders, including some within his own ideological sphere who project an image of polished elegance, he has consistently presented a modest, almost abstinent persona. His preference for simple attire, such as embroidered Mao-collar shirts, and his choice to reside in traditional, unadorned housing, present a powerful statement.

Furthermore, in his speeches one can see a very strongly underlined slogan: social change. Every speech he reads in a public act (he is not a person prone to improvise, he always takes with him his written speeches, something that has become one of the major focuses of critique of the opposition) is centered around the challenges the country has to face in social matters; he usually speaks of the reforms that are needed in order to deepen the undergoing social change and underlies the fact that his opponents do not understand the country because they have not pondered deeply the subject of poverty and the high inequity of Colombia. His speeches are a defense of the social reforms he considers that Colombia needs.

Media and Digital Performance: Cepeda's approach to media engagement is characterized by a deeply traditional and cautious methodology, deliberately avoiding the personality-centered dynamics that dominate the modern information landscape. There are few examples of him participating in long-form interviews with legacy media outlets, and even less material online that adopts the aesthetics and formats native to internet platforms. Instead, his

primary strategy to disseminate information has consistently been through formal press releases issued by the organizations he represents. This strategic choice serves to de-emphasize his persona and instead elevate the collective, a principle so ingrained that he is often seen reading from prepared documents when addressing the media, ensuring the message remains institutional rather than personal.

This established communication doctrine was adapted during his presidential precandidacy within the ruling party coalition. The algorithmic and relational demands of a modern campaign required a subtle but significant pivot towards more personalized content. For the first time, he was featured as the central protagonist, most notably in official campaign photography and more directly in social media posts. This shift, however, was a pragmatic concession. The change highlighted a strategic tension: the need to build a personal brand for a national election while remaining true to an ideology rooted in collective action. While he appeared more frequently in campaign materials, the bulk of his communication assets were dedicated to showcasing testimonials from supporters and endorsements from a wide array of social and political groups. This approach effectively recentralized the “many” over the “one”.

Class and Background: Iván Cepeda’s background is anchored in a formative environment that deliberately paired high-quality intellectual training with an immersion in working-class social worlds. Growing up in a family recognized for its political and pedagogical engagement, his upbringing took place in traditional neighborhoods closely associated with labor movements and community organizing. This biographical fact shaped his political project: he is an intellectual who incorporates communist principles, but whose primary orientation is ethical rather than doctrinal. His political mission is inseparable from his personal history, and this has allowed him to articulate a distinctive identity: one that merges theoretical reflection with empirical knowledge of Colombian problems.

This background explains why Cepeda has emerged as a unifying symbol among various progressive constituencies. Trade unionists, student movements, ethnic and rural organizations, peace signatories, and multiple victims’ groups see in him a figure whose life captures the continuum between personal trauma and collective struggle. His well-known assertion, “*We victims are superior to impunity. We hold the power of truth*” (Cepeda, 2025) is more than rhetoric; it encapsulates the emotional and political logic underpinning his trajectory. It reflects a mode of leadership that is both empathetic and uncompromising, grounded in the belief that the pursuit of justice is not only a legal endeavor but a profound political responsibility. In this sense, his class background, ideological evolution, and experience of victimization are not parallel elements but deeply interwoven foundations of his long-standing political role.

4.3. The Technocratic Professor: Sergio Fajardo

Persona and Narrative: Sergio Fajardo emerges in Colombia's contemporary electoral field as a paradoxical figure: a technocrat from an elite background who nonetheless built his reputation by refusing the traditional elite playbook. This is a case of what Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti (2021) term *technopopulism*: a form of leadership that blends technocratic claims of expertise and moralized competence with populist appeals to representing the people as a whole, rather than relying on traditional partisan loyalties. This tension echoes Caramani's (2017) distinction between technocratic and populist representation: both claim access to a unified general interest, but technocracy grounds legitimacy in expert responsibility, while populism grounds it in responsiveness to the will of the people. Fajardo's persona is closer to the technocratic pole, emphasizing expertise, administrative competence, and responsible government. In contrast to candidates who rely on spectacle, aggression, or identity-driven polarization, Fajardo cultivates the persona of "the professor", a calm, methodical, and pedagogical leader who frames governing as an exercise in rational problem-solving. His biographical narrative—a mathematician, scholar, public educator—anchors a political identity that draws legitimacy not from charisma or lineage but from cognitive authority, ethical consistency, and a meritocratic ethos.

Unlike the explosive, hyperperformative right candidate Abelardo De la Escribana or the morally charged, historically rooted left candidate Iván Cepeda, Fajardo's narrative foregrounds restraint. He does not raise his voice, amplify outrage, or participate in the moral dramaturgy that defines Colombian political debate. Instead, his public persona emphasizes composure, clarity, and pedagogical explanation. He projects a form of authority grounded in pedagogical clarity, presenting politics as an opportunity to explain, teach, and guide rather than to dominate or inflame. This style aligns him with global figures of technocratic centrism—leaders who invoke expertise as a moral resource—but his narrative is distinctively Colombian: it is grounded in the transformation of Medellín, a city long associated with violence, inequality, and fragmentation (McCoy, 2009).

During his tenure as mayor, the story he told about Medellín—"from fear to hope", "Medellín, the most educated city"—became the story he told about himself. By constructing libraries, cultural centers, and educational infrastructure in marginalized neighborhoods, he converted urban policy into a narrative of civic pedagogy. Through these policies, he enacted a sort of mission-oriented governance: public policy framed as a collective learning project. His rolled-up sleeves, notebooks, and engineering metaphors crystallize a repertoire of leadership that blends civic pedagogy with administrative expertise.

Politics and Ideology: Ideologically, Fajardo occupies the space of the centrist reformer, a position he describes not as moderation but as a principled refusal of polarization. His call for "the politics of decency" (Sánchez, 2025) positions him as a corrective to Colombia's emotionally saturated partisan field, where moral outrage and class-coded resentment dominate political communication. Yet this centrism is double-edged. On the one hand, it appeals to Colombians weary of ideological trench warfare; on the other, it

risks to go unnoticed in a political arena where affect has become a currency of legitimacy.

Fajardo's reformism emphasizes transparency, public ethics, anticorruption commitments, and evidence-based policy. He frames political life as the realm of "doing the homework", "solving problems", and "bringing the best of society to those who have the least" (Ramírez, 2018). This moral-technical hybrid contrasts sharply with the identitarian narratives mobilized by his competitors. While De la Espriella embodies the spectacle-driven right and Cepeda represents a lineage of moral resistance within the left, Fajardo articulates an ideology that rejects both the aesthetics of confrontation and the seduction of ideological purity. His politics are grounded in an epistemic claim: that Colombia needs knowledgeable, orderly, ethical leadership capable of reducing noise and maximizing institutional performance. He rejects the aesthetics of polemics and ideological integrity, embodying instead what Waisbord (2020) describes as post-partisan pragmatism—a style centered on institutional performance rather than on partisan identities.

This epistemic stance also illustrates the structural tension of technocratic centrism in the digital era. A candidate who communicates through reason risks losing visibility in a media ecosystem structured by virality, affect, and outrage. Thus, Fajardo's strength—his decency—can also become his communicative vulnerability. His challenge is not ideological coherence but emotional resonance.

Media and Digital Performance: Among the three leading candidates, Fajardo is the one who most visibly confronts the contradiction between his political ethos and the logic of algorithms. Historically, his media presence avoided personalization and spectacle; his communications mirrored his academic persona—sober, measured, institutional. But the 2026 electoral cycle forced him to adapt. On TikTok and Instagram, he blends explanatory videos on public policy with humorous responses to memes, ironic audio trends, and collaborations with young influencers (Hernández Osorio, 2025). This hybrid performance reveals a strategic attempt to reconcile decency with virality.

The 2025 initial campaign shows, however, that Fajardo is trying not to reproduce his older professorial repertoire. He is attempting to correct a recurrent weakness of his previous campaigns: the difficulty of transforming decency and pedagogy into mobilizing emotion. In some of the interviews, he presented himself as a "new Fajardo", one who has learned from previous defeats and is willing to adopt a sharper tone. Although the term "new majority" appeared in December, after the period covered by the corpus, it helps clarify the direction of Fajardo's campaign strategy. The term refers to an attempt to build an electoral coalition beyond the traditional label of "center", appealing instead to citizens who reject polarization, corruption, and ideological trench warfare. In this sense, it signals an effort to abandon the center as a purely geometric identity, the center as midpoint, and translate it into a broader affective and political identity.

Unlike candidates who weaponize outrage or cultivate celebrity aesthetics, Fajardo experiments with digital humor grounded in self-deprecation.

When mocked online for briefly falling asleep at a political event, he reposted the memes himself and now laughs about the incident, framing it as a moment of collective amusement rather than as a scandal (#HolaSoyDanny, 2025). Similarly, his use of viral audios –such as the melodramatic clip about “defending with vehemence” (sergiofajardov, 2025)– illustrates an effort to translate his sober persona into formats legible to younger audiences without abandoning his core identity.

Still, the platform logic imposes limits. His content remains measured, visually simple, and ideologically restrained, producing a digital presence that is neither fully appealing to TikTok users nor fully anchored in traditional media. This hybrid strategy situates Fajardo at an inflection point: he is a technocrat navigating a media ecosystem that rewards performance over pedagogy yet attempting to convert decency into a communicative asset.

Class and Background: Fajardo embodies a distinct fraction of Colombia’s elite: the technocratic middle-upper class shaped by academic merit, urban professionalization, and global educational mobility. His campaign does not deny elite status; rather, it attempts to redefine this kind of legitimacy through education, expertise, administrative experience, and a public aesthetic of simplicity. Born into a family linked to Antioquia’s architectural and urban development sectors, he inherited neither the aristocratic social capital of Bogotá’s traditional elites nor the ostentatious economic capital of Caribbean “new money”. His father’s architectural legacy –most notably his role in designing the Coltejer Tower– situated Fajardo within a lineage of modernizing professionals rather than political dynasties.

His academic trajectory reinforces this status. As a mathematician trained at the Universidad de los Andes and later at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he entered public life not through party patronage but through civic engagement and independent coalitions. This background allowed him to frame himself as an outsider to traditional political machines and as a representative of middle-class meritocratic ascent. In contemporary Colombian politics, where class-coded aesthetics are central to public perception, Fajardo’s aesthetic of simplicity –jeans, rolled up shirts, an almost ascetic avoidance of luxury– positions him as an anti-elite elite: a figure who uses the authority of expertise to critique the excesses of both old and new elites.

Within the analytic frame of elite evolution, Fajardo represents a third path: neither the attention-seeker nor the revolutionary, but the intellectual technocratic whose legitimacy derives from knowledge and pedagogical authority. His candidacy thus illuminates the diversification of Colombian elites, showing how technocratic discourse based on expertise has become a symbolic resource in the struggle for political power.

5. Conclusion: Three Elite Repertoires and a Moving Electoral Field

Colombia’s 2026 presidential race reveals a paradoxical political landscape: while the country appears to be moving away from traditional party-based elites, it is not transitioning toward a single new model of leadership but

rather toward a fragmented field of competing elite forms. Abelardo de la Espriella embodies the spectacular, hypermediated right who imitates Trump, Bukele, and Milei; Iván Cepeda represents an ethical-moral elite grounded in historical trauma and collective struggle based on political figures like Barack Obama, Gabriel Boric, or Zohran Mamdani; Sergio Fajardo articulates the technocratic meritocratic elite whose authority derives from expertise and pedagogy that tries to recreate academic values. Together, they illustrate that Colombia is not experiencing a decline of elites but a diversification of elite repertoires.

The subsequent consolidation of Paloma Valencia as a competitive figure on the right does not invalidate this argument but rather complicates it. Valencia represents a fourth possible repertoire: that of the traditional elite reactivated electorally in a context of polarization. Her trajectory combines conservative lineage, family-based political networks, educational capital, and loyalty to Uribism. Unlike De la Espriella, whose campaign builds authority through spectacular exteriority and a promise of disruption, Valencia embodies the persistence of traditional political capital as a resource of authority, experience, and order. Her rise after the closing of the corpus shows that the 2026 campaign is not only marked by spectacular, moral, or technocratic elites, but also by the capacity of traditional elites to reorganize and recover electoral centrality.

This diversification mirrors global transformations in political communication, where legitimacy is increasingly produced through the interplay of narrative, affect, class signaling, and digital performance. Colombian politics no longer rewards a single style of leadership but rather a mosaic of symbolic strategies. The explosive celebrity, the calm revolutionary, and the pedagogical technocrat coexist within the same electoral field, each mobilizing a different repertoire of power. Understanding this evolution is essential not only to interpret the 2026 race but to understand how political authority is being redefined in a media-dominated world.

In this context, there are three identified campaign models: one that mimics the “I am the spectacle” model (an elite of self-interest: “new money” is the ideal); another of “I am an ideology” (a society where a solidarity-based social model is still possible); another of “I am the enlightened one to guide” (the belief that there are those who should guide society because they are educated to do so). In any case, for all three models a strong presence on social media, digital performance, and media influence are key.

The three cases analyzed here show that contemporary Colombian political elites are not disappearing but being reassembled through new repertoires of visibility, affect, class signaling, and media performance. De la Espriella turns private success and punitive rhetoric into spectacle; Cepeda transforms grief, memory, and moral discipline into political authority; and Fajardo translates academic expertise and administrative competence into a pedagogy of public leadership. The later rise of Paloma Valencia adds another layer to this field, showing that traditional elites can also re-enter the campaign through inherited political capital and ideological discipline. The 2026 presidential race, therefore, should be read less as a replacement of old elites by new ones than as a struggle among competing forms of elite legitimacy.

Declaration on the Use of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, generative artificial intelligence tools were used exclusively to support the translation of selected sections from Spanish into English. The final version of the text was subsequently reviewed, edited, and approved by a professional human copyeditor. The authors take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and integrity of the manuscript.

Declaration of Authorship Contributions and Originality

All authors made substantial contributions to the research, analysis, and writing of the manuscript. The order of authorship was determined randomly and does not reflect any hierarchy of contribution, responsibility, or academic leadership. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript submitted to the editorial process of *Más Poder Local* and confirm its originality, their agreement with the content of the article, and their consent to be listed as authors.

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