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## Political leadership for peace processes: Juan Manuel Santos – Between hawk and dove

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/lea](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/lea)**Juliana Tappe Ortiz** 

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### Abstract

Many studies have explored Colombia's peace process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – guerrilla group (2012–2016). Conflict negotiation literature indicates that the impact of leadership is particularly relevant to peace processes as leaders have to find a balance between war and peace. Still, little is known about the political leaders in charge. This study deals with the development of a political leader's leadership in peace initiatives. It uses an in-depth case study of Colombia's former President Juan Manuel Santos combining leadership and conflict negotiation literature to trace back the origins of his leadership. Santos, a controversial figure, represented a policy of reconciliation to negotiate with the opponents while also appearing tough in order to maintain his political base. Between hawk and dove, he initiated and signed the peace negotiation and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016. I adopt a personal biography approach using biographical data to explore the origins of Santos' beliefs and values, his competence and skills and the way others perceived him. Linking this leadership-centred argument with findings from the conflict negotiation suggests that a pragmatic and reconciliation-oriented leadership might be relevant to find solutions to protracted conflicts like the one in Colombia. Most importantly, it contributes to a significant claim: Leaders have at least some level of choice and their biographical factors are relevant for political outcomes.

### Keywords

Political leadership, peace process, biographical data, Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos

“[...] you can in a way say [I am] an undercover dove with the head of a hawk, but [only] if you are defining a dove as someone who wants peace.” (Santos Calderón, 2018)

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## Introduction

Much has been written about why leaders go to war (Fearon, 1995; Horowitz et al., 2015), but there is still a need to fully understand why they initiate peace processes. This is especially relevant for seemingly intractable conflicts like that of Colombia, a country that has been entangled in a bitter struggle between the government and different guerrilla movements for over half a century (Deas, 2015). Conflict negotiation literature indicates that in order to be capable of initiating a peace process, the political leaders in charge have to represent a policy of recognition, and even reconciliation, to negotiate with the opponents; on the other side, they have to appear tough to maintain their political base who often struggles to accept that the government makes political concessions (Gormley-Heenan, 2001; Stedman, 1997; Zartman, 2001). Among other factors, the impact of leadership seems particularly relevant to peace processes because leaders have to find a balance between war and peace. It is key to ask: ‘Where does this type of leadership in which a political leader is capable of combining policies of recognition with a certain type of toughness to initiate a peace process come from?’

This study deals with the development of a political leader’s capacity for leadership in peace initiatives. It uses an in-depth case study of a very controversial figure combining leadership and conflict negotiation literature to trace back the origins of leadership. The dependent variable is policy related to the initiation of peace negotiations; it does not analyse the eventual success or failure of such a policy. Political leaders often hesitate to initiate a peace process perceiving them as cost intensive, ambiguous and risky (Ramsbotham et al., 2011: 159–163; Westlake, 2000). However, this has not been the Colombian experience, as all Colombian presidents since 1978 have sought peace with the guerrillas – and failed. In 2012, after months of secret talks, Colombia’s president, Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) initiated a peace process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), signing an agreement in 2016 and winning the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts (Pizarro Leongómez, 2017). This article adopts the recently developed personal biography approach (Krcmaric et al., 2020) to study Santos’ biography, creating a new perspective on leadership for peace processes. It uses biographical data to demonstrate how Santos developed a pragmatic and reconciliation-oriented leadership, defined here as the bridging of toughness and reconciliation. Santos has often been called an opportunist – even though it is debatable whether any political leader can actually be successful without opportunism. For the present study, I prefer the term ‘pragmatic’, understood as the capacity to maintain followers through appearing strong and making decisions which increase political power.

In this study, I aim to make two contributions: firstly, the analysis is important for understanding how a leadership for peace process may develop. For the Colombian peace process specifically, it is relevant to grasp how a controversial leader could successfully initiate a peace process being, *inter alia*, called a traitor, a hawk, a chess player and a chameleon. Secondly, it has significant implications for Leadership studies in general, as it aims to explore leadership for the initiation of peace processes by looking at Santos’ role. The analysis provides a better understanding of the extent to which political leaders may be able to improve the likeliness that peaceful solutions to armed conflicts are initiated. As suggested by scholars of international relations, heads of states facing the prospect of peace in an armed conflict can endanger the process by misjudging and rejecting information or by not acting and reacting in an appropriate manner (Arnson, 2007; Aronoff, 2014; Jervis, 1976; Larson, 1997; Walch, 2016). Moreover, Leadership studies benefit from an early application of a new research method to study leaders – the personal biography approach, which has not been used with qualitative sources.

By looking at the development of Santos' leadership style, I build on a growing body of interest in the ways in which leaders' characteristics and experiences shape decisions about peace (Kertzer et al., 2020; Yarhi-Milo et al., 2018). Thus, this study contributes to a significant claim: leaders have at least some level of choice and their biographical factors are relevant for political outcomes.

The study proceeds as follows: firstly, the article gives some background information on the Colombian armed conflict before it discusses the existing approaches for understanding the development of Santos' leadership. Then, I discuss the personal biography approach and the methods to explore the link between Santos' biographical factors and political outcomes. In the core analysis, the personal biography approach will be combined with the literature on leadership in peace negotiations: The first step of the approach is to look at Santos' beliefs and values, then his competence and skills, and lastly, others' perceptions of his leadership. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the role of leadership for peace processes elsewhere through analysing Santos' biographical factors.

## The Colombian armed conflict and its peace processes

For our understanding of Santos' leadership, as a man who was born in 1951, it is relevant to give an introduction into Colombia's internal armed conflict from 1948 to 2010. In 1948, the clash between the conservative and liberal parties sparked into a conflict known as *La Violencia*. Colombia also experienced a short period of military rule (1953–1957). Between 1958 and 1974 conservatives and liberals agreed to share power, alternating mandates every 4 years. During that period Colombia's leftist guerrilla groups emerged: The FARC, a Marxist–Leninist guerrilla rooted in peasant organisations, was founded in 1964. Their main aim was to carry out a socialist revolution influenced by other countries like Cuba. In reaction to the left-wing insurgencies, paramilitary forces emerged in many parts of the country. Parallel to the conflict, the drug trade increased from the 1970s onwards, and by the early 1980s, there was a complex mosaic of actors, including the famous Medellín and Cali cartels. In the 1980s, drug cartels began to join forces with counter-insurgency groups, and the number of paramilitary groups also multiplied (Kalulambi Pongo, 2003; Romero et al., 2007). Both the guerrilla groups and the paramilitaries benefitted from the drug trade.

For this analysis, the last two governments before Santos are of particular importance because they laid the foundation for his peace process with the FARC: President Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002) initiated a peace process with the FARC in 1999. Soon the so-called 'Caguán peace process' turned into a political disaster for Pastrana as he was considered to have been naive, offering a ceasefire with almost no conditions on the FARC, believing they would cooperate while actually they were rearming and increasing their power (Pizarro Leongómez, 2017: 370). Still, Pastrana initiated and implemented *Plan Colombia* in 1999, a US-led foreign aid, military and diplomatic initiative aimed at ending the armed conflict by increasing funding and training of the army and reducing the cocaine trade through anti-drug trafficking operations. *Plan Colombia* significantly amplified the army's military capacity (Granada, 1999: 594–596; Palacios, 2012: 172–174). In comparison to Pastrana, who had desperately tried to make peace with the FARC, President Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) ran as an independent candidate who positioned himself as a strong leader, not going soft on the FARC (Bermúdez, 2010). During Uribe's administrations, the official position was that there was no internal armed conflict, but rather a 'terrorist threat'. By changing the discourse, Uribe created an atmosphere against human rights defenders and social movements (Kline, 2015). In the media, guerrilla fighters were depicted as terrorists which dramatically changed the perception of the conflict (Armsen, 2007). Uribe's popularity hinged on a hard-line offensive promising to terminate the FARC militarily. However, even though they were weakened, the FARC continued to be active after 2010.

In 2002, it was estimated that the FARC had almost 20,000 members; in 2009, that number reduced to 11,500 (González Muñoz, 2014: 243–262). The FARC's power mainly began to weaken after 2007 (Pécaut, 2008: 114). Not only was the FARC's manpower including their military capacity decreased, their financial revenues, communication channels and leadership structures were also weakened (Schreiber, 2010: 247). Many high commanders died in military operations after 2007. Nevertheless, the FARC continued to attack on a broad scale. Until 2005, the number of armed confrontations did not decrease significantly (Pécaut, 2008: 125). Moreover, the number of extortions, collective homicides and kidnappings remained the same in 2008 and 2009 (Bermúdez Liévano, 2018; Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, 2009). After 2008, the FARC renewed its internal structures and strategies, as such creating a new blog in Guaviare and choosing new commanders to keep their hierarchical structures functioning (Chernick, 2017: 209–210; Schreiber, 2010: 249). Moreover, they learned to adapt to the state military pressure by attacking on smaller scales and using anti-personnel landmines (Kline, 2015; Restrepo and Aponte, 2009). The complicated geography made it difficult for the Colombian military to eliminate cocaine exports completely and to gain state control. In other words, the FARC continued to be financially independent while acting in a power vacuum (Montenegro, 2006: 109; Richani, 2013: 85; Valencia, 2008). Moreover, the social conditions of the rural population sustained the FARC's domination in certain regions and helped the guerrilla recruit new fighters (Chernick, 2017). The FARC thus did not have the capacity to take over the state, but it continued to be financially independent, flexible and perseverant.

Taking this into account, a political negotiation was the solution to the conflict. Structural factors influencing the initiation of peace processes were already present, among them international support, the state's relative military strength and a certain dead-end for the FARC (Monteiro Dario, 2014). This was also recognised by Uribe who had tried to initiate dialogues with the FARC throughout his presidency since 2003 (Acosta Patiño, 2016: 36; Bermúdez, 2010: 284–287). In public, Uribe continued his narrative of fighting to the end against the FARC, but the documentation of secret exchanges between the Uribe government and the FARC in 2009 and 2010 – which occurred without an agenda – clearly paints a different picture.<sup>1</sup> Uribe's peace talks failed after a year in April 2010 when he publicly gave a speech against the FARC. Before Santos was elected in June 2010, he was known as a hard-line defence minister under Uribe (2006–2009), leading the heaviest attacks against the FARC in Colombian history. After his election in 2010, Santos announced that his key agenda was going to be peacemaking with the FARC. Many Colombians did not expect that he would become a president with such a strong commitment to resolving the conflict via peace negotiations (Pachón and Hoskin, 2011: 17–22). Secret peace talks started shortly thereafter, and in 2012, it was made public that a peace process had started (later ending in an agreement in 2016).

## **State of the art: Lessons from leadership and conflict negotiation studies**

Leadership scholars have continuously claimed that leaders matter for political outcomes, and their work has found resonance in the profiling of political elites (Leites, 1951, 1953) and US-American presidents (George, 1967; Greenstein, 1965). However, political science omitted this approach by concentrating on the structure of the international system (see Byman and Pollack, 2014), thus far overlooking many contributions seeking to understand political leadership (Barber, 1985; Hermann, 1977). It is only recently that studies on political leaders have experienced a renaissance, going beyond the general statement that leaders matter *somehow*. Rather, a recent article in the *Annual Review of Political Science* states that 'personal attributes and life experiences of individual leaders affect important political outcomes in systematic, predictable ways' (Krcmaric et al., 2020, also see

Jervis, 2017). Still, the methods to unpack the black box of political leaders continue to be very diverse, with little disciplinary consensus; political psychologists and scholars trained in psychology try to draw generalisations from human cognitive processes to make inferences about political leaders' behaviour using experimental methods (Mattes and Weeks, 2019; Rathbun et al., 2017). However, this approach falls short in understanding leader-specific attributes and experiences. Another line of research uses content analysis (e.g. Schafer and Walker, 2006) and in this process there is difficulty of finding access to original data, and country- and culture-specific differences in language make comparisons difficult. Quantitative scholars such as Horowitz et al. (2015) take leaders' biographical data and correlate them with political outcomes, but questions remain about the actual causal mechanisms at work when correlating certain biographical experiences with political outcomes. Others use qualitative methods to analyse biographical data (Jervis, 2017; Saunders, 2011; Tuchman, 1984). Here, the problem lies in the fact that single case studies often cannot produce attributes and experiences that have systematic and comparable effects. However, new approaches, like the personal biography approach, seek to systematise the angle to study single-case biographical data (Krcmaric et al., 2020).

Conflict negotiation literature has often ignored the importance of leadership for the initiation of peace negotiations. However, there is a wealth of contributions on peace spoilers, defined as actors who try to destroy peace attempts out of personal fears or interests (Newman and Richmond, 2006; Stedman, 1997). There are almost no works on political leaders who engage positively in peace processes (an exception is Lieberfeld, 2018). Peace and conflict scholars have often overlooked the importance of leadership and focused on 'the moment of ripeness' to explain the initiation of peace negotiations (Pruitt, 2011; Walch, 2016; Walter, 2002; Zartman, 2001). The concept of 'ripeness' assumes that both parties in conflict must suffer until the only situation is to initiate a peace process. The concept was often criticised (e.g. Kleiboer, 1994), but still only a few scholars took a turn to leadership, even if Zartman himself stated: 'Ripeness is only one condition, necessary but not sufficient, for the initiation of negotiations. It is not self-fulfilling or self-implementing – it must be seized, either directly by the parties or, if not, through the persuasion of a mediator' (2001: 9). The scholars who recognised that the initiation of peace negotiations depends on the national executives still did not focus on the development of leadership (e.g. Kegley and Raymond, 1999: 19). However, some scholars contributed to the idea that leaders with certain psychological traits are more likely to engage in a peace process (Aguilar and Galluccio, 2008; Forgas et al., 2011; Suedfeld and Rank, 1976: 171).

Not much has been written on the actual leadership needed for a successful initiation of peace negotiations. The main contribution to Peace and Conflict studies is that the political leaders in charge have to be ready to represent a policy of reconciliation to negotiate with the adversaries. However, they also have to remain careful to appear rather strong in order to keep the support of their political base (Gornley-Heenan, 2001; Stedman, 1997; Zartman, 2001). This stands in line with some political psychology contributions on a 'hawk's advantage', meaning that decisions by hardliners are more accepted than by doves, when it comes to the implementation of unpopular and new policies (Kertzer et al., 2020; Mattes and Weeks, 2019). Thus, a leadership fruitful for negotiations has to appear strong for the public and respectful towards the opponents – a middle ground between hawk and dove.

Literature on Colombia's peace processes has also not focused on leadership by using changing regional and internal circumstances as the key variables to explain the trajectories of war and peace (Cepeda Ulloa, 2016; Chernick, 2017: 208; Jaramillo, 2017; Pizarro Leongómez, 2017: 383–385). These studies seem to disregard that leadership is important and functional in combination with other

factors. The few contributions on Santos' leadership are three non-academic biographies (Duzán, 2018; Granados Morales, 2016; Hernández, 2014).

Ultimately, conflict negotiation literature highlights that a pragmatic and reconciliation-oriented leadership is necessary to initiate peace negotiations successfully; however, it remains unclear how this leadership can be developed.

## **Methodology: A biography approach to leadership for peace processes**

The research design begins with the assumption that Juan Manuel Santos developed a leadership eligible for the successful outcome of Colombia's peace process. There are three reasons why this is less problematic than it seems: first, the main focus is the interaction between biographical factors and leadership. In this case, the observed behaviour is the initiation of a negotiation exploring Santos' biographical factors, which laid an important foundation for the successful initiation of the peace process.

Second, when it comes to negative cases, scholars have hesitated less to draw a connection between leadership and political outcomes (e.g. on Netanyahu in the Israel/Palestine conflict, see Aronoff, 2014). Jervis criticises that Leadership studies focus on negative examples, calling for a more inclusive approach in which positive cases are comprehensively assessed and not treated as individual incomparable cases (2017: 6). Moreover, in line with other contributions in Leadership studies (Lieberfeld, 2018), this article follows Greenstein by claiming that leadership matters when the 'situation is novel, ambiguous, and with no formal rules' (1992: 110). During an internal armed conflict like the Colombian case, where there is significant intergroup violence, there is notable potential for the leader to make an impact. Moreover, it was a novel situation that the FARC was significantly weakened (Pizarro Leongómez, 2017).

Third, Santos' behaviour, even before the peace talks started officially in 2012, illustrates that it was Santos' leadership that initiated the process. After his election in 2010, Santos called Frank Pearl, Uribe's high commissioner for peace since 2009, asking him to inform him about Uribe's secret peace talks. Pearl concluded that the relationship between Uribe and Hugo Chávez, president of Venezuela, had largely made it impossible to achieve a fruitful dialogue (interview with Frank Pearl, 2018). Chávez was a key figure for Colombia's peace process as Venezuela's socialist project of *Bolivarismo* served as a point of reference for the guerrilla groups and because Chávez provided shelter, arms and other supplies the guerrilla groups needed (Freeman, 2017: 203–216). Thus, Santos arranged a meeting with Chávez to gain his support despite many personal differences (see Santos' writings against Chávez, e.g. 2004b). This proactive move reveals that Santos' behaviour was key to facilitate the dynamics between the government and the FARC (Acosta Patiño, 2016: 48).

Studying political leaders from a distance is not an easy task (Hermann, 1977; Rhodes and 't Hart, 2014). This study therefore pays great attentiveness to qualitative sources drawn from memoirs, biographies, interviews, journalistic accounts, newspaper archives and secondary academic literature. To explore the link between Santos' capacity to represent a leadership of pragmatism and recognition, I adopt the recently developed personal biography approach (Krcmaric et al., 2020) which differs fundamentally from other strands of leadership research as it actually unpacks the micro-foundations of political leadership. The idea is to take observable features gathered from Santos' biography, which explain his beliefs and values, competence and skills and the perceptions others have of him, to predict the positive outcome of the last peace process with the FARC. These three mechanisms are commonly invoked by scholars working in the political leadership vein; however, it is novel to combine these features in a rigorous manner. The personal biography approach can be linked to other Leadership studies claiming that a leader's life story is an important

source for our understanding of political leadership (Shamir et al., 2005). Providing a rigorous analysis, this approach explores, step by step, each mechanism and its causal impact on Santos' leadership potential for peace processes. Coding is the main analytic process in this approach; I categorised segments of data with a code and used these codes to sort and develop an understanding of Santos' leadership. Santos' biographical factors have been carefully examined by taking a macro perspective considering secondary sources, a micro perspective looking at archival data and a personal perspective through interviews and autobiographies. In comparison to the 'Krcmaric' approach, the analysis will not include a section on 'material interests' because for Santos the peace process was neither financially nor electorally rewarding. Coming from a very wealthy family, Santos did not have any financial gains to make by initiating a peace process. Also, electorally, he lost a large portion of his political capital during the peace process, as his plunging levels of popular approval show (Pizarro Leongómez, 2017).

According to the personal biography approach, beliefs and values 'are shaped by ascriptive characteristics given at birth and/or socialising life experiences accrued prior to assuming office' (Krcmaric et al., 2020). This requires a close look at Santos' family, his education and his military service, and his career before he went into politics. To do so, I conducted in-depth interviews with family members and friends who were asked to describe their time with Santos and with Santos himself who was asked to comment on his beliefs and values. Moreover, qualitative content analysis is used to examine Santos' past statements prior to his presidency. Since 1994, as both journalist and politician, Santos himself has written extensively on Colombia's conflict which is why his opinion pieces in the newspaper *El Tiempo* and his books will be critically examined. I coded this material for the words: *conflict*, *peace*, *guerrilla*, *FARC*, *defeat* and *negotiation* to grasp the development of his beliefs and values.

Secondly, Santos' competence and skills focuses on Santos' qualities as a leader, which he developed since he entered politics in 1991 until his presidency in 2010. Biographical factors may affect a politician's competence and skills, as for example family connections facilitate the access to certain work opportunities (Krcmaric et al., 2020). Leaders pay more attention to specific policies when they have had personal and professional experiences in certain areas (Burden, 2007). Therefore, the focus lays on Santos' performance in the different ministries by examining media reports, military accounts and secondary sources on his competence and skills. To code skills, I looked at new policies and structures, publicly known problems or scandals, and public statements by Santos.

Finally, other peoples' perceptions of leaders are key for the development of peace process, in which actors have to believe their opponents and voters trust their representatives (Kupchan, 2010; Larson, 1997). The actors involved in the conflict, such as the insurgents and the military, have to support or at least recognise the political leader in charge. Biographical factors may affect how other actors perceive the executives because people make assumptions about their skills, interest and beliefs based on identifiable features from a leader's background. These perceptions, in turn, can indirectly shape leader behaviour (Krcmaric et al., 2020). Also, Leadership scholars have claimed that the *self* is constructed through the narrative others develop of the leader (Sparrowe, 2005). Santos' biographical factors may have affected how the FARC and the military saw him as a leader. Methodologically, primary data on their opinions are limited, but still it is possible to analyse statements from the FARC and the military through secondary sources. Moreover, it is possible to explore how Santos believed to be seen by these two groups by taking his autobiography and his interview into account.

Yet, before going into the analysis of the three mechanisms at work to understand Santos' leadership, two important disclaimers need to be made: Santos' capacity to combine policies of



recognition with a certain type of toughness to initiate a peace process heavily depends on the fact that he is a *wealthy man* who could easily personify strength and responsibility. Although it is empirically challenging to isolate the effect of male leadership on conflict resolution, it can be doubted that a woman would have been equally respected by the military and the FARC. Studies have shown that leaders' reconciliatory behaviour is publicly more accepted if the leader in charge was a hawk and a man (Schultz, 2005). Additionally, so far, no woman has been elected as president in Colombia. Concerning wealth, it can be assumed that the public relevance and economic power of the Santos family was a benefit, if not a prerequisite to unite and reconcile many forces behind his back to become both, president and a peacemaker.

## Santos' beliefs and values

Firstly, I examine Santos' childhood and socialisation prior to entering politics, in order to explore the origins of his leadership. This requires a close look at Santos' family, his education, military service and career before he went into politics in 1991. Most importantly, I examine the beliefs and values dominating his journalistic contributions from 1994–2006.<sup>2</sup>

Santos was born in 1951 into an influential family in Colombia. Their public relevance was most notable from 1913 when Eduardo Santos Montejo (President of Colombia from 1938 to 1942), Santos great-uncle, purchased *El Tiempo*, which in the next two decades became a leading national newspaper. With his three brothers, Santos grew up in a predominant liberal household in a wealthy neighbourhood of Bogotá (Santos Calderón, 2018: 24). Santos' relationship with his father was very close (López Michelsen, 1993: 76–87), and he was portrayed as an ideal son who did not cause any problems (interview with Santos' step-cousin Enrique Santos Molano, 2018).<sup>3</sup> Santos' mother Clemencia believed strongly in liberal and Catholic values (Santos Calderón, 2018: 22–23). At home, politics were discussed daily, and politicians walked in and out; however, no Santos family member was expected to enter politics based on the principles Eduardo Santos had established *El Tiempo*. This is a key aspect to consider because it shows that Santos became involved in politics against the family rule. His brother Enrique, who published his memoirs in 2018, describes the atmosphere at home: 'The order of things was the country, the newspaper and then the family' (Santos Calderón, 2018: 35). Santos considered his family background as relevant to his governing behaviour because he developed the belief that Colombia's destiny mattered and needed to be changed (interview with Santos Calderón, 2018).<sup>4</sup>

Santos' first step towards a career in the public sector started with his decision to join the navy as a cadet when he was only 16 years old. In many speeches, he mentioned that this was a key experience for his socialisation, as he learned that problems can be solved (Abbott, 2018). In 1973, at only 22 years of age, he received his first job with the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia as the chief executive to the International Coffee Organization (ICO) in London, thanks to Arturo Gómez Jaramillo, the director of the federation (1958–1982) whom he called his second father (Santos Calderón, 1999e). According to Santos' life-long friend Osorio, a Colombian diplomat, who spent many years with Santos in London working for the ICO, their jobs taught them the arts of diplomacy (interview with Néstor Osorio Londoño, 2018).<sup>5</sup> Those years in London were of great importance for Santos' professional career as he strengthened connections with Colombian politicians and diplomats (Hernández, 2014: 81).

Back in Colombia, his next step was the family newspaper *El Tiempo* in 1982. In comparison to his brothers and cousins, Santos did not start working there in a low-level position. Instead his father directly nominated him as subdirector of the newspaper. Such a position of power at a young age within the family business influenced both Santos himself and his relationship with other family

members (Santos Calderón, 2013: 56–57). In 1986, he was already a close friend of Gabriel Silva Luján, a national security advisor of President Virgilio Barco (1986–1990) working on a peace negotiation with the FARC. If Silva is to be believed, Santos had already begun developing an interest in peace negotiations in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

His professional career and his family background already give an insight into the development of Santos' beliefs and values. However, his writings (1994–2006) shed more light about his beliefs and values concerning war and peace. Between his adolescence and his election as president, he authored a significant number of books and opinion pieces for the press, which offer a unique source to explore the development of his thinking.

In 1994, Santos published, *Colombia sin fronteras*, a book, in which he elaborated the idea that achieving peace should be Colombia's main goal for its own development (1994: 363). Between 1996 and 1997, he established a political project under the banner *Destino Colombia*. Its content is relevant for the analysis of Santos' beliefs and values. It shows what Santos wanted to achieve: recognition of the constitution by all parties involved in the conflict, a mutual ceasefire, support from the international community and the establishment of a demilitarised zone for starting the dialogues (Fundación Buen Gobierno, 1997; Santos Calderón, 1997c, 1998). In 1997, Santos also depicted the country as divided, in which every citizen had the duty to make his or her contribution to end the conflict as soon as possible (1997a). Santos went even further by stating that, if the conflict was finally to be solved, a new country needed to be constructed instead of only incorporating the insurgents into the political system (1998). He frequently repeated this view by claiming that Colombia needed an inclusive peace agreement which would transform society. Around that time, much of his thinking developed around the 'third way', a political position akin to centrism developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens. Santos was very fond of the idea and even wrote a book together with British Prime Minister Tony Blair about how to introduce this concept to Colombia (1999). Blair and Jonathan Powell, British diplomat, significantly influenced Santos' beliefs about conflict negotiation when they were working on the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland (Abbott, 2018).

In his writings, he also made specific references to the FARC: He stated that it was crucial to understand the other side and to see the conflict from different perspectives, which is why he tried to put himself in the position of 'Marulanda', the main leader of the FARC (1999a). At the same time, it cannot be denied that Santos kept a very neutral and respectful tone when writing about the FARC and the ELN. Until 2005, he did not once use the term 'terrorists' to refer to them, and even during the Pastrana peace process he did not accuse the FARC of destroying the dialogues (2005b). Additionally, Santos considered South Africa's, Sri Lanka's and Northern Ireland's experiences and the importance of international advisors like Kahane (1996b). However, at the same time, he believed that 'with force it is necessary to conquer peace' (1994: 365). Santos here recognised a political negotiation as the best path for Colombia, but that he also understood that the main condition for the success of a negotiation is that plan B, meaning military defeat, is actually a threat for the guerrillas (1999c). For Santos, it would be impossible to negotiate with the guerrilla groups if they did not fear the state's power (1996b). Nevertheless, he clearly rejected a military defeat as a justified solution to the conflict and even called it a 'perverse' suggestion considering that the exclusion of certain social groups had caused violence (1996c).

His aversion towards a non-negotiated solution was also made explicit when he wrote: 'The country is confronted with a devilish paradox, in which to construct peace one turns to violence' (1999b). Thus, he expressed his firm commitment to a negotiated solution when Pastrana initiated his peace process (1999d). In 2003, he stated that, according to his conviction, a political negotiation should always be preferred (2003: 5). However, 2 years later, when the political climate was in

favour of Uribe's national security policy, he stated that this path had to be continued because it was necessary and suitable for Colombia at that moment (2005d). Still, Santos continued to mention a political solution to the conflict in his articles, and in 2005, he invited experts like Shlomo Ben Ami, an Israeli politician, diplomat and peace negotiator, to Colombia (2005c).

This section showed how important Colombia's future was for Santos' leadership development; at home, liberal values were transmitted; at work, Santos focused on diplomacy, and in his writings, it becomes apparent how Santos' values and beliefs formed around solving Colombia's internal conflict. Thus, it was predictable that he would become a reconciliation-oriented leader and it can be assumed that his success in the peace process depended on his deeply rooted belief that peace needed to be achieved.

## Santos' competence and skills

The first section showed that even before entering politics, Santos' family connection gave him access to certain work opportunities. Santos belonged to a closely knit and highly influential family, and the name 'Santos' had a significant impact on Colombian politics. These biographical factors directly affected the formation of his competences and skills from 1991 to 2010 when he became president. Early on Santos had the chance to prove his expertise in different political projects and ministries. Mainly, his last position as minister of defence (2006–2009) gives an insight into his skills development.

President César Gaviria was the first one who had a positive opinion of young Santos offering him the position as minister of foreign trade from 1991 until 1994 in a newly founded ministry. In this position, Santos worked effectively on expanding Colombia's international trade and opening up the economy. Paying attention to economic issues made sense given his experience in the coffee sector.

In 1995, when accusations became public that President Ernesto Samper's campaign had partially been funded with drug money, Santos soon became a strong opponent of the Samper government (1994–1998), demanding his resignation (1996a). During the scandal, Santos developed further political competence when he founded his already mentioned project *Destino Colombia*, a peace initiative to bring the Colombian conflict to an end putting together different sectors of Colombia's society from *guerrilleros* to paramilitaries and from representatives of the church to businessmen. His diplomacy improved by organising several meetings for *Destino Colombia*, and he even met with FARC commander 'Raúl Reyes' in Costa Rica in 1997 to gain his support (Corral, 2016: 21–24; Hernández, 2014: 107–113). However, one aspect of the initiative was to call for a national constituent assembly without informing President Samper. Soon the government denounced the initiative as a conspiracy against Samper, as it seemed that Santos sought to negotiate a peace process under the condition that it would not materialise under the 'illegitimate' Samper government. It was highly debated as to whether or not this was a condition imposed by Santos, the FARC or the paramilitaries (Aranguren Molina, 2001: 287). Santos was accused of doing this to promote his own presidency, which forced him to withdraw his pre-candidacy in 1998 while the peace initiative lost its drive and meaning (Santos Calderón, 1997: 374). It is important to note that his election manifesto during this short campaign was to achieve a political negotiation with the FARC (El Tiempo, 2016). Conspiracy or not, it is clear that organising these events without including the president was an idea doomed to fail. This experience probably made Santos understand that he had to be more pragmatic by pronouncing his plans.

When Pastrana was elected in 1998, he asked Santos to form a commission aimed at establishing a demilitarised zone to negotiate a peace process with the FARC (León, 2018). However, Santos soon left the commission criticising its lack of organisation, structure and objectives through his

foundation *Buen Gobierno* and in his opinion pieces in *El Tiempo* (1997b). In his view, any peace process needed a clear definition of what kind of peace was to be achieved (Señal Memoria, 1999). The FARC quickly lost interest in the peace process with Pastrana and abused his extreme concessions to actually strengthen their fighting capacities. This first-hand experience in a peace process introduced Santos to the challenges of making concessions. He learned that concessions had to be made, but with strength and caution to achieve a political agreement (interview with Santos Calderón, 2018).

In 2002, Uribe was elected as the new president. Santos did not support his candidacy and became a strong critic of Uribe's style of governing (Santos Calderón, 2004a). In 2004, Uribe nominated Santos as the leader of the governing party in congress. This can only be explained by the fact that Uribe needed Santos to strengthen his government. Santos had a name that the Bogotá elites and politicians respected, and he had the skills to organise and convince different sectors to work with Uribe. Santos' failure to become mayor of Bogotá in 2003, and Uribe's extremely high approval rates might explain why Santos engaged increasingly in Uribe's political agenda (Santos, 2005a). Also, it must have inspired Santos that one of his ex-professors wrote a novel in 2003, in which Santos would be the president of Colombia in 2020 (Fuentes, 2003: 49). In 2005, Santos decided to support Uribe by founding the U Party (*Partido Social de Unidad Nacional*), which became the political platform on which basis Uribe got re-elected in 2006. Shortly after Uribe's re-election, Santos stepped down from his leading position of the party and became minister of defence. Minister of defence was a key position, since security was the flagship of Uribe's government and it was seen by many Colombians as the most important political position after the presidency. Santos' trajectory under Uribe needs to be seen as a strategic and pragmatic adaptation to the political circumstances of someone who understood that there was no political future without Uribe. In the past, he had learned that being too open about his preferences towards peace negotiations without the president's knowledge was not effective, and in a political atmosphere that favoured Uribe's policies, Santos took the opportunities that Uribe offered him.

In Santos' last position before the presidency, as defence minister from July 2006 to May 2009, he gained further skills. Firstly, he knew how to break up old structures in the military in order to improve them (Deas, 2015; Pécaut, 2008: 65; Valencia, 2008). This is a key leadership skill in protracted conflicts as it is often the military which cannot adapt to new agendas (Chemick, 1999: 52). Another example is Santos' suggestion of Óscar Naranjo as new general director of the national police in 2007 which made the national police more effective, transparent and cooperative. Still, many problems of the security sector persisted (Grabendorff, 2009: 83).

Secondly, Santos learned how to deal with a highly sensible issue by blaming others, changing the discourse and escaping responsibility (La Silla Vacía, 2010). Santos had a very controversial role in the case of the 'false positives', which was a scandal evolving around extrajudicial killings of Colombian citizens by members of the military in 2008. The victims, mostly young, mentally challenged or poor men from the countryside, were registered as guerrillas killed in combat. Despite the scandal, Santos knew how to keep his position as minister, not stepping back, and becoming famous for some strong measurements against human rights violators. As such, 27 military officials had to leave the army, including three generals (Fiscalía General de la Nación, 2009: 20).

Third, Santos knew how to model his reputation in the media. Most of Santos' fame as hard-line defence minister comes from the fact that he was the one who announced the successful operations to the press. Moreover, Santos made it seem that he was responsible for authorising the operations without Uribe's direct permission but with his unspoken consent (Semana, 2008). One major success was operation *Jaque* in July 2008, which resulted in the successful rescue of 15 hostages, including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt (Torres Cuéllar, 2008: 28–32; Villamarín Pulido,

2009). The media reportage of operation *Jaque* made Colombia's public think that the FARC had significantly been weakened and that the army was gaining the upper hand thanks to Santos (Becerra Gómez and Burgos Suárez, 2018). Not only in the news, but also in his book, *Jaque al terror*, Santos presented himself as the strong decision maker through using an aggressive language against the FARC and by choosing pictures of him with rescued hostages, military generals and dead FARC members (2009: 42). At the same time, Santos was pragmatic enough not to humiliate the FARC in public speeches. Mostly, he congratulated the national army without mentioning that the operation deceived the FARC nor by calling them terrorists. His presidential campaign was also characterised by pragmatism (Taylor, 2016: 184). In 2009, 57% of the electorate claimed they would re-elect Uribe again if possible, whereas Santos himself only got a 4% approval rate (Ipsos Napoleón Franco, 2009: 35). Considering these approval rates, the only way to become president was through standing for a continuity of Uribe's policies. Therefore, nothing indicated that Santos would start a dialogue with the FARC before his actual election in June 2010.

This section showed that Santos developed very pragmatic skills from 1991 to 2010 with the competence to organise, solve constraints and represent himself in a positive light with different actors, keeping his doors open and gaining political support. Of course, Santos' pragmatism can be seen as a perfection of opportunism and as a lack of consistency. However, this does not change the fact that he embodied many leadership qualities needed to unite many different sectors of Colombia's society, a key pre-requisite for conflict resolution.

## Others' perceptions of Santos

This last section explores the FARC's and the military's perceptions of Santos, which in turn, indirectly shaped Santos' behaviour. At the end of 2008, the FARC found itself in a new position: they were not only significantly weakened in terms of numbers, but the military pressure increased as leadership changes occurred in a new generation of FARC commanders. This was a significant shift because the leadership changed from a top of old guerrilleros keeping hold of a decentralised organisation to a group of leaders who envisioned a future in politics (Pizarro Leongómez, 2017: 370; Taylor, 2016: 183). How did the FARC view Santos at that time? Of course, data are very limited, but it can be assumed that they saw him as a possible negotiation partner based on the fact that 'Alfonso Cano', commander of the FARC between 2008 and 2011, even produced a video 1 week before Santos' inauguration offering peace dialogues (Al-Jazeera, 2010). Based on his predisposition towards a political negotiation, Santos interpreted the FARC's actions as a chance for a fruitful dialogue (interview with Santos Calderón, 2018). Another political leader could have exploited their weaknesses, ignored their offer or advocated for increasing military pressure. Moreover, the FARC had always maintained a positive opinion of Santos' brother Enrique, a rather leftist journalist (Santos Calderón, 2014: 19–21). Additionally, Santos' biographical factors (mainly the fact that someone from the highest Colombian elite had always tried to work on possible negotiations) caught their attention ('Timochenko' in *El Colombiano*, 2019). It is also reported that the FARC respected Santos as a military man because he had been an effective defence minister and had military training (Kline, 2015: 89; Santos Calderón, 2019: 164, 193). They were impressed by the efficacy of the attacks and valued the fact that he treated them as insurgents and not as terrorists (Acosta Patiño, 2016: 48).

Most army commanders highly respected Santos as defence minister, not only because he led the heaviest attacks against the FARC, but also because he made the military apparatus more transparent and efficient (Pizarro Leongómez, 2018; Torres Cuéllar, 2008; Villamarin Pulido, 2009). Furthermore, Santos' strong approach against the ones responsible for the 'false positives' brought him

notable recognition in the army ranks as a man who understood that this scandal was very bad for their reputation (Pizarro Leongómez, 2018). It might have also influenced the military's perception of Santos. He joined the navy as a cadet, when he was still a student, and most high-level politicians do not choose to join the army, (see Pastrana's and Uribe's biographies). The respect for Santos' leadership made it possible that Sergio Jaramillo, Santos' closest work partner and his vice-minister of defence, could develop a new way of thinking about conflict resolution, which was accepted by the military (Gómez Giraldo, 2016: 26). In past peace attempts, the military had feared that their political power would be reduced, as such President Belisario Betancur's (1982–1986) peace process failed due to resistance of the military and the traditional political elites (Martín Medem, 2016: 260; Pizarro Leongómez, 2018). Consequently, the fact that many generals saw a peace negotiation as the victory and not the end for the Colombian army was a decisive step for the outcome of any dialogue. Secondly, some military branches developed a new understanding of human rights and of the genesis of the conflict, although there is no shared military version of the conflict (Pizarro Leongómez, 2018). Based on these observations, Santos could count on the military support for his plans to negotiate (interview with Santos Calderón, 2018).

Lastly, it is important to compare this to the FARC's and the military's perceptions of Pastrana and Uribe. Pastrana's peace process with the FARC (1999–2002) could never embark on suitable conditions, as the Colombian army did not have the military capacity to put some pressure on the FARC. Moreover, Pastrana's leadership seemed weak as he offered concessions to the guerrilla without expecting anything in return (Kline, 2007: 52). Pastrana's example shows that being reconciliation-oriented is not enough, as this can be interpreted as a weakness by the opponents. Additionally, the military did not see Pastrana as a strong leader and were sceptical about his decision towards establishing a demilitarised zone for starting the dialogues (Kline, 2007: 54; Martín Medem, 2016: 260; Pizarro Leongómez, 2018; Richani, 2013: 35–49). On the contrary, Uribe had much military support and many external conditions were eligible for negotiations. Mainly, the FARC's position had changed: As such in April 2010, before Santos came to power the FARC lamented in an open letter to Pearl that Uribe had decided to finish the talks with them before they even properly started, claiming that their doors would remain open (FARC-EP, 2010).

There are several reasons why Uribe missed the conditions for a peace process. Firstly, Uribe might have still felt bitterness for the death of his father, who had been allegedly killed by the FARC in 1983 (Kline, 2015: 95–97). Secondly, the FARC did not see any coherence in Uribe's actions: On one side, he continued to attack them verbally, and on the other, he showed them his goodwill towards dialogue by releasing some FARC prisoners (Bermúdez Liévano, 2018: 31). Thirdly, Uribe himself saw the fault clearly with the FARC who, according to him, had no genuine interest in negotiations and abused his concessions (Uribe Velez, 2012). Thus, scholars like Kline described Uribe's negotiation attempts in 2009 and 2010 as 'paradoxical peace non-processes' (2015: 89). Fourthly, personal animosities between Uribe and the presidents of Ecuador and Venezuela made any effective peace initiative in his two administration periods difficult. Thus, his leadership style was not suitable for the development of peace initiatives and his personal issues with the FARC and other presidents could not be combined with a convincing peace policy. Despite Uribe's popularity, it can be doubted that he could have personified a reconciliation-oriented leadership style.

This last section showed that the FARC perceived Santos as a strong leader who respected them and was ready to commit himself to ending the conflict. On the other side, Santos could count on the military's support because they saw him as a trustworthy and pragmatic military man who would not let himself be fooled by the FARC. Being and feeling accepted and respected by the two main actors of the conflict was a key factor for the initiation of a successful peace process.

## Conclusions

This article argues that Colombian President Santos developed a leadership between hawk and dove – and that this was possible due to crucial factors residing in his biography.<sup>7</sup> Linking this leadership-centred argument with findings from the conflict negotiation suggests that a pragmatic and reconciliation-oriented leadership might be relevant to find solutions to protracted conflicts like the one in Colombia.

Adopting the recently developed personal biography approach, I explored Colombian President Santos' beliefs and values, his competence and skills and others' perceptions of him. Based on qualitative sources, it became obvious that the concept of reconciliation was both formative and central in Santos' belief system. His skills and competence were highly influenced by the fact that the name 'Santos' gave him access to political power. However, he also adapted to the political climate under earlier President Uribe, which officially excluded a negotiated solution to the conflict and waited until he was elected as president to promote his ideals to resolve the conflict. In the meantime, he left the doors open, did not humiliate the FARC and yet also gained respect from the military apparatus by leading the heaviest attacks against the FARC, presenting the successful operations as his achievement. Santos was perceived as a potential negotiator, and simultaneously he treated others as potential negotiating partners and peace supporters.

Still, Santos remains a controversial figure and it needs to be clear that a leadership between hawk and dove might only be fruitful for the initiation of a peace process. Santos' leadership could not prevent that the implementation of the peace process faced many difficulties. Moreover, it is still debated if Santos' main motivation for initiating a peace process was his wish to 'go down in history' as a peacemaker. Further studies need to explore if this was a unique Santos' feature or rather a common desire shared by all political leaders. More studies should broaden the link between structural factors, biographical factors and character traits, as it is still unclear how exactly experiences shape personality (Horowitz and Fuhrmann, 2018). It would also be interesting to find experimental evidence for pragmatism and orientation towards reconciliation as key variables for understanding decision-making in peace scenarios, contributing to recent studies on hawks' advantage to pursue rapprochement (Mattes and Weeks, 2019). Moreover, this study claims that a policy of reconciliation is not enough (contrarily to Lieberfeld, 2018), which invites further qualitative case comparisons of leaders in peace processes.

This analysis contributes to the idea that leaders' biographical factors are relevant for political developments. It shows that the explanatory power of 'ripeness', which has so often been used in conflict negotiation literature, is incomplete when leaders are left out. It also indicates that a distinction between hawks and doves is not fruitful for Peace and Conflict studies. As humans subject to change, leaders are not empty black boxes but have varying potentials to act according to certain biographical factors combined with other, often structural factors and process dynamics. Put differently, human subjectivity and leadership capacities are central to our understanding of peace and conflict decisions, which implies that studying the individuals involved in political processes should be seen as a counterweight, though not replacement, for institutional and structural theories.

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## Notes

1. Author's interview with Frank Pearl, High Commissioner for Peace, Bogotá, 22 August 2018.
2. Note that Santos did not publish any contributions in *El Tiempo* as minister of foreign trade under Gaviria (1991–1994), as minister of finance under Pastrana (2000–2003), and as minister of defence under Uribe (2006–2009).
3. Author's interview with Enrique Santos Molano, Santos' step-cousin, Bogotá, 18 August 2018.
4. Author's interview with Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, Oxford, 13 November 2018.
5. Author's interview with Néstor Osorio Londoño, diplomat, London, 3 December 2018.
6. Author's interview with Gabriel Silva Luján, politician, Bogotá, 21 August 2018.
7. For a contrary view claiming that Santos was more a hawk see [McNeish, 2015](#).

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