Teaching a New Kind of Politics

By Natalia Garbiras-Díaz

In Colombia’s 2018 presidential elections, a 62-year-old math professor transformed the race. He was in the running to become the country’s first new head of state since the 2016 peace accord that sought to end more than half a century of traumatic civil conflict. It seemed a logical next step. After all, Sergio Fajardo had already served his country as the mayor of Medellín, the third-most populous city in Colombia after Bogotá and Cali, and as the governor of Antioquia, the second-richest department in the country in terms of its GDP.

Just two months after the elections, Fajardo spoke for the Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) at UC Berkeley. His informal look — jeans, rolled-up sleeves, and no tie, not even for presidential debates — as well as his personable campaigning style and his unusual trajectory, made it clear that he’s not your traditional politician.
Before diving into local politics, Fajardo had received his Ph.D. in Mathematics from the University of Wisconsin and enjoyed a career as a math professor, teaching at the Universidad de Los Andes and the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá. His years as an academic left their mark, evident today in the way he approaches politics. Fajardo claims that his greatest pride is to be a teacher.

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Under Fajardo, Compromiso Ciudadano experienced an extraordinary transformation, which today is recognized around the globe. The city’s homicide rate plummeted from 400 per 100,000 people in 1991 — a figure that earned Medellín the infamous record of being the most violent city in the world — to 31.5 by the end of his term in office in 2007. How did this social transformation come about? According to Fajardo, the “engine of social transformation” is education, understood in a broad sense. Specifically, education empowers young people, who may be at the verge of passing over the threshold to a life of crime and violence, enabling them to make a radical pivot and develop a life free of crime. Education became his flagship program, linking all the initiatives of his administration under the umbrella slogan: “Medellín: la más educada” (Medellín, the most educated).

**Transforming Medellín and Antioquia**

Widespread corruption, violence, and drug trafficking had stigmatized Medellín for decades by the end of the 1990s, when Fajardo first became involved in politics. By then, he and a group of friends had realized that the most important decisions in Colombia — decisions that would eventually lead to structural changes — were made by politicians. So, they decided to start a civic political movement called Compromiso Ciudadano (Citizens’ Commitment). They originally founded Compromiso Ciudadano on the basis of 10 political principles that Fajardo called the “axioms.” According to Fajardo, these axioms — now numbering 18 — are the compass that has helped Compromiso Ciudadano navigate 19 years of doing politics differently.

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As governor of Antioquia (2012-2016), Fajardo continued to articulate his policies around education. Among the most impressive projects of the Fajardo administration were the parques educativos, massive architectural marvels constructed in the most remote and marginalized areas of Antioquia, where the state had barely been present before. These cultural centers emphasized innovation, experimentation, and knowledge. They provided the residents of neighboring communities with comprehensive libraries, free access to the Internet, technological tools, recreational areas, and other resources.

Governor Fajardo also created several signature programs — such as Jóvenes con Futuro (Youth With a Future) and Entornos Protectores (Protective Environments) — that provided vulnerable young people with vocational training, along with sports and cultural activities, as an alternative to crime.

Fajardo’s commitment to education has been a leitmotif of his political career, including the 2018 presidential election. As he often stated in his campaign speeches, the main characters of Colombia’s history have always been drug lords, corrupt politicians, the guerrilla, and the paramilitary. By making education the main focus of policymaking, Fajardo envisions a new chapter of Colombia’s history, which he called a “chapter of opportunities,” where the lead roles are replaced with teachers, who Fajardo recognized as the most important social leaders of their communities.

**Running for President**

Turning his attention to the 2018 presidential election, Fajardo highlighted the complexity of the context in which his campaign took place. He spent almost two years traveling throughout the country, finding a society he described as fragmented, unequal, afraid, and very indignant. To fully understand his diagnosis requires a brief account of Colombia’s recent history.

Colombia’s civil conflict was one of the longest in the Western Hemisphere. From 1964 until 2016, what began as a leftist Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), fought the
the country polarized between those supporting the peace agreement and those against it (this latter coalition was led largely by former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez). According to Fajardo, Colombians missed a unique opportunity to unite the country around the positive — in fact, essential — national project of peace. This climate of polarization carried over to the 2018 presidential elections. Colombians were fragmented as a society and also distrustful of the country’s political class following one of the biggest corruption scandals in the recent history of Latin America. The Odebrecht scandal involved bribes received by high-profile politicians (both in Colombia and other countries in the region) from the eponymous Brazilian construction firm in exchange for obtaining construction procurement contracts.

In this context of dramatic polarization and general indignation, Fajardo ran for the presidency under the slogan of “La fuerza de la esperanza” (The Strength of Hope), which symbolized his efforts to reconcile Colombians’ most pressing concerns. In the midst of one of the most polarized elections in recent history, Fajardo maintained a serene campaign style, always advocating for education as the engine of social transformation and not only promises structural change but has been tested being spent. Politics should emphasize transparency and pedagogy, he concluded, it should empower citizens and their communities and connect different sectors around a common project, which for Fajardo will always be education.

Sergio Fajardo has served Colombia as the mayor of Medellín (2004-2007) and the governor of Antioquia (2012-2016). A presidential candidate in his country’s 2018 elections, Fajardo holds a Ph.D. in Mathematics from the University of Wisconsin. He spoke for CLAS on October 2, 2018.

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